E.I. Reader Challenge

What’s the most ________ book you ever read?

In Remarkable Reads: 34 Writers and Their Adventures in Reading (W.W. Norton, 2004), J. Peder Zane asked almost three dozen contemporary writers (himself included) to write about “the [most] ________ book” they ever read.

They got to fill in the blank with any adjective they chose.

Some were predictably laudatory. Bebe Moore Campbell nominated The Cat in the Hat, by Dr. Seuss, her “most memorable.” Robert Morgan tabbed Boris Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago the “wisest,” and Denise Gess chose The Stranger, by Albert Camus, “the most important.” When Lee Smith thinks of The Little Locksmith, by Katharine Butler Hathaway, the adjective that comes to her mind is “luminous.”


Remarkable Reads is “delightful,” “challenging,” “inspiring.” In fact, there’s only one thing missing in it-- you.

How about it, E.I. Army? In all the world, what is your [most] ________ book?

Think about it. Play around with it. Pick a book and an adjective. Settle on something fun and/or interesting (we won’t hold you to your choice forever) and fire it off to me. I’ll start running your choices in the next issue. Send them to your Editor-in-Coach at mcook@dcs.wisc.edu.

For further inspiration, read The Most Wonderful Books: Writers on Discovering the Pleasures of Reading (Milkweed, 1997), edited by Michael Dorris and Emilie Buchwald.
First Person Personal

Pigs stink!

By Sandy Mickelson
You can take the girl off the farm — especially if there are pigs around.

You can take the girl off the farm, but you’ll never get the farm out of the girl.

You’ll never take away the memories of chasing cattle out of the garden, walking the bean fields or raking hay.

You can take away the desire, for sure, but you’ll never get rid of the memories.

On a warming spring day when the breeze is still cool but the sun is bright, when water in the ditch shows royal blue against new lime-green grass, that’s when I wonder what someone from the streets of New York would think if she magically appeared on a dusty gravel road in the middle of Webster County. Shoot, in the middle of any county.

I’d bet against anything that fear would start to boil deep down in her stomach until her heart pumped fast and her hands shook. That’s when you’ve got to wonder how the wide open spaces in the heart of America’s heartland could scare anyone.

That may be one of my favorite phrases — the heart of America’s heartland.

That says it all.

We’re in the middle of life for the entire country. Fields of corn and soybeans, pens of beef cattle, herds of sheep.

We’ll forget the pigs. Pigs stink. I apologize to all those who raise pigs for saying pigs stink, but all those who raise pigs know pigs stink. No amount of lime or pen cleaning can change that fact.

Some processed sausage actually tastes like pigs smell. Few people can understand that, but it’s true. How can a person swallow something that smells like a nasty sow in the corner pen?

I used to like pigs. I rode the big duroc sow through weeds taller than I was. I imagine it made quite a picture — at least Dad reacted to it. But I never rode her again, so maybe it didn’t make that great picture I envisioned.

Baby pigs actually are cute little critters, but the mommie pig makes no bones about hating everyone in sight when her babies squeal. Of all animals a farmer could raise, there could be none less suited to farmland fun. The movie “Babe” notwithstanding, you just can’t have fun with a pig.

Our pigs never talked to our sheep. Our cats may have, but only to say “thank you for letting me use your wool blanket.” Our pigs never did.

I swear, though, they talked to me. A deep guttural grunt, followed by rolling eyes and a quick, little straight-legged run at the gate where I stood. At me.

Oink, oink doesn’t mean “Hi, how are you?” It means stand back, human, we’re coming through.

Pigs don’t shy away when you wave your hands, so there’s no scaring them back inside the pen. The gate goes down and wham, bam, they’re gone. And not as a herd, you understand, but as spiders in the wind — crisscrossing paths in every direction, a wild glint in their eyes that means they’re going for the gold. And the gold, it seems, is anything you most want to keep them out of.

Cows grazing in the garden can be swooshed away gently at a fast walk or easy lope. Pigs, on the other hand, know only one gear. Go. Go fast. Go now. Do not look back. Do not slow down.

I hate pigs. Maybe the pigs that make the sausage that tastes like pigs smell aren’t so bad, after all.

And maybe you could take the farm out of the girl if she had to be around pigs too often.

So long friends, until the next time when we’re together.

Sandy Mickelson is the lifestyle reporter for the Messenger in Fort Dodge, Iowa. In 2006 she received master columnist honors from the Iowa Newspaper Association. This column appeared in the Farm News Spring Section of the Messenger Wednesday, February 17 and is reprinted with permission. Contact Sandy at (515) 573-2141 or by e-mail at smickelson@messengernews.net.
First Person Personal

Shattering writers block or writers lethargy

By Rex Owens

I am a professional wanna-be writer, which means I write but haven’t been published – yet. For us wanna-bes much of life is spent in suspended animation waiting. Waiting in turn leads to self-doubt, depression and remorse for a life wasted resulting in writer’s block or worse, writer’s lethargy. Face it, it’s a career hazard.

I’ve found the solution to shatter through writers block and banish lethargy – travel, especially international travel. When you travel you break away from everything that makes you comfortable. Recently I traveled to Egypt which has proven to be a life changing experience.

Egypt is a dichotomy. I flew a modern jet from Cairo to Luxor. Outside the Luxor airport I saw farmers taking vegetables to market on a wood cart pulled by a donkey. All agriculture in Egypt is manual, which employees more people.

Quite by accident my entrance to Egypt was terrifying. I found myself the only American in the baggage claim area of Cairo International Airport at 9:00 at night – without my passport. I didn’t know where my wife was, and she had my passport. I was frightened to the quick. We had decided to separate, she to look for our tour guide and me to retrieve our luggage. Big mistake.

Egyptian security guards finally understood our dilemma and recovered my passport so that I could even begin our Egyptian adventure.

The banged-up knee is a story. We were riding in a felucca (Egyptian sailboat) and were stranded in the middle of the Nile. A motor boat was sent to rescue us. As I changed boats it rocked and I jammed my right knee when I jumped into the motorboat. I spent the night icing it and taking ibuprophen.

The next day we visited the Alabastar Mosque in Cairo and a fellow traveller lent me his cane. It was one of those fancy collapsing metal canes like you can buy at REI. The Tourism Police wouldn’t let me into the Mosque with the cane.

Three of the police shuffled me off to a little room the size of a small storage closet. They only spoke Arabic and our sign language lacked a lot. They took the cane from me and let me enter the mosque.

After the tour I went to recover the cane and again I was whisked off to the closet. There I was asked to give them money to get the cane back. We had a short, heated discussion in Arabic and English -- the only word I used was "no." They had me sign and date some book and they returned the cane. I’m now a known person by the Cairo Tourism Police.

When we visited the tombs at Luxor, our tour guide gave us his unique insight into Egyptian history and mythology. His viewpoint is that culture began with the invention of paper and a system of writing, in Egypt’s case, hieroglyphics.

The light went on. It’s all about writing. Without the writing we could admire the colossal monuments, pyramids and statues but not understand their story or why so much time and resources were devoted to their construction. Even in 2010 each time I pound away on my laptop I’m a part of this legacy. Writer’s block and my stubborn lethargy, banished!

Wow!

This is Rex Owens’ first published article -- first of many, I’m guessing.
One Writer’s Progression
It's not the destination
It's the journey
By Norma J. Sundberg
Note: In issue #4 (still available at our cyber site) we shared Norma’s poem, “Memorial.” I asked her for a short bio to run with it, which she supplied. Creating that snippet led her to write this longer bio, and I thought you’d enjoy it.
Editor-in-Coach
My first memory of recognition as a writer came from a sixth grade teacher who posted a Thanksgiving poem I’d written in the school newspaper. In high school another teacher introduced us to literature and poetry. She gathered her students poems and had them printed in a booklet.

My senior year our class went to Washington D.C. When we visited the Library of Congress I developed a distinct longing to have something of mine listed in the Library some day so that I might leave something of myself in the world.

I married shortly after high school and kept the pen moving sporadically, with letters to the editor of our local paper and poems to their poetry corners.

Before my third child was due I signed up for Famous Writers School. Never finished it, but the training helped when returning to school in 1977-78.

My youngest was two years old and I was pushing 45 when I entered college. This fork in the road was necessity to upgrade job skills and enhance writing skills. We had just purchased the family farm, and I figured I might have to go to work to help supplement the family income.

Before entering college I was editing my church newsletter. My co-editor and I each wrote a poem. I wrote an inspirational essay as well gathering the news. After a few years we presented poetry readings to church and school groups.

With these experiences under my belt I queried a local newspaper to do a weekly column. I wrote the column for 10 years and did another monthly column for an agricultural insert in another paper for a short time.

In 1984 I fell from and was run over by a farm tractor. While being transported to the hospital, slipping in and out of consciousness due to a concussion, my mind whirred trying to put together what and how this had happened. How was I going to write about this? When I recovered, I wrote several articles, each with a different slant, for various publications.

In 1991 my youngest daughter and I ran away from home. This journey was stressful and frightening. But we didn't look back. I divorced and set out on another life path in new territory, trying to capture the nuances along the way both emotionally and verbally. Moving to the South can be a culture shock.

It has been a journey for this writer, a progression, meeting new writers, artists, networking together. Each time I take a new path, go in a new direction, I dream I'm back in school, can't find my room, and I'm late, or not dressed properly, or have left my books at home.

If I stay on the path, enjoying the journey, not worrying about a destination, will I continue to grow and progress and dream more productive dreams? I'm still traveling and may not reach a particular destination any time soon. But it's not the destination’ it’s the journey.

I’d love to run another writer’s journey in the next issue. Anybody game to share yours?
“Please Let Me To Get Published”
By Becky Meyer Pourchot
Part Two
In Part One, last issue, Becky’s agent induced an editor to look at her memoir. Becky resorted to magical thinking to try to convince the publishing gods to smile on her. Our story continues.
The walk from my house to the top of Fredrick’s Hill is almost two miles. It crosses streams, wild prairies, and oak savannas and is so beautiful it soothes even the most agitated of nerves. As I started my ascent of the hill I tried to clear my mind and think only good writerly thoughts. I envisioned holding my published book in my hand, flipping the pages and smelling the fresh print. As a flock of birds flitted in the trees, I imagined myself on TV with Oprah, teaching her and the rest of America how to laugh and love themselves.

With my heart pounding and my legs exhausted from the climb I reached the peak of Fredrick’s Hill. Below me I could see the gold November grasses dipping their limbs into Pheasant Branch creek. I took a deep breath, raised my arms overhead, and felt all of my concerns dissolve away. In my moment of peace, I pulled out my note and with a clear mind I read:

“Please let me to get published”
Something was wrong. I read it again only slower.

“Please-let-me-TO-get-published.”
I was aghast. There was a grammatical error in my plea to the Universe.

I panicked. I couldn’t leave that note up there. But I scanned the miles of trail below and knew I wasn’t going to do the journey again.

So, I did the best I could. I picked up a twig and punched a hole in the note where the “to” was. Now the note read:

“Please let me (big gaping hole) get published”
It was the best I could do. I tucked the note beneath a rock and headed home.

Walking back, I became convinced that there were several deities (each with close ties to Chronicle, Penguin, and Random House) plotting my demise. In fact they were probably out there now manipulating the Universe so that I wouldn’t see any of my books in print -- ever. I was screwed.

I’ve learned over the years, when life gets weird it’s good to have friends with unusual skills. Aside from being a homemaker and a writer like me, my friend Sara is a trained shaman, with capabilities to journey to other worlds and converse with spirits. It’s a unique ability and quite handy for a friend who has just made a fool of herself on several cosmic planes. So, later that day I gave Sara a call and confessed my catastrophic mistake.

Sara just laughed. “I think you’re spirit guides have a good sense of humor,” she said.

I imagined my totem rabbits, hawks, and hedgehogs up on that hill at that very moment reading my note and chuckling:

“This girl is funny. Really funny. Let’s put in a good word.”

Sara’s laughter set me at ease. Perhaps spirits appreciate irony. Thanks to my friend and my new outlook, I waited out the next few weeks with minimal anxiety.

One day as I deleted four emails titled “Opra diet makes YOU thin,” I discovered a message from my agent and clicked on it. When I read the first word: “sadly,” I knew the news was bad.

Sadly the publishers passed on my idea, sadly they didn’t think my idea was marketable, sadly the book selling market is not so good, but perhaps most sadly of all, the spirits didn’t get my joke.

I was disappointed but still had hope. My agent had other ideas for me, and I looked forward to more projects to come.

As for the magical realm, I wasn’t giving up on that either. Maybe I had used the wrong stationary for my wish or maybe my guiding spirits are just burnt out on the memoir craze. The good news is when my next book is sent into the big publishing world, I’ll have some new tools for managing stress. I won’t fear the unknown, because I’ll know that I can always climb Fredrick’s Hill and try again. Only next time, I’ll bring an eraser.
Flash Fiction

Night Sky

By Jan Kent

Lucy sat cross-legged on the pebbly shore and looked at the huge, cold lake. She felt the familiar hum in her bones that happened only when she was here in this special, wild place. Her watch read 9:02 p.m. — time for the moonrise. It was a blue moon, the second full moon in September.

Right on time, a glow appeared on the horizon, grew quickly and turned into a perfect, orangey orb, shining across the water. “How can Drumlin sit inside and read a geology book,” she wondered, “when all this is happening outside.”

Lucy eased her kayak into the lake. Everything was ready – life jacket, paddle, cell phone. Drumlin’s instructions and worries rang in her ears. But, it was a perfect night – no wind and calm water. She slipped carefully into the boat and began to move up the ribbon of moonlight. Her paddling was steady and effortless.

In the cabin, Drumlin put down his book and stared out the window. Lucy had been right, he supposed. It was a safe night to be out on the lake. He walked out to the porch where his telescope, on the tripod, stood in the corner. With great care he lined it up to view the strip of moonlight that held Lucy and her kayak.

There she was, his Lucy, paddling smoothly through the water. Her determination, energy, strength were part of what he loved about her. But these traits scared him too, somehow.

Hold on – what was that? He checked again. Yes, he had seen it. Below the bottom of the boat and above the bright moonlight on the surface of the lake was a cloudy, foggy, something. Drumlin wrestled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit the button to call Lucy. Her voice in his ear was wonderfully familiar, and yet eerie.

“No, Drum,” she said. “It’s good.” The phone went dead.

Drumlin turned back to the telescope. With great precision he scanned the whole length of the moonbeam on the water, the horizon, the sky. The stars, if possible, seemed even brighter than before.

Lucy and her kayak were gone.

Jan Kent spends her winters in the Chicago area and her summers in an old log cabin in Minnesota. She was a founding member of Jane’s Stories Press and writes a short column, The Word Whisperer, for their monthly online newsletter. Jan has given me permission to ask you to finish the story. What happened to Lucy? Where is she now? Will she ever reappear? What kind of a name is Drumlin, anyway? Send your thoughts to the Editor-in-Coach at mcook@dcswisc.edu.

Writers on Writing

I don’t know how writers retire. You see, I don’t know how writers are made. Somebody who is in a profession and transfers at a certain point and climbs the ladder, gets to the top. The profession dictates the time frame.

Writing doesn’t dictate a time frame. There can be long periods of time when you are not writing at all and you are sitting there looking out a window and thinking. It’s as mysterious to me now as it was when I was sixteen, seventeen years old. I don’t know what retirement means, because there is no time frame for a writer. I may decide I don’t want to write anymore--so, okay, I’m finished writing. But that doesn’t mean it’s going to turn off. All it means is I’m going to lie there and toss and turn, and sentences are going to go through my head as they always do, and sooner or later I’m going to pick up the pen and write.

I have no illusions about writing. It’s not something I do, it’s something I’m driven to do. I don’t understand it.

Chaim Potok

Thanks to Jack “Warning Track” Walsh Vice President in charge of player development co-author of Pack Your Bags: Baseball’s Trade Secrets and Baseball’s Good Guys
From the Nethermost
He’s no poet, and he knows it
By Jim Herod

I started writing stories in 2005. Mostly they were stories reflecting incidents in my own life. I pushed the time period of the episodes forward for a particular reason. I wanted a pivotal event in the life of my barely fictional character to be a mile race at the national track and field competitions. This race would take place on the fiftieth anniversary of Roger Bannister’s historic run of the four minute mile. The fictional race is in a collection of stories called Gathering Moss.

I had an epiphany when I read Mary Ward Brown’s memoir, Fanning the Spark. She said that her initial writings were fragments of her own experiences “injected into supposedly fictional characters, a common practice of beginners.” She went on, “To learn that fiction is a product of the imagination, and not palmed-off personal experiences, takes time and many failures.”

A middle Alabama treasure, Mary Ward Brown was my critic before we even met. I confess: Gathering Moss was palmed-off personal experiences.

I have had the pleasure of having two conversations with Mary Brown. If I were to see her again, I’d own up to being properly chastised. And I’d say that I have tried to do better with prose.

William Stone in Journey Beyond Innocence was a completely fictional character who rode with me as I was driving home from Tennessee one fall day. I promise: I had never seen him before. Yet I listened with fascination as he told me of his experiences in the countryside where I was driving. He had been on those very roads in the nineteenth century. At that time, the highway was no more than a dirt road through long-leaf pine forests. He told me that when a bridge was burned out, there was nothing to do but ford the river.

I’d acknowledge to Mary Brown that William and I had one historical connection. He was in the home that my grandparents would purchase more than three decades after he was there. They bought the Averitt House in 1898. What he was doing in the Averitt-Herod House is recorded in Journey Beyond Innocence.

Mary Ward Brown’s criticism of beginning storytellers probably applies also to beginning poets as well. If so charged, I plead guilty. I am guilty of trying to write a poem, and I am guilty of making the poem tell the story of a personal experience. It’s true.

The Education of a Four Year Old

We were in the second war.
‘N I was only four.
We were on the eastern side.
Gram was in the west.
And, I knew how to run.
Our side had two rooms,
Another just to cook.
We had a room for us to eat.
And one to take a bath.
While I was there to run.
Grammy had the living room,
A kitchen and a bath.
One to sleep, one to eat.
For renting, there was more.
But, I was there to run.
He was flying jets at Craig.
They paused to take a look,
Parked his cap upon my head
And asked if I would fly.
He’d catch me on the run.
Picked me up into the air
And swung me all around.
Decided they would surely stay
On just their second day.
And, I was on the run.

I thought the house was only mine.
Forget the doors are closed.
Certainly not a stop for me.
Slam, bam. And he said damn.
I should have turned to run.
But
I stared.
He laughed.
She screamed.
And, I was on the run.

That’s what really happened. I had no idea why the lieutenant pointed at me and laughed every time he saw me thereafter; nor why his bride never spoke to me again. Maybe when they had their own four year old running through the house, they laughed at the memory.

And maybe Mary Ward Brown laughter now -- not because I have palmed a personal experience off onto some barely fictional character, for I was the four year old. She laughs because it’s clear, I am not a poet.
The Missouri Muse

Some writers just mosey along -- sucking

By Perry Stone

Peer pressure can be an unpleasant part of authoring, especially when it defines success as piles of rejection letters, with randomly published efforts. Perhaps someone should mention success is a frame of mind with different meanings to different people.

For example: One fellow spent almost ten years writing a book titled *Amos Crutcher*. When it was finished he sent off five synopses and got back two rejections, two suggestions to try elsewhere, and an acceptance to publish from ‘Publishing America’.

The writer wasn’t interested.

At the end of his book, the protagonist had ridden off into the sunset, literally. And the author (a fellow named Stone) was happy taking Amos on yet another adventure, not to mention, the fellow had also started a manuscript in the science fiction romance gene.

Its plot was a haunting thing: To begin with John, the protagonist doubts his sanity. Then Malenie, who previously leased his apartment, returns from the dead, and John concedes -- he’s Schizo; it’s the only answer. Humoring himself, John agrees to help Melanie find her killer while the sensuous voice tries to convince John he isn’t crazy. And the author, Stone, is having a blast.

Writing offers a smorgasbord of choices. It can be a leisure pursuit. As a game, it offers countless contests, which can also be used as a stepping stone upward toward professional writer. It may be only an outlet for thoughts you wouldn’t or couldn’t say.

Though we are writers, one and all, at times peer pressure makes me question what constitutes deserving the title. I honestly believe the word writer implies tenacity and delight as the partaker suckles sustenance from the effort in his or her own way. And if you’re happy sauntering along sucking, more power to you.
First Person Personal
Life begins at 60
By Carolyn Howard-Johnson

Sometimes the big barriers in life aren’t abject poverty, dreaded disease or death. Sometimes it’s the subtle ones set upon us by time and place. The ones that can’t be seen and can’t be acknowledged because we don’t know they are there. They creep up silently on padded feet and, if we sense them at all, we choose not to turn and face them.

The decade of the 50s was a time when these kinds of barriers faced those with dark skin, those who lived in closed religious communities, and those who were female.

When I applied for a job as a writer at Hearst Corporation in New York in 1961 I was required to take a typing test. I was piqued because I wasn’t applying for the typing-pool, I was applying for a post as an editorial assistant.

I was told, “No typing test, no interview.” I took the test and was offered a job in the ranks of those who could do 70 words per minute. I had to insist upon the interview I had been promised. I was only 20 and had no real skills in assertiveness. I am amazed I had the wherewithal to do that.

I was put out for the wrong reasons. My irritation was a reflection of hubris.

However, that pride was probably what goaded me into speaking up; pride is not always a bad thing.

It certainly never occurred to me that this requirement applied only to women much less that I should be angry for the sake of my entire gender. Prejudice is sometimes like traveling on well-worn treads; you have no idea you’re in danger. It also feeds on the ignorance of its victims. They benignly accept their lot because they know no better.

Something similar was at work when I married and had children. I happily took a new direction to accommodate my husband’s career and the life the times presented to me. I left my writing with hardly a backward look. Back then, in the days before women had been made aware, the possibilities were not an open book to be denied or accepted. I just did what was expected by the culture.

Things are so much better now; I don’t think women younger than their mid-fifties have any idea of how ignorant most women were to their own possibilities. There was a time when we didn’t even know we had choices.

I had always wanted to sit in a forest or an office or a newsroom with a pencil in my hand. I dreamed writing, lived writing and loved writing. I wanted to write the next Gone With The Wind only about Utah instead of about the South. I had a plan that was, itself, gone with the wind.

It was the 1950s and women in that time, and especially in that place, had a notion of who they should be, could be; mostly, they got it from those around them because many of them couldn’t see the difference between society’s expectations and their own.

“You can’t be a nurse,” my mother said. “Your ankles aren’t sturdy enough.” I also was told I couldn’t be a doctor because that wasn’t a woman’s vocation.

“Be a teacher because you can be home the same hours as your children, but learn to type because every woman should be able to make a living somehow if their husband dies.”

Writing was not a consideration. It didn’t fit any of the requirements. So when I gave it up, it didn’t feel like I was giving up much.

When I began to put myself through college I took the sound advice and studied education so I’d have a profession. I made 75 cents an hour (this was, after all, the 50s!) working as a staff writer at the Salt Lake Tribune. That I was making a living writing didn’t occur to me.

I met a handsome young man and we were married. His career took precedence; that was simply how it was done. Then there were two children, carefully planned, also because that was how it should be done. By the 70s we both yearned for a career with autonomy, one where we could spend time with our children and be in command of our own lives.

My dream was a victim of the status quo. It never occurred to me to just strike out in my own direction when my husband and children needed me. The pain was there. I just didn’t recognize it so I could hardly address it and fix it.

My husband and I built a business. We raised a lawyer and a mathematician, grew in joy with a grandson, lived through floods and moves, enjoyed travel. For 40 years I didn’t write and, during that time, there were changes.
Women had more choices but more than that they had become more aware. The equipment, gears and pulleys were in place for a different view on life. In midlife I became aware that there was an empty hole where my children had been but also that the hole was more vast than the space vacated by them. I knew I not only would be able to write, I would need to write.

Then I read that those who live until 50 may very likely see their hundredth year. That meant that I might have another entire lifetime before me -- plenty of time to do whatever I wanted. In fact, it’s my belief that women in their 50s might have more time for their second life because they won’t have to spend the first 20 years of it preparing for adulthood.

One day I sat down and began to write the “Great Utah Novel.” I thought it would be a lot easier than it was. I had majored in English Lit. Writing a novel should be pretty much second nature.

It wasn’t long before I realized that it wasn’t as easy as writing the news stories I had written as a young woman. There were certain skills I didn’t have. It was a discouraging time. I might not have to learn speech and motor skills and the ABCs but there sure was a lot I didn’t know about writing.

Somewhere after writing about 400 pages (easily a year’s work), I knew something major was wrong.

I took classes at UCLA in writing. I attended writers’ conferences. I read up on marketing. I updated computer skills that had been honed in the days of the Apple II. And all the while I wrote and revised and listened and revised again. This Is The Place finally emerged.

It is about a young woman, Skylar Eccles, a half-breed. In Utah where she was born and raised, that meant that she was one-half Mormon and one-half another religion. Skylar considers marrying a Mormon man in spite of her own internal longing for a career. By confronting her own history -- several generations of women who entered into mixed marriages -- and by experiencing a series of devastating events, she comes to see she must make her own way in the world, follow her own true north.

Much of what I wrote about is my own story. If my novel were a tapestry, the warp would be real but the woof would be the stuff of imagination—real fiction.

I think I bring a unique vision to my work. Utah has a beauty and wonder of its own. The Mormons are a mystery to many. I think I tell a story about Utah in the 50s that could only be told by someone who lived in that time and place and who was a part of the two cultures—the Mormon and the non-Mormon—that make it a whole.

I am proud that I did it. I’m glad that I waited until I was 60. I believe that 40 years brought insight to the story in terms of the obstacles that women faced in those days.

I think I also really like being proof that a new life can start late—or that it is never too late to revive a dream.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson wrote her novel, This is the Place, at an age when most are considering retirement. It subsequently won eight awards. Her Harkening: A Collection of Stories Remembered (www.budurl.com/TrueShortStories has won two. Find more on her writing and author advocacy at www.carolynhoward-johnson.com. She puts out the Sharing with Writers newsletter, an interactive periodical that helps writers help writers and promote their writing at the same time. Subscribe with an e-mail to HoJoNews@aol.com.
Put SUBSCRIBE in the subject line.)
Why some guys have a dog instead of a wife

1) The later you are, the more excited your dog is to see you.
2) Dogs don’t notice if you call them by another dog’s name.
3) Dogs like it if you leave stuff on the floor.
4) A dog’s parents never visit.
5) Dogs understand that you have to raise your voice to get your point across.
6) You never have to wait for a dog; they’re ready to go 24/7.
7) Dogs think you’re funny when you’re drunk.
8) Dogs love to go hunting and fishing-- or anywhere.
9) A dog will never wake you up to ask, “If I died, would you get another dog?”
10) If a dog has puppies, you can put an ad in the paper and give them away.
11) A dog will let you put a studded collar on it without calling you a pervert.
12) If a dog smells another dog on you, they don’t get mad. They think it’s interesting.
13) Dogs love to ride in the back of a pickup truck.
14) If a dog leaves, it doesn’t take half your stuff.

Not convinced?
Try this simple test: lock your wife and your dog in the trunk of your car and drive around for several hours. When you finally open the trunk, which one is happy to see you?
Non-required reading
Murder, incest, ghosts, madness-- and jokes:
Hamlet’s got it all
by Carrie Gruman-Trinkner

He was the first EMO kid. You know, the one you see around the mall, dressed in black, hair in the eyes, uber-depressed. Conforming to the specifics of non-conformity. EMOs talk with great earnestness about life and death and worth. Self-analysis is their favorite hobby.

We all met him in high school, reading some of his and his compatriot’s more famous lines:
“To be, or not to be: that is the question.”
“This above all: to thine own self be true.”
“The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”
“A little more than kin, and less than kind.”
“Brevity is the soul of wit.”
“What a piece of work is man!”
and the often misquoted: “Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio.” (uttered while holding Yorick’s skull aloft)

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The prince who struggles with solving his father’s murder by his uncle who has married his mother…. Confused? Let’s slow down. The plot has something for everyone: murder, incest, ghosts, mystery, spies, betrayal, madness, and jokes.

So why do we fear this great tragic play? Most will probably answer “the language.” It can be a rough read for those of us who are not familiar with the 1600’s version of English. However, once you fall into the cadence and look up a few of the words, this story is intriguing, insightful and fun.

A quick plot summary: Hamlet is depressed and angry about his father’s death. His mother has married his uncle far too soon after the death. To add intrigue, the ghost of his father tells Hamlet he has been murdered by Hamlet’s uncle! Hamlet makes it his mission to find out the truth and avenge his father’s death.

He pretends to be insane and pushes away the girl he loves (Ophelia). He wrestles with his plan, trying to find a way to prove without a doubt that his uncle is guilty. His opportunity comes when a troupe of traveling actors performs at his home. Hamlet has them act out a play that reenacts the murder. When his uncle rises up, obviously upset at the murder onstage, Hamlet has his proof.

To add complications, Hamlet accidentally murders Ophelia’s dad (he thought it was his murderous uncle hiding in the room). Ophelia goes mad and ends her life…whether by suicide or not, we are left to guess. Ophelia’s brother, Laertes, returns vowing to make Hamlet pay for the deaths of his sister and father.

The final scene holds betrayal, poison, accidental death, murder and final vengeance!

While Hamlet may be a bit whiny (he talks to himself A LOT) and slow to action at times (although sometimes he is irrationally impulsive!), he is generally a likable young man caught in a horrible situation. His parents even have some of his best friends spying on him!

I recommend getting your hands on a “No Fear” translation if you struggle with the language. But once you’ve checked out the “translation” side of things, go back and read the original. The cadence of the language, the word choices, even the words Shakespeare made up, are lovely and descriptive.

And while you’re at it, pick up a copy of The Story of Edgar Sawtelle, a novel by David Wroblewski. This enchanting novel is Hamlet updated. An unlikely casting (Edgar, a farm boy who helps raise valuable dogs, is Hamlet. One of the dogs is Ophelia….) becomes absolutely right as you make your way through this wonderfully written book.

Read Hamlet. Visit Edgar Sawtelle. Either way be prepared to ache. Both are as heartbreaking as they are beautiful.

Each issue, Carrie invites us to take a second or third look at a book that may have been ruined for us in school.
Nice sketch, huh?

It’s by artist Doug Landis. Landis doesn’t have hands; he draws by holding the pencil in his mouth. What’s your excuse for not writing today? Thanks to Mary Callahan for introducing me to this guy’s work.