Extra Innings

"For writers and linguaphiles everywhere"

Number 104 Madison, WI Dead of Winter, 2019

Cold and darkness got you down?

Read this story.

Jamie Henke

Coach's note: Friend and colleague Jamie Henke says she "spent some time trying to decide what to send you for encouragement and inspiration, and I decided to send you this. ...I'm a musician for a reason, so don't expect this story to be anywhere near the level all of you writers can attain!"

Boy, did this story work! Jamie, welcome to the level all writers can attain.

Aria was the youngest and smallest little girl in our Odyssey Jumpstart class. In November we read the book *The Tall, Tall, Grass*. The art project for the unit was to rip strips of green paper that the kids would use to make their own Tall, Tall Grass meadows.

All of the kids gleefully started ripping paper, all except Aria, whose tiny fingers would just bend the paper, instead of making it rip. I sat down to help, and we found she could rip the paper if I would start the rip for her, but she still wasn't able to rip strips of grass. The paper would just come apart in large chunks.

We kept working at it and she kept getting better, and soon my starter rips were getting smaller and smaller. Finally, after considerable time and practice, Aria ripped her first truly grass-shaped strip, all by herself. She shrieked at the top of her tiny little two-year-old lungs:

I DID IT!!!!!!!!!!

From that point on, there was no stopping her, and she ripped enough grass for an entire prairie. She covered the table, her chair, and the floor. Every time she made a new strip, she announced, still at full volume, "I DID IT!" I finally managed to encourage her to complete her project, and you can still see her joyful "I DID IT!" in the photo.

At times when I feel discouraged, that affirmative "I DID IT!" coming from that tiny morsel of humanity gets me on my way again.

Jamie and Aria

A dog in winter

Tom McAllister

As I write this note, my dog, a ten-year-old beagle/basset mix, is staring at me impatiently. I've moved several times to try to break the laser focus of her eye contact, but she moves right along with me, so that, at every moment I know a) she is there, and b) she would very much like to be outside right now.

But also as I write this, my sidewalk is covered in ice and the wind chill outside is in the single digits. Due to a birth defect, she has no pad on one of her feet, which makes her very sensitive to the cold ground. Going outside for more than a few minutes is really not an option. For the rest of the day, she'll follow me around the house, and for the rest of the day she'll be disappointed.

Being a dog means often being disappointed--when your owner leaves, when they go to the kitchen without feeding you, when they decide to stop throwing the tennis ball. But this dog is also very hopeful. No matter what happens, she wags her tail, convinced that the next thing to happen will be very good indeed.

I envy that optimism and persistence, and I think there's something to learn from it. For me, as for many writers, the biggest obstacle in writing is my own self-doubt. If I could harness just a fraction of her limitless faith in the process, I would be a much more productive worker.

Tomorrow the temperatures are supposed to rise, and then we'll take a walk. She'll trot along, thrilled to be outside again, and sometimes looking back at me as if to say, See, outside is fun. She'll wag her tail and smell everything and be in love with the world.

File photo

Tom lives in New Jersey, teaches at Temple, is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, an editor at Barrelhouse, and the author of a memoir, *Bury Me in My Jersey: A Memoir of My Father, Football, and Philly*. His debut novel is *The Young Widower's Handbook.*

I can't remember the Roman Numerals for 51, six, and 500, and I'm just LIVID about it.

First Person Singular

Who needs tonsils?

Angela M. Rosati

When I was around five or six, my friends and I played a dopey game, "Who could scream the loudest."

You guessed it. I did. Now, if four or five little girls were screaming, none of us could hear the others. We didn't know that, and each thought we broke the sound barrier (which, at the time, we knew nothing about). But I screamed the loudest.

My short Italian mother scolded me the first time we played that game. We were playing close to my father's Italian *Lattecini* (Dairy) Store, so she easily heard us. We went around the corner to play— or scream. I thought Mama wouldn't hear us there. Little did I know. (Did you ever see a German Shepherd's ears stand up really straight when they hear a foolish burglar? That was Mama.) When I arrived at my father's store, little tough Mama, a twist to her mouth, asked me if I had participated in the screaming game.

At the time, I wasn't suicidal, so I confessed and made a swift getaway, so she couldn't grab one of my long auburn curls to teach me a lesson, like screaming was disturbing the peace. And sometimes strangers didn't know we were playing and ran out of their stores and homes to see who was killing whom.

Now I was nine, and Mama had this ridiculous idea that my brothers, aged 12 and seven, and I should have our tonsils removed. WHAT! Why weren't our tonsils removed when we were two, as my oldest brother's had been. He had no memory of the surgery. We, on the other hand, were older and prone to FEAR and PAIN. To us, it didn't sound like a good idea. Help!

Our little Italian mother spoke broken English — I mean really broken English— but the non-Italians understood her, even when she wanted to say, "I betcha" and it came out "Ah bitch." No one laughed at her English, not if they wanted to go home and have dinner alive.

The local hospital was known as "The Slaughter House"; lucky for us, we hadn't heard that. So Mama and Papa took us to the hospital. I watched as my brothers were taken (against their will) to the boys' ward.

I was pushed, pulled to a room containing three patients who were as old as the hills. Well, when someone looks like your friend's mother, they, ya know, look old. Why had they brought me there? Lucky me, there was no room in the girls' ward.

The ladies made a fuss over me. They said I was cute. What baloney. I occupied the fourth bed. I was quiet. All I heard was horrible stories of family members who had gone under the knife and suffered immense pain— or didn't recover. And now I, an innocent girl of nine, was going under the KNIFE! I couldn't help it; I burst into tears. The ladies changed the subject and began talking about their brats— little comfort for me.

Soon a young priest came in to see me. He was good looking, but that had no effect on me. I was scared. He wanted to hear my confession. I told him that I had not made my First Holy Communion because my father had an Italian Dairy Store, and we moved several times to a new and better location— which never panned out.

Said priest was so furious, I thought he was going to take a knife out of his cassock and stab me. He angrily left me, probably saying prayers very different from Hail Mary.

But here's my question: what terrible, unforgivable sins could a nine-year-old Italian Catholic girl commit?

The nurses came in to prepare me. I was wrapped up like a mummy. Then they covered my hair and put me on a gurney. took me into the hall and shoved the gurney up next to the wall— to wait and wait and wait. Many people stopped to look at me. Was I dead or alive? Every single one asked me where I got all my freckles. I blamed it on Papa. I hated freckles. Shirley Temple didn't have freckles! Neither did Jane Withers. The people all told me the freckles would disappear when I got big. I'm still waiting. I'm now a senior citizen and still have those freckles.

I waited so long to be taken to surgery; it was a good thing my bladder behaved. It was also good that I didn't have cooties; can you imagine having an itchy head wrapped like a mummy and not being able to scratch? I would have lost my mind.

— Tonsils continue, next page

I was brought into the operating room. Someone placed a strainer over my mouth and nose. I smelled ether. Oy, what a stink! A nurse told me to breathe deeply. I really tried. At least I think I tried. All I could do was spit, which made the nurse laugh. This angel of mercy had no mercy for me.

Lucky for her I settled down and soon fell asleep— to wake up with great throat pain.

I never played the screaming game again; I couldn't hit the high notes. And I was planning to be an opera singer.

My heart hurt.

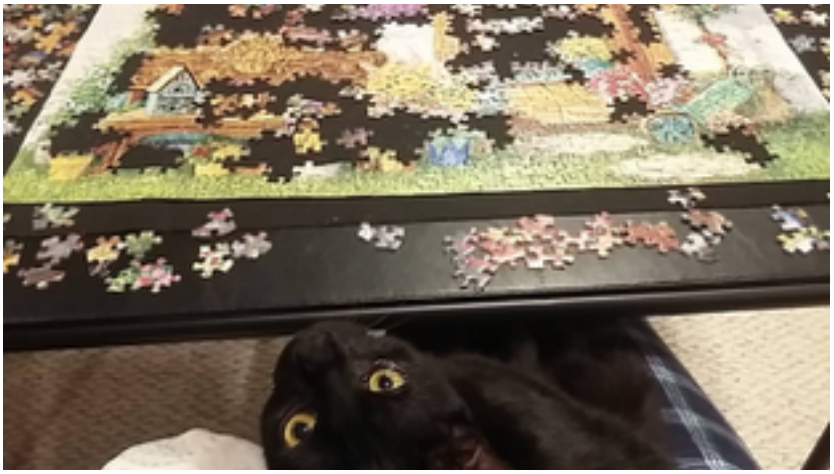
We were brought home the same day. We could barely speak. That made Mama and Papa happy. We couldn't complain.

But here's what made us happy. Since we couldn't swallow normal food, we ate ice cream and chocolate pudding, something we didn't have often— or even ever. Yes, my mother learned how to make chocolate pudding, and no, wise guy, it didn't taste like pasta sauce.

What a great Italian mother she was.

Introducing Lily's new kitty, Willow.

Willow stares down a neighbor cat.



Willow eyes a crossword puzzle. What could go wrong?

Photos by Lily's mom

The Writer's Poet

Craig W. Steele

Writers' Methods

The methods of writers are various—
some simple, some quite multifarious.
But there's no real dispute
that the method is moot:
fine writing is mostly vagarious.

To seed a poem…

To seed a poem with pizzazz,
it's necessary that it has:
a voice that readers comprehend;
well-versed beginning, middle, end;
and clever trope that will serve as
a classy dose of razzmatazz.

Pedro’s Ponderables _____6

thanks to Pedro Hiort-Lorenzen

There are two kinds of pedestrians, the quick and the dead.

Life is sexually transmitted.

Healthy is merely the slowest possible rate at which one can die.

Health nuts are going to feel stupid someday, lying in hospitals dying of nothing.

Have you noticed since everyone has a camcorder these days no one talks about seeing UFOs like they used to?

Whenever I feel blue, I start breathing again.

All of us could take a lesson from the weather. It pays no attention to criticism.

In the 60's, people took acid to make the world weird. Now the world is weird and people take Prozac to make it normal .

How is it one careless match can start a forest fire, but it takes a whole box to start a campfire?

Who was the first person to look at a cow and say, 'I think I'll squeeze these dangly things and drink whatever comes out'?

Why does your OB-GYN leave the room when you get undressed if they are going to look there anyway?

If quizzes are quizzical, what are tests?

If corn oil is made from corn, and vegetable oil is made from vegetables, then what is baby oil made from?

before the holiday gets too far in the rearview mirror…

A little rock Christmas

Susan Murphy

I'm hard to shop for. My children have been after me to make an Amazon gift list where they can point-and-click and have the whole thing wrapped and delivered.

The problem is that when I sit down to think about the things that I really, really want, the things that would make a difference in my life, I doubt even Amazon could fill the bill.

What do I want? I want there to be a day when the flag doesn't have to fly at half mast over the post office, a day when the sad, crazed person who gets the idea to shoot a bunch of defenseless strangers would somehow have a change of heart. I'd click on that.

I'd like to have a day (two since I've been really, really good) where people in positions of power or influence just naturally use that ability, not to divide, not to denigrate, but to lift up the people around them.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of fear and anger being the coin of the realm. I'd like for the Us vs.Them game to be called on account of darkness, or on account of light, I suppose.

That's what I really want, with free two-day shipping, please.

There have been some dark days of late, enough to make a sane person despair of where we're headed, but I'm one of those crazy people who thinks we have the capacity to do better.

I keep this quote on my desk: "I believe we are all a part of something beautiful, something bigger than ourselves, something deeply, profoundly, surprisingly good."

A bit too Pollyanna? Maybe. I know that the loud, blustering voices would have you believe that every person you come across is secretly out to get you, but I'm here to tell you that there is also covert kindness afoot.

I've been going through chemo lately. The only reason I bring it up is that it speaks to my point. My family and friends have been wonderful, but I knew they would be.

Susan Murphy (from OTMJ website)

What I did not count on was my hair stylist, who refused to take payment when I got my pre-bald haircut, the unknown woman in Walmart who asked if she could give me a hug, the sanitation worker who now quietly wheels my empty garbage can back up the driveway. And sure, I know I just look like someone who could use a little help, but the point is, people do it. They have been kind and generous and supportive. It's been a surprisingly beautiful gift.

This season is all about those kinds of gifts, good things that no one saw coming, freely given even when they weren't deserved. What better way to honor the miracles we celebrate than to keep moving in that direction?

There may be times when it seems like the world has been reduced to a hopeless pile of rubble, but even if all you have to work with are castoff pebbles, you can make a difference. One little rock of kindness, one smile, one time you let someone into traffic w hen they should have gotten in the correct lane a good while back, all these things laid gently upon each other, have to move us in the right direction.

Maybe that's what we're supposed to be learning. The really good gifts always come in kit form. We can't just hope to have a Merry Christmas. We have to be Christmas for each other… one little rock at a time.

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There's always a story

Madonna Dries Christiansen
***E.I.* Contributing Editor**

"You wake up in your momma's house and you smell the best bacon you've ever had. But more than anything you hear her footsteps. You hear her moving around. And you know that everything's all right—as long as you hear that sound."— Rick Bragg

Author Rick Bragg's latest offering, *The Best Cook in the World*, is an ode to his mother. Her recipes were never on paper until he persuaded her to share them. They begin with Bragg's maternal great-grandfather, Jimmy Jim Bundrum, who taught his daughter-in-law, Ava Bundrum (Bragg's grandmother), who taught his mother, Margaret Bragg.

Momma Bragg has never owned measuring cups or spoons, a meat thermometer, or an oven timer. When asked how long to cook something, she replies, "Till it's done." Her measurements are dribbles, dabs, a small handful, a generous handful, just enough, or, "You know, Hon, just some."

The subtitle, *Tales From My Momma's Table*, becomes clear when Bragg states that this book is not really about food—it's about story. Through regional language and self-deprecating humor, he brings life to the tales passed along by his people. His pecan pie story had me giggling. His and his mother's dialogue is delectable sustenance for readers. Better the metaphorical sustenance than the real thing, because the basic ingredient in the recipes is grease, lard, butter, and meat, the fattier the better.

Bragg advises: "Eat it, be glad to be alive, and don't tell your doctor. Is a life of rice cakes really life?"

Bragg's mother was a 1930s Depression child, and his sometimes fatherless childhood was also one of make-do. Everything was handed down and reused. Feed sacks became dresses, shirts, aprons, and when a garment finally wore out, the scraps were stitched into quilts. Zippers, overall and belt buckles, and buttons were saved. Every household had a button box.

Rick Bragg with Momma Bragg
(Facebook photo)

When I mentioned button boxes on Facebook, Nadja Bernitt recalled: "I inherited several from basements in old houses where we lived when I was a child. Fascinating."

Toni Clark shared a photo of her jar. "I remember playing with Mom's buttons as a child. Sorting and counting. I inherited my mother-in-law's, and hers are probably worth something [they might be her mother's]. Buttons are pretty, handy, and easy to store!"

Chris Kimball wrote: "Grandma Boysen had a metal button box when I was young. I loved sorting through them." Chris's sister, Carol Messner, added, "I thought I had Grandma's button box and I couldn't wait to rush home and take a picture of it but I can't find it! Maybe Laurie ended up with it." (Laurie is Chris and Carol's niece.)

Jill Buzby wrote that she had contributed to another Facebook thread about button boxes. The friend had posted that her husband asked, "What is it with women and buttons? Every woman's house I've ever been in has a jar of buttons!"

Buzby shared two photos, and someone asked, "You have two?"

The response: "I actually have more than that. LOL. I have a basket in my closet that all the spare buttons from clothes go in. Those eventually get removed from the bags/envelopes and put into a jar. The Button Box doesn't currently have buttons. It was Madonna's, and was bought by her friend at a yard sale decades ago. That friend recently gave it to me. It's on my desk."

See there—whether it's buttons, bacon, chitlins, cornbread—whatever the topic, as Momma Bragg said, "Good stuff always has a story."

Mary Tracy

Books on my nightstand:

The Paris Wife and a few romances by Susan Mallery

Pieces of writing that got me started reading:

Beautiful Joe, Chessie, Nancy Drew books

Last great book I read:

Evening

Classic novel I intend to read:

Tess of the D'urbervilles

Books I would keep with me for the rest of my life:

Short stories of Edgar A. Poe, The Pilot's Wife, Mitty and Mr Syrup, Julie and Romeo, Wifey, A Shopaholic Book, A Round-Heeled Woman, Coffee House mysteries, Year of the Buffalo, Off Season, *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Periodicals I read regularly:

Appleton Post-Crescent, New York Times

The writers I would invite to a dinner party:

Edgar A. Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Ann Rice

Last reading that made me laugh:

I've got your number

Last reading that made me cry:

Me Before You

Favorite place/time of day to read:

Sitting in my favorite chair with a cozy throw— no special time— whatever time I can find. I seem to enjoy evening reading.

AND SO TODAY'S MOMENT OF HAPPINESS DESPITE THE NEWS
KATHIE GIORGIO

Looking for Mr. Hughes

So lately, I've not been sleeping well. I'm sleeping – which is a huge change in my insomniac life – but it's not a happy sleep. For weeks now, I've been having a recurring dream. It's not a nightmare. I don't wake up shaken and scared. But I do wake up disturbed.

It takes place in a house I lived in from 1966 to 1972, when I was six years old to 12. It's in Esko, Minnesota, a teeny community way the heck up between Duluth and Cloquet. This house has been prevalent in many of my dreams for the last several months, and, in fact, was the scene of my last nightmare.

But now it's decided to stick itself firmly as setting into a dream that happens again and again. I'm in the house and I'm looking for a man named Mr. Hughes. That's all I know. He's in there somewhere and I am going from room to room to room and up and down from the basement, looking for him. I'm all sorts of ages, depending on the night. I'm the age I was when I lived there, I'm older, I'm who I am now. The rooms, for the most part, are true to the layout of the house as I remember it, though from time to time, another room arrives from another house that I lived in. My parents are there in that way of dreams, somewhere behind me, a presence. I don't see them and I don't hear them. Yet I know they're in the house.

But I'm looking for Mr. Hughes. Over and over and over. Room after room after room. I'm getting really tired of looking for him. I don't even know who he is. I can't remember ever knowing a Mr. Hughes.

I didn't find him again last night. Which led to my moment of happiness today. Around six o'clock, after a long day of running around, doing a ton and accomplishing nothing, I sat down to meditate. According to the app I use, Insight Timer, I've been meditating 408 days in a row.

It was cold today, and I was cold today, so I pulled out my heated throw, turned it on high, and climbed under it. I was joined by a cat, of course. I plugged my head into the headphones and tuned into one of my favorite guided meditations, *Create Inner Peace*, by Glenn Harrold.

My original idea of meditation was that you have to stop thinking. That's not the goal at all. But every now and then…it happens. At least for me. It's not a sleep. I'm just gone.

There's no sound, no light, no dreams, no thoughts, no people, no problems, no to-do lists, no expectations, just nothing, nothing, nothing.

If you're doing a guided meditation, as I do, you don't even hear that. Gone. A state of happy, happy goneness. And that's where I went today.

Ohmygod, what a relief. Even Mr. Hughes wasn't there. Well, he's never there, is he; that's the freaking problem. But even the search for him wasn't there.

Twenty-five minutes later, I was suddenly conscious of Glenn Harrold saying, in his delicious British accent, "Open your eyes! Open your eyes!" Obedient me, I did. And I was back. Rested. Brain calm. Body relaxed.

Happy.

The search may continue tonight. It might continue until I finally, in my dreams or awake, find Mr. Hughes. But at least right now, I've had some deep, deep rest.

And yes, that helps. Despite. Anyway.

Coach's note: I've never needed an excuse to republish one of Kathie's essays, She wrote 365 of them, one a day for a year, whether she felt like it or not. She wrote through cancer (hers) and job/health insurance loss (her husband's). The everyday horrors of this fallen world shake her. She admits that some days it was very tough to come up with "Happiness." But she did, every day, every one worth reading. She posted them on Facebook from January 30 to March 9, when "moment' became a blog.

The occasion of running the column and telling you all this now is the publication of all those daily moments in book form. She never thought of it as a book in progress. That idea came from Black Rose Writing (www.blackrosewriting.com).

Here's a cure for the dead-of-winter blues. Get this book. Gulp it down, sip it, maybe take one a day. It will help. Despite. Anyway.

KEEPIN' ON
PAT GOETZ

Memories of ice fishing

"Dad wants to know how come you don't come to see him."

Amazed. For sure. Looked at her.

"I didn't know he wanted me to come and see him."

"Well, he does and you might want to do it soon, ok?"

"Ok, got it. Darn, I just did not know that."

Called the nurse's desk when I got home. Told her I wanted to visit him. What would a good time be? A good day? She said she would check with him and I should call back the next day.

She knew him. Gave me a time and a day. I was scared. We hadn't talked for years. Well, we talked, but only when we'd see him for Thanksgiving or Christmas. And then it was not really 'talking.' Always good to see him, but always good to leave. Just didn't know how to act any more. Because it was really like 'acting.'

One Christmas when I had to leave early to go to work, Herbie walked me to the car. "You don't have to work do you Mom." Not a question. *[Coach's note: "Herbie" is Pat's son. "Herb" is her ex-husband.]*

"Well, yeah, I do."

"But I mean, you always get off every other Christmas. Nobody has to work every Christmas."

I looked at him. Wouldn't do to make excuses. He could look right through me in those days.

"Well, it's hard for me to be with him, Herbie. Just kind of not comfortable, you know? So I just offer to work so other people can have off."

"Yeah," he said. "I figured."

I was scared to go. But of course, how could I not? He didn't have long to live; we all knew that.

So I drove to the VA hospital in Milwaukee. I'd been there before. When Herbie asked Rachel to marry him and wanted his Dad to be part of it. Herb and Rachel just connected. Immediately. It was a joy to watch their simple looks of love. One just does not know how that happens.

So I got to the hospital. Got to the dining room where we were supposed to meet. How very strange. Married 22 years and we're meeting in an empty dining room. A big empty dining room, sun streaming in huge windows. Quiet. Oh my goodness it was quiet.

Walked to the nurse's station. She said he was ready and she'd bring him out.

I waited. Not long. Soon a bent man slowly walked toward me from the far side of the room. Walked oh so slowly. My Herb. My handsome husband. Come to this, Lord.

I walked toward him. Met him halfway. We sat at a dining room table. A small one. Not like the long ones where twenty could sit. Just enough room for four. A nice size for us.

I remember that I had seen *Grumpy Old Men* recently. Buddies forever. Ice fishing. buddies in winter. It was so Herb. How he loved ice fishing. Oh, the memories when the kids were little. When I'd pull them on the sled while Herb fished.

"Watch out for open holes," he'd called that day. I grabbed the rope and headed across the ice.

"I guess I can see an open hole," I called back..

He smiled.

Suddenly, no more than 10 feet away, I broke through a small, crusted over, invisible hole, my left leg dangling in ice cold water. Sat stunned a moment, pulled myself out, defiantly limped back to him. He grinned. "Told ya," he taunted. "Yeah, yeah," I threw back at him. "I know, I know."

So we sat at the table that day so long after. I decided to tell him about the *Grumpy Old Men* movie. Was fun to talk about it. Told him it was with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau. How they squabbled. But loved each other. Years and years, they were buddies.

"You know," he said, so very unexpectedly, "there's a big old black guy that used to stop at my table every night. He'd ask me the same thing. Over and over. 'Do ya love the Lord?' And I was getting awful tired of it. Night after night. Every supper time. Geeze.

So one night when he does his routine, I looked up at him and said, 'Just want you to know that I know my Man and my Man knows me, so don't tell me that any more, ok?'

So the guy stopped stopping."

Years after Herb died, Herbie said to me one day, "I don't think Dad's in heaven." And I said, "You don't?" "Nope, I don't."

— Keep on, next page

And I remembered. And I told him what his Dad had said. "I know my Man and my Man knows me." And I said to my son, "I know your Dad's in heaven."

"You do?"

"I do."

"Just from that?"

"Yup. You should have seen his eyes, Herbie, and heard the certainty in his voice. Yup, your Dad's in heaven."

And now I know why I love to take the Lake Road in winter. I watch for when the ice is ready for fishermen. I watch for when the first ice shanties go out. I watch on the way home at night, for the lights far out, a tiny culture out there in their own world. The quietness of it. Their own little houses. Quiet. Don't even need a cooler for their beer. An awesome life.

And every time, I think of Herb.

When you reach 100 years old in Barbados, you get a stamp in your honor.
Thanks to Mary Callahan

As You Slide Down the Banister of Life — _____13

Thanks to Barry Bishop

Transvestite: A guy who likes to eat, drink and be Mary.

The difference between the Pope and your boss is, the Pope only expects you to kiss his ring.

My mind works like lightning, one brilliant flash, and it is gone.

The only time the world beats a path to your door is if you're in the bathroom.

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I hate sex in the movies. Tried it once. The seat folded up, the drink spilled and that ice. Well, it really chilled the mood.

It used to be only death and taxes. Now, of course, there's shipping and handling too.

A husband is someone who, after taking the trash out, gives the impression that he just cleaned the whole house.

My next house will have no kitchen - just vending machines and a large trash can.

…pray that all the splinters are pointed the other way.

Marshall J. Cook, Coach-in-Chief

Two brave newspapers you should read and support

… though you've probably never heard of them

Several issues ago I gave you a list of my must-read publications and asked you for your lists. I got lots of great feedback and have been passing the lists on to you, one per issue.

But here are a couple of publications I left out of my list but have now come to treasure as much as any of my other favorites.

Simpson Street Free Press

"Never hand in a first draft"

I know of only two attempts at helping kids learn that have been proven to be effective. One you've heard of— project Head Start— but the other may be new to you- the *Simpson Street Free Press*.

It began as an experiment in teaching students key writing and researching skills. When school lets out for the day, some students choose to extend their school days, heading to yet another classroom of sorts, although this one operates as a newsroom. Volunteer editors assign stories to young folk ranging in age from 9-18, talk through the assignments with them, then work patiently through several drafts until the stories are polished and ready to be published in a tabloid and online newspaper named for the neighborhood where the newsroom is.

It grew. More and more folks picked up free copies of the interesting publication, and many donated to keep the project going. The print version of the paper went online (although they still print copies too). Soon it had spawned seven sister publications: *Janesville Free Press, James Wright Free Press* (Middle School), *Glendale Free Press* (4th and 5th graders), Le Prensa Libre de Simpson Street, *Sennett Free Press* (in English and Spanish), *Badger Rock Free Press* (focusing on science and the environment), *Wisconsin Free Press* (www.SimpsonStreetFreePress.org/on-wisc)

Older Simpson Streeters who stay in the program often become editors themselves, and many serve as ambassadors, speaking to groups throughout the area.

The *SSFP* covers science (**High-Tech Archaeologists Uncover Hidden Cities**), history (**Huge Ship Vanishes on Lake Superior: The Mystery and Legend Behind "the Titanic of the Great Lakes"**— about the storied sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald), and energy and the environment (**Proposed Driftless Power Lines Spark Controversy.**)

While students generate most of the stories from secondary sources, the paper also includes original reporting (**Madison College Builds Rooftop Solar Panels**) and editorials (**Supporting Classroom Teachers More Important then Ever**).

— *Free Press* continues, next page

Book reviews are plentiful (along with reviews of movies, music, and games),. The Book Talk section recommends books for various ages, and writer profiles encourage reading (**Virginia Wolf Blazed a Trail for Female Writers**).

The writing is first rate, the topics interesting, and the variety of material almost overwhelming. *SSFP* is a great read.

You can become a friend and/or supporter by following these great young journalists on Facebook (Simpson Street Free Press) and twitter (@ssfp_news), sign up for the eNewsletter (editors@ssfpnews.org), read their work at www.SimpsonStreetFreePress.org, or write to them at Box 6307, Monona, Wi 53716.

San Quentin News

"written by prisoners
— advancing social justice"

Those of you who have ever shared a writing class with me may have heard me say (probably more than once): "All great stories are about redemption." Agree or disagree, folks, have I got a redemption story for you.

"The first time I found hope in prison was by writing," sports writer Rahsaan Thomas was quoted as saying in the November edition of *San Quentin News (SQN)*.

"When I first came in [prison], all I had was a past, no future," according to Jesse Vasquez, who's been writing for the *SQN* for a year. He's had an article published in the *Washington Post.* He has a future now.

Thomas and Vasquez honed their new craft in the SQ Journalism Guild, which recently held its first formal commencement ceremony. This "farm team" of new writers for the paper had already contributed more than 160 stories to the newspaper and will no doubt publish many more.

Volunteers from the University of California-Berkeley do much of the teaching. Students learn much more than the rules of journalism like "don't bury the lead" and "if your mother says she loves you, get a second source."

"Reporting from prison starts with self-transformation to amend past damage and provide healing for the future," according to Journalism Guild chairman Marcus Henderson.

Many of the stories they report describe other programs aimed at reclamation. These are headlines from that November issue:

Message of Hope for Mental Wellness Week
Law enforcement and prisoners get together in Barbershop Dialogue
50 men graduate from California Re-entry Institute

This is a prison that actually seeks to expand the definition of "prison" ("an institution where persons are confined for punishment and for the protection of society") to include rehabilitation.

Prisoners write and edit every word in *SQN*. Of course they have an oversight board. Every journalist in the world is subject to the dictates of a publisher. But they are well aware of and adhere to their mission, to "continue to advocate for those inmates without a voice and report on what works in that criminal justice system, what doesn't, and how we can join together to fix it."

The advocacy and the examples of what's working and what isn't begins in SQ itself and extends to events all over the country. Again a sampling of November headlines:

Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People & Families Movement Conference— A Quest for Democracy (a group advocating for an end to the "Life without possibility of parole" sentence).
Class action suit alleges Tennessee neglected diabetic inmates
Texas warden demoted after instituting disciplinary quotas

SQN has room for features and fun, including book reviews, remembrances of inmates who have died, puzzles, trivia tidbits, and sports news you won't find anywhere else:

Prison Sports Ministry edges out Hardtimers, 36-34 (softball)
San Quentin Warriors take visiting Lincoln Hills in overtime (basketball)

Like *SSFP, SQN* is supported solely by grants and donations from the outside community. Visit the website (sanquentinnews.com) or write to "Friends of San Quentin News, Box 494, San Quentin, CA 94964.

You'll feel a whole lot better about the world and humankind's chances for survival after reading these publications and better about yourself if you can help support the amazing work they're doing.

The word

Karen Busch

How important is the word?
What will happen when it's stirred?
I can give you lots of thrilling, chilling
variations, with a twist and turn.
With tumbling letters all put in a line.
add humor, memories ,
and with a
little drama, oh yes
it will be a playful churn.
Shaking things round and round.
When it's read it’s quite a sound.
It can discover or investigate.
Make it on time or make it so late.
It can add sparks to your imagination.
I look at it as a form of recreation.
So take a word and see what you can do
Stimulate your mind— go ahead try it,
it's all up to you.

Street-art Before andAfter

thanks to Pedro Hiort-Lorenzen

WRITING
CRAFT AND ART
SUE ROUPP

How to write books for kids

You want to write a children's book?

Define a target market

If I hear "This is a story for ALL ages" one more time, I'm going to spontaneously combust. Pick an age group and write a relatable story for them. Get familiar with the books out there for the age group you're considering. Is it for young children (target ages 2-6); Middle graders (target ages 8-11); or Young Adult (target 12+)? If you have really written a story for all ages, it will work on this and so many more levels. But if you can't engage even one of these groups directly, it won't work for any of them.

Choose a relatable theme

Does it have wide appeal? Is it from a child's point of view – or at least about an issue that's important to a child's world? If a child relates to your story and sees themselves in it, they'll want to read it over and over. Kids are always curious and love characters who are curious, too.

Popular fiction themes include: love, jealousy, belonging, identity, family, loss, grief, growing up, anger, suffering or…

Make a clear beginning, middle, and end

A story about a little girl who sees a snail, fills a bucket with sand, and goes to bed at night is not a story; it's a child's day. While I'm sure she had a lovely day, it just doesn't make for a compelling story…well, to anyone other than her grandmother.

The truth is, ending a story is even harder than starting one. For kids ages 6-8 introduce some simple conflict. For older kids you can develop complex conflicts, and you can have two or three main characters wrestling with these conflicts.

Don't get preachy

Your story should be subtle enough to convey a message without the moral being in your face. Kids can smell morals. And they smell like something to avoid.

Sue Roupp teaches a variety of workshops for writers and is the author of Memoir Writing in Six Easy Steps. *She and her husband live in Rib Lake, Wisconsin.*

Winter Baseball Reveries I
Sandy Rafter

Baudelaire pitches parakeets at Yankee Stadium

Baudelaire worked at Yankee Stadium as a vendor of roasted parakeets. Most of the vendors had gimmicks to set them apart from the other sellers. One guy sang opera, some danced or juggled peanuts, always some trick to get the fan's attention. Baudelaire was a quiet guy; he'd go so far as to read his customers a poem by Richard Brautigan, but no one asked again after the first time.

Mostly, when fans raised their fingers for two or three of the roasted birds, Baudelaire would reach into his metal hot box and quietly call, "with mustard or without?" One time, a woman grabbed his arm as he passed by and told him, "I bought one of your snacks for my daughter, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You almost frightened her to death." After that, whenever Baudelaire made a sale, he'd ask about the mustard first and add, "with head or without?"

Baudelaire wasn't known for his accuracy. Once, he tossed a roasted parakeet that wobbled toward the infield. Phil Rizzuto plucked it from mid-air for the final out of the inning. Another time Snuffy Stirnweiss hit one of the fowl balls for a triple, but he slid on a patch of parakeet grease past the bag and was thumbed out. Another day Larry Doby won the game for Cleveland when he hit a slider parakeet for a double.

Baudelaire liked meeting famous people. One game Marilyn Monroe sat behind home plate and blew a kiss to Joe DiMaggio in center field at the same time one of Baudelaire's tosses went astray and hit DiMaggio's lips. "Wow," said Joe, "This is the best kiss she's ever given me." One Sunday game Baudelaire met Jesus in the bullpen and asked him if he were going to save the Yankees. Jesus replied, "I might, but I don't throw a curve."

Casey Stengel complained constantly to Baudelaire that the feathers from the parakeets were blowing onto the playing field. Baudelaire solved that dilemma by asking if he could borrow the cleanup hitter, but the guy would go into periodic slumps.

When he tried to improve the taste of his parakeets by combining them with goat cheese dip, the groundskeepers complained that the goat herd was making a mess of the outfield. Shoeless Joe raised a blister when he stepped onto a hot parakeet in left field. After that, Baudelaire carried bandages and iodine in his pocket, a list of banned players, and the phone number of Kevin Costner.

Baudelaire wondered how he could make his job a bit easier. One day he heard the players in the dugout talking about stealing signs from the catcher and had an idea: ESP. If he could sense what was in the catcher's or pitcher's mind before the ball was released, he knew Casey would be interested. And, he knew just the one to help him — Maisie Gercher.

Baudelaire and Maisie met one foggy day when he was exploring parks his parakeets might like to visit on their days off. She mostly resided in a small cemetery listed in the New York Guide to Parks and Cemeteries, 1938 edition. Maisie had been reclining on a small tombstone, but there was no guarantee he'd find her in the same spot. She was a free spirit who lived on a trust from her grandmother that carried over into the afterlife.

She had interesting stories about parakeets she knew who used to live in cages in the McCrory Five and Dime stores. Baudelaire thought that If anyone would know about a sixth sense, surely someone beyond this world would. He just wished she had a sense of time so he could find her before the parakeets at home had marinated too long.

Maisie was nowhere to be found. Baudelaire was disappointed as he headed for his apartment. Still, he wished his friend Maisie well. She was doing what she liked. At home he decided to play his electric parakeet guitar and sing Grateful Dead songs for her. She had told him that the parakeets in the Five and Dime always wanted to fly but made do with what they had and were happy. He had seen them flying, swooping toward the catcher's hands. He could see the straps around their necks with their little binoculars. Of course, they were the parakeets that still had their heads.

Lyricist's preface: I wrote this song long ago. I was inspired by Rusty Staub's speech to Mets fans who honored him on his day after he retired. The theme was that he wished the fans all could have "something like the feeling I'm feeling today."

Something Like The Feeling

Keith George

Remember that home run everyone heard?
I know how he felt as he came around third
Those have walked on the moon far away
Had something like the feeling I'm feeling today
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today
It's too big for words, believe me when I say
If you've never heard it, my friend for you I pray
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today
If you could dance on the wind above every care
To the prettiest music ever heard anywhere
Or capture the magic of a child at play
You'd have something like the feeling I'm feeling today
It's the prize for the climber who claws to the peak
And the spirit that wins when the body's too weak
For those who are lost, it's finding the way
It's something like the feeling I'm feeling today
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today
Like a summer breeze carries your troubles away
A lover's first kiss, a baby's first day
Bring something like the feeling I'm feeling today
History's heroes searching for more
They risked every danger 'till they reached a new shore
I bet in their triumph they felt the same way
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today
It's too big for words, believe me when I say
If you've never felt it my friend for you I pray
Something like the feeling I'm feeling today.

COACH'S BULLPEN BRIEFS

You never know what you'll find in a Little Free Library

Recent winner of the monthly "oddball book title" award from the Little Free Library website: *There's a Weasel in my Meatsafe*, by **Paul Drabble**, which showed up in **Shannon Masur's** LFL in St. Peters, Missouri.

The picture (above) of a spectacular LFL in Idaho comes from **Madonna Dries Christensen**.

MOST WACKY BOOK TITLES OF THE YEAR DEPT:

Would any of these books shout "Buy me! Buy me!" as you cruised the shelves of new arrivals at your local book purveyor?

Stop Whining. Shut Up. Get a Life.
Cosmetic Surgery for Dummies
How to Lose Weight While Driving

No, I am not making these up.

Lethal Lit: A Tig Torres Mystery

Tig Torres, a high school junior, has a true crime podcast. Its purpose: To discover the true identity of the Lit Killer, the well-read murderer who terrorized Tig's hometown, Hollow Falls, a decade ago. Trouble is, the Lit Killer is listening in. And he or she wants Tig on permanent hiatus. …A digital-native Nancy Drew bristling with wit, snark and vocal fry, Tig is the creation of comics writers **Alex Segura** and **Monica Gallagher.**

Each episode (there are six in the first season of "Lethal Lit") is structured as a podcast within a podcast as Tig and her classmates narrate their investigations, searching for clues in battered copies of *Lord of the Flies"*and *The Great Gatsby.* Call it nerd-pride noir.

The vocal talent is variable, but the writing is savvy, the nods to genre are droll, and the cliffhangers — don't go into the abandoned amusement park, Tig! — just about unbearable.
— ALEXIS SOLOSKI
NY Times, "Five Great Podcasts from 2018"

Author! Author!

Kudos to late-night television hosts Seth Meyers and Trevor Noah, who often host authors on their shows. No, not the usual celebrities or best-selling authors pushing their work, not folks who have written cookbooks and novelty joke books. In a landscape largely devoid of literature, Meyers and Noah introduce the world to first-time novelists and relatively obscure but fascinating authors.

Groaners from the *Reader's Digest*

An Englishman, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, and a German are watching a street performer. The performer suddenly realizes that these men have a poor view, so he gets on a small platform. "Can you all see me now?" he asks them.

They respond "Yes," "Oui," "Si," "Ja."
— JUST SOMETHING.COM

"It's a good thing snakes don't interbreed with dogs. Nobody wants a loyal snake."
— ROY BLOUNT

Knowing that the pastor enjoyed his drink, a hotel owner offered him a case of cherry brandy for Christmas in exchange for a free ad in the church newsletter. The pastor agreed and ran this in the next issue: "The pastor would like to thank Patrick Smith for his kind gift of a case of fruit and for the spirit in which it was given.
— HOTSERMONS.COM

Now showing at a theatre near you

Movies staring women earn more that those with males in the lead, according to research covering 2014-2017. Also, films that pass the Bechdel do better. What's the Bechdel test? Does the film contain a scene in which two female characters discuss something other than a man.

Pay attention, filmmakers. If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody going to the show.
New York Times, December 12, 2018.

The second worst thing ever to take place in the Oval Office?

When Nancy (Pelosi), Chuck (Schumer), Mike (Pence), and the Donald (Trump) met recently in the most sacred secular room in the United States, the result resembled a cat fight. Only V.P. Pence sat quietly and politely during the ugly exchanges.

"Me Too" Flapdoodle

A 74-year-old standard, a mainstay of every radio station that plays Christmas and pseudo Christmas songs, was pulled from the rotations at many of those stations this year, due to assertions from #Me,Too and others that it's sexist and suggestive.

"Baby it's cold outside" certainly isn't "O Holy Night,", and yes, it's suggestive, but I'm not sure it's worth the uproar.

Actor **William Shatner** champions the song. "You must clutch your pearls over rap music," the *NY Times* quoted him saying.

"You gotta have [no] heart"?

In mid-December a Southwest Airlines flight had to turn around and go back when a human heart (no longer in a human body) was found on board.

"Wonderful Life" took 30 years to be recognized as a classic

It's a Wonderful Life'
from the *New York Times*, December18, 2018

Frank Capra's classic comic drama about **George Bailey's** Christmas dark night of the soul in Bedford Falls has been a Yuletide standard for so long, it's easy to forget what a ho-hum reception it got in 1947, when it came out. A best picture nomination was the sole consolation prize for a film about a small-town family man **(James Stewart**) that neither critics nor audiences fully embraced until the mid-1970s, when its revival as an annual television staple commenced.

Sentiments like these, from **Bosley Crowther's** review, were common:

Indeed, the weakness of this picture, from this reviewer's point of view, is the sentimentality of it — its illusory concept of life. Mr. Capra's nice people are charming, his small town is a quite beguiling place and his pattern for solving problems is most optimistic and facile. But somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities. And Mr. Capra's "turkey dinners" philosophy, while emotionally gratifying, doesn't fill the hungry paunch

Same goes for "Christmas Story"

A Christmas Story (1983)
Rent it on Amazon, Google Play, iTunes, Hulu, and YouTube.

Director **Bob Clark's** nostalgia-soaked comedy, based on stories by **Jean Shepherd** and centered on a put-upon nine-year-old (**Peter Billingsley**) and his disaster-prone Midwestern family in the 1940s, owes its popularity to Turner broadcasting, which turned a modest hit into a phenomenon by airing it relentlessly on TBS and TNT. Cherished details like the "Little Orphan Annie decoder ring," "a triple-dog dare," and the "Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle" were lost on **Vincent Canby** at the time:

There are a number of small, unexpectedly funny moments in "A Christmas Story," but you have to possess the stamina of a pearl diver to find them.

You, too, can look like a Kardashian

Licensed doctors performed 18,489 buttocks augmentations in 2016, an increase of 26% over 2015, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

It Should Be a Word but Isn't

"A" is for "a crapella"

According to a recent "Department of Wit column in *Reader's Digest,* "a crapella" (ah cra PEL huh) means "Sung badly while listening to music using headphones."

"Basebull"? That's the endless litany of hits, ERAs, OPS, WHIP, wOBA, wRC+, OPS+.BABiP, FIP, xFIP and on and on "at the fingertips of every major league basebore.

"Chiptease" is a bag of potato chips that turns out to be mostly air. "Destinesia" is reaching your destination but forgetting why you went there. "Pressitute"? A biased journalist, of course.

One we should probably all practice from time to time: "Metox"— to take a break from being totally self-absorbed.

And finally, a word that might well apply to this column: "unlighten," which means you've just learned something that made you dumber.

Like basebull, football has gone stat-crazy

Rookie N.F.L. quarterback **Josh Allen** of of the Buffalo Bills ranks near the bottom of the league in most QB statistics. But he leads the N.F.L. in "intended air yards," according to the league's "Next Gen Stats." When Allen throws a pass, it goes an average of 11.5 yards downfield, tops in the league. Whether the ball is caught or not is irrelevant in this measure. Two more strong-armed rookies, Baker Mayfield of Cleveland and Sam Darnold of the Jets are tied for fourth on this scale with 9.1 intended yards per throw.

So why ain't I a bestselling author?

The "By the Book" column in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* on the the penultimate day of 2018 featured one of my favorite writers, **James Lee Burke.** I could totally relate to many of his choices. (Most of the time, I think people are just trying to prove how erudite they are.)

His favorite book of all time? *The Sound and the Fury,* by **William Faulkner**. "There is no better text for a young writer— or an old one."

Favorite fictional detective? Harry Bosch, the L.A. cop created by **Michael Connelly**.

What got him started reading? The Hardy Boys.

Favorite literary characters? The Hardy Boys and Captain Marvel (the old time one, the Big Cheese who appeared when Billy Batson uttered the word "Shazam!"—If you know what the six letters in "Shazam" stand for, you're my kinda people.)

He thinks everybody should read *Of Love and Dust,* by **Ernest J. Gaines.**

And I especially love this… Who should write his life story? "My life is a chasm-like yawn that on audiotape could put anyone asleep in less than three minutes."

He loses me at wishing "Jack Kerouac had lived to be a thousand years old," but otherwise, I'm right there with him.

Hope you enjoyed **MaryTracy's** reader profile on page nine this issue. As you may remember, the *Times* "By the Book" column gave me the idea for asking you for your reader profiles— and I'm glad I did. I think they're a great feature. If you haven't sent yours yet, please do.

More importantly, I just can't wrap my head around these

For the 44th year, Michigan's Lake Superior State University has issued its "List of Words Banished from the Queen's English for Miss-use, Over-use, and General Uselessness," based on a poll on Facebook and the school's website.

Among the top three of 18 entries on the list for 2018 is "collusion" (as in "no collusion with Russia"*). "Wheelhouse" and "in the books" were the other two top finishers.

Other non-favorites included "wrap my head around," "platform," "importantly," and "legally drunk."

Three of my least favorite pop-words or phrases remain "at this point in time" (you mean, like, "now"?), "arguably" (you either believe it or you don't. Which is it?), and "boots on the ground" (There are people in those boots!). I'm happy to see that they have faded from use.

A rose by any other name

The Houston Texans football team is known for its smothering defense, or was, anyway, until the Indianapolis Colts hung 21 points on them in the first half of their first-round playoff game. And no wonder, with an outside linebacker named Whitney Mercilus. And for those of you with coulrophobia (from the Greek word for "one who walks on stilts"), defensive end Jadeveon Clowney is equally heart— and quarterback— stopping.

Another reason to stay away from Twitter and Facebook

Many publishing contracts are now including morality clauses. If somebody smears you in social-media and it results in controversy, the bottom-line folk can cancel your agreement.

How to write a first draft

Show up. Let it rip. Hold nothing back.
If you can't think of anything to write about, don't.
That's a wrap. If this got any longer, we'd have to call it "long johns" instead of "briefs."

Coach

Whatever I can make of this I have _____ 23

Tom Crawford

The brisk rubbing together of the hands,
my Asian apology for the innumerable lapses of love.
The heart's big ship too often moored.

The new day, nevertheless, coming right on schedule.

The lighted world a blue mote, a morning sweet
God rolls in His mouth.

A sprinkling of goldeneyes, feeding on kelp.

Failure, whatever I can make of you, I have.
You're like a new bride coming into the room.
Petals floating in a white dish.

Everything's forgiven.

— from *Wu Wei*

Street-Art Before and After

thanks to Pedro Hiort-Lorenzen

Just a buncha funnies

What did the Buddhist ask the hot dog vendor?
"Make me one with everything."

You know why you never see elephants hiding up in trees?
They're really good at it.

Where does the general keep his armies?
In his sleevies, of course.

What do you call bears with no ears?
B.

Pity poor Joe, a dyslexic insomniac agnostic.
He stays awake at night wondering if there is a dog.

What's a foot long and slippery?
A slipper.

How did the moron die ice fishing?
He got hit by a zamboni.

<u>Another classic— which may be read silently:</u>
Knock, knock.
Who's there?
To.
To who?"
"It's to *whom*."

<u>A classic, to be read aloud:</u>
I told my friend 10 wordplay jokes, trying to get him to laugh.
Sadly, no pun in 10 did.

What do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in common?
Same middle name.

The highway department accused my husband of being a thief.
I didn't believe it until I got home and saw all the signs.

Why did the cowboy get a dachshund?
He wanted a long little doggie.

Want to find out who loves you more, your wife or your dog?
Lock 'em both in the trunk of your car for an hour, open the trunk, and see who's happy to see you.

I intend to live forever.
So far, so good.

One with everything

More than just another mystery

Blacklands, a novel

Belinda Bauer

In my never–ending search for the next great mystery writer, I stumbled across Ms. Bauer, who worked as a journalist and screenwriter in Europe and Africa and now lives in Wales. *Blacklands*, her first novel, won the Gold Dagger crime novel award of 2010 from the Crime Writers Assoc. in England. Her latest novel, *Snap*, was long-listed for the Man Booker award in 2018.

In her opening paragraphs, 12-year-old Steven digs in the moors for the body of his Uncle Billy, killed by a pedophile 18 years before when Billy was about Steven's age today. His killer is in prison based on some circumstantial evidence in Billy's case, as well as for many confessed murders.

Billy's body has never been found, but many of this killer's victims are known to have been buried in Exmoor, where Steven lives and is digging, hoping that discovery of the body will close the dysfunctional hole in his family caused by Billy's death. Billy's mother, Steven's grandmother, has been staring out the window waiting for Billy to come home for 18 years, and Billy's sister, Steven's Mom, has tried out a succession of "Uncles," one of whom gives Steven the shovel.

This subject matter would not be my first free choice, but Ms. Bauer sidesteps the maudlin invitations and creates and increases the tension when Steven, not telling his family, begins a cat and mouse game of communication with the killer to disclose Billy's burial site. The killer is up for parole soon, and with good behavior will probably be released, All communications must be in code to avoid prison censorship. The killer gives no free information. When Steven sends a requested photo of the moors to the killer that inadvertently identifies himself as a young boy, the killer starts plotting his escape from prison that he might claim one last victim.

Sparse but beautiful writing makes this far more memorable than just another mystery. It gets well beneath the skin of the serial killer, not a voyage you might enjoy, but one that delivers verisimilitude, the strongest reason to read fiction. JS

Mind-numbing mumblings

The Witch Elm

Tana French,

Viking (an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC), 2018

Tana French, born in Vermont, holds U.S. and Italian citizenships, lives in Dublin, and writes psychological mystery thrillers, almost all of which have won prizes. *The Witch Elm* was one of the *NYTime's* "Notable Books" for 2018.

I've developed a real hatred for psychological murder mysteries. I wander in the interior depths of the characters, never really knowing what the police are up to. It makes for a very unsatisfactory murder mystery read.

This one is no different. It does, however, transmit the feeling of helplessness which the characters express, over and over and over, if you like that sort of thing. Just to be sure, French gives her protagonist, Toby Hennessey, aphasia.

A self-proclaimed lucky guy, Toby, who narrates the story, soon winds up in the hospital after being beaten almost to death by a pair of home burglars. He decides to spend his long recuperation (aphasia, memory loss, PTSD) at his dying uncle's estate, Ivy House, where he spent many years growing up, along with his rich cousins. They join him once again for weekends, and other occasions, during one of which the female cousins children discover a skull in the Wych Elm out in the garden. This parallels an actual case in England where a still unidentified female skeleton was found inside a Wych Elm.

French brings in the detectives, who soon find the rest of the body and identify it. Since this book is written from Toby's point of view, we never know what the detectives know so the solution of the murder, if it was a murder, takes 170,000 words of mind-numbing interior mumblings and cousin to cousin conversations going mostly nowhere amid the incessant F-bombs and indecipherable Irish slang.

The skeleton is identified as a male acquaintance of the cousins when they were all teenagers (and are now in their thirties) and of whom it may be said that he never met anyone who didn't ultimately want him dead.

Unfortunately for our protagonist, his memory has lapsed so far that he thinks he might have been the murderer, and his cousins seem more than willing to support that possibility.

He came to Ivy House, not only to care for his uncle. but to solve the mystery of why he was burgled in the first place and later, how that might fit in with the skeleton in the Wych Elm. His feeble mind makes little progress in either case except that he did have an exceptional girl friend whom he manages to lose by his own ineptness.

I may as well tell you that his uncle dies. Toby also had a decent job before the burglary that he is no longer mentally capable of handling since it dealt with using his high intelligence and verbal capacity to satisfactorily resolve all manner of conflict among his bosses, customers, and colleagues. He had been a great fixer of other people's problems. No longer. He's reduced to helping his uncle research genealogical questions for others. That doesn't get resolved either. For a lucky guy, Toby's luck seems mostly to be bad.

However, there's another 15,000 words. Keep reading. JS

Patchett earns Swift praise

Bel Canto

Ann Patchett

Harper Collins, 2001

I'd heard of Ms. Patchett before, and when Bel Canto hit our librarian's favorite books table I decided to see what all the fuss was about. She's a wonderful writer even though many of her stories, personal relationship dramas, are not really in my genre. There's always something to learn. I've even bought the Opera 101 book she used to write this novel. As Aristotle said, "To be learning something gives the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it."

I assume most *EI* readers have read this book, as it's a kind and loving story. It's shaped as a dramatic love story one might find in an opera or soap opera but with more gravitas than the latter. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and has won other awards as have many of Patchett's writings.

In an unnamed country somewhere in South America a small local terrorist group captures 100 birthday party attendees come from all over the world to the country's Vice President's palace to honor a Japanese industrialist and listen to one of the world's greatest sopranos sing some of her favorite arias- possibly in the bel canto style, which I believe means "beautiful singing."

So begins a weeks-long hostage situation perhaps patterned after a real life event involving about 600 hostages lasting 126 days at the Japanese Embassy grounds in Lima, Peru, which was ended with a commando attack by the Peruvian military on April 22, 1997, killing all combatants and a few others.

Whether the Peruvians were able to concoct incredible love stories between people who spoke different languages and communicated with each other through an interpreter is not known, but this is what Patchett sets out to do and does convincingly. She also creates an opera singer and champion chess player from a couple of terrorists who had never sung opera or played chess before, but these transmutations lack the verisimilitude of her love stories.

I'm not a student of the opera, but Patchett clearly became one while writing this novel. That she was able to endow so many of her characters with grace, beauty, and great inner strength, enabling them to change and grow into people we really care about, reminds me of the opera and speaks well of Patchett's formidable writing talents. Even the Catholic priest who was caught up in this comes across as a caring, compassionate, and deeply religious man.

I hated to see this book end. JS

AWE-SOME PICTURE

Harold Whittles hears for the first time, 1974

or what to read while flat on your broken back in the hospital, willing the pain to go away and your legs to start working again.

Coach won't tell on you if you enjoy a King novel

The Green Mile

Stephen King

Plume, a division of Dutton Signet, a division of Penguin books, 1997. Originally published as a series of six episodes by Signet.

My copy: a gift from wonderful nurse Meghan at Sisters of Saint Mary Hospital

Don't read Stephen King because of general principles? Because he sells so many books? Because you've read critics who dismiss him as a "hack"? (They probably haven't read him, either.)

Well, you're missing out on a lot of great (and great big!) novels, and they don't all involve demented clowns, time travel, or manifestations of the demonic. If you haven't already done so, drop those principles, get past the envy, eschew the mob snobbery, and read *The Green Mile.*

You probably saw the movie, released in December, 1999, right? Tom Hanks was predictably spot on as guard Paul Edgecomb, and Michael Clarke Duncan was a huge surprise (literally) as John Coffey, a massive black man convicted of brutally killing a pair of young girls. Pretty good movie, right?

The book is even better. King is a masterful storyteller, who can capture a character's essence in a few words or sentences. Although I thought it started a bit slowly— rare for King — it quickly picked up emotional momentum and had me, yes, turning the pages, eager to get to what came next.

You probably already know the plot. If you don't, I won't spoil it for you here.

King writes in the introduction to the "Complete Serial Novel" edition that he first got the idea of writing about an inmate on death row as early as 1992 or 93, but each time he tried, to start, it just wasn't right. And, as you can well imagine, he was very busy with a lot of other projects.

But he couldn't get the idea out of his mind. (He had even "written" the first chapter in his head during a bout of insomnia.)

The miracle (King admits in his marvelous *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft,* that he often doesn't know where or how he gets his inspiration) came in a FAX from his foreign-rights agent, asking if he might be interested in writing a serialized novel, as Charles Dickens had so famously and successfully done. The notion intrigued him, and the form seemed to mesh with the jailhouse story he wanted to write.

The six novelettes came out one a month, and while people didn't have to wait for the boat to dock to get the next installment, as they did in Dickens' day, they hustled to a bookstore when the next episode was due.

When reading the compilation of the six stories, I noticed some repetition, King catching readers up on what had transpired previously, but I got so caught up in the story, I didn't mind. With Edgecomb providing the narration— supposedly in a memoir written decades after the events take place, while he is shelved in an old folks home— I came to care about him, his wife, the other guards, John Coffey, even Mr. Jingles, a preternaturally bright and talented mouse.

Give it a try. I won't tell your snobby friends.

Dunning a sure thing for Coach

Sign of the Book

John Dunning

My copy: Simon & Schuster, 2005

Dunning is one of my favorite authors, and I've read several of the books in his Cliff Janeway mystery series, so I figured I'd enjoy this one, too.

I did.

Janeway, a former cop in Denver, now owns a used and rare bookstore on seedy Colfax Avenue. When new partner and friend Erin d'Angelo asks him for a favor, he drives to the small town of Paradise, where a former good friend of Erin's, Laura Marshall, is in jail, accused of killing her husband. Did she do it? Did she confess to protect her autistic oldest son?

As always, Dunning presents a strong supporting cast, including a local lawyer and a rogue deputy sheriff, and they all stand up and cast shadows.

You learn a lot about books and the people who buy and sell them in a Janeway tale, and the plot and the people impel you through the book.

— We're not quite done with Dunning

Other stories in the Janeway series include the first, *Booked to Die* (1992), *The Bookman's Wake* (1995), *The Bookman's Promise* (2004), and *The Bookwoman's Last Fling* (2006).

Dunning has also published two of my other favorite books, the stand-alone mystery *Two O'Clock Eastern Wartime* and *The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio.*

Go a little easier on the research

The Great Train Robbery

Michael Crichton

My copy— a Harper paperback, also from Meghan, 1975

Many of you know that bestselling novelist Michael Crichton can write a great yarn. (See *Jurassic Park, The Andromeda Strain,* and others*).* You also know that he is a voracious researcher.

Both are laudable marks of a bestselling author.

Crichton and I have one thing in common: I do a lot of research when I write a novel. (It's often more fun than writing.)

My tendency is to jam every scrap of that research into the novel. It's juicy stuff and will prove to you how hard I worked and how much I know. That's the fat first draft, the "shitty draft."* Then I have to at least try to cut out anything that doesn't advance the story.

That's not fun. That's "killing your babies."**

Reading Crichton's fine novel, I learned an awful lot about London in the 1850s, great stuff, but a few times I think it interrupted rather than enriched the story. At times I struggled with what I'm sure was authentic dialect from the criminal underclass,

That said, it's a great read, based in historical fact, and the finale is a stunner.

* I think I first encountered that term in Anne Lamott's marvelous book on writing, *Bird by Bird,* but I'm sure others can claim it, too.

** I thought Dorothy Parker said it first, but many give the credit to Ernest Hemingway. Stephen King used the word "murdering" when he cited it.

And speaking of writers who know how to spin a yarn…

Reacher delivers again

Without Fail

Lee Child

My copy— G.P. Putman's Sons, 2002, from the Capitol Lakes Health Center Library

In this the sixth in the series of Jack Reacher novels (there are now 26 and counting), Lee Child really hits his stride, his ex-military cop already an almost mythic character. As a bonus, we learn a lot about the nomadic Reacher's older brother, Joe, six years dead at the time the adventure takes place.

The U.S. Secret Service receives a series of anonymous threats to assassinate Vice-President elect Brook Armstrong. SS agent M.E. Froelich, once Joe Reacher's lover, wants to hire brother Jack to test the security she has created around Armstrong by determining how he would go about pulling off the assassination.

The most perplexing question facing Froelich, Reacher, and Reacher's former Army colleague, Frances Naegley, whom he enlists to help— why would anyone want to assassinate the hail-fellow-well-met Armstrong, an uncontroversial and until recently largely unknown politician.

Just as Shane, another mythic hero played by an actor much too short for the part, rides off at the end of book and movie, still an enigma to all who know him, Reacher the nomad "headed west for the Port Authority and a bus out of town."

The end.

There's no sequel to Shane, but there's plenty more Reacher novels out there. If you read *Without Fail*, you'll probably go looking for them.

Still on my wobbly bedside table—

Thunder dog: the true story of a blind man, his guide dog, & the triumph of trust, by Michael Hingson with Susy Flory, a gift from **Pernetta Deemer**; Ron Chernow's massive and readable biography of *Alexander Hamilton*, on loan from **Willis Browne**; *The Bloody Spur,* a Caleb York Western by Mickey Spillane and Max Allan Collins, which I bought; *Relic,* by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, on loan from **Kim and Jeremiah Cook**; *Bagombo Snuff Box*, a collection of early Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. short stories, on loan from **Barry Orton**; and *Have a Little Faith,* by Mitch Albom, lent by **Deb Schroeder.**

E.I. Celebrations of Life

Rosanell Johnson Eaton

April 14, 1921 — Dec. 9, 2018

a warrior for justice

Rosanell Eaton, a resolute African-American woman who was hailed by President Barack Obama as a beacon of civil rights for her role as a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against a restrictive North Carolina voting law that reached the Supreme Court in 2016, died on Saturday in Louisburg, N.C. She was 97.

Caught up as a witness to history in one of the nation's major controversies, Ms. Eaton, an obscure civil rights pioneer in her younger years, became a cause célèbre after Mr. Obama cited her courage in his response to a 2015 article in *The New York Times Magazine* about growing efforts to dismantle the protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"I was inspired to read about unsung American heroes like Rosanell Eaton in Jim Rutenberg's *A Dream Undone: Inside the 50-year campaign to roll back the Voting Rights Act,"* Mr. Obama wrote "I am where I am today only because men and women like Rosanell Eaton refused to accept anything less than a full measure of equality."

A lifelong devotee of voting rights who vividly remembered the terrors and degradations of the Jim Crow era, Ms. Eaton, one of seven children of a North Carolina farm family, attended segregated schools, used segregated bathrooms and other public accommodations, and drank from a "colored" water fountain in her hometown, Louisburg, N.C.

In her first act of defiance, when she was 21, she went to the Franklin County Courthouse in Louisburg. Three white men confronted her there and demanded to know what she wanted.

"I'm here to register to vote," she said.

They told her that she could register only if she could recite from memory the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. It was a common ruse, disguised as a literacy test, to turn away black voters. The valedictorian of her high school class, she complied without hesitation.

She registered and cast her ballot that year, 1942, becoming one of the state's first black voters since Reconstruction.

She voted in nearly every election thereafter. For more than 40 years, she was a county poll worker on election days, and a special registrar commissioner, helping some 4,000 people to register to vote.

During the civil rights turmoil of the 1960s, she and her family were threatened repeatedly by night riders, according to federal court papers. She awoke several times to the crackle of burning crosses outside her home. Farm equipment was damaged one night, and bullets were fired into a shed and into the farmhouse. One struck just below her bedroom window.

North Carolina's effort, a half-century later, to impose restrictive changes on voting laws prompted Ms. Eaton to join a peaceful protest outside the Legislature in Raleigh in 2013. As she moved slowly with a walker, her friend, the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, then president of the North Carolina N.A.A.C.P., told her: "Rosanell, you don't have to do this."

"I know what I have to do," she said.

A New York Times *obituary by Robert D. McFadden.*

Amanda Sequoyah Swimmer

Oct. 27, 1921— Nov. 24, 2018

"There's no word for goodbye in Cherokee. We're always going to see each other again."

Amanda Sequoyah Swimmer was born in North Carolina at a time when Native American children were forced to attend boarding schools as part of a national effort to assimilate them into mainstream culture.

But as a child in fourth grade she grew tired of being punished for speaking her native Cherokee and forced to use English, and one day she jumped her school's courtyard fence and ran away. She never returned.

Instead she fashioned a life devoted to the preservation of Cherokee culture, keeping its language and pottery traditions alive. She was revered in the mountainous tribal lands of western North Carolina — honored there as a "Beloved Woman" — and renowned as one of her people's most skilled potters.

Obituary in the New York Times *by Ana Fota, December 6, 2018 and obituary in* Cherokee One Feather, *November 26, 2018, by "Scott."*

Carole Penny Marshall

Oct. 15, 1943 — Dec. 17, 2018

Many of us first met Penny Marshall as Laverne DeFazio, half of the hit sit-com "Laverne & Shirley" for seven years (1976-83), about two down-to-earth women who worked in a brewery in Milwaukee.

Her first big acting break had come in 1971, when she played Jack Klugman's gloomy secretary, Myrna Turner, on the sitcom "The Odd Couple."

She then became the first woman to direct a feature film that grossed more than $100 million when she crafted "Big" in 1988, a comedy about a 12-year-old boy who turns into an adult, played by Tom Hanks.

Next came "Awakenings" (1990), staring RobertDe Nero and Robin Williams, a modest success.

She followed that in1992, scoring big at the box office again and creating her most important and impactful work, "A League of Their Own," about the wartime women's baseball league. Madonna, Geena Davis, Rosie O'Donnell, and Hanks starred, and one line became a cultural meme, Hanks' quivering "There's no crying in baseball."

There was crying, there was laughter, and there was overdue recognition for the women who kept baseball alive during World War II and paved the way for other breakthroughs for women.

Marshall was born October15, 1943 in the Bronx. (She never lost the accent.) The family name had been changed from Masciarelli.

She died at her home in Los Angeles from complications of diabetes. She had been treated for lung cancer, discovered in 2009, and a brain tumor. She was 75.

Charley Parkhurst, stagecoach driver, 67
"one-eyed Charley," a swashbuckling, one-eyed, whiskey drinking, cigar smoking and tobacco chewing stagecoach driver during the California Gold Rush, lived her life disguised as man. She wore a black eye patch after being kicked in the head by a horse. Her secret was only revealed after her death in 1879, provoking widespread astonishment.

Jerry Chestnut, lyricist, 87
His blue-collar songs have been sung by Loretta Lynn, Willie Nelson, George Jones, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Jerry Lee Lewis, two Elvises (Elvi?): Presley and Costello, and many others.

Norman Gimbel, lyricist, 91
He wrote the lyrics for "Killing Me Softly With His Song," "The Girl from Ipanema," "I Will Follow Him," "I Got a Name," and the themes for "Happy Days" and "Laverne and Shirley."

Bob Einstein, comedian, 76
He was faux-daredevil "Super Dave Osborne" and played Marty Funkhouser on "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and "Officer Judy" on "The Smothers Brothers." His writing for The Smothers Brothers and Dick Van Dyke garnered Emmys.

Daryl Dragon, musician, 76
He was "The Captain" who teamed with Toni Tennille to form the popular "Captain and Tennille" duet. He got his nickname from wearing a captain's hat while playing backup for the Beach Boys.

Christine McGuire, singer, 92
She was one of the singing McGuire Sisters, who climbed the pop music charts in the 1950s with hits like "Sincerely" and "Sugartime." They were boosted to fame by an appearance on "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts" in 1952. Dorothy predeceased her in death; Phyllis, who did most of the talking for the group, survives her.

Dr. Bernice Sandler, teacher, activist, 90.
"the godmother of Title IX."

Carlos Sánchez, actor, 83
He was Juan Valdez in all those ads for Colombian Coffee from 1969 to 2006.

Samuel Snipes, lawyer, 99
He defended the couple that integrated Levittown, Pennsylvania.

Extra Innings

una cosa al tiempo

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And now, with her two front teeth growing in beautifully…

Lily—Christmas, 2018