EDITORIAL EDICT
MARSHALL J. COOK, Editor-in-Coach

To theme or not to theme--
that’s a question?

Pulled out the Book Review section from a recent Sunday New York Times for throne room reading (usually takes about a week) and noted that it was the annual “Art Issue”-- meaning the reviews would all be of art books or criticism of art books.

“Good,” I thought. “This one won’t take long to read.”

I was happy because I read the NYT Book Review religiously, which is to say I pray I’ll be able to get through it quickly. But I often get snagged reading reviews of books I know I’ll never read, because of the good headline or lead or the subject matter.

All this got me to thinking about our discussion of having theme issues for Extra Innings. What it got me thinking about it was that, on balance, it would be a bad idea, and I’m not going to do it.

What if I had a theme that was of no interest to some of you? I’d feel terrible about that. (I’m sure nobody at the NYTBR cares what I think about their art issue or the fact that I wish I could get through it faster.)

What I would like to do, though, is share good topics for writing-- prompts, we can call them-- to stimulate some of you to share your thoughts with the rest of us. Here are some of the suggestions:

* a building or room you remember vividly;
* first car you ever drove or owned (guys all remember this, I think);
* Person you miss most;
* Person (living or dead) you’d most like to meet;
* Your favorite book(s) when you were a kid;
* The book that hooked you on reading;
* What do you want written on your tombstone?
* The headline and first paragraph of your obituary;
* An encounter with a UFO or other paranormal phenomenon (meeting Big Foot or Nessie qualifies);
* Favorite TV show of all time;
* Favorite radio show of all time;
* Favorite singer/group/band of all time;
* A movie sequel or remake you’d actually like them to make.

If more than one person submits something on the same prompt and I decide to publish them, I’ll group them together in a “theme section.”

When you do write in...
on one of these topics or anything else, don’t forget to ask for our writer’s guidelines if you haven’t already received a copy in the email. And please include your city/town and state along with your name, just as you’d like it to appear in print.

Now how about some fiction?

We now run a fair amount of poetry but almost no fiction, the major reason being length restrictions. That seems like a shame. So I’m challenging each of you to write a short short story-- no more than 150 words-- and submit it by next month’s deadline, Monday, August 24th. Any subject, any style, any point of view, but no more than 150 words. I’ll run the best of them starting with the September issue.

If you think 150 words doesn’t give you enough room to tell a story, remember Ernest Hemingway’s classic six word story:


And don’t forget Garrison Keillor’s classic, containing the “five required elements of a humor story (religion, money, family relations, sex, and mystery)” in just 12 words:

“God,” said the banker’s daughter. “I’m pregnant! I wonder whose it is?”

Summer afternoon, summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.

Henry James
YOUR RMA OF IRONY

Last month I promised you...

An example of irony that would embody one of the worst, most offensive mistakes any newspaper has ever made. I’ve kept that promise here. This sort of thing could have happened to any newspaper that pastes “sticky note” advertisements on its front page, a practice I abhor. It ain’t easy putting out a daily newspaper (or a weekly, for that matter); mistakes like this happen. And I don’t have to pay the bills to put out a print newspaper, so I can afford to be high and mighty about intrusive advertisements. I’m not singling out this newspaper, The Charleston Post Courier, for special blame. They did a fine job of covering the horrendous murder of nine worshipers, including the pastor (and state senator) Clementa C. Pickney, at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston.

Nevertheless, the day of those murders, the front page of many editions of the June 18, 2015 paper looked like this:

The sticky note ad is for a special offer at a local shooting range.

The newspaper ran this apology:
“The front-page sticky note that was attached to some home delivery newspapers on the same day as this tragedy is a deeply regrettable coincidence. We apologize to those who were offended.”
I’m a white boy from Bakersfield

Tom Crawford

So, why am I thinking about the Nazis, their systematic extermination of the Jews. My dad taught me the proper way to kill a rabbit with a galvanized steel pipe, by holding the rabbit by the hind legs, up side down and striking it behind the head, hard. Most people don’t know that rabbits will squeal if it’s not done efficiently. You want to please your father. That came first. He called Jews kikes. He believed that Essie Barren, a Jewish man and his partner at Crawford Creations, a furniture factory in Flint, cheated him. They’re all dead now, Essie and my father and I’m getting there. Father, Father Land. Could I have marched those scared souls, children, mothers, fathers, grandparents, into the showers? He was a son-of-a-bitch, my father, and I knew it even as a boy, but I loved him.
A hard lesson
Gary Busha

He put me on the roof of the shed, maybe seven feet off the ground.
I was not older than six.
*Jump,* he said. *Daddy’ll catch ya.*
And I said no, *I’m afraid.*

*C’mon son, don’t be a scairy cat. I’ll catch ya.*
*But it’s too far down.*
*Be a man,* he said.
*Look, my arms are out. I’ll catch ya, boy.*

I saw his smile,
heard his pleas to jump, arms out, ready to catch me.

And I jumped.
But at that moment, he stepped back, letting me fall almost to the ground,
my heart jumping out of my chest, lungs gasping, and just as I was about to hit the ground he caught me.

He laughed.
*See, boy, don’t ever trust nobody,*
*not even your ol’ man.*

Reprinted with author’s permission from *The Skeptic,* by Gary Busha, Wolfsong Publications, 2015
Writing lessons from my cat

The feline approach to dispensing lessons about writing is unique. My cat, Marble, a black-and-white shorthair, takes his role of mentor to this writer quite seriously.

Cat: Those flowers are mine! Several years ago, my wife, Kitty (how’s that for irony?) asked me to stop buying her flowers. Not that she dislikes flowers — quite the opposite. However, we quickly learned that the kitchen table and countertops were no obstacles to Marble’s leaping ability while in pursuit of fresh flowers; true also of the fireplace mantel.

We thought we’d won when we placed the next vase of flowers atop the refrigerator. But we hadn’t reckoned with his cleverness in using the adjacent kitchen work desk as a halfway platform in his quest for the top of the ‘fridge — albeit not without experiencing several very un-catlike, whole-body introductions to the kitchen floor. Eventually he perfected his technique and was soon happily munching the flowers.

Lesson: Perseverance pays off. No matter how great the obstacle, Marble continued improving his ability at leaping. No matter how many times he smacked the floor, he’d stagger to his paws and try again. How can I be dismayed by a plot temporarily stuck in neutral, a line with clunky meter, or a little thing like (another) rejection when I have his “catitude” as inspiration to continue leaping toward my goals?

Cat: Happiness is a clean litter box. Marble loves his litter box. He spends considerable time each day filling it with personal treasures and artfully burying and rearranging all the crusty globs and spongy cakes. And after it’s cleaned out, he happily begins the task anew.

Lesson: Whining doesn’t overcome writer’s block. When I’m trapped in that basement, which often resembles a medieval dungeon, no amount of complaining, grousing, ranting or venting gets me out until the door opens. I used to wait until my muse opened the door for me. But after listening to Marble, I’ve learned to take positive steps, detailed in many “how-to” books and articles, to turn the knob and open the basement door myself — after all, what’s the use in having opposable thumbs if I don’t use them?

So, what has your cat taught you about writing?

Interesting facts about guacamole

thanks to Mary Callahan
with additions and tampering from the editor

Avocados have the most calories of any fruit, 167 calories/ hundred grams.

Holy guacamole!

The Earth gets 100 tons heavier every day due to falling space dust.

Or maybe it’s too much guacamole?

Earth's gravity prevents mountains from being higher than 15,000 meters.

Although the presence of avocado trees may have something to do with it, too.

The moon moves about two inches away from the Earth each year.

Because it hates guacamole.

Mickey Mouse is known as "Topolino" in Italy.

Whatever you call him, he has never been seen eating guacamole.

Soldiers do not march in step when going across bridges because they could set up a vibration that could knock the bridge down.

Unless they swear off guacamole before marching.

Everything weighs one percent less at the equator.

Because guacamole is relatively unknown there.

For every extra kilogram carried on a space flight, 530 kg of excess fuel are needed at lift-off.

Which is why astronauts are on a guacamole-free diet.

The letter J does not appear anywhere on the periodic table of the elements.

Neither does it appear in “guacamole.” Coincidence? We think not.
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All-Star Columnists
Madonna Dries Christensen,
Sandy Rafter,
Rex Owens,
Jacob McLaughlin,
Esther M. Leiper-Estabrooks,
Tom Hicks,
and Jan Kent as The Word Whisperer.
First Person Singular
Pat Goetz,
Glenda,
Ron Hevey
The Writing Life
Craig W. Steele
Poetry
Tom Crawford,
Sandy Rafter,
Gary Busha,
Norma Sundberg,
Sandy Mickelson,
and The Writer’s Poet, Craig W. Steele
Reviews
Mary Callahan
John Swift
Jake McLaughlin
Scud Farcus, Jr.
Staff neptis:
Lily
Internet Browsers
Mary Callahan,
Sandy Mickelson,
Steve Born
Web Weaver
Kerrie Jean-Louis Osborne
The Masked Man
Brace Beemer
Stuntman
Yakima Canutt

Assistant undersecretary of the superior
S. Dardanelles
Coach-in-Chief:
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Next Deadline:
Monday, August 24, 2015
When upset with my brother and me, Mom would say, “Wait until your father gets home!” I never quite understood why she would make such an announcement considering we waited for my father to get home every day.

There was that one really bad day when Brother and I were quarreling all day and, of course, none of it was my fault. The day started off with him pushing me aside to be the first one into the bathroom. Then at breakfast, he ate the last of our favorite cereal and left me with Dad’s All Bran. Yuck!

Things didn’t get any better as we did the breakfast dishes. He washed; I dried. This day brought death to Mom’s favorite sugar bowl. Great grandma had given it to Mom years ago and it was in need of a good washing. Now I can’t help but question my mother’s wisdom in letting us kids do anything with that sugar bowl since it was so precious to her, but she did.

Suddenly my brother decided that he would also dry. He grabbed one handle of that bowl and I the other. We tugged back and forth, each claiming the right to dry. I was right since drying was my chore.

For some reason, we each decided to let the other dry and simultaneously let go. In a split second the bowl smashed into small pieces on the floor. Of course that triggered an argument as to who was the blame.

Mom’s reaction was not fun!

By lunch time we had argued our way through the morning. My brother gave me a verbal list of games I could or could not play. I didn’t agree and flung that old saying at him, “Who died and made you boss?” That led to a physical confrontation that got Mom’s attention.

“No radio for a week!”

We waited for her to leave and then fought violently in whispers.

“Now see what you did!”

“It was your fault, not mine.” . . .

Lunch time brought no relief. Instead of just feeding us, Mom asked what we would like. She should have known better. We hadn’t agreed on anything up to that point so why start now?

She sat silently sipping a cup of coffee until finally she was sick of our bickering. We had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with milk, her choice, not ours. We both hated P & J sandwiches. I hope he was satisfied!

After lunch we were told to go outside and play together! Like that was going to help! I wanted to play house; he refused. He decided that we would play Cowboys and Indians. Instinct told me not to do it, but when he told me that I could wear a feather in my hair and use a bow and arrow, I couldn’t resist.

It turned out that the bird feather was a filthy half-rotted one he found next to a dead bird, and the bow and arrow set was made of brittle sticks. We argued for a while, and finally he won by announcing that he wasn’t going to play with me, and I gave in.

We drew our boundary line and were each prepared to defend our territory. On my very first try, the bow snapped. He said I broke it on purpose. He got his revenge by overcoming the unarmed Indian and tying her to a tree. I stayed tied to that tree for most of the afternoon.

Then I did something really stupid; I ran home to tell Mom. Huge mistake! She turned to my brother and announced in no uncertain terms, “You will play with your sister again tomorrow and she will be the cowboy!” I knew this couldn’t be good, but what could I do? Mom had spoken!

For what it’s worth, the next day, as I had feared, the cowboy spent the afternoon tied to the tree. We continued to bicker while doing supper dishes when I pointed out that he wasn’t washing the dishes clean and he accused me of deliberately trying to get him in trouble. Mom sentenced us to an early bedtime.

Brother and I continued arguing, he on the lower bunk and I on the top.

“Do the two of you want a good spanking?” It was Dad this time. We wanted a lot of things, but a good spanking wasn’t one of them. What’s “good” about a spanking?
We had taken a moonlight trip to the secluded Wolf Sanctuary of Pennsylvania, and like most folks, we had a burning question. Stories abound about how wolves were reintroduced at Yellowstone and not only restored predator balance but also brought biodiversity to reinvigorated waterways. On this continent they enjoy life at the top of food chain. Go wolves!

There are no wild wolves where we live, the lower line running through Maine and northern Minnesota, yet minutes after we arrive, the sanctuary’s Big Pack peers out from behind double fences.

Lucas, the alpha male, lies facing us, surrounded by his family. Crossed paws indicate Lucas is in control, not concerned with us, more aware of family goings-on. Trinity, his alpha female, lies next to Lucas, surrounded by her sisters, who take care of the younger ones. On Lucas’ other side, his beta brother stands ready as pack enforcer.

Volunteers tell us when a road-kill deer is brought in the animals gather around while Lucas eats first. They consume a healthy five pounds each, three days a week. Lucas allows youngsters to play with the deer skins, wrestling and throwing and chewing them, which tickles them to no end.

The omega wolf, Scout, climbs a mound and looks beyond the crowd. A caretaker that the pack feels is likely to carry out ‘unpleasant chores’ has entered the area. Scout lets Lucas know what’s up with the caretaker.

Warmer weather has arrived, not a happy time for wolves as they become scraggily while losing winter coats. If you want to see a wolves in a state of ecstasy, they say, watch them at play on the most miserable day of winter.

Lucas’ mother, Lucky, a fourth generation sanctuary wolf, has moved to a separate enclosure that she shares with a blind wolf and now lives at a slower pace under managed care. Lucky, 15, was the alpha female until she took ill. A wolf’s lifespan, 6 to 10 years in the wild, may reach 18 in captivity.

We are uneasy around the confined wolves just as we’ve been at zoos where large animals have little space.

Volunteers repeatedly caution not to reach cameras between the fences. Wolves know how to snatch cameras and raise billy heck with them until distracted. They look so friendly though. Wouldn’t wolves befriend people who care for them day after day? These wolves are lifers, no longer able to make it in the wild. Sanctuary turnover keeps the population in the 40s in a place spread over 44 acres, but most of the wolves are in four pens close to visitors. Wolves are no longer bred at the sanctuary - not their mission.

So, what’s it like to go in among the wolves, feed them and care for them? Can these beautiful German Shepherd-like animals become pets? They can’t be that fierce - I watch a volunteer move his finger close to let a wolf lick him, a touch of tenderness. Besides, wolves tend to shy away from people.

Risky? Depends on which volunteer does the talking. One says that when you go in, “show no fear or the wolves will tear you apart,” unleashing a 1,500 pound bite, twice that of their nearest competitor. Got it. Another talks about playful wolves that tug on clothing when he goes in. Yet another was “nipped” in the hand when he went in to break up a fight. Some of the wolves have never had “human contact.” We hear quite a range of answers to the question in our minds.

We leave it that wolves are wild animals. Wolves in the wild live cohesively and responsibly in a family with well-defined roles. What happens to one member affects every member of the pack.

“Of all the native biological constituents of a northern wilderness scene, I should say that the wolves present the greatest test of human wisdom and good intentions.”

Paul L. Errington, Of Predation and Life
Mary and I were headed for the Old City in Jerusalem. Our goal for the day was shop and eat. Almost anything you want, the shops in the Old City have it. It's like going back into ancient days as you walk farther downward through the maze. Ever darker, with a ceiling covering the corridor, it leads on and on, leading to more food and more shops. We were ready for the day.

Mary loves jewelry, and when one of the shop-owners stepped over to her, commenting on the beauty of her earrings, it was the beginning of a story.

He invited her into his "open-faced shop," and while I browsed at his display cases, Mary became immersed in the beauty of his wares. I didn't pay much attention; it was between the two of them. But eventually she came away with a ring. An ancient ring, she said, that she fell in love with. As for the shopkeeper, Ahmi, he was now her forever friend.

Ahmi was short and well-built, dark-brown hair curling at his neck, and a full but nicely shaped beard, but it was his eyes that did the trick. And did I mention his smile? Pepsodent would pay money for that smile. He was clearly born to be a salesman.

Both he and Mary were content when we left and headed further down the narrow pathway, lined on both sides with small shops full of hand-carved chess sets, animals in glossy wood that you could set on your piano or coffee table and think of Jerusalem. Souvenirs by the hundreds, or was it thousands? Something for everyone. It was their livelihood. They were pros.

That evening at the convent, Mary and I were tucked in our beds, only a wall-knock between us. I was settled in and reading, and she was pouring over her treasures of the day. It was good. It was quiet. Only the sounds of the streets of Jerusalem filtered through the open window. We were fed, content, and very tired.

Suddenly there was a loud knock on my wall. An urgent knock. I heard her cry out, "Mom!"

I got out of bed, rushed to her room, and before I opened the door, I could hear her sobbing.

She sat on her bed, the bag with her treasured ancient ring on her lap. "Mom!" she cried again. "He used super glue!" And she held the ring out toward me, with the ancient jewel in her other hand. And I saw the super glue inside the ring and on the base of the 'stone.'

"I thought he was my friend!" She told me then how much the ring cost.

"I'm going back tomorrow, and he's going to give me my check back!" She was hurt and mad.

"Well, OK, but you're not going alone," I said. There had been more than one story, true or not, of women disappearing in the maze of shops, never to be seen again.

The next day, a sunny one, we headed back to the shop in the Old City, a walk for us of only 20 minutes or so. Mary was geared up, for sure. The night before, when she was reading her Bible, she found a verse that talked about 'defrauding.' She brought her Bible with.

We walked into Ahmi's shop. He smiled. Mary said, "I need to talk to you." She sat down and told him to sit next to her. He did. Once again I stayed on the fringes, but I heard her say, "Listen to this!" And after she read the scripture to him she said forcefully, "Do you know what 'defraud' means? It means to cheat. And you cheated me. And I trusted you. And I want my check back, now!"

"I can't give it back to you," he said quietly, certain of himself. "It's already in the bank."

Mary got up quickly and began walking out of the shop, but before she passed the open front, she was sobbing and began to run.

-- follow the chase to the next page
I ran after her, Ahmi close behind me. She was fast. Rushing out into the open courtyard full of tourists, she sat down on a stone bench, her face in her hands, sobbing, shaking.

I sat down next to her, my arm around her shoulders-- the she-bear protecting her young. Ahmi was beside me in seconds. For sure he had been touched. You could see it in his eyes.

"Let me sit by her," he said. Mary shook her head, hands still over her face, and I said, "You are NOT sitting by her."

Sitting at a nearby bench, he started talking to her, his voice quiet, soothing. "I'll get the check back to you," he said. "I promise. Come to me tomorrow and I'll give it to you."

I said, "We are not coming to your shop to get it. You can meet us at that restaurant at noon, and we will pick it up." He agreed. I thought, "We'll never see that guy again" as he walked away.

At noon the next day, Mary and I walked into the restaurant. Ahmi was already there, seated at a table. He handed Mary her check for $300. He told her he was sorry. And I believe he was. He invited us to come to his shop again, that he would make things right. But Mary said she didn't have time, she was headed home soon.

Months later, shortly before I also would head back to the states, I stepped into Ahmi's shop. He looked at me, smiled.

"Do you remember me?" I asked. "I'm Mary's mother. The one you cheated with the super-glued $300 ring."

"Oh, I remember," he said, hesitating, thinking. "And she cried, And I ran after her, and held her and told her I was sorry."

"No, you didn't hold her," I said. "You wanted to but she wouldn't let you."

"Yes, I remember now," he said softly.

"I just wanted to say good-bye," I said. "I leave next week for the states, and I want to thank you for bringing Mary's check back to her. She thought you were her friend, you know."

"Yes, I know," he said. "And thank you for coming to see me." He reached out his hand then, and as we shook, in his empty shop, with tourists streaming past, I felt a forgiveness, a caring. Whatever it was, it was good.

And I turned away, went out into the corridor, the maze and headed back to the convent. I never saw him again.

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**Fascinatin’ Facts**

None of which involve quacamole

Thanks to Sandy Mickelson

The average person’s left hand does 56% of the typing.

*You only thought you were right-handed.*

The cruise liner Queen Elizabeth II gets six inches per gallon of diesel.

*And you thought your car was a gas guzzler.*

The microwave was invented after a researcher walked by a radar tube and a chocolate bar melted in his pocket.

*Better check that one with snopes.com.*

The sentence: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" uses every letter of the alphabet.

*...the only thing it seems to be good for.*

The words 'race car,' 'kayak' and 'level' are the same read left to right or right to left (these are called palindromes).

*A possible cure of dyslexia?*

There are 293 ways to make change for a dollar.

*...and only 50 ways to leave a lover.*

There are more chickens than people in the world.

*...and the world is the better for it.*
**WORD FAMILIES DEPARTMENT**
in which we begin at the beginning, playing an etymological game of

“Who’s your daddy?”

**etymology**
n: Etymology: the study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history. More basically, the study of the true sense of a word.
From Greek, *etymon*, “true” or “actual” + *logia*, “study of” or “speaking of.”

**Genesis**
n: origin, creation, beginning.
n: The first book in the Old Testament *Bible* and in the Jewish *Pentateuch* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Penta means five). From Latin *genus*, “race, stock, family, kind, rank, species.” from Greek *génesis*, origin, source, from Greek *genos*, “race, kind.”

In fact, all of the following words eventually derived from *genus* and *gnos*.

**Genus**
n: in biology, kind or class. A group of animals or plants with similar traits or qualities.

**Genre**
n: a particular style, sort, or kind of art.

**Gender**
n: kind, sort, or class. When used to indicate sex, male or female.

**Engender**
v: beget, procreate, bring forth.

**Generate**
v: to bring into existence, cause to be, produce.

**Genius**
n: great originality, skill, wit, or talent. Originally “guardian spirit” and then “generative power.”

**Genial**
adj: cheerful, friendly,
from Latin *genialis*, pleasant, festive, literally “pertaining to marriage rites.”

**Genital**
adj: pertaining to sexual reproduction.

**Genitals, Genitalia**
n: reproductive organs.
From Latin genitalis, genus.
“Pregnant,” “impregnate,” even “jaunty” and “genteel” all derive from “genus.”
In walks around the neighborhood, where every house has a two-car garage, I’ve noticed that more and more people leave two cars in their driveway. That leads me to conclude that the garages are filled with stuff these folks don’t use or need, but they can’t seem to part with the items.

It’s common to cling to things for which we have an emotional, sentimental, or reverent attachment, be they our own, a loved one’s, or even someone we never knew. The longer we save things, the more difficult it becomes to discard them. A friend once told me she had been sorting family pieces, trying to decide which to keep and which to toss away, but gave up the task. “I leave it to the next generation, who will be less emotionally involved,” she said.

I’m determined to whittle away unnecessary possessions. Having only one heir, I have an idea of what she might want and what she’ll be stuck with if I don’t trim the excess. She attempts to minimize her household but, like all of us, there’s that urge to hang onto things.

In a closet, I found several pieces of Roseville pottery that belonged to my mother-in-law, Clara. I’ve used it a few times, but my daughter doesn’t want it, so I contacted a niece who well remembers her grandmother. She was thrilled to accept the merchandise because she has a granddaughter who is Clara’s namesake. The pieces will eventually go to this great-great-granddaughter.

I’m currently disposing of a vintage doll collection. When I began collecting dolls in the 1970s, my husband suggested that I probably had not had enough dolls as a child. I had the usual number (one at Christmastime); nevertheless, this collection grew, and I enjoyed their pretty faces and personalities.

Not so with a guest who once slept in a room where many of the dolls were displayed in a glass-fronted cabinet. The flirty-eyed Shirley Temple gave him the creeps. He swore her eyes followed him around the room.

So far, I’ve given family related dolls to three nieces and a nephew (it was his mother’s). They all have daughters, and one has a granddaughter, so these dolls should be around for a few more generations. But that’s only four gone out of what I will call scads, because I rarely have an opportunity to use that word. I’ll attempt to sell some of the little creatures, keeping in mind that while most have a high value according to price guides, the reality is that collectors want a bargain. Dealers want even more of a bargain because then they can ask book value and maybe fetch a nice profit. That’s business.

Here’s the thing about collections; once you start, everyone knows, and they begin adding to it. “I saw this little porcelain rabbit and thought of you,” someone might say. Then comes a birthday gift rabbit and one for Christmas and soon your house is alive with so many rabbits you will believe that inanimate animals actually do breed.

I don’t have expensive bling; what jewelry I have would be more the sentimental value type. When my oldest granddaughter was about five she noticed a ring on my finger and asked where I got it. I told her my sister had given it to me, and that if she liked I would give it to her when she was older.

She said, “No, thanks; I can get my own.”

Sigh. God bless the child who has her own.

And God bless those people up the street with a two-car garage full of possessions that no one else wants. They have plenty of their own.
I responded to a tiny ad in the local newspaper, the theater group asking for volunteers. The ad didn’t specify what skills or experience they needed, with not even a name, just a phone number. I called the number, and Patty answered. I told her I wanted to volunteer, didn’t have any live stage experience, but was willing to learn. She suggested I start by working as a stagehand. Fair enough.

My first production was the musical Camelot, one of the more popular period pieces, with well known music and a familiar story guaranteed to draw a crowd. The director was a retired drama/speech/English teacher well known in the community. She had directed for years. She imagined a very elaborate two-sided set. We’d make scene changes by rotating the set on stage.

I was assigned to stage left with two veteran stage hands. The set was elaborate, and there were many set pieces and props to get on and off stage. There were seven stage hands for the show; the normal number for our small civic theater is two.

In the hallway off stage we taped a list of set pieces, props and set changes for each scene. I learned to use a blue light in the dark to read the list. We lined up all the things needed down the hallway, leaving just enough room to squeeze between the wall and all that stuff. The two veteran stage hands wore headsets to take direction from the stage manager. I took orders.

At the first night of rehearsal I was standing in the stage left hallway watching the show. Suddenly I was shoved into the wall from behind, and an actor in a screaming whisper said, “Get out of the way.” No one told me that the actors used the same hallway to enter and leave stage.

At the next break the actor found me and screamed right into my face – “You can’t stand there idiot. You have to know the show.”

“Sorry” didn’t seem like the right response. One of the old pro stage hands came over to me and said, “Don’t worry; they’re always uptight the first night. It was my fault; I should have given you a signal.”

At that point it was clear I wasn’t contributing and may have made a mistake in volunteering.

In the second act we had to rotate a part of the set that was 16 feet long and 12 feet tall. Our practice facility is too small to practice this change, so the first time was in “tech” rehearsal. The director wanted the lights to go to black while closing the curtain, and the three of us would rush on stage and turn the set 180 degrees.

The set swayed back and forth as we tried to turn it and nearly toppled over. The director started screaming that we were taking too long. The veteran stage hand reminded the director it was the first time doing the turn and it was bound to be rough, plus they were training a newbie.

The director told the actors to take a break, and we practiced several times turning the set with the curtain open and lights on, improving with each attempt. The rehearsal started again from the top of the show.

We came to the point to go black, close the curtain, and turn the stage. A wheel got stuck, and the set wouldn’t turn. The director started screaming again to turn the stage. She ordered the curtains open, and there we were in the dark trying to figure out why the set wasn’t moving.

The director lost it. She screamed that we were incompetent and ruining her show. She said to forget moving the set, that she would spend the night re-writing the show so that the set wouldn’t need to be moved – she ordered everyone to go home. I was embarrassed. Her anger and language were astonishing.

I later learned that one theater standard is never to change the show in the last week of rehearsal, and normally the stage manager runs the show, while the director works with the actors. The two stage hands I worked with were angry because they felt they were being blamed when we hadn’t been given chance to practice and work out the kinks – the normal way of doing things.

That was the first night of rehearsal. Things only heated up after that. More back stage drama in the September issue.
Cremation is probably less fun for survivors. Burial lets them off the hook. They plant the corpse, brush their hands, and walk away. They can’t do that when they’re handed an 8-pound box of bone and ash. They’re stuck.

I can picture them circled around the dining room table asking one another, “What should we do with Dad?” If the roles were reversed, I would certainly be saying that. What you don’t want after a funeral is that box in your home. Where ya’ gonna put it? Freezer maybe, but it’s gonna take up room and there’s never enough room in a person’s freezer.

So, someone has to finally ask the question: “Where do you think he would want to be?” I think the trick here is to find someplace close, unless the estate will pay for your disposal trip. If the latter is the case, I’d start to remember all the exotic places he went, or better yet, the places he always wanted to go. “Remember how Dad always wanted to travel Europe,” I would say. I would go on to list several cities where I could dump a few of the old man’s ashes in a river.

If you can’t pass the hat among the relatives to pay your expenses, and you’re still stuck with that dusty box, then find someplace close. The best place, for passive aggressive types, and I’m not mentioning any names, would be at a sibling’s house. “He’d always talk about wanting to have more time with Olivia.” I call this the drop & run technique.

If you’re stuck, though, then any neighborhood bridge or body of water works great. Won’t take long either. You’ll be home by dinner.

I thought long and hard just in the past few days about my funeral ashes, and I think I’ve come up with the perfect disposal plan. It’s going to be an interactive bonding ritual for all of my friends and relatives, one that will leave me chuckling through eternity.

My funny, silly, beautiful wife, Jennifer, will take possession of my ashes. She will take 2” diameter by 4” tall aluminum containers and fill each with my ashes and then hand these out to the mourners at the wake with the words: “Tom asked me to ask you to please wear a smudge of these on your forehead once each year until the canister is empty.”

There are sure to be protests, but Jenny and I have that covered. For example, when a mourner says, “Well Jeepers. That would be kind of conspicuous, and I just don’t think that I can do this.” Jennifer replies with, “Yes. Tom thought about that, especially when asking you. He wants you to wear them on your forehead in the shape of an X on the Christian holy day of Ash Wednesday. There will be a lot of people with ashes on their foreheads on that day. In fact, some of them will probably be Tom’s old friends.”

Oh, no. No one walks away without a tin of Tommy at my funeral.

How’s that for a tribute? This plan is a big benefit to our environment, too. Holy Smokes, if everyone keeps dumping ashes into our lakes and streams, then no one will want to swim in them. Think of the poor fish, too. We need to stop this ash pollution now. At least here in the U.S., the European vacation trip/dump thing should be left to the Europeans.

So come on, get this request into your last will and testament now. Don’t you want to go out as one crazy cadaver? What do you say? Let’s put the ashes back into Ash Wednesday.

Medical update: “I’m alive! It’s been a difficult couple of months. I returned from the hospital last night after battling “acute kidney injury” caused by an anti-GVHD medication. They slowly took me off of it and gave me intravenous fluids and meds to cure my kidney disorder. I’m extremely exhausted from lack of food and sleep but feeling like I can get back to normal with a high protein diet and a lot of exercise.”
I decided to visit a writing group in Massachusetts with the hope that I might learn more to ease the ups and downs of my own group (see *EI* #63, Jan. 2015). The writing circle was small, so I quickly learned the member’s names: Bronson Alcott, Henry Thoreau, Ralph Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

I noted first that both groups have a similar problem under discussion: Whitman accused Thoreau of writing the same old stuff and said it wasn’t new writing, “Why must we forever hear about the same old pond; can’t you write anything fresh and different each week?” Thoreau countered by pulling a small notebook from his pocket and vehemently pointing to the pages to show that each week he wrote about a new amphibian. Alcott, a philosopher and educator, interrupted with a cough and remarked in defense of Thoreau, “We seem to hear a lot of the same old writing from you: ‘I, I, I, I.’ Personally, I assume nothing you assume.”

Next, the talk turned to choosing a suitable name for the group. Alcott proposed “Lofty Expurgated Conscientious Tidbits”; Thoreau, “Ripples Concerning Taxes and Lily Pads”; Whitman, “Leavings from the Scythe”; and Emerson, “Over the River and Through the Woods by the Over-Souls.” None of them made any sense to me. We call ourselves “The Writing Group.”

I wondered how many of the writers had been published, since my group agonizes over the matter. Emerson and Alcott seemed to prefer to write for newspapers and magazines, primarily *The Dial*, a publication for like intellectuals and associated with their exclusive Boston club — sort of *The New Yorker* without the cartoons. Whitman disclosed that he had worked at various newspapers and eventually decided to self-publish his work, *Leaves of Grass*. The others laughed when he said he had printed 795 copies and that there was one poem, “Song of Myself,” with 1,136 lines.

No one writer seemed to want to monopolize the group, as often happened with my own. They all wanted to do so. “It’s *Saturday Night Live*, and here are your hosts: Bronson Alcott in the role of Meg from his daughter’s ‘Little Women,’ Henry Thoreau performing the ‘Chicken Dance,’ Walt Whitman harmonizing with himself on a tune from ‘Long Island Jersey Boys,’ and Ralph Emerson singing from the ‘Unitarian Book of Mormon.’”

I asked whether any of them had an agent and learned about divine messages, pure mind, and inner spirit. I think the closest my group will come to those is if we engage a guest speaker with a crystal ball or I stop at a store and buy a ouija board, and they will be for laughs.

The day was warming and tempers were flaring over the state of spirituality when Thoreau suggested that the writers take a dip in Walden Pond. The men shed their clothes as they headed for the water — all except Emerson, who remarked, “No biographer of mine is ever going to write about the day I went swimming in my shorts.” Is there a writing group in existence without a Super Ego?

None of them mentioned writer’s block. No one said writing could be difficult, nor that they couldn’t think of a thing, nor that they were stuck. They all seemed so erudite, I wondered why there were no stack of papers before each one. Just then, it dawned on me that we had been meeting for almost two hours and not one of them had read a word they had written. They all had writer’s block.

I left with an invitation to return for the next meeting. Whitman called out, “Please come back. We still haven’t decided upon the name of our group.”
I never heard of chaga till my friend Launa Keenan showed me a chunk. It was squatly, fist-sized, musty, and brown. Part of it looked singed. I was puzzled plus horrified. What could this stuff be good for? Launa informed me that if you brewed such fungus —after prying it off a birch tree’s crotch—the resulting liquid would fix what ails you. I had my doubts, but she insisted that Russians from time immemorial have used chaga to cure colds, flu, and even cancer.

You steep it like tea and drink it. The stuff does taste rather like tea and has a similar color. I started as a Doubting Thomas, yet last winter neither Peter nor I, sipping it daily, caught any hint of cold or flu.

If you live far from birches, the Internet has numerous sites where suppliers urge you to buy some. A fist-size chunk costs about $30, but can be brewed numerous times—up to a year, one source claims—if allowed to dry after each use.

Off-setting to look at? True, chaga is a punky fungus. Yet this odd remedy is being studied by researchers as a cure, and the results seem good.

I felt bound to write a poem to thank Launa, but I should add that first I searched for chaga poetry and found none, so here goes:

**A chaga chant**

It grows in the midst of a big old birch,
But finding some may take quite a search,
Yet it boosts health, for this lumpy fungus
Proves a wondrous cure-all put among us.

It surely looks strange, and seems quite odd,
But chaga is definitely good for the bod!
I like mushrooms, plus chaga surpasses
Alcoholic spirits we slug from shot-glasses.

Since chaga grows high, one often must climb
To reap the large chunks that prove sublime,
Next boil and steep it till the color of coffee
Which is also the hue of sweet, rich toffee.

Yes, far into the woods go comb and roam
Deep in the wilds of your North Woods home.
Take a small saw too, and be ready to climb,
Plus of course be careful, so take your time,
And if you’re lucky, you just might locate
This natural remedy that proves first-rate.
Go seek out a birch grove as I end this saga
Hoping you reap your own source of chaga!

This is far, far from immortal verse.
Poems written on set subjects are called “occasional” and usually honor a newsworthy event like the birth of a prince, a presidential election, or a notable death. Of course, any occasion can inspire. The fact that chaga exists, and I had never heard of it before makes it special. Wikipedia, incidentally, describes the stuff as belonging to the Hymenochaetaeae family-phew!-- what a word for a spelling bee!

Chaga is being tested to see if it can really neutralize auto-immune diseases and inhibit cancer. I hope it’s true! Pretty good for a lowly fungus among us. I jotted a limerick-- not quite as limber as I’d like, but we can’t always be perfect.

Hear these words in praise of chaga
In this short, but grateful saga:
The stuff rarely fails
To cure all that ails:
And indeed it may make you go ga-ga.

Next I added

**Health costs $$$**

You can buy the stuff in capsules;
You can purchase lumps in chunks,
But I warn you, it’s expensive
For such brownish, blackish hunks.
Brews, tinctures, extracts, skin creams
--Try whatever form suits best--,
If you want to cure what ails you,
Chug a jug of chaga and put it to the test.

Is it the cure-all of our dreams
From what looks rough and hard?
Are folks going to dire extremes
On a fungus that appears charred?
Ah, “the proof is in the pudding”
--Is a long plus time-honored cliché--
So if you like to sip brews of chaga,
Why, just keep right on, I say!

Don’t be averse to doggerel verse. If I’d found examples by others on this fungus among us, I’d have passed them on, honest — but as is, I just had to make do!
In The Digs
Norma J. Sundberg

Searching frantically beneath piles of paper, writing materials, Exploring diligently through carefully arranged chaos, for a specific item only to find flotsam and jetsam, flint stone or potsherds, This archeological find just won't be discovered. Will it materialize while searching for something else beneath, within this limited Labyrinth? If buried forever, slipping deeper into the chasm, to become fossilized, will it wait to be discerned a century from now, Its value appreciated? Or found eons hence hidden in a cave, in an ancient urn like the elusive fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls? It might help in the search, To remember where I left my glasses.

Fascinatin’ Facts

trigger alert: some of this may be TMI.
Thanks to Sandy Mickelson

There are only four words in the English language which end in "dous": tremendous, horrendous, stupendous, and hazardous.

There's no Betty Rubble in the Flintstones Chewables Vitamins.

Tigers have striped skin, not just striped fur.

TYPEWRITER is the longest word that can be made using the letters only on one row of the keyboard.

England's famous prime minister Winston Churchill was born in a ladies' room during a dance.

Women blink nearly twice as much as men.

Your stomach has to produce a new layer of mucus every two weeks; otherwise it will digest itself.

*don't say I didn't warn you.*
Childhood cocoon
Sandy Mickelson

What's that song? she yelped
as fingers flew to train the dot upon the line.
Songs, to me, are all alike, unless they make me cry.
But not to her.
To her come memories that set her childhood pride on edge.
How come, she asks, was I the fattest kid in class?
A question without answer.
“I always had that problem!”
Alas, and so she did.
“And I was ugly, too!”
With my arms around her in one rare moment of shared content,
I tried to answer.
Only laughed.
And when that laugh subsided and she again confided
she'd always had that problem, I laughed again.
Her double problem seems, perhaps, in later years
far afield from frown and worry.
Did they know back then? Could they have guessed?
Did they know that chunky little tomboy
would send shivers of delight, and rightly so?
For who can find a butterfly
with the cocoon?
EXTRA INNINGS
ALL-STAR REVIEWERS

MARY DELIVERS
MARY CALLAHAN, Longmont, CO

A story of lives redeemed in post-bombing Oklahoma City

The Long and Faraway Gone: A Novel by Lou Berney, Published by HarperCollins (2015)

Many of us have a list of “Where were you when …?” memories. The younger you are, the shorter the list. Sadly, mine includes assassinations (JFK, RFK, MLK), the explosion of a space capsule, and 9/11. (It also includes the first footprints on the moon, to balance things out.)

Also on that list is the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, which left 168 people dead and nearly 700 injured. For those who call OKC their home town, the effect of that catastrophe lingered, reminding people for years afterward that evil, manmade deeds can rip cities and lives apart, even on a seemingly lovely day.

Post-bombing OKC is the backdrop of Lou Berney’s story. The Murrah bombing was still fresh in the minds of the book’s main characters, Wyatt and Juliana, when each suffered a personal catastrophe that crippled their social and emotional development for years after. This coincidence, as well as a couple of incidental meetings, tie their parallel stories together in a way that enhances the pleasure of reading this book.

Long and Faraway Gone begins 20 years after Wyatt and Juliana had experienced a shocking tragedy. They are both in their forties and have never achieved the personal and professional success their capabilities would have predicted. Wyatt, then 17, had a summer job as a ticket-taker and factotum at a movie theater. The job was dreary, and the boss was a jerk, but Wyatt and the other teenagers enjoyed themselves, as teenagers do – playing tricks on the boss, stealing tickets and bartering them for booze or music tapes, climbing over fences to swim nude in apartment house pools, and so forth.

In particular, Wyatt enjoyed getting close to a couple of the girls and developing a relationship with one of the older teens, who admired his charm, confidence, and knowledge of music.

One night, two masked robbers broke into the theater, stole the cash box full of the week’s earnings, and terrorized the kids and the boss. They executed everyone … except Wyatt. For 20 years after, Wyatt was haunted by the question, “Why was I left alive?” His survivor’s guilt sapped his energy and prevented him from forming close relationships.

Juliana was a little younger when her tragedy occurred. As a twelve year old with an absent father and an absent-minded mother, she adored and clung to her beautiful and bold seventeen-year-old sister, Cassandra. One afternoon the sisters go to the downtown amusement park. As night comes on, they are ready to go home, but Cassandra leaves Juliana alone “for just a few minutes” and is never seen or heard from again. Thereafter, Juliana’s life is filled with loneliness and self-doubt. How could her sister just leave her there when Juliana needed her so very much?

The 20-years-later action begins when Wyatt, a private investigator, returns to OKC from San Diego to delve into a complex murder case. The details of tragedy in his past return and become more vivid the longer he stays in town. He starts asking himself questions and remembering details that he had not thought of as a teenager. The progress of the current murder case and the earlier movie theater massacre add momentum to each other. Wyatt is able to return to San Diego and his friends there in a hopeful frame of mind.

Get Juliana’s story, next page.
Juliana got through junior college and works in hospitals and emergency rooms when we meet her as an adult. She is alone, depressed, dissatisfied, and continually depleted by just getting through each day. Her “hobby” is immersing herself endlessly in mementos and newspaper stories of her vanished sister, asking herself the same questions that have stuck in her mind for 20 years.

When a new memory occurs to her, she gradually shakes off her stupor as she realizes the new light it casts on all that she thought she knew about her sister’s disappearance. Gradually, Juliana feels more and more able to reclaim her life.

I was favorably impressed by the quality of Lou Berney’s writing – both spare and evocative -- and by the thought processes that must have gone into designing the plot and creating the characters. The setting of personal tragedy on a platform of a public catastrophe worked well to connect me to the characters as they emerged from their 20-year-old cocoons to face the possibilities of a real life. I look forward to reading Berney’s other novels.

Lou Berney is the Edgar-nominated author of the novels The Long and Faraway Gone (William Morrow, 2015), Whiplash River (William Morrow, 2012), and Gutshot Straight (William Morrow, 2010). His short stories have appeared in publications such as The New Yorker and The Pushcart Prize anthology, and he’s written feature screenplays and created TV pilots for, among others, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Focus Features, ABC, and Fox. You can visit him at: www.louberney.com. Look at the “Wall of Noir” on his webpage.

**SWIFT TAKE ON BOOKS**

**JOHN SWIFT**

**Read one, then read two more**

*Some Luck*, by Jane Smiley,
Knoff Doubleday, 2014

Don’t know whether you read Jane Smiley much, but I just finished this first of her trilogy on the implementation of tractors and anhydrous ammonia (and possibly other stuff) for Iowa farmers over the last century.

Even though she has won the Pulitzer, I’ve been off and on with her writing. (Good on *A Thousand Acres*, boo on *Moo.*) However, if the other two books are anything like *Some Luck*, America is in for a nostalgic awakening, or something like it, probably even better.

She has some great stuff in here on crop rotation and a few riffs on “How you gonna keep ’em down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree.”

*Coach’s note: The second volume in Smiley’s ambitious Last Hundred Years trilogy, Early Warning, is already out.*

**Baseball’s Sad Lexicon**

**Franklin Pierce Adams**

These are the saddest of possible words:

"Tinker to Evers to Chance."

Trio of bear cubs, and fleeter than birds,

Tinker and Evers and Chance.

Ruthlessly pricking our gonfalon bubble,

Making a Giant hit into a double—

Words that are heavy with nothing but trouble:

"Tinker to Evers to Chance."
I enjoy many online entertainers. From The Cinema Snob to Red Letter Media, lots of people make great content online. One of my favorites is 5 Second Films. Based in Los Angeles, they make short films that are only five seconds long. They had a new film every weekday for five years, and during the fifth year, they launched a Kickstarter to make a feature length film called Dude Bro Party Massacre III, based on one of their short films. They needed $200,000 and got $240,000. So they got to make their dream project and now, just a little over two years after the Kickstarter was launched, it's finally out.

I've been a fan of 5 Second Films since 2011, when I discovered them through Patton Oswalt on twitter. I immediately loved their bizarre, twisted, and sometimes dark sense of humor. I'm really impressed how funny their shorts can be in just 5 seconds. So to see what they can do with a feature film is very exciting.

Dude Bro Party Massacre III is a tribute to 80s slasher flicks that many of the 5SF members loved when they were teenagers. They decided to call this the third film in a series because that's usually where things get really bizarre and insane.

They recap the nonexistent first two films in the first five minutes of this movie. After Brock (Alec Owen) is killed by Motherface (Olivia Taylor Durdley), his twin brother Brent (Owen, again) must investigate his murder and gain the trust of the Delta Bi Theta fraternity that Brock was a part of. After the Deltas' senior prank goes horribly wrong, they must stay at the Old Sorority House by the lake. The police chief (Patton Oswalt), who is also a cult member, creates a plan for Motherface to murder the Deltas.

Using every bit of their Kickstarter funds wisely, 5SF has made a comedy that puts many modern Hollywood comedies to shame. This film had me in tears twice, both times involving Brian Firenzi's Officer Sminkle, and provided lots of other great laughs throughout. The humor is so detailed and well written, I may have missed some jokes or visual gags.

Direction, writing, acting, and effects-- it's all great. The movie does a perfect job of capturing that 80s horror movie feel.

I enjoy that this movie has a gender reversal, where the boys are sexually objectified and terrorized instead of the girls.

With great attention to detail, 5SF was able to amplify everything they were able to do in their shorts.

The movie is made to look as if it were recorded off a VCR and is the single remaining copy of the film.

The movie has brief commercial breaks that are little short films of their own.

They're very funny and don't interrupt the flow of the actual feature.

Alec Owen is a great lead as Brent. The Delta Bi members are all very funny and bring a distinct personality to each character. Paul Prado, in particular, as Turbeaux, steals a lot of the scenes he's in. I most enjoyed Officer Sminkle, played by 5SF creator, Brian Firenzi. He and his girlfriend, Maria Del Carmen, share their scenes together and play off each other very well. She plays Sminkle's partner and covers up her English accent very well. Olivia Taylor Durdley is really good as Motherface. Kelsey Gunn is also really funny as one of the Delta Bi member's girlfriends, Samantha. There are some great cameos as well. Patton Oswalt is great as the chief, Greg Sestero and Andrew WK play Delta Bi members, and even Larry King shows up in the opening recap.

Dude Bro Party Massacre III is one of my favorite comedies of the decade. If you enjoy bizarre, twisted humor and fun throwbacks to 80s slasher movies, I highly recommend this film to you.
MOVIE CLIP
SCUD FARCUS, JR., Stoughton, WI

An ant-sized thumbs up for Ant Man

Ant Man, directed by Peyton Reed, starring Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas, Walt Disney Studios
Ant Man. It wasn’t bad.

Paul Rudd does a passable impression of a troubled super hero trying to salvage his relationship with his daughter while navigating the difficult waters of life as an ex-con. The movie starts with his release from prison and his search for work. We learn that he’s a reformed cat-burglar/electronics wizard with a Robin Hood streak. He stole from a company that was overcharging its clients and deposited the money back into the accounts of the swindled.

The only work he can find is as a clerk at a Baskin Robbins, and he’s quickly fired from that job when his boss discovers his checkered past. In walks Michael Douglas to give him a second chance – as the Ant Man.

The movie is a little slow at times. I could do without another montage of our hero learning to fight from a master, slowly gaining experience with each cut scene, but it seems to be the nature of origin stories to be chained to such clichés.

Still, Rudd delivers his lines with aplomb, there’s a decent amount of comedy and tension mixed throughout the film, and as a whole it worked for me. Thumbs up, but not a big thumbs up in the league of the first Iron Man movie or even Winter Soldier territory.

Gems from the nay-sayers almanac
thanks to Steve Born

“There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will.”
--Albert Einstein, 1932

“We don’t like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.”
--Decca Recording Company on declining to sign the Beatles, 1962

“This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”
--Western Union internal memo, 1876

“Reagan doesn’t have that presidential look.”
--United Artist exec, rejecting Reagan as lead in the 1964 film The Best Man

“I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.”
--Thomas Watson, chairman, IBM, 1943

“There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home.”
--Ken Olson, President, chairman, founder, Digital Equipment Corp (DEC), 1977

“The world potential market for copying machines is 5,000 at most.”
--IBM- to the eventual founders of Xerox, 1959

“X-rays will prove to be a hoax.”
--Lord Kelvin, President of the Royal Society, 1883
The Glory and the Shame
Sandy Rafter

blue robin’s eggs in a fallen nest
on the playground,
baseball for the boys
and jump rope for the girls
at recess time,
the World Series blasting
from the teacher’s radio
on the window ledge
while we tagged outside,
a pole by the chalkboard
with the red, white, and blue,
eraser claps against the building
because I loved my teacher,
songs at our Friday
assembly in the gym,
writing my name in cursive
ink spot proud,
reciting spelling words
at home to my Mom,
sailing with the Pilgrims
through waves to shore,
soaring with the Wrights
at Kitty Hawk,
reading New York history —
savage Mohawks and Iroquois,
so proud Nathan Hale
and Paul Revere
Washington to be free
and American,

but I never wore yellow
on Thursdays
and didn’t know why
’til my girlfriend told me
it meant I wasn’t queer,
and I snickered with my friends
when the Catholics
crossed themselves
when they heard a siren,
and we snubbed the Polack girls
whose parents worked
in the factory with ours,
and the only Negroes
I heard about
was eating Brazil nuts
which were Nigger’s toes,
and George Washington Carver
I remembered because
of peanut butter cookies.
I liked school a lot.
Recently I watched and listened, against my will, as a local meteorologist spent approximately seven minutes and well over 1,000 words to say “There is no longer a tornado in this thunderstorm.”

In the course of this discourse, he must have said the word “tornado” 50 times (I may be exaggerating; that’s more than seven tornadoes a minute. But it seemed like at least 50), mixing in the phrase “tornadic activity” just to show off. (That’s weather whiff equivalent of “precipitation event” for rain. And don’t get me started on “dew point,” “heat index,” and “wind chill factor.”)

To compound this felonious assault on my patience and my sense and sensibility concerning proper usage of our beloved mother tongue, this special “Storm Mode Coverage” was interrupting my favorite show. (“Wheel of Fortune,” if you must know. I be lovin’ my wheel!)

We wound up getting maybe 16 drops of rain from this massive storm front, by the way, although nearby areas were hard hit with wind and rain.

Am I against the tele warning us of impending dangerous weather conditions? Of course not. If the warnings saved even one life in a decade, they would be worth the inconvenience.

Then just what am I railing against?
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

A truck backing through my family room when “our regularly scheduled programming” is finally restored to us (too late! I even missed the bonus round!)? That is annoying, but more annoying is the “graphic crawl” (television has taken to calling words on the screen the “graphic,” even though they are text, not graphics) reminding me every few seconds that two adjacent counties are still at high risk for the storm that no longer contains tornadic activity.

If there’s a mugging in town, the local news reports it-- with a breathless on-the-scene reporter standing in the dark, in front of the familiar yellow crime-scene tape in an otherwise completely deserted location-- to assure us that, although police have no suspects, they’re sure it was a random act and that there’s no danger to the community, although, well, yes, the “alleged assailant” is “still at large.”

How very reassuring.

If there’s a fire, we’re washed away in it. If there’s a mugging, we’re reminded to keep our windows and doors locked at all times.

If there’s no fire or flood or assault or other mayhem nearby but good footage from something juicy in Paducah, Kentucky, we’ll see that instead.

The point! Please come to the point!
Okay, here’s the point. Watching television news distorts our sense of reality.

If TV news is our major source of information about our world, then that world becomes an endlessly violent, dangerous place to live. Studies show (no, really, they do, and they’re legitimate studies) that folks who watch TV news regularly tend to overestimate the amount of violent crime in their vicinity, often wildly so. While violent crime rates are dropping in many areas, the people who live there have the perception that it is increasing, if not ubiquitous. (That’s me showing off. It means “everywhere present,” as in, “tornadic activity is ubiquitous in Dane County.”)

So let’s get a grip, folks. Keep things in perspective. The world is not as it seems on the nightly news. Oh, the lion isn’t exactly lying down with the lamb, not just yet, but not everyone’s out to kill us, either. and not every cloud contains tornadic activity. Some might even bear a silver lining.

Think I’ll turn off the tele and take the dog for a walk.
Good morning Coach -
Just finished reading the July issue from beginning to end - found the "extra Lily" at the bottom of page 21, I'm pretty sure.

I also got a major hoot out of the "Senior Humor" story [Gus Knollenberg, last issue] about the author's sister asking if he had farted, and then acknowledging "well, then it must have been me" - I could just hear her.

And I found what I think is a letter from my old buddy Randy Skoog, who I always fondly referred to as "The Skoogmeister" - I copied it and am going to email him to check on it!!

Finally, I loved your reference to Roger Miller, and his rhyming “purple” with “syruple” in one of his WONDERFUL silly songs!!

Pat Laux, Neenah, WI
Coach's note: You really read thoroughly, Pat! And you're a fellow Roger Miller fan! No wonder I like you so much! (There, now, you made me use up a full days supply of exclamation points.) Yep, that's Lily on page 21, with her doddering old Grandpa Coach, sharing some great literature.

To you, the coach, editor, poet, and lover of good words,

OK ok ok I can't read anymore! Got to page l9 and had to stop... had already gathered in laughter that had me doubled over my keyboard. It was the 5 yard match throw that got me started. [Mark Gaedtke] I just did a belly laugh and needed it badly! And then the funeral. [Sandy Rafter]

Wow, now that is an idea. not so very funny but endearing as heck as I too would not mind being built into a castle with water to make paste of me to build the turrets!

...the Phyllis Diller list was awesome. ...

Was good to see Tom Hicks back, but didn't expect this new writer-person that said such neat things about kids growing up these days. When I asked my grandson (Kurt is l9) about something he was looking up on his cell-phone, he said confidently, "Gramma, there is more information in this phone than there was in the rockets they sent up in space years ago."

I truly was surprised at the 'radical' change in Tom Hicks subject matter. From fake homeless (one of my favorites) in order to write an accurate story (he ran holding his pants up I think in that story.. to concern about the kids growing up today in this confusing society. I commend him!

The snails. [Tom Crawford] About the 5th line in, you could darn a sock quicker... and I thought, does this generation even know what that means? My Mom used to put the sock on a light bulb to darn (ie mend) the hole worn no doubt in the heel. Well, I don't know how to do the zillion things on the computer the kids can do either.

All for now. time to sign out for the day. Thank you thank you for all the deep thought you put into the EI that I just perused. The people I have met and re-met (good to see Gary Busha again!) made my day.

Blessings.

Pat Goetz, Knoxville, Tennessee

Mary has a book to suggest
I will recommend a great book our library is reading-- Shadow Divers, by Robert Kurson. It’s a true adventure of two Americans who risked all to solve one of the last mysteries of WWII, Robert Kurson recounting the discovery of a WWII German U-boat 60 miles off the coast of New Jersey in 1991. My husband and I both read it and listened to the audio.

Mary Post, LaCrosse, WI

Esther uses Wiki to solve the “southpaw” poser
Coach, you asked about the origin of the term ‘southpaw.’ Wikipedia states that it comes from baseball slang of the 1880’s. Baseball diamonds were often arranged so the batter faced east to avoid looking into afternoon sun. The pitcher’s left hand, or paw, would be on the left side which I suppose would be the south side. I found the discussion a bit complex to follow easily, but I never was very good at directions! (Peter calls directions – destructions)

There was far more info than I can easily summarize, but many speculations and declarations to choose from. It’s one of those read them all and take your pick, I guess!!

Esther M. Leiper-Estabrooks
Coach's note: Esther and Wiki are quite right about “Southpaw,” meaning “left-hander.”
COACH’S BULLPEN BRIEFS

Your keyboard is a writer’s best friend

Writers, how well do you know your keyboard? Here’s a quick quiz to find out. Answers appear at the bottom of the column.

1) Why is the most commonly used keyboard configuration called “qwerty”?
2) Why is the qwerty keyboard laid out the way it is (instead of, for example, in simple alphabetical order?
3) What is the only U.S. state name that can be typed on one row of keys?
4) What is the longest common word that can be typed on the first row of letter keys?
5) What is the name of this diacritical mark: ˜.
6) What are the four types of keys?
7) How many keys does the U.S. IBM PC keyboard have?

A million dollar idea

Spotted on Facebook

How about a smoke alarm that shuts off when you yell, “Shut up! I’m just cooking!”

My pastor actually told this joke

Q: How can you tell the difference between people praying in a church and people praying in a casino?
A: The ones in the casino really mean it.

One if by land and two if by sea?

In that same June 28th issue of the NYT Sunday Book Review that I mostly skipped (see front page editorial edict this month), I did pause to note this happy coincidence.


Plutonic update

Don’t cry for Pluto, recently downgraded from “planet” to “dwarf planet” (Doc, Sleepy, Dopey, and Pluto?). Know that it is the largest known object in the Kuiper belt and the largest and second-most massive known dwarf planet in the Solar System (behind Ceres) and the ninth largest and tenth-most massive known object directly orbiting the Sun.

What’s in a name?

As regular readers no doubt know, I’m a baseball fan (as in “fanatic”). Thus I was most interested when Sandy Rafier sent me the complete schedule for her hometown Binghamton Mets of the AA Eastern League. Other teams in the league include the Erie SeaWolves, the New Hampshire Fisher Cats, the New Britain Rock Cats, the Portland (Maine) Sea Dogs, the Richmond Flying Squirrels, and the Akron RubberDucks.

Akron probably thought it had retired the trophy for “strangest name” in the league, had, that is, until the New Britain Rock Cats franchise picked up and moved 12.5 miles down the road to Hartford, lured by a spiff new $56 stadium, and rechristened themselves... are you ready for this... The Hartford Yard Goats.

Yard Goats?
Yes, Yard Goats.

A yard goat, in case you’re not familiar with railroad terminology, is the locomotive that switches cars from one track to another in the railroad yard. The name pays homage to the Hartford and New Haven Railroad.

Fans were not placated.


Really? I mean, seriously?”


Keyboard Quiz answers

1) “qwerty” renders the first five alphabetic keys on the qwerty keyboard.
2) The qwerty keyboard came into common usage to slow typists down. They were constantly getting letters jammed on the early typewriters.
3) Alaska.
4) “typewriter” (unless you can come up with a longer one. This answer appears elsewhere in the newsletter, btw).
5) Tilde.
6) Alphabetical, numeric, functional, and special.
7) 104.
COACH’S BULLPEN BLURBS

KIT offers writers opportunity and challenge

Kid’s Imagination Train e-magazine is sponsoring a “Joliday” writing contest. Create a holiday story under 500 words for children ages 4 - 8. The entry fee is $10, and the deadline is October 1, 2015. The winner will receive $100, and the story will be published in the December 2015 issue of KIT. The guidelines can be found http://www.kidsimaginationtrain.com/p/contest_30.html on the homepage of KIT.

Joan publishes great book for kids

Joan Hughes has published a children’s book with a strong Christian message. In Upside-Down Clown (see picture of cover, top right), young Jason figures the shiny new bicycle he got from his mom and dad for his seventh birthday was the greatest present he ever received. Then when Jason takes a tumble from that bike, neighbor Gerald Taylor comes to his rescue, and they embark on a friendship that produces an even greater gift, as his friend introduces Jason to the Bible. Joan tells the story well, and the illustrations are grand.

Joan’s a native of Mineral Point, WI, where she raised her two sons and three stepchildren, and now resides in Monroe, WI with husband Don and dog Sadie. This is her second book. Upside-Down Clown is available from www.littlecreekpress.com and, of course, from Amazon.

Coach’s pick-to-click

Field of Blood, by Denise Mina, 2005

The bloody murder of three-year-old “Baby Bryan” Wilcox is the saddest and the biggest story to hit the local newspapers in years. For Paddy Meehan, an overweight young woman “copyboy” for the Scottish Daily News, it represents a chance to prove herself as a reporter and to escape the scorn of the “arseholes” she works with.

“Paddy” proudly shares her name with convicted felon Patrick “Paddy” Meehan, a career safecracker convicted for the murder of an elderly woman during a housebreaking. The real life case was a notorious miscarriage of justice, which Mina skillfully weaves into the present-day Paddy’s struggle to prove that the cops have once again nabbed the wrong person.

A few last gems from the nay-sayers almanac

thanks to Steve Born

“Everyone acquainted with the subject will recognize it as a conspicuous failure.”
--Henry Morton, president, Stevens Institute of Technology, on Edison’s light bulb, 1880

“The horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty-- a fad.”
--Pres, Michigan Savings Bank, advising Henry Ford’s lawyer not to invest in Ford Motors.

“Television won’t last because people will soon tire of staring at a plywood box every night.”
--Darryl Zanuck, producer, 20th Century Fox, 1946

“[I]t will make war impossible.”
--Hiram Maxim, inventor of the machine gun.

“There will never be a bigger plane built.”
--anon Boeing engineer, of the 246, a twin engine plane holding 10 people.

“How, sir, would you make a ship sail against the wind and currents by lighting a bonfire under her deck? I pray you, excuse me, I have no time to listen to such nonsense.”
--Napoleon Bonaparte, when told of Robert Fulton’s “folly,” the steamboat, 1800s

“It’ll be gone by June.”
--Variety Magazine on Rock n’ Roll, 1955

and now, because you wouldn’t forgive me if I didn’t, it’s time for you moment with Lily...
Double adorable

Lily (on the right) with her Florida cousin MacKenzie at the Fourth of July celebration at Grandma’s house.