The purpose of being a serious writer is not to express oneself, and it is not to make something beautiful, though one might do those things anyway. Those things are beside the point. The purpose of being a serious writer is to keep people from despair. If you keep that in mind always, the wish to make something beautiful or smart looks slight and vain in comparison. If people read your work and, as a result, choose life, then you are doing your job.”

The Way Things Were

People used to tell me
How they thought it was
Way back then.
Used to tell me
How they imagined it.
And I tried to say
It wasn’t like that.
We were men
Flesh and blood
And we played baseball in the sunshine.
We hit doubles off the wall,
Slid hard into second base.
We had fights, and we made love.
We sang songs and prayed on Sundays.
Before games.
We were real. Yeah. We laughed and cried.
We felt pain. And we felt joy.
There was a lot of wrong with the world.
But we weren’t sad, man.
We had the times of our lives.
I told them that for fifty years.
They heard. But they didn’t listen.
They listened. But they didn’t hear.

Buck O’Neil, as quoted by Joe Posnanski in The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O’Neil’s America.
Why I write
I started to write about five years ago. I was at a crossroads in my life and, quite frankly, not sure what choice I was going to make. I remember thinking to myself, "This may not end well. I want to take some time to write to my children and tell them who I am, how I love them, and about the life I had tried to live." So I began to write...

I still cannot explain what happened next. Something happened every time I sat down to write. It was magical and otherworldly the way my fingers would start typing, telling me stories about times and places that I had forgotten and how I actually felt about some things. When I wrote I was safe and strong and smart and insightful, and connected to the world around me. From that moment to this one, I have learned that there is so much power in each of our stories. We just need to be willing to share our experiences as honestly as we are able to. I believe that when we are able to share from that tender, hurt, and haunted place inside all of us, that it is at that particular place where we are able to experience genuine...connection and identification and validation and reformation and transformation and revelation and ultimately...Salvation~

Introducing our new columnist
Lisa Partee

Our other All-Star Columnists
Madonna Dries Christensen, 
Rex Owens,
Ron Hevey
Esther M. Leiper-Estabrooks, and Jan Kent
as THE WORD WHISPERER.

Reviewers
Books: John Swift
Movies: Jacob McLaughlin

Humorologists
Sandy Rafter
Ed Pahnke

Poets
Pernetta Deemer
Marshall J. Cook
Sandy Rafter,
Gary Busha
Tom Crawford,
and THE WRITER’S POET, Craig W. Steele

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Ancestral truths
When you dig within the roots of your family tree, don’t be surprised by what shakes loose from the branches. The gnarled undergrowth fleshes out long-buried tales—both pleasant and disturbing.

The latter is what veteran journalist Karen Branan encountered on her quest for the facts behind stories handed down orally by her elders. When she and her sister were children, their father told them he’d unintentionally killed a black woman when he struck her and she fell and died from injuries. Although Branan later learned from research that the woman hadn’t died, her alcoholic doctor father continued to claim he’d killed her. (Sometimes it was a man he said he killed.)

*Branan’s book, The Family Tree, revolves around her maternal ancestors’ involvement in a 1912 lynching in the small Georgia town where she’d grown up. After a white man was murdered at a black woman’s home, the woman and two black men were taken into custody—for their safety. A black minister was also confined with them in the local jail.*

The murdered man was the nephew of Branan’s great-grandfather, the town sheriff. Her grandfather was a deputy at the time and later sheriff. On the day the four innocent black persons were lynched, the sheriff was conveniently out of town, thereby sanctioning the deed. His son, the deputy, did nothing to deter the mob from carrying out its plan.

When Branan questioned her ninety-something grandmother about this, her mother warned, “You can’t believe everything she says. She embroiders, you know.” Branan’s mother was openly racist and a hidden drug addict until her teenaged daughter caught her plunging a needle into her arm.

Branan discovered that she had black and mulatto ancestors on both sides of her family, slaves and slave-owners, her “rainbow family” (which includes a biracial grand-daughter). Classified as biography, the narrative sometimes becomes confusing, with too many names and relationships to keep straight.

*I extrapolated the nugget of the book, the lynching, and envisioned it on film, in the vein of John Grisham’s *A Time To Kill*—evocative of time and place, with fully realized characters we would come to know through dialogue and action rather than from the author’s voice.*

As far back as childhood, Branan stated she wanted to be a writer, and she first dabbled in fiction. One of the childhood scenes she described brought me a flashback of Scout Finch in Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird.* Branan recalled that on Sundays her grandfather, Daddy Doug, took her and her sister and their two cousins for ice cream and then to the courthouse. There, while he worked in his sheriff’s office, the cousins had the run of the building, from the jail cells where the lynching victims had spent time to the courtroom, where the children held pretend trials.

Despite the ugliness Branan unearthed, her great-grandfather’s and grandfather’s roles in the lynching, and the fact that, according to her mother, Daddy Doug had used a punishing hand on his daughters, the author concludes, “The good, I am happy to add, includes the capacity for recovery and positive relationships with family and friends. As a result of this difficult journey, I have achieved a greater sense of peace and wholeness, of being at home in the world, than I have ever known.”

*The Family Tree* is personal but also a branch of our collective history, a worthwhile read.
My original idea was to host a show specifically to support writers, editors, and publishers, the writing profession exclusively. Then I had my friend Joe Vosen and his daughter Grace on the show. Joe is a playwright, composer, and musician. Joe and Grace performed live music, which was a first for 103.5 The Sun (www.sunprairiemediacenter.com). It was a lot of fun, and I thought maybe my original focus may have been too narrow.

Our library director’s husband is a professor of music at UW-Madison, and she said her husband would be interested in being on the show. “No” is not in my vocabulary. I e-mailed Dr. Mark Hetzler, who was enthusiastic about being on the show. I researched the School of Music staff and learned that Mark is an accomplished trombonist and is interested in several musical styles, including classical, jazz, and modern-- exactly the type of person who would be a fantastic guest.

So now the show title of Writing in Wisconsin didn’t fit. I played around with a title for days trying to both broaden the focus and let the title broadcast (pun intended) what the show was about. After trial and error I settled on: Conversations with Wisconsin Artists. The station’s executive director, Jeff Robbins, liked both the change in focus and the new title.

For my February show I interviewed Christine DeSmet, well known by many Extra Innings readers. I set up a phone interview so she wouldn’t have to come out to the station. This form of interview was another first for our fledgling station.

I ALWAYS arrive at the station 30 minutes before air time to set up and work out any kinks. Again, I struggled to transition from automatic broadcasting to live broadcasting but with about six minutes to spare, I was ready to go.

I didn’t know if I should have Chris call the station or I should call her. Jeff worried that Chris wouldn’t know when to call because I couldn’t give an exact time. I called Chris on a cell phone and asked if she would mind being on hold while I did the intro. She agreed, and that worked well.

For some reason, when I started the show my headset didn’t work, even though I had tested both the headset and microphone as part of the pre-show routine. Jeff was in the studio and pushed all sorts of buttons on the sound board. I just sat there.

Finally Jeff said: “Start talking, just start talking.” I did. I read through the introduction of the show and Chris’s bio. When I took Chris off hold the headset kicked in and we had our conversation.

Every broadcast has presented a unique challenge.

As I left, Jeff said, “With doing only one show a month it’s hard to remember the technical part of the broadcast.”

“I’m going to have to start doing two shows a month,” I replied, “just to become proficient at running the board. Guess I need to start looking for guests.”

I’m on the hunt for interesting artists to interview. If you’ve always wanted to be on radio, now is your time. Please e-mail me at: rexowens00@gmail.com.

Coach’s note: Rex’s next guest will be Professor Emily Auerbach, professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a recognized expert on Jane Austen, cohost of the popular “University of the Air” radio show on WHA, and director and lead teacher for the Odyssey Project (www.Odyssey.wisc.edu). You don’t want to miss this one, Monday, March 7 at 9:00 a.m. CST, (103.5 FM in the Sun Prairie area and streaming live on the website all over the world).
Early one Saturday, as we enter the supermarket, store workers rush past Diane and me. We wonder what’s going on, more store people passing us, a bagger, the meat man, and a security officer, an odd assortment. They pour from the entrance door shouting, “The Similac man has struck again.”

Food is pilfered regularly from supermarkets in amounts unnoticed by store workers. I peek my head out the exit and join store folks standing in the parking lot.

“He’s gone. The Similac man is gone,” one says.

“His car was parked over there,” another says. No one has gotten the license number.

Back inside employees crowd around a sizable gap in a shelf that housed at least three dozen Similac cartons. At $17 a pop, we’re talking at least $500.

Diane tells me Similac is baby formula. I did not know that. Similac is so darned good its price has gone up fast from our baby-raising days. We lament all the unfortunate neighborhood babies who need formula, worried that youngsters may go without today.

How sad that some need to steal to feed their kids. Something has to be done. For one, the supermarket may have to lock Similac behind glass, like cigarettes.

When we get home, we have to say something about the Similac heist to Diane’s dad, who is visiting. Dad’s next birthday is his 90th, so we soft-peddle news of break-ins, same as with car thefts and other incidents in a neighborhood otherwise devoid of crime. We don’t want him thinking we live in a dangerous world. But Similac stolen right from under babies is human misfortune we tell Dad about.

Dad surprises us by saying, “They stole the Similac to cut heroin.” Cut heroin? What is he talking about? Ninety years old and Dad knows about cutting heroin, and we don’t have a clue. Heroin is bitter, Dad explains. I did not know that either. Similac’s sweet similitude, similar to mother’s milk, makes heroin palatable. Alrighty.

It dawns on us that Similac thievery is more than petty, more a crime linked to gang drug activities run by hardened criminals. No way I would have gone poking my head into the parking lot if I knew dangerous thieves were there.

Diane and I consider ourselves savvy about the world around us - after all, we have advanced degrees. Yet, as Dad likely picked up on, we don’t know nothin’ about drugs. However, as a pair with extensive marketing experience, we should not have to ask, “Why all the drugs?” Persistent products find ready markets.

Heroin is big business, having taken over from cocaine and the rest. “Rising death tolls are driven mainly by heroin,” according to The Morning Call, December 16, 2015.

Drug businesses run by dangerous characters are no place to go poking one’s nose.

We wonder how Dad is so knowledgeable? For one thing, many 90-year-olds have learned to be good listeners. Dad reads a lot and surrounds himself with younger people, too. For our own good, we might want to pay more attention to what he knows and how he knows it.

Checking back at the supermarket a week later, we find that the gaping hole remains where dozens of Similacs were stolen, this ironic product that builds kids up and then helps tear some of them down. Plain old Similac and fruit-flavored Similac remain on the store’s shelves. What was stolen was “Advanced” Similac, the gentler product.

Weeks later Similac makes news again. The baby formula is also being stolen U.S. wide for its intended purpose as baby formula. In what has become another billion dollar business, Similac is resold, repackaged, and pedaled overseas. Thousands of small-time crooks work alone, running illegal operations out of their homes.

With Similac’s growing number of unintended uses when stolen from shelves, retailers have begun moving it to locked glass cases.
Leaping Leprechauns

I’ve heard that little green men come from Mars, but I’ve never seen one--nor met a leprechaun. Possibly they’re at the root of the legend. Mars is called the Red Planet. Perhaps leprechauns dislike red and emigrated. Whatever the truth, mostly we keep separate from them.

In folklore “the little people” are cobblers, and leprechaun means “shoemaker” in Gaelic. Reputedly, each hides a pot of gold at a rainbow’s end. This requires shifting treasure when the rainbow melts. Such work, not to mention cobbling, keeps them busy and (mostly) out of mischief.

Irish lore says leprechauns descend from folk living before the Tuatha Da Danaan, the demi-gods who ruled the Emerald Isle in a golden age. Believers also say the little people traveled to America in coracles—boats made of wicker and lath. Reportedly a lep named Og Bol accompanied St. Brendan to the “New” World, which wasn’t, of course, new to natives! By repute the saint had a magic staff, but perhaps Og Bol was his “one man” (or “one being”) staff!

Most leprechauns prefer privacy. Perhaps women cobble while menfolk count their rainbow gold or make whiskey—then, of course, drink the latter. I wrote this scenario:

**THE COUNTRYMAN’S VIEWPOINT**

Into the hollowed trunk of a fairy tree
A cobbler leprechaun climbs with glee
And so descends to his warm, dry cave;
Yes, snug as a bug where no winds rave.
Here he can whistle, or fiddle, or harp,
Nor cares, if above, wild gales blow sharp.
But no human I’ve met has ever seen
If his abode is lit with a golden sheen!

I picture this fellow who sips from a mug
That he often tops off from an earthen jug:
Tales say he mends shoes plus worn boots too
But more likely his wife cobbles shoe after shoe!
If he hoards gold coins, well, how can I say,
Or seeks after rainbows on a storm day?
Since I respect privacy, the leps trust me—
Thus we keep our distance for courtesy.

I wrote of a “dry” cave, meaning dry from outer elements, but leprechauns certainly don’t stay dry around whiskey!

---

Alas, some folks scorn these little fellows; legends tell tales both pro and con. Are ‘leper-cons’ tricky? And if so, is that merely defense against larger folk striving to steal their gold?

Apparently our races maintain some contact, for William Butler Yeats wrote of a woman lured away by little people; she returned with no toes, for she danced them all off in one wild night of revelry! Was lure of adventure to blame, a taste for strong drink, or infatuation with her captor? Leprechaun liquor is potent, and potent proves the root-word of “poteen,” an old term for illegal Irish home brew.

It’s wise to leave the little folk alone, and they’ll return the courtesy. Yet common sense is often breached, and leprechauns are cunning at self-protection and usually avoid humans. Still, there are exceptions. Reputedly Christopher Columbus hired a leprechaun guide when sailing to the “New” World since the fellow possessed a mental map of how to get there and instructed the helmsman where to steer.

The same source declares (without details) that these beings are “giants in the *unwritten* history of America.” Og Bol at some point invited all his relatives to join him. Allegedly some came, but stay hidden.

The following verse takes its spark from an anonymous piece containing such rough rhythm and rhyme that I wrote a new version:

**REQUEST TO A LEPRECHAUN**

Oh, airy Lep, soar over the sea to the grand old Emerald isle,
And fetch a shamrock plant back to make this colleen smile!
Bring no nettle or thistle; the shamrock I’ll plant for luck,
Then indeed I’ll kiss you, Lep, for your errand plus your pluck!”

So we together, dear small friend, can wear the shamrock gay
And mingle with my happy guests on the feast of St. Paddy’s day.
I can promise quite a lovely spread with plentiful Irish stew,
Corn beef, cabbage; well-chilled ale--so dear Lep--you come too!
The world is wide plus the spring is green,
Thus for just once a year, can’t you be seen?
FIVE RULES TO REMEMBER IN LIFE:

1. Money cannot buy happiness - but it's far more comfortable to cry in a Porsche than on a bicycle.

2. Forgive your enemy - but remember his name.

3. If you help someone when they're in trouble. they will remember you-- when they're in trouble again.

4. Alcohol does not solve any problems - but then neither does milk.

5. Many people are alive only because it's illegal to shoot them.
The poet in her own words: I've enjoyed "Write by the Lake" several times and have two books in print, *Pavel of Poland* (young adult historical fiction) and *A Crack in the Lawn*, in which I shrink down to three inches tall and fall in a crack in the lawn.

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**A Poor Excuse**

**Pernetta Deemer**

My muse is playing hard to get, dancing just beyond my reach. She doesn't know, but there's a thing or two that rascal I could teach.

The art of writing escapes me now - I'm doing other things. But poetry comes when least looked for, sometimes it simply sings.

But my muse is off on a jaunt of her own, no telling when she'll return. Yet the notion of telling a story still tugs, though the muse is away, I learn.

Stories, events and happenings abound and seem so very right, But my muse and the urge to write are playing tag tonight.

So to writers and story tellers and creators all, I offer this drivel with a heart-felt promise to make up for it in the fall.
The Writer’s Poet

Craig W. Steele

The Best Recipe for Writing

Great writing is not a chance happening; it’s skill that requires proper leavening. But remember my plea that the best recipe must also include tons of shortening.

Hobo Tea

Bonny Conway

two drifters
one cup drizzle
one overcoat shared
two cardboard boxes
three hunks of coal
a freight train rumbling
stir and add Thunderbird
Pop Quiz
Marshall J. Cook

Answers appear at the end of this quiz.
You are on the honor system and may score your own paper.
You may not use any references that do not already dwell in your head or your heart.

Time is relative.
Einstein taught us this.
February, for example.
Not the shortest month,
even without leap year.
If you live where there is real winter
(I live in the upper Midwest and have
earned such arrogance as “real winter”)
you know this.
It is the longest.
1) Which is the shortest month?

When my father was a plebe at Annapolis
he was constantly challenged by upperclassmen,
insane with the power to haze.
One might bark, “How long until the Army-Navy Game?”
You had to know, not just in days, but in hours, minutes, seconds.
Then the interrogator might hiss,
2) “How Long is a Chinaman?”
You don’t know the right answer?
Woe unto you, lowly plebe.

3) How long did it take to write this poem
in seconds, minutes, hours, days, years?

4) How long is love’s first kiss?

Answer key:
1) The shortest month is spring.
2) “Aye, aye, sir.” (How Long is a Chinaman.)
3) Every year, month, week, day, and second I’ve been alive.
4) Every year, month, week, day, and second since-- and counting.
(I thought I heard God whisper to me)
Sandy Rafter

I thought I heard God whisper to me
in the drive-up lane at McDonald's.
I never thought I'd hear from him
in a place with no stained glass,
so, I thought I imagined it.
What bothers me though
is I didn't hear what He said.
The car ahead had five kids wailing
and screaming into the speaker,
and I was listening to Sports Radio,
so I heard other voices, too.
I didn't see any angels on clouds
or dead dudes holding a list of sins.
Maybe God just hangs out,
one of the guys, and my timing
was always wrong before.
But God didn't repeat what he said,
so maybe He was disappointed in me.
I don't think big thoughts;
He knows what a lightweight I am --
only maybe not so much anymore:
He spoke to me.
Of Water
Gary Busha

In time
water slips from leaves
rolls under logs and stones
off the backs of mice
and gulls
Water falls on rocks
in rivulets slides down panes
collects in pools
gives birth to cells.
Stream to river
lake to sea it runs
sediment flowing liquid
glass over glass
flowing centuries back.

Night bound
Gary Busha

In the woods
are whispers of
fieldmice
silverfox and
horseflies
in clearings of
sharp brambles
rustling.

Lean trees whisper
to lichen and moss
speak of no trespassing
and wire fences
and the wind is
nightbound... whispering

Both poems are from On Lake Winnebago,
Wolfsong Publications, 2015,
published with permission of the poet.
Poetry won’t climb a ladder
Tom Crawford

The roof springs a leak!
What to do? Well, you get a ladder
and climb up there.
Short of that you hire a roofer.
Once the leak’s repaired
you pay him by check or cash,
and that’s that. Problem solved.
In this case the ladder is a way
to the money that fixes the leak.
But you can’t say to the roofer,
“How many poems to fix the leak?”
You can’t get away from it—
even the physicist has to obey
the laws of the ladder.
The child says to his parents,
“I want to be a poet.”
The father, it’s usually the father,
right away objects. He knows already,
without the ladder there is no work.
You can imagine the objections
to the Buddha addressing the leak
thousands of years ago. Rain all night,
all day, day after day. “My god!
Is this it— and you just going to sit there?”

from Caging the Robin, Poems by Tom Crawford,
Cedar House Books, 2014,
reprinted by permission of the poet.
The Wisdom of Will Rogers

thanks to Pat Fitzgerald

Editor’s note: Will Rogers, who died in a 1935 plane crash, was one of the greatest political sages this country has ever known.

1) The quickest way to double your money is to fold it and put it back into your pocket.

2) If you're riding' ahead of the herd, take a look back every now and then to make sure it's still there.

3) Lettin' the cat outta the bag is a whole lot easier'n puttin' it back.

4) After eating an entire bull, a mountain lion felt so good he started roaring. He kept it up until a hunter came along and shot him. The moral: When you're full of bull, keep your mouth shut.

5) One of the many things no one tells you about aging is that it's such a nice change from being young.

6) Being young is beautiful, but being old is comfortable.

7) Long ago, when men cursed and beat the ground with sticks, it was called witchcraft. Today it's called golf.

And, finally ~ If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you're old.
With the NFL season finally concluded, we present for grieving Packer fans the previously untold true story of why the Packers didn't make it to the Super Bowl this year.

The 911 call came in from the Packer's stadium, but it didn’t make much sense. Something about crumbs. Deputy Bernie Fife and I headed out, and after miles of snow drifts and icy roads, we could see in the distance some ambulances and a large group of people milling around.

Some men were grilling food, while some gals with real short skirts were jumping up and down and yelling "Hurrah," which I took to mean "Hurry," and some were crying.

As we exited the car, Highway Patrolman Sven Urkle headed toward us.

"It's a bad one, Sheriff Taylor," he said.

"I’ve never seen anything like this before. They're just disintegrating before our eyes. The docs can't do a thing."

"Whoa, back it up. Who is disintegrating, and what do you mean by disintegrating?" I asked.

I didn’t need his answer, though. As soon as we entered the field, I turned my gaze toward the players and recognized quarterback Aaron Rogers. He was stretched out on his back, a usual position without blockers. He recognized me and wanted to throw me the football, but his shoulder crumbled before he could make a move.

"What's going on here?" asked Deputy Fife.

"Did you question them, Urkle?"

"I tried," answered Urkle, "but have you ever tried to get an answer from someone whose lips are crumbling as they speak? And why would he be mumbling about wrestling, something about a half Nelson."

"They don't seem to be quite together," I said. "Let's see if we can find some cure. Call Aunt Bea and ask her how she keeps her pie crust from falling apart."

Patrolman Urkle reported back in a few short minutes. "Aunt Bea says she puts her dough in the refrigerator before she rolls it out, and then it doesn't fall apart so easily."

"Hmm. We can’t move these players or they'll come apart on us, so we need lots of ice cubes to put over them. Ladies, we need snow and ice cubes to help these men. Go to your ice chests and your fridges and bring the cubes back here."

The ladies hurried away, and the Packers were covered with snow and ice within 40 minutes, I could see that the disintegration had been frozen in place, but the player’s jerseys were turning chartreuse.

"Deputy Fife," I directed, “Call the Red Robbing Hood Diner out near Highway 41 and ask their cook if she has any experience with crumbs and crumbling. Maybe we can piece something together if we ask enough people."

Fife was back in minutes. "Marthy Stewart says the only thing she knows about crumbs is she makes cobblers with them," he reported. “How is someone making shoes going to help us? Though they could have used different cleats last game."

Sheriff, I’ve been thinking. Some of these Packers look to me like they’re on their last Hail Mary. Maybe we ought to be thinking more of planning for their final moments. It sure will be an easy funeral. They're practically ashes to ashes, dust to dust right now."

I wish I could say this case had a happy ending, but it didn't. The Packers continued to crumble. A bunch of Vikings came by, but they were looking for fur, not hand warmers. Some Panthers were prowling, but we passed out some cammed hams to get rid of them. Our sheriff's department did all we could for them, but they just wanted another draft to carry them away. Fife was right. The Packers were crumbling into no-bodies.

The coroner was disgusted, because he had nothing to autopsy. Commissioner Goodell was on the scene contemplating fines and suspensions for unlawful hazardous waste disposal. Before we finally left the scene, Deputy Fife went to the car to hunt for his old CD of Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces," and we all bowed our heads.
JUST FOR THE PUN OF IT
ED PAHNKE

There’s a catch

The doors of the Long Brunch Café swung open to admit the frontier conman Jeff “Soapy” Smith, along with a frigid gust of March wind. Soapy carried his briefcase full of his “special” Patent Medicine. He went by ‘Doc Smith’ in town.

If anyone back then had known he was really the notorious Soapy Smith, he would have been shunned by God-fearing folks. He swaggered up to the wooden counter just as he’d been doing most of his life.

“Gather round, folks,” he said loudly, “for this here health elixir that is a sure bet to cure your ills no matter what they are. After all, would I sell something if I didn’t test it out myself?”

He opened his black bag and took out a bottle. “Dr. Sylvester Wynn developed this here elixir and called it Sil Wynn,” Soapy said. “I’m sure you all have heard of Sil Wynn.” He took a swallow of the liquid. At this prompt, a woman paid to praise the elixir raised her voice: “Oh, just a few sips of Sil Wynn cured me of dreadful shingles and keeps me well. It’s wonderful. I’ll buy me a bottle now.”

A clamor of folks lined up to make purchases following her claims. Suddenly another voice raised above the din.

“Hold on there, folks.” Annie Wan elbowed her way to the counter, then banged on it. “You folks here know me. Drinking this stuff cured me of one thing – ever buying any doggone Patent Medicine again. There’s something in Sil Wynn that gave me terrible headaches and delusions and joint pain, just to mention a few side effects.”

People in the crowd began to amble back to their tables or out of the Café.

“And that ain’t all,” Annie continued. “This here Doc Smith looks an awful lot like Soapy Smith.”

A chorus of loud “ohhhhhhs” arose.

Soapy Smith grumbled while packing up his wares. “You’ll be sorry you listened to her,” he said, then stomped out while muttering, “It’s a Sil Wynn that flows no good for Annie Wan.”

JAN KENT IS
THE WORD WHISPERER
Blame it on Seuss

When I was growing up there were no nerds. That’s because it wasn’t until 1950 that Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel) coined the word in If I Ran the Zoo. Now they're everywhere. Amazing.

YOUR RMA OF IRONY

Truths little children have learned

1) No matter how hard you try, you can't baptize cats.
2) When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.
3) If your sister hits you, don't hit her back. They always catch the second person.
4) Never ask your 3-year old brother to hold a tomato.
8) You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
9) Don't wear polka-dot underwear under white shorts.
10) The best place to be when you're sad is Grandma's lap.
Hawk captures reviewer

_H is for Hawk_, Helen Macdonald

I’ve never finished a book and felt such a dread of responsibility to review it and, in doing so, maybe escape its grip on me. If you read it, you’ll never forget it. I’m going to put it on the shrine with _Unbroken_, by Laura Hillenbrand.

Helen Macdonald is a writer, poet, illustrator, historian, naturalist, and an affiliated research scholar at the University of Cambridge. She and her father were soul mates, and his sudden death shattered one half of her soul.

Nonetheless, several months after her father’s passing, still deep in grief, she fell back on her falconry background and decided she should train a Northern Goshawk, the largest, blood-thirstiest member of the Accipiter genus and notoriously hard to train. While they exist in North America, they have a long hunting history in Europe and are adept at chasing down prey, such as pheasants and hares in the thick woods, brambles, and hedgerows, where their short, round wings, stocky, short legs, and razor-sharp talons couple with their insatiable beak that eats the captured prey alive.

Neither were Goshawk trainers, called austringers, known as gentlemen in the field of falconry, at least not in the early books on the subject. “Do not house your graceless austringers in the falconer’s room,” said Gace de la Binge in the fourteenth century. “They hate company and go alone about their sport.”

One might wonder why read a book about a couple of bloodthirsty loners? This book is a linguistic journey into life’s deepest sorrows and nature’s cathartic possibilities. It also offers a parallel examination of the life of an early austringer and author, T. H. White, who used goshawks to excise his own demons, and failed many times, as goshawks will not endure any punishment, until he discovered he could teach young boys without the maltreatment he received from his father and schoolmasters.

But this does not describe the magnetism of the beast being trained, Macdonald’s obsessions, or her process of becoming more like the hawk, and the hawk more like her. There is madness, myths, and more in this book, and language that bridges them all and brings us to understand what Macdonald calls the archaeology of grief. She tried to forget her grief by becoming a hawk but came to realize that her hands were better formed for holding another human than to serve exclusively as a perch.

So this is one-third memoir, one third hawk training, and one third a mixture of language, etymology, myth, and T.H. White and his problems, the least of which was his hawk, which he lost. Some of his problems he couldn’t lose.

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_Mabel*

Fierce ambered yaraked eyes glaring through pupils blackened by twenty centuries of anger bred. Razored talons gripping fistèd gauntlet, exploding past meadows, thick with morning, smashing innocent, singing, strutèd cockerel. Prey feathers floating back to earth, perhaps a startled squawk. Halluxèd, speared, not yet dead, keratinèd beak ripping blood and meat, gorging crop, austringer in wild pursuit of murderess, making in and trickèring her to come back home before she eats too much to fly so they can hunt again and kill.

*If some of this looks peculiar, see _H is for Hawk_
Best movies of 2015

This past year was full of blockbusters and mega hits, but only a few were actually good. Luckily, there were some great surprises this year. Here are my 10 best for last year, in no particular order.

Mad Max: Fury Road-
I've said so much about this movie already, but I think it deserves all the praise it can get. It's amazing that my favorite film of the year even exists. Who would have thought that 70-year-old George Miller would return with ease to his franchise 30 years later while also making this masterpiece of film making.

Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens-
This was the one movie of 2015 that I had the most concern for. The original trilogy was so vital to many people's childhood. How could this possibly live up to decades worth of hype? Luckily, it did. It's an absolute blast of a movie that should please old and new fans alike. The blending of classic and new characters works beautifully, and I can't wait for the next two installments.

The Hateful Eight-
Quentin Tarantino continues to make successfully entertaining films filled with excellent dialogue, great characters, tense violence, and a solid plot, and this is one of his best. At almost three hours long it breezes by. A Western tribute to The Thing, it's a great whodunit. The film looked beautiful, and Ennio Moricone's tense, gripping score is just the icing on the cake.

Inside Out-
Pixar had been in a bit of a slump since Toy Story 3, but this movie proves that they still have magnificent ideas in store. This is one of their best films ever, joining the ranks of Up and The Incredibles. Gorgeous animation mixed with a perfect voice cast makes this one of the most emotional and enjoyable experiences I've had in the theater all year.

Kingsman: The Secret Service-
In a year full of spy movies, with new installments from James Bond and Ethan Hunt, I'm surprised this one topped them all for me. Matthew Vaughn has proven himself to be a competent director, and his take on the spy genre made one of the best spy movies I've seen. The church sequence in particular will get your blood pumping.

Bone Tomahawk-
One of the biggest surprises of the year for me was a movie that few people saw. This is the most realistic Western I've ever seen. The subtly of the film makes it stand out. The violence, while not a huge focus of the film, is brutal and works for in this journey across the frontier.

Turbo Kid-
Made to feel like a lost movie of the 80s, this post-apocalyptic sci-fi film is an absolute delight. From our neighbors in Canada, this movie has developed a good following and deserves it. While the over the top and gory violence may be a bit jarring to some, those who can look past it will find that there's a lot of heart, especially the main relationship between Munro Chambers' The Kid and Laurence Leboef's Apple. This is destined to be a cult classic.

The Martian-
Ridley Scott's best film in over a decade. I never would have thought a survival film could be so funny and such fun. Mark Watney (Matt Damon) is a likable protagonist, and the rest of the cast makes this a great ensemble film.

Space Cop-
The guys at Red Letter Media have been my favorite online entertainers for years, and their newest film is exactly what I wanted out a sci-fi comedy from them. Their sense of humor may not be for everyone, but if you're a fan of Red Letter Media, I'd definitely recommend seeing what they can do in a feature length film.

Dude Bro Party Massacre III-
5 Second Films' debut feature is an hour and a half of pure insanity, one of the funniest movies in years, and I loved every minute of it. I hope we get to see them make more movies like it.

Jake now has his own blog devoted to movies. You can find a lot more of his essays at http://seekerofschlock.blogspot.com/.
Why and how I write

I missed a soft place to fall when I grew up, so I've made my own now, but not without help. I tease my husband, saying that he's home-schooled me and that's why I'm the person I am today. He insists that all of the talents and joy were always inside of me, but when I was young nobody showed me the way to get them out. But then I discovered writing.

My readers say I write about life and it's true. But that sentence is so boring, so simple that in today's world it wouldn't entice anyone to spend time reading the things I write about. I guess what I do is take the everyday mundane things that most people don't even notice and bring them to life, giving them a voice so people can see the funny in them or recognize the sadness they feel. I hate being preached to, so I'm not an advice-giver. I don't know all the answers, and that's one of the reasons I write, so I can try to see the meaning in my life.

When I'm writing a column, eventually there comes a part in the process where I feel agitated and it's not clear what I'm feeling, but I plow through anyway and, magically, 20 or 30 minutes later, the column appears.

I'm not quite sure where the column came from; in fact, sometimes when I'm reading it again the next day, in my book club email, I'm amazed that I wrote it. Just where did these words, where did this ability to write, come from?

Maybe I shouldn't be questioning where the ability came from. But as soon as I finished writing that sentence, I remembered what my mother said when I told her that I was publishing a business magazine--I clearly remember the look on her face. It was a look of confusion and amazement, shock really, and then she asked, "Just where did you learn how to do all of this?"

It was as if nothing great was expected from me and she still couldn't believe that I'd accomplished such a thing--and that I was successful at it. But truth-be-told, sometimes I still stand back and look at what I do, and I too wonder--just where and how did I learn these things?

I write about a lot of different topics, but a familiar underlying theme has a lot to do with self-esteem. A friend of mine shamed me when she said that the subject had been written to death: "Nobody wants to hear another poor self-esteem story." And she might be right. But people feeling lost, needing a place to check-in once in awhile, knowing that they're not the only one who feels like this-- these things don't disappear just because it's not in vogue to write about them.

And I have just enough confidence in myself, and just enough doubt, to write about my worries and fears, to make fun of myself and invite people to laugh along with me.

Hopefully when people read the things I write they go easier on themselves and find that soft place to fall.

Thanks for reading with me. It's so good to read with friends.

Suzanne Beecher runs a marvelous service she calls "DearReader," sending out summaries and excerpts of books in various categories. Each day's email, Monday through Friday, also contains her column. This service is free and a great way to get introduced to lots of new books and authors. I republish this recent column with her permission. You can contact her at: Suzanne@DearReader.com blog: http://dearreader.typepad.com/
Coach’s note: The topic for my radio show one recent Tuesday was “Your Origin Story: How Did You Become a Reader?” I got this response from a listener who has become introduced to this newsletter because of the show. It was my “email of the week” on the next show, and now it’s one of my two “letters of the month.”

My radio show, “Writers and Their Words,” airs every Tuesday at 9:00 a.m.CST at www.sunprairiemediacenter.com. Rex Owens’ show, “Conversations with Wisconsin Artists,” is on the first Monday of every month, also at 9:00 a.m., both shows airing locally at 103.5 FM, WLSP-lp, The Sun.

And now, take it away, Barbara.

In first grade, we had an interesting class where we learned what certain symbols meant. This class was called reading. We used a (green?) book that helped us decipher these symbols and turn them into words. The book was full of action: Spot and Puff running, Dick and Jane seeing. (Actually, all I remember of the book is a lot of running and seeing.) I liked this class and thought it was fun.

One day when I was at home (I think this was sometime around the end of September of my first grade year) I opened one of my Golden Books to look at the pictures. It was one of my favorites--about Pantaloon, the French poodle. As I turned the pages, words below the pictures jumped out of the book at me: the, he, one, and, is! I was electrified! I’m really not exaggerating the thrill I felt. I thought, "Reading isn't just for school--I can do it anywhere.” (I didn't realize that the stuff we did in school could be used outside of school--I thought what happened in St. Stanislaus Grade School stayed in St. Stanislaus Grade School.)

To this day, I still remember the feeling I had when words and worlds were opened to me. It was one of the defining moments of my life. I became a READER!

Barb Wera

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Shedding identities

Interesting topic for tomorrow [Origin stories]. I'm doing an online writing course, "Writing to Reclaim Your Sacred Self," which has been transformative for me. We've just started a third section, with the first assignment about shedding our identities. Part of the exercise was to list at least 5 identities we've lived through, such as mine: Adventurous Toddler; Kindergartner who could read her way into flights of fancy; Upper Elementary kid (I don't think we had "Junior High" way back then) who wanted to be a marine biologist; High Schooler who wanted to be a journalist, went to J-Camp in Boulder, CO, and wrote "Obie's Overture," a goofy little mimeographed newsletter for my pals; Married young to a Navy guy, lived in the Bahamas, where I learned to play a good game of pool and drink scotch, but more importantly learned about Bahamian stories and songs and dances. What also caught my attention was that, except for my toddler-hood, I always was reading and writing. I need to ponder what actually got me started.

Nancy Obermueller

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And always, Lily steals the show

Your well-deserved Lily encomium initiated another splendid collection of words and wisdom. She is one lucky young lady, to be the recipient of so much love. Keep it up.

John Swift

There is hope for you if you keep hanging out with Lily. Some of the others you are known to hang with are suspect as it pertains to character building. ...Another nice job with EI.

Cheers,

Bill Stokes

--- Letters continue, next page
Marsh,
I was not very familiar with Hopalong Cassidy so didn't know his horse's name. To show you how much I trust you, I thought it odd anyone else but Roy Rogers would have a horse named Trigger but went right along with it. Oh, well. :)*

I also loved the Rose Parade piece. I used to call my mom long distance and we'd watch part of the parade 'together' over the telephone discussing each float. Your recollection brought back some nice memories for me. Thanks.
The piece on the things Lily is teaching you warms my heart. Grandchildren are the best kind of miracle. ... When I married Bruce, his kids immediately became very special to me and I've always considered them a blessing. But as I wasn't their mom, they called me Barbara. Now having grandchildren who actually call me Grammy puts me over the moon! Neither of their other grandmothers will have anything to do with being called Gramma or any variation thereof. They're Nana and Gigi. But I feel like I won the lottery when I hear it.

I'll be home and listening in tomorrow morning if our internet is working. Drive safely, please.

Barbara Burris

*That will teach you not to trust anything I say! I'm still embarrassed about getting Topper confused with Trigger.

Dear Marsh, what a great way to start Extra Innings 76!-- with 10 things your granddaughter is teaching you! Your heart is in every line, and if I touch the words I will feel it beating. You were right about the bottom line, keep the trust and enthusiasm. I love that most about little children. Thanks for written wonders put out for us to read each month. Have a good day tomorrow. May your favorite team win. As Ever,

Bonny Conway

In Memory

Nelle Harper Lee

April 28, 1926, Monroeville, AL-Febuary 19, 2016, Monroeville, AL

“[B]efore I can live with other folks
I’ve got to live with myself.
The one thing that doesn’t abide
by majority rule
is a person’s conscience.”

Atticus Finch

To Kill a Mockingbird

And now, another life affirmation,
your monthly
Moment with Lily ....
Lily loves her teddy bear

That’s “Gigi” (great grandmother Goldie) in the background.