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Her Name is Quintana Roo: Essays, Poetry, Memoir

Linda Q. Lambert MFA
University of Southern Maine

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Her Name is Quintana Roo: Essays, Poetry, Memoir

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Linda Q. Lambert

2015

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 2015

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Linda Q. Lambert entitled *Her Name is Quintana Roo: Essays, Poetry, Memoir* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

t Fleischmann

Advisor

Rick Bass

Reader

Justin Tussing

Director

Accepted

Adam-Max Tuchinsky

Interim Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

Her Name is Quintana Roo is a collection of essays, poetry, and memoir through the lens of the author's experience as child, mother, wife, journalist, and librarian. The title essay, circling back to an interview with Joan Didion in 1969 when the author was a graduate student in journalism, recasts the experience as creative nonfiction. *Six Glimpses of Tom Robbins* recounts the author's attempts to persuade the Librarian of Congress to change Robbins' incorrect birthdate in the LC catalog. Another essay establishes the relevance of library research for Nancy Pearl, Daniel James Brown, Jim Lynch and Laura Kalpakian. *Oscar Wilde's Perch* weighs in on the life-changing experience of visiting Dublin and participating in Stonecoast's Dingle residency. *Accidental Poet* records the author's tentative acquisition of the label "Poet." The portrait of a potential library employee emerges in "What we Might Have Learned." The poem *Face Forward* is based on family genealogical research, reconstructing the life of a civil war veteran. *Fruits of a Fifties Childhood* is a companion poem to the memoir chapters in *Powerhouse Quinby* that chronicle personal stories of adventure, faith, and ancestral connections. The dominant thread is the establishment of a septuagenarian's enchantment with words and writing.

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for the MFA program

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difficulties of the MFA journey

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and writer

Amory Peck: first reader, endlessly supportive wife

Jason, Jules, Elizabeth, Deborah, Leslie, Jonathan, and Weston: the children for
whom I write, and for Heather who has become family

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Preface: Artist's Statement

DEVELOPMENT OF WORK

While not adept at crafts, I joined other members of my Girl Scout troop to tick off the requirements for the Dabbler Badge. I pinched pots, played with chalk, made block prints, worked wood into walking sticks, and formed enough fishes out of wire to add the Dabbler Art Badge to my sash. I felt my world expanded in spite of my ineptness. Would that there had been a Dabbler Badge in Writing.

The Dabbler Badge exposed me to new areas of interest—some of which I was not good at (carving). Nine years later with a Bachelor's in hand, I had a decent background in English Literature, including some subjects within the discipline in which I did not excel (Middle English), and a superficial acquaintance with the one-offs that those of us with a four-year degree knew about: music appreciation, introduction to psychology, and various 101 classes. I thought of my B.A. degree as a Dabbler Badge Plus, a basic liberal arts education, and a passport for entry into the work world.

Later, I went to graduate school in library science. Working at reference desks in a public library and a community college was the perfect job for a dabbler. I might answer a question like “Where can I find a drawing of a skeleton” or “I have to do a paper in which two philosophers talk about the meaning of life. What d’ya have?”

Dabbling implies superficiality, but when a library question intrigued me, dabbling turned into serious follow-up research long after the student had left the desk or the Ask-A-Librarian chat room. As a writer, dabbling means looking into a little of this and a little of that. For example, I sampled a chapter of Ryan Van Meter's *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*, and then read the whole book.

I'm grateful that one component of dabbling, exploration of other genres, is encouraged in Stonecoast's MFA program. I entered Stonecoast with memoir on my mind, fresh from the yearlong "Memory into Memoir" class taught by novelist Laura Kalpakian through Western Washington University. At the very first Stonecoast residency in Maine, I looked at the staggering number of identical, black-bound, gold-stamped theses in the Stone House and I snapped a picture of a few of them for my Facebook page. Later I noticed that one title was the successful memoir of a faculty member: *A Chant to Soothe Wild Elephants* by Jaed Coffin. I expected to conclude my degree work with a completed memoir.

My path turned out to be a different one.

I was assigned to a fiction workshop that I did not request. My plea to the director for reassignment went something like this, "But Justin, I don't write fiction." Fiction has always scared me—the fearful task of extracting from thin air a tangible construct of sequenced events. I felt no oxygen in that air. Several times I've grazed through the 808.3 section of the public library, finding books like *The Plot Whisperer*, *20 Plots*, and *Plot Your Book In A Month with Scrivener*. I've checked some out, but even with help, I found plotting difficult.

Justin wouldn't budge. So I turned in a tiny little fiction story in addition to a longer article called "How Four Writers—Jim Lynch, Daniel James Brown, Laura Kalpakian & Nancy Pearl—Use Libraries for their Work."

No one in the workshop said my fiction was deficient. Faculty member Lewis Robinson made suggestions for its improvement, and told me to keep writing fiction. A little knot of confidence rose up in me. Perhaps I *could* write fiction. Since then, I have

written six flash fiction pieces and put my pen to a local NaNoWriMo collective manuscript in which each person took a day and wrote a chapter. Using dialogue, scene setting, plotting, and narrative arc, has enriched my nonfiction writing.

As for the other piece, “Libraries & Writers: are they still getting along?” morphed into “Five Writers & How They Use Libraries in their Work,” which is in this collection. Every re-writing, every pair of faculty and student eyes, has colluded to make a better manuscript.

When I communicated my pleasure to Justin about being in the workshop, he nearly leapt over the table at the Stone House to administer his high five. “I knew it,” he said, “I knew it.”

My positive experience in Jaed Coffin’s Literary Nonfiction workshop prompted me to request him as my second semester mentor, and then again as guide for the third semester project, “The Underside of the Tapestry.” “Tapestry,” was built on an interview I had with Joan Didion forty years ago and a discussion of persona in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and *The White Album*. I worked on material for a month and enthusiastically outlined a plan for my project. Jaed enthusiastically rejected my proposal and suggested an entirely different approach: a braided essay, an approach that proved more daunting than even writing fiction.

After four weeks of deleted paragraphs and wastebaskets full of false starts, I confided my exasperation to a fellow student, also a Jaed mentee. He too was stuck: “What is it about Jaed that causes existential crises? We’ll be lucky to survive.” My wife, tired of my malaise, said, “Perhaps you could *try* to do what Jaed says.” I referred to a book she’d given me. In *Dancing on the Head of a Pin: The Practice of a Writing Life*,

Robert Benson quotes John Wesley's simple advice: "Just begin." I reviewed my false starts, selected promising paragraphs, and tossed the rest. I managed to weave both a voice-driven narrative and analytical component into what Jaed called an "essayist voice." I accomplished the goal that Jaed had set forth: "...to challenge you as a writer, not to make you feel as through you've completed something."

I took Jaed's comment as a gentle hint that my project could stand some more work. I changed the title of "The Underside of the Tapestry" and eliminated more text. The streamlined version, "Her Name Is Quintana Roo," is the title essay of this thesis.

In addition to opening up new genres of writing in which to experiment, my process of writing has changed. At the Dingle residency, visiting short story writer Kevin Barry said,

When you say you're going to write something, you're making a pact with yourself. Writing is a mysterious business. The only thing it's close to is dreaming. It's close to the subconscious. When you awake in the morning, you're still in the puddle of dreams. We're all perfect storytellers when we are dreaming, and soon after we wake up. The front part, the critical part, shuts down. So, first thing, I sit up, scratch down words using crazy nerve ending places, and spew onto the page.

After hearing Barry, I adopted an early morning pattern, producing arresting pieces of writing that surprised me—flash fiction, bits of poetry, quotidian observations. I substantiated something else Barry said: "What seems like God-given genius in the morning, seems like dross at 5 o'clock."

The best result of being influenced by Kevin was that I established a pattern of writing early in the day. Conflicting possibilities—shall I swim first? Get the newspaper? Make some tea? Jump on the Internet? Check into Facebook?—no longer take up brain space. I stumble from bed, pull on my bathing suit to insure that exercise will occur later,

go to my desk and spew. The words fly out, and later, I rub my hands over the hot spots, as Barry suggests, and go from there.

Helene Cixous, the French feminist poet, playwright and professor, has something to say about early morning writing and dreaming. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, she asserts that dreams are critical to literary inspiration and output in the “strange science of writing.” She herself arises early: “I write following the sun, at six in the morning, and I write at length without interruption.”

In Patricia Hampl’s essay, “Red Sky in the Morning,”¹ she describes a time when she looked through the smeared window of a bus and saw an unlikely couple—a “stout middle aged woman” being kissed by a “godlike young man. Their ages dictated that he must be her son, but I had just come out of the cramped, ruinous half sleep of a night on a Greyhound and I was clairvoyant: This was that thing called love.”

Early morning, free-spirited writing allows a freedom that academic writing does not. Our graduate presentations are supposed to be “pedagogically viable.” That sounds like language crafted for accreditors—I know, I’ve been on an accrediting team for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. I’m glad that our artist’s statements have the latitude of informality and that there is flexibility to explore within Stonecoast’s MFA program.

I am concluding the program with a different thesis than I’d projected. My fiction workshop leader Lewis Robinson was the first to suggest that I do a selection of my work. Since a finished memoir had been my goal, I was resistant to the idea.

¹ *I Could Tell You Stories*, p. 15

² Email from t Fleischmann, August 2015

³ Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No 71, *The Paris Review*, Fall winter, 1978, No. 74.

My thesis mentor, t fleischmann—just the right person for me during my last semester—dispelled my anxiety with this advice:

Having gone through an MFA program and taught in several, I will say that the idea of a cohesive, “book like” thesis is more often a trap and a distraction than a helpful goal for writers. While very few programs or professors actually expect a thesis to be a cohesive manuscript, many students aim themselves toward that goal which precludes them devoting their final semester to experimentation and craft-based growth...The final semester of the MFA...should be the last push of generating, playing experimenting, etc.²

Stonecoast faculty members, workshops, and presentations have much to do with the development of my work, bringing me to a place where I can identify an assortment of literary influences and aesthetic aims.

LITERARY INFLUENCES

Since I am older than most Stonecoast MFA students, I could be expected to have a long list of writers who shaped and influenced my thinking.

I like the compact rhythms of Emily Dickinson; the ahead-of-his time, syntactical flair of ee cummings; the loopy, sexual prose of D.S. Lawrence’s in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, and the investigative style of Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*. I admit enjoyment over the anguished insights of Vivien Gornick and the surprise endings of Linda Pastan’s poetry. Long ago, Strunk and White changed a freshman’s understanding of how to write clearly (omit needless words; revise and rewrite) and William Zinnser helped me understand the underlying requirement of saleable writing (“Ultimately the product that any writer has to sell is not his subject, but who he is”). I like writing that does somersaults, as in Tom Robbins’ *Another Roadside Attraction*, and writing that is deft and insightful, as in Joan Didion’s *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*. I like short pithy books

² Email from t Fleischmann, August 2015

like Austin Kleon's *Steal Like an Artist* and Art Spiegelman's book-length comic book *Maus*.

Does a simple "like" mean influence? The word influence stems from the Latin *influer*, "to flow in." Several dictionaries used "to sway" and "to be persuaded by" as definitions. At best, I think it means taking that admiration and applying what is liked to one's own writing. Joan Didion admired Hemmingway's writing so much in high school that she "typed out his stories to learn how the sentences worked...very direct sentences, smooth rivers, clear water over granite, no sinkholes."³ Amanda DeMarco wrote in *The L.A. Review of Books*: "One never really understands a book unless one copies it."⁴

I have yet to copy an entire book, but I have copied my share of sentences. I have paid particular attention to the opening of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: "As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." I claim direct influence on my writing process from Anne LaMott (*Bird by Bird*), William Zinnser (*On Writing Well*), Stephen King (*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*), and Eudora Welty (*On Writing*).

A young friend working on a Ph.D. in English Literature asked, "Do you like to read about craft?" Sure, I said, pointing to my copies of *Writer's Digest*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Writers Chronicle*, and showing him the 30+ books on writing in our library. His silence provided an opinion. The way I learn about writing, besides from the act of writing itself, is to read books about writing; read fiction and nonfiction, both classic and

³ Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No 71, *The Paris Review*, Fall winter, 1978, No. 74. Accessed online August 18th, 2015

⁴ "Translators Note," reproduced in www.lithubdaily.com, August 14, 2015.

current; and, sign up for classes, outside a credit program like Stonecoast, that beckon me.

In *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, Joan Didion's 1968 classic, she wrote "...there is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged, but actually aphasic."

Reading that passage as a graduate student in the 60s, there were three things that struck me: the inventive language ("a room literally papered with false starts"), the concept that writing was hard (I thought so, but wondered if I were merely slow), and the use of a word I had to look up ("aphasic"). I no longer huck baseballs of onion-skinned rough drafts across the room to a waste paper basket, but I still live in the squalor of overfull recycle bins of 20 lb. Ultra White. The worry of aphasia has been replaced by the specter of Alzheimer's.

In 1999, almost thirty years after *Slouching*, Patricia Hampl's book *I Could Tell Your Stories* was published. Subtitled "Sojourns in the Land of Memory," the book generated a jacket blurb by a *Minneapolis Star* reviewer who said it "weaves personal stories and grand ideas into shimmering bolts of prose." That appraisal is very similar to the boldly simple slogan associated with *Creative Nonfiction*: "True Stories, Well Told." I can find true stories within and outside my personal life. The more difficult task is the "how" of well-told stories, especially if a writer strives for "shimmering prose."

There were many times when I read a Hampl passage, and I had to make time to contemplate the array of words before me, as in: "Memory is such a cheat and piracy,

such a dodging chimera that between the two of them—literature’s goalposts—the match is bound to turn into a brawl.”

Hampl’s use of the right word, often an unusual word, is legendary: “Her voice was rinsed of outrage.” She injects humor, charm and insight into her writing: “It is pointless to claim your First Amendment rights with your mother.” Her sense of detail is spot on, as in this description of an older woman giving advice “over her lace covered Formica table.” And language cannot be more evocative and personally applicable than this: “Prague entered me the way bad weather invades a landscape, haunting and enshrining a place more powerfully than a sunny day ever can. I was after that bad weather, the endless drizzle of history...”

I go back often to Hampl’s language and allusions in *I Could Tell Your Stories*, the little book recommended at Stonecoast. It prods me toward greater creativity, even as I write this very ordinary sentence.

Occasionally, we students of writing get to meet in person someone whose writing and personality position him or her as a combination cheerleader and change agent.

Northwest writer Brian Doyle exited the stage at the 2015 Chuckanut Writers Conference, exuding the same energy present during his reading and lecture, his puckish face framed by a scraggly beard, the face he Sharpie-draws above his signature when he’s autographing a book.

Doyle had told us that an editor asked him to write about 9/11. He resisted, feeling he was too far away and had nothing to say; prayer, he thought, was the only appropriate response, but the subject wouldn’t leave him alone. The result was the title essay of his collection of prose pieces called *Leap*. It begins like this: “A couple leaped from the

south tower, hand in hand. They reached for each other and their hands met and they jumped.”

The essay is a poignant, lyrical, 600-word essay. Doyle’s energy, spirituality, and dogged research to learn more about an event he had not witnessed, motivated me to approach him as he descended the stage. I briefly outlined my obsession with an ancestor whom I felt compelled to learn about through research, whose presence I had felt, and about whom I wanted to write a book-length piece. (See the chapter “Every Family Has Its Lore” in this thesis.)

Doyle, whom I’d describe as a left-leaning, faithful, unapologetic Catholic, said, “Have you absorbed everything you can about him?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I think there’s more to learn.”

“Learn it, then let it sit in your mind, and then write. You can do it.”

When I referred to my experience of unexplainable nearness to that ancestor, my great grandfather, Doyle said, “There’s a lot we don’t know about the afterlife, things we should pay attention to. Your grandfather has a voice, even if he’s dead.”

Other poignant influences in my recent writing history have come from direct contact. At my first residency Barbara Hurd said, “You’ll never again get the kind of attention paid to your writing as you will now.” I heard that and it was true, even though there were times of disagreement: when I didn’t like being assigned to a workshop I hadn’t requested, when a mentor sent me in an entirely different direction than the one I proposed, and when, for my very last semester, the mentor I thought best for me was replaced by someone not even on my list.

I try to follow the examples of the writers I've cited, particularly the imagination of Robbins, the reflective, penetrating insight of Didion, and the energy of Doyle. I try to follow the advice of the mentors I've been privileged to work with.

The key for me is to engage with literature and with practitioners of the literary arts, just as I have been: taking almost-free classes for those over 60 at the community college or university; meeting monthly with an organized writers group; having weekly meetings and write outs with local writers; attending Writers Conferences, special workshops, and lectures; and, reading online and print resources. All of these explorations, and others I don't yet know about, will produce "*influre*," the flowing in of influence.

AESTHETIC AIMS

1. Write something worth reading.

I haven't thought about aesthetics since I read Edmond Burke's "On the Sublime and Beautiful" and dropped Philosophy as my college major. Nor have I considered what's beautiful or what's ugly in any formal way, although recently I saw a tee shirt emblazoned with a Pliny the Elder beer logo⁵ that incentivized an *Encyclopedia Britannica* search.

Pliny the Elder is described as a "Roman savant and author of the celebrated *Natural History*, an encyclopedic work, of "uneven accuracy."⁶ His work was a "collection of myths, odd tales of wondrous creatures, magic, and some science, all mixed together uncritically for the titillation of aristocrats." His nephew, Pliny the Younger, was also a

⁵ From www.russianriverbrewing, the brewers indicate that they named their brew as they did because Pliny the Elder "either created the botanical name or at least wrote about *Lupus Salictarius*—or hops, currently known as *Humulus Lupulos*," an important ingredient of IPA Beers.

⁶ Pliny the Elder, accessed August 17, 2015

writer, who left (here comes *Britannica* again) “a collection of private letters of great literary charm.” It’s from P the Younger that I extract the first of my aesthetic aims, even though the online sages at *Britannica* have discredited Pliny the Elder’s science. Pliny said this about his uncle: “For my part, I deem those blessed to whom, by favor of the Gods, it has granted either to do what’s worth writing about, or, to write what is worth reading.”

The measure of writing’s worth is ephemeral, elusive, and subject to controversial opinion. Worth is often measured by publication, to which I aspire. However, publication will not be possible unless the creator can think like a reader, an idea lodged in my mind in the 60s when I read Robert Graves’ classic *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*. Thinking like a reader means taking off the purple glasses and multi-colored felt slippers I always wear and putting on the sensible shoes and horn-rimmed glasses of my anticipated audience and imaging what I could tell them that they might enjoy hearing or learning. Then, I should step back and, if I feel honest satisfaction from my many revisions, send my work out to the world. Publication is an incidental kudo for me. The more important accomplishment is to have placed myself at a desk, stared thoughtfully out at the view, and organized my dreamer’s recollections, dabbler’s impressions, and researched findings into a piece of writing. Each writer owns his or her own idiosyncratic process, but we all have the same goal: participating in the isolated and independent act of writing that becomes social when dispensed to readers.

2. Choose words carefully

I began this Artist’s Statement with a reference to dabbling. Unpacking the word “dabbling” is my entre to illustrate the importance of word choice in my writing. *English*

Dictionary's definition of a dabbler is "One who dabbles, esp. in any business or pursuit." 1611: R. COTGRAVE, *Dict. French & Eng. Tongues. Patouillard*, A padler, dabbler, slabberer; one that tramples with his feet in plashes of durtie water." One might think that the *OED* mistakenly left out the "s" in front of "plashes," but that is not the case. A plash is "an area of shallow standing water; a marshy pool; a puddle." You've probably already correctly guessed that the meaning of "slabberer" is solved with an "o" instead of an "a." The spelling of "durtie" is quaint and dainty. I wish we used it today. In 1768, A. Tucker wrote in *Light of Nature Pursued*: "Your dabblers in metaphysics are the most dangerous creatures breathing." I love the suggestion that dabblers are dangerous, even though I do not know the context for A. Tucker's rant.

Except for my Kevin Barry early mornings, I write slowly and gingerly. I pause to look up words in the dictionary, I search for synonyms online or in my print thesaurus, and I am painstaking in research.

I blame my preoccupation with words on Miss Grant, Mrs. Bertheau, and my English 101 teacher whose name I can't remember. In Miss Grant's sixth grade class, the spelling books had frustrating definitions. I can't recite a specific, but if one looked up "helper," it would say, "one who helps." Then I'd have to look up the root word "help." My complaints about the extremely limited spelling book dictionary may be the reason my grandmother gave me a Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, a book I still have.

Eighth grade teacher Mrs. Bertheau insisted that our book reports include five new words that we encountered in the text. We were required to list each word, cite the page number, give the definition, and use it in a sentence of our own construction. I loved that

exercise! Since that time, I have been unable to encounter a word and not shake hands with it by looking up its definition.

In my very first college class, my English 101 teacher gave me an “F” on an essay. The words I used convinced him that I had plagiarized the essay. I brought the “Increase Your Word Power” pages torn from Wilfred Funk’s column in *Reader’s Digest* from which I had learned words like “torpor” and “insouciance” and then used them in sentences in my essay. He changed the grade to a B+.

A friend once accused me of taking a long time to respond because, she opined, I was trying to respond using the most complicated word possible. In truth, my cogitation (with her I would have said “mental process”) was to strike the multisyllabic word that jumped into my mind first, and think of a more common substitute that would not sound pompous. True story.

Now, my strategy in writing, and in conversation, is to find the most deliciously appropriate word to use. If it’s unusual, that’s cool, but meaning is the most important measure of whether it slithers onto the page or not.

I once heard Anu Garg (*The Dord, the Diglot, and an Avocado or Two: the Hidden Lives & Strange Origins of Common & Not So Common Words*), which made me a devoted follower of his daily Word-A-Day blog. Likewise, my wife and I use the cheating software *Win Every Game* to play Words with Friends because esoteric words spring from its algorithms, many of which we look up, even though we may never use them in speech or writing, and promptly forget them.

3. Do authentic and scrupulous research

My 20-year career in libraries, particularly working the reference desk, has solidified my desire to consult quality reference sources, by which I mean those beyond Wikipedia and Google. Both are useful starting points, but I have encouraged students to double check and verify facts, follow the links, and be religious in their vetting and verification—if “being religious” still implies fervency of endeavor. I have a lecture and a PowerPoint presentation on the hierarchy of information sources—which would not enliven these pages, but the concepts are important and will guide my own work. For example, in a memoir chapter, I mention the town whistle that blew every day at noon in my hometown. Using Google, I found the exact sound that I heard as a child, an auditory prompt that restored childhood memory and enriched my description. Much can be found using Google, but I will lament the loss of access to the University of Southern Maine’s excellent suite of online databases, especially the Gale databases and the OED, when my graduate degree is complete and my student status expires.

4. Pay attention to publication design

In one amateur way or another, from editing and designing newsletters and anthologies, to self-publishing a guidebook to Phoenix in the long-gone 70s, I’ve cared for the way words, type, and elements of design are presented on a page. I have worked with professional artists, taken graphic design classes, and will be participating in the editing and design of a new literary annual, *The Red Wheelbarrow Review*.

I avoid the indiscriminate insertion of drop caps and dingbats and the overuse of various fonts just because Word offers a zillion. K-12 teachers, aiming to please kids, cheapen scholastic material with the constant choice of **Comic Sans**; athletic teams think *Brush Script* (\$@#!?) is cool and aggressive. I’m still considering the advice of an

advertising guy who said all you need for effective copy is **Impact** for heads and either a simple sans serif font like **Arial** or a contrasting serified font, either **Baskerville**, **Garamond**, or **Times New Roman** for body text, which is, not that much different from the Baskerville I usually use. For months now, since Hermann Zaph died in June of 2015 at the age of 96, I have been throwing in his dingbats or using one of the 200 fonts he created as a sneaky memorial to his life's work. Look for them in this thesis. He was a master calligrapher and typeface designer whose **Optima** typeface is used variously, from Estee Lauder cosmetics to the Viet Nam memorial. All typefaces should be used judiciously; I'll reproduce my favorites of his to demonstrate their design, with each preceded by a Zaph dingbat:

❑ **Palatino Bold**

▲ *Optima Italic*

And, finally, the elegant, calligraphic typeface whose letters are best shone off by its very name, printed in a footnote because of the disproportionate space it takes up mid-manuscript.⁷ There is one place I always use the typeface Zapfino. At the end of every first draft, I place discarded portions of my current manuscript in a "Parking Lot" because I believe that they are both shit and too beautiful for permanent elimination. They can at least bide their time under a graphically pleasing Zapfino banner, their destiny unknown.





Several other aberrations are defensible only to me, but they are important influences on my writing process just as baseball player Ichiro's unusual, patterned gyrations in the

⁷ ☆ *Zapfino*

batter's box were part of his successful performance, as was Steinbeck's line of 12 sharpened pencils on his desk.

I type first drafts in Avenir Book, 10 pt., because it is a clean typeface that perpetuates the illusion of a clean, sans serifed mind. Compressed 1.5 line spacing allows me to see how the paragraphs might take shape in publication. And, I'm more drawn to read and revise because of their prettiness on the page—an individual, quirky preference, I know.

I am a snob about poorly produced publications, though aware of the limitations of my status as an untrained dilettante. Still, I will persist in presenting my own work in artful ways, when possible, and if my work is publishable, I'll look for publishers whose products I like. Workman, Flatiron and Chronicle Books pay attention to presentation. I also like the small square format of some books emanating from Algonquin, and I like Sarabande's inclusion of single embossed pages.

An almost final note: I love interobangs (who wouldn't?!) and ampersands. Unfortunately, few fonts offer interobangs. An attractive one can be found in Apple's Wingding 2. An interobang looks like this:  Also, consider these ampersands from different typefaces:   & and . I use them with indulgence, even when they're uncalled for or stylistically wrong, and mess up the spacing as they do here which brings me to the last paragraph.

I'd rather make the words prance across the page and judiciously tangle them up with illustrations, white space, and just the right font. However, I've been a proofreader and taught library workshops on MLA and APA, so I understand an academic institution's need for stylistic conformity.

GROWTH OF WORK IN THE FUTURE

A friend at writing group asked, “Does anybody here know Latin?” I took Latin in high school, but I couldn’t translate the term she mentioned: “sui generis.” The MS Word dictionary provided the serviceable definition “unique.” Will I ever use “sui generis,” finding it as a clue for a crossword puzzle with ten blanks or in pursuing what Joyce Carol Oates meant when she applied the phrase to describe William Faulkner? Might I write about it? I don’t know, but dabbling with the definition prompted me to buy *The Art of Memoir*, in which Mary Karr used the phrase like this: “Every author worth her salt is sui generis.”

I expect insights from Karr’s book that will counter Larson’s cautionary comments on memoir:

Beware of family histories unless you’ve got one hell of a story to tell. You may have loved your grandmother, but it is possible no one else will...Nobody cares about your trip to Paris unless it’s as compelling as Adam Gopnik’s *Paris to the Moon* or Thad Carhart’s *The Piano shop on the Left Bank*.⁸

On the one hand, I think any life can be interesting, but on the other hand, I think that an ordinary life has to be *very* interesting or cleverly written to be published.

I conclude my education at Stonecoast with an assortment of manuscripts, polished by the insights of faculty mentors, workshop leaders, intelligent fellow students, and burnished by outside readers. Locally, I am embedded in a lively literary community. Village Books puts on over 300 Literature Live events annually and has a writers’ table set aside for groups and individuals; Red Wheelbarrow Writers meets monthly at a local Irish bar, sponsors a collective writing of NaNoWriMo in November as well as its own

⁸ Larsen is the author of the current bestseller *Lusitania!* and delivered his remarks at a workshop titled “The Dark Country of No Ideas” at the 2016 Chuckanut Writers Conference.

local WhaMemWriMo memoir writing push in September. Whatcom Reads, organized by the six major libraries in the area, sponsors a community book club that has brought Sherman Alexie, Daniel James Brown and other authors to town. Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College offer classes for community members.

Whatever my projects—fiction, non fiction, poetry—I expect my post Stonecoast growth will be generated by dabbling and will be built on poet Jeanne Marie Beaumont’s mantra: Further...Deeper...Wilder.

Her Name is Quintana Roo

In April 1969, I found myself driving over surface streets from the University of Southern California to Hollywood in the company of a student photographer, Sharon. I was a graduate student, on assignment for the *Daily Trojan*, tasked with interviewing Joan Didion, who had just published *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* to great literary acclaim.

I had nominated her for the Outstanding Woman in Journalism award, given by Theta Sigma Phi, USC's journalism sorority. Some students did not much like her book—the gloomy portraits of California, the overlay of pessimism—but they did admire her style and insight, so she was chosen.

In preparation, I read her novel *Run River* and every article I could find in USC's Doheny Library. My copy of *Slouching* was dog-eared and underlined. “On Keeping a Notebook” was my favorite chapter. Notebooks were a way to stay in touch with our old selves. A factual record was not the point. All of her observations were cleverly and beautifully said.

She had a keen understanding of California and of my own territory. She knew the San Joaquin Valley where I had grown up, referencing nearby towns, describing the buildings, the landscape, the people. She knew the Los Angeles where I was then living and she dazzled me with her writing about writing. I was not alone in my state of dazzle. Dan Wakefield in *The New York Times Book Review* referred to *Slouching* as “a rich display of some of the best prose written in the country.”⁹

⁹ Gale Database: Dictionary of Literary Biography. Accessed March 12, 2015

In the title essay, she captured the fractured lifestyle of San Francisco hippies in specific, and the atomization, as she called it, of culture in general.

I had lived through the sixties, spending time on the radical campuses of Berkeley and San Francisco State. I met Sandra Goode, who became a Charles Manson acolyte. I read Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, ordered peyote from a supplier in Texas, froze it, dried it, stuffed it into capsules and swallowed 25 one night at the beach with no effect. I heard Ken Kesey speak just before he and his Merry Band of Pranksters headed across the country in their DayGlo-colored drug bus.

In San Francisco I bought handmade sandals in North Beach and frequented City Lights Book Store. I saw *Hair* and witnessed the frontal nudity that had everyone abuzz. By the mid-sixties, I had graduated, married, lived in Europe, and was back in Los Angeles getting a graduate degree in journalism while my husband finished his film history degree at UCLA.

Joan Didion's book was a translation and a conduit for understanding the era through which I had lived, but had left unscrutinized. I wondered: how did she get Deadeye, Don and Max—all those Haight Ashbury types—to talk if, as she said she was, a bad reporter?

My questions were neatly typed on my preferred 3x5 index cards. When had she started writing? How many hours a day did she write? Did she like journalism or fiction writing better? Did she still have that Big Five Tablet? What kind of writing did she expect to be doing next—novels or journalism?

We drove slowly, avoiding the freeways so that we had time to relax. Sharon made sure she had her light meter and extra canisters of film. I mentally refined my questions.

“What if she is too shy to talk?” I said to Sharon. If Didion was as bad at interviewing people as she said she was, would she also be bad at being interviewed herself? Would the writer in person be the same as the writer on the page? I didn’t know.

“That’s your department,” Sharon said. “I’m just going to be inconspicuous and take pictures. Don’t worry. It’ll be okay.”

I remembered how in synch with Joan Didion I felt when I read what she wrote about the San Joaquin Valley. We were both from the same valley; that fact gave me a sense of being a fellow countryman. The valley was a country with a character all its own, after all. She had gone to Berkeley. So had I.

I touched the marked up copy of *Slouching* in my bag. I wanted Joan Didion’s signature on it.

It took me a week to gather the courage to pick up the phone, put it down, pick up the phone, put it down, and finally call for an appointment.

A woman other than Joan answered the phone. I explained my assignment. Joan came on the line, her voice young, tentative, pleasant. Yes, she would meet with us. We agreed on a date and time.

Didion’s Hollywood address suggested grandeur, but the magnificence of the Franklin Street house had dimmed. We found ourselves facing a white, two-story house with the blinds drawn. The yard looked casually cared for—the grass was slightly long, the bushes unpruned. We walked to the front and knocked. A housekeeper—or perhaps a nanny—opened the door. She led us into a living room that I remember as a plain vanilla

blur, anxiety disrupting my attention to detail, my previous confidence dissipating. We eased ourselves onto the sofa and waited for Joan Didion.

A slender woman, dressed in a white top and dark peddle pushers, appeared in the doorway, moving slowly into the room. Didion's presence on the page was large; her presence in person was even smaller than I had imagined. My feeling moose-like around most people was exaggerated as she came toward us.

I managed to say, "I'm Linda. This is Sharon. She'll be taking some pictures. Thanks for seeing us." I extended my hand.

Her hello was barely audible, her handshake weightless.

She sat down on a small chair, leaned forward, and said—though I hadn't asked—"John is working on a script so we're renting here temporarily."

I thought her reference to John and the rental was an odd opening. Did she establish that John was working so we shouldn't expect an introduction? Why was it important that she communicate that they were renting? Did she think that we two graduate students in our twenties would think less of them because they didn't own their own home? I wasn't sure what to say next.

I looked to Sharon to supply an answer, but she was concentrating on taking pictures. Didion seemed unconcerned, as the camera's clicks continued.

"Will you be able to come to campus for the presentation?" I asked. When she didn't reply immediately and the silence began to feel uncomfortable, I added, "It's on April 30th, a Wednesday."

"No," she said softly without explanation. "No."

Her response was off putting in its absence of expected etiquette, as in “No, I’m sorry I have another commitment that day.” I changed the subject.

“Were you sure that you’d be a writer when you were a student at Berkeley?”

“No,” she said, “I was so full of self doubt that they would have had to tell me I was better than Flaubert.”

One of her professors had supplied her name to a publisher who was interested in talented young writers. The publisher—she didn’t say which one—contacted her and asked for samples of her writing.

“I was so stunned I carried the letter around, unanswered in my purse for three years.” She hesitated. “It just didn’t seem real, and I guess I was afraid I’d be turned down.” Her eyes were direct, her voice low-toned and steady.

“But now,” I said, “you’ve been writing regularly for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines.”

She nodded. “When I’m not reporting, I miss getting into other people’s worlds,” she said. “I would not like to stop doing nonfiction.”

Remembering the way she got into the landscape and lives of the people in the Central Valley of California, I said, “I know you’re from Sacramento. I grew up in the San Joaquin Valley too, Visalia.”

“Oh. Were you born there?”

“No, I was born in San Francisco. My parents adopted me. They were living in Porterville, but then when my father was drafted, my mother moved in with her mother in Visalia.”

Joan raised her head, straightened up, and looked at me directly, smiling very slightly. “John and I adopted a little girl. Her name is Quintana Roo. We have always let her know that she is our little adopted daughter.”

For my generation, there was a significant stigma attached to children born out of wedlock, as I was, and to mothers bearing those children. My birthmother, according to her sister, kept her secret, never divulging my birth, even to the birthfather. Beginning in the sixties, with the advent of relaxed attitudes towards sexuality and marriage, such stigmas were reduced.

An adopted child inherently feels that there may be another identity out there—royal parentage perhaps, or trailer trash, a brother or sister in the genetic landscape, unknown cousins, aunts and uncles, and maybe someone who has the same nose.

Parents before the midpoint of the twentieth century generally kept adoption of their children quiet, quite different from Joan Didion and John Dunne’s open approach. I had not known about Quintana, and hearing it from her gave me a little chill of recognition, that we shared something besides geographic or educational similarities. I relaxed.

“A ‘Q’ name...” I began, “My maiden name is Quinby. Tell me about her name.”

“Quintana Roo is the name of a region in Mexico that John and I liked.” She explained that they were in Mexico when Quintana Roo was not yet a state—“terra incognita.” They liked that it meant “unknown region,” interpreted as “free of complication.”

I thought it was unusual, and a little strange, to name a child after a political entity, but...I liked it, and the name carried a sense of hope with it, and I said so.

Joan smiled again. Then she began to ask me questions.

“How do you feel about being adopted?”

“Would you like to know who your biological parents are?”

“When did you find out you were adopted?”

“Do you mind being an only child?”

“Do you know what your name was?”

“Did your parents give you a good life?”

“Are you close to them?”

My adoption had always been my secret, the one I told to the girls who became my best friends, or to dates with whom I felt “something” might develop. Adoption was the explanation for why I felt different from both my parents. Being adopted was an identity that had permanent residence in my cerebellum and relentlessly generated questions—why had my mother not kept me, what was she like, who was my father, did I have brothers or sisters—to which I found answers twenty years later when my adoptive father lay dying in the hospital and I mustered enough courage to broach the subject with him.

And now Joan Didion was asking *me* about *my* adoption.

I told her what I knew in 1969. I knew the name I was given at birth: Elise. I had a modicum of information about my birth parents: my father was a Marine and my mother was a domestic in San Francisco. The name of the adoption agency was Native Sons and Daughters of California and my prospective parents drove from Porterville, California to San Francisco to pick me up when I was eight weeks old. My father was drafted within a few months, and my mother moved in with my grandmother, who was a nurse and more comfortable with babies than she.

I remembered exactly and precisely the moment I was told I was adopted. I was eight years old, sitting on the steps of the stairway from my second-story bedroom that led to the small stage containing a grand piano that my mother played by ear. My arm was draped over the bannister and I was peeking through the slats. The radio, a large Philco console, was on and someone was telling a story. I heard the word “adopted.”

“Mommy,” I said to my mother who was in the living room, “What does ‘adopted’ mean?”

She came up the short flight of stairs and put her arm around my shoulder.

“Why that’s what you are, honey. It means that I didn’t give birth to you, but daddy and I chose you.”

So there it was, the explanation for why I felt different from both my parents. I *was* different, but it was okay. That sense of being different from my parents has continued throughout my life, and that difference is still okay. The truth, my secret, anchored me through my teenage years, and allowed me to grow into the feeling my mother expressed in a card she gave me. “You weren’t born under my heart, but you were born in my heart.”

As I answered Joan’s questions, I understood how she obtained information from Max, Don and Deadeye. Her questions were short and her manner insistent. Her responses were minimal and communicated quickly. She was a listener, an observer.

She looked at the clock, waited for a moment, and then said, “Would you like to meet Quintana?”

The housekeeper entered the room a few minutes later, holding the hand of a little girl wearing a white dress with blue flowers on it.

“Quintana,” said Joan, “This is Linda, and she’s adopted just like you.”

Quintana smiled with as much enthusiasm as a three-year-old could. I smiled with as much enthusiasm a young woman without siblings and who was not interested in having her own children could.

Joan and I shook hands, an exchange with more weight in it this time. Could I call her if I had additional questions about her work? She said yes.

At the time of our interview, Joan had been a mother for three years. Quintana was the daughter to whom Joan had dedicated *Slouching*. Quintana, by virtue of her very name, was the daughter she hoped would not experience the tremors of the world described in her book.

The housekeeper showed us to the door. Quintana Roo ran to her mother, arms stretched out.

I remembered the unautographed copy of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* in my bag, but I did not retrieve it. I was embarrassed that it was underlined, smudged and dog-eared, as if I had not taken care of her words. I did not want to spoil the moment by asking her for something.

Joan Didion did not attend the April 30th ceremony. She might have enjoyed meeting Jessie Mae Brown, the editor of *The Sentinel*, a large influential African American newspaper in Los Angeles, who was sharing the “Outstanding Woman in Journalism” award. I did not think Didion would like the token presented to her. Theta Sigma Phi had decided that the organization could only manage plaques fashioned out of lead, the material used to create newspaper “slugs,” spacers between lines of type. One of

the students asked a friend on the *Daily Trojan* staff to craft it—grey raised letters on a grey background, unfitting even for a woman who said to NPR interviewer Susan Stamford, “I’m more attracted to the underside of the tapestry. I tend to look for the wrong side, the bleak side. I have since I was a child. I have no idea why.”

Note

One of the points in Didion’s “On Keeping a Notebook” essay is the importance of keeping in touch with the people we used to be. I’m glad that Claude Zachary, a friendly archivist at the University of Southern California, managed to retrieve the press release written by my graduate student self over 40 years ago. To my great displeasure, then and now, the *Daily Trojan* editors sliced off a third of my article, relegated it to the Society page, wrote a nondescript headline, and did not include any of Sharon’s pictures. However, I was pleased to have included some good quotes from the Great Writer.

Tuesday, April 29, 1969_DAILY TROJAN_5 SOCIETY

Profiles Editor’s note: Joan Didion and Jessie Mae Brown Beavers have been chosen as Outstanding Women in Journalism by Theta Sigma Phi, national honorary for women in journalism. The awards are being presented at a writer’s conference being held tomorrow afternoon at Hancock and Town and Gown.

Former Vogue staffer earns praise, prizes

By LINDA LAMBERT Professional journalists at a recent career conference advised students: “Don’t be afraid to take the small job.” Aside from stints as night editor of the *Daily Californian* and editor of UC Berkeley’s literary magazine, Joan Didion neither cranked out prose to little magazines nor was pressed into service by groups wanting a free scribe. In 1956, after she won *Mademoiselle*’s writer’s contest the year before, and *Vogue*’s Prix de Paris, *Vogue* offered her a job in New York.

She was and is a small, shy person whose writing has earned her praise and prizes ever since. The *New Yorker* called her a “cool and impressively skilled writer,” and she will receive one of Theta Sigma Phi’s two awards to Outstanding Women in Journalism.

She has been writing since she was five when her mother gave her a Big Five Tablet and suggested she stop whining and learn to amuse herself by writing down her thoughts. At Berkeley, where she majored in English, she was less than confident about her writing. "I was so full of self doubt that they would have had to tell me I was better than Flaubert." One professor supplied her name to a publisher interested in talented young writers. When she received his request for samples of her writing, she was so stunned she carried the letter around, unanswered, in her purse for three years. "It just didn't seem real, and I guess I was afraid I'd be turned down," she said.

At Vogue she began as a junior merchandising copy editor, a year later advanced to writing advertising copy, then became a staff writer in the feature department. She is now working on a second novel, *Play It As It Lays*. Her first novel, *Run River*, was published in 1963. She usually works from 11 to 6 each day, and finds it an isolating experience. "I miss getting into other people's worlds," she said. "I would not like to stop doing non fiction."

Six Glimpses of Tom Robbins

Though Tom Robbins would recognize me as a librarian he's met during his book-threaded life, I'm not a friend of his. I haven't been invited to mayonnaise tastings at his home and I haven't attended the Seattle spam carvings where he served as judge for eight years. No, I'm more of a paparazzo with pen and notepad who's enjoyed multiple hours of mind-spinning reading, and edged up to the front of the line to shake his gentlemanly hand and exchange a few sentences.

❶—Ortho novum & Tillinghast Seeds

A few decades ago, fresh from a YWCA creative writing class in Bellingham, Washington, four of us—three thirtyish mothers and one fiftyish grandmother—launched *The Fourth Corner Quarterly*, a pasted up at the dining room table newspaper. It was 1976; there was no desktop publishing, just a shiny mahogany surface temporarily deprived of its functionality as a family gathering place for meal times.

Anna Marie, Jayne, Nora and I wrote essays, book reviews and features. We snagged rhymes from a Seattle poet—none of us remember her name—and an interview with a state legislator. We all remember *her* name, Mary Kay Becker, because she became a judge and a prominent political figure stateside.

We fired up our IBM Selectric II typewriters, two new type font elements (the round balls used in the 60s and 70s) at the ready, and poured over copyright-free, camera ready clip art. We sized photos and toyed with sheets of transfer letters called Letraset to craft headlines. A graphic artist friend, just beginning her career, designed our logo for \$25.

We got the first issue and then the second out the door and distributed. Circulation

increased steadily, probably due to the friends we'd bludgeoned into subscribing. We decided to up our literary ante and try for an interview with an author of celebrity status who lived in LaConner, a town 45 minutes away: Tom Robbins, whose wildly eccentric juggling act of disparate words and metaphors in *Another Roadside Attraction* had us dizzy with admiration.

I had learned about Robbins from Eve, an old college friend and the editor of an Army base newspaper, who happened to love Tom Robbins. Her checkered love life was populated with unsuccessful liaisons and she had been dreaming about quirky authors. She conveyed her interest in Tom Robbins by sending him a picture of her purple-painted toenails. When he didn't reply, she surrendered her battered copy of *Another Roadside Attraction* to me. She said I *had* to read it because I'd love it.

I did and I did. His zany characters, operating a funky roadside zoo in the Skagit Valley, which included a mummified corpse of Jesus and a baboon, were far removed from my life as a mother, but exemplified what I strived for in my writing: imagination. I also appreciated the fact that only half the 1971 print run of 5000 hardbacks had sold, but then the mass market paperbacks took off, reaching several hundred thousand and that a diversity of publications, from *Crawdaddy* to *Rolling Stone* and the *New York Times*, paid attention to him.

We small-time publishers, full of naive optimism, thought that a transplanted Southerner crazy enough to exchange metropolitan Seattle for rural LaConner, population 700, on April Fool's Day 1971, might just take a chance on us.

"Dear Mr. Robbins," we wrote, "We are a new literary quarterly..."

Sigh. Tom Robbins didn't have time for an interview, but he did write back. He

explained that he was about to go on a book tour. We were disappointed, of course, but delighted because he had penciled his reply on a piece of paper torn from a prescription notepad advertising Ortho novum, a popular birth control pill of the day. He had also enclosed a packet of carrot seeds from Tillinghast Seed Company, a revered LaConner landmark, established in 1845.

The Fourth Corner Quarterly folded after four issues but I continued to read Tom Robbins, disproving the words of the smarmy critic who wrote "My theory on Tom Robbins is that unless his work was imprinted on you when you were 19 and stoned, you'll find him forever unreadable." (Karen Karbo, *New York Times Review of Book*). I wasn't 19 and I wasn't a stoner. I was the eventual mother of seven who loved an imaginative story and admired Robbins' quirky style and unlikely allusions. For the next 20 years, I read each book as it came along—*Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, 1976; *Still Life with Woodpecker*, 1980; *Jitterbug Perfume*, 1984; *Skinny Legs and All*, 1990; and *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, 1994.

②—"He Writes, I Read"

In 1998, when divorce and the need to make a living trumped the freedom to dabble in amateur publishing or free lance writing, I got a job as director of the LaConner Regional Library. Robbins still lived in LaConner. Every now and then he was mentioned in the weekly newspaper, *The Channel Town Press*, but mostly his privacy was respected and protected. When tourists (who came into the library to use the bathroom or browse through the Friends of the Library bookstore for a cheap book to read on the bus ride home) asked where he lived, locals waved a hand in a vaguely southerly direction. There was a rumor going around that he lived on Pull and Be Damned Road, an honest-to-

goodness street on the outskirts of LaConner. The name ensured repeated thefts of the street sign and repeated replacements by unamused county officials who threatened to rename it. The locals, however, knew that he lived in town, and left the street and house number unmentioned. I did the same.

I can't tell you whether Robbins ever lived on P&BD Road. I can't even affirm or deny that Robbins had a library card because (watch me climb onto my high horse now) a librarian's professional ethics preclude disclosure of patron and circulation records. I *can* tell you that a combination of hopeful expectation and anxiety huddled in the back of my consciousness when I imagined The Author walking through the door.

"Hi, Tom," I'd say with a genial smile and a forgery of calmness, "Can I help you with your research?"

Or, "Welcome to the library, Mr. Robbins. You'll be glad to know that all your books are checked out." The LaConner Regional Library had "regional" in its name, but was (and is) a small rural library with an active and loyal number of library patrons who kept the 30,000 volumes circulating.

Luckily for me, an appearance by Robbins did not nudge the utterance of those well-intentioned, pedestrian lines. Instead, one Sunday afternoon when I was attending a reception for LaConner's annual Arts Alive event at Maple Hall in downtown LaConner, Alexa D'Avalon—dark, slender, sexy—introduced herself to me. "I'm Tom's wife, Alexa," she said, looking in the direction of a reddish-brown haired man in a corduroy jacket a few feet away. "He writes," she paused dramatically, leaving her sentence momentarily unfinished, "and I read. I'm a psychic."

"Tom," Alexa said, "this is the new director of the library."

Robbins extended his hand, "Glad to meet you. I don't get to the library very often. I have someone who does research for me."

I never understand the range of responses—guilty to explanatory—emitted by people when they meet a librarian. "I get everything I need from the Internet, but I love libraries." "I like to buy my own books, so I don't go to the library." "I think my library card has expired. Can I call up and get it renewed?" "I just don't read as much as I used to."

I love working in a field that is a perceived force for good, and therefore inspires excuses for those who don't avail themselves of that good.

"Well," I said, politely, "if you ever do need help with research, here's my card. And, by the way, could I take your picture? I'm doing a series of "Read" posters for the library. I'm not selling or distributing them."

I was talking fast now.

"I'll only print one. It will be posted on the end of a bookshelf. I just did a poster. It featured Terry Tempest Williams." I'd heard Williams, another writer I admire, do a reading at Village Books and she'd granted me a photo for a READ poster. The American Library Association had CDs with templates for their READ series posters, but that wasn't how I wanted to expend the LaConner Library's limited budget. We were all about support from the Friends group, leaning on the largesse of generous professionals, and retired people in the community, and projects born of homegrown ingenuity.

He smiled that famously reluctant, off kilter grin, and said. "Sure. But I have to leave my sunglasses on. Agent's instructions."

If you Google "images Tom Robbins," you'll find Foster-Grantish evidence that

he's been following his agent's instructions for most of his writing life. (These days I know that he has also had five ocular surgeries and that he can't write for more than 30 minutes without adding steroid drops to his eyes.) His agent's instructions may have also encouraged the presentation of a serious, literary face. That was the visage on the "Tom Robbins says READ at the LaConner Library" poster that I left behind when I departed LaConner and their most famous citizen a few years later for a job in Bellingham.



③—Beyond Fifty Shades of Crap

Photos of Robbins smiling are uncommon. This one, taken by Alexa, accompanied a news feature about a book signing and workshop in February 2013 on "The Art of the Sentence" in Florida.

Robbins does workshops infrequently, and when he presents, he focuses on sentence structure and language. At a 90-minute "Art of the Sentence" session for the 2013 Chuckanut Writers Conference, he modeled a healthy impatience and disdain for contemporary writers who do not pay attention to craft: "Like that woman who wrote *Fifty Shades of Crap*. She has no more aptitude for writing good sentences than a cat has for swimming but she's purring and doing the backstroke all the way to the bank."

That clever quote was excavated by Colette Bancroft, the *Tampa Bay* book editor

who snagged the smiling photo and wrote about Robbins' workshop in Tampa.

Robbins often mentions that his own sentences are heavily reworked, sometimes 40 times. He's proud of the fact that he has neither taken nor taught creative writing classes. However, I count his workshops as teaching, even though workshops are one-offs, not regularly scheduled credit classes.

His workshop curriculum is pointed and his advice is pithy.

"Back in the Jurassic period," Tom Robbins said to a capacity crowd of conferees, "when newspapers had type, and it was hard to get space adjusted, one of my jobs at the *Seattle Times* was to write filler. One sentence I kept seeing over and over as filler in other newspapers was 'Ants don't sleep'."

He paused. "You have the next five minutes to write a second sentence."

Dressed in a striped sports jacket and khaki pants, he tipped back slightly in his chair. Three or four gold rings caught the sunlight. His chartreuse socks showed conspicuously above sand-colored loafers.

At this point, the woman next to me said, "Do you think he'll walk out on us?" Robbins had told the story of conducting a workshop in Port Townsend. There were over 50 in the class and they had all been asked to submit a short piece of writing. He had thumbed through the pages, then dumped them in the wastebasket and walked out. "The next morning, fifteen people came to class," he said. "They were the ones I wanted to work with. They wanted to learn."

"I don't think he'll walk out. I think he wants to scare us into doing well."

If that was his rationale, it didn't work. He listened without expression as the microphone moved down the long auditorium rows. Over a 100 people, sometimes

timidly, sometimes boldly, spoke their second sentence truths. There were, I thought, some clever endings.

"Ants don't sleep. They wait until I retire for the night so they can find the crumbs my dishrag missed."

"Ants don't sleep, but civil servants? Now that's another story."

"Ants don't sleep, but dreams collect in their burrows like matted hair"

"Ants don't sleep. They don't live long enough to get tired."

I suspect that at least one was crafted according to what the writer thought Robbins might like: "Ants don't sleep, and thanks to their potbellied ex-wives, neither do they screw."

Robbins wasn't looking for endings. "Most of your sentences didn't go anywhere," he said. I looked quickly around the room; some of us were metaphorically kicked out. "They didn't move the story or idea forward." Robbins did hear one that he liked: "It wasn't as creative as some that were read," he said, "but it had a narrative trajectory." He invited the author, a slender, bearded student named Chris, to read it.

Chris sprang to his feet and raced to the stage—obviously pleased to be chosen—the rest of us, speaking for myself, trying to render invisible any facial manifestations of jealousy.

"Ants don't sleep," Chris asserted, "For weeks now, ever since that night in July when he had a little too much to drink, ever since he went skinny dipping with his step daughter, Gordon hadn't slept either."

With one word, *trajectory*, and without knowing it, Tom Robbins answered a question that I have carried around with me since 1962: Why did Dr. H. Kennett Moritz,

an English professor at the University of Southern California, ask me and my classmates to memorize the first line of the short story "Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka? "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." I have carried these words around in my head for over 50 years, a long time for perplexity to prevail.

Who was Gregor Samsa, what were his dreams, how could anyone be transmogrified into an insect, and just what kind of monstrous creature had Gregor become? Kafka's words were projectiles in a single sentence, demanding the reader to continue. I am convinced that Dr. Moritz had us memorize a perfect sentence because it had trajectory.

(I will never disclose my-ants-don't-sleep second sentence, which would propel no one to read past the puddle of ink at its end called a period.)

④ —Doo-Wah-Wah

Robbins has a favorite bookstore: Village Books in Bellingham where I live, and the next county over from his. He's a fan of Village Books because Chuck Robinson, co-owner of VB, "quite literally made one of my wildest dreams come true," which Robbins wrote about in *My Bookstore: Writers Celebrate Their Favorite Places to Browse, Read and Shop*. You'll have to read the anthology to find out the details, but his dream had to do with a trio of sexy back-up singers in long slinky, dresses "Doo-wah, wah-wahing" accompanying him where ever he went—to the bank, for a root canal, or to argue with the IRS about taxes.

He read his selection at VB shortly after the book's publication in 2012, recruiting three "gorgeous young stylists" from the salon where he got his hair cut to stand behind

him. "Village Books," he read, was "a store apart, a store with nerve, a store with heart; a three dimensional literary supercollider where fantasy can fuse with reality at the speed of a turning page." Then he patiently signed books for a long line of fans. I proffered my copy and introduced myself.

"I used to be the librarian in LaConner." He nodded.

"I'm wondering if you got the birthday card I sent you for your 75th birthday last year?"

"Yes, but, they got it wrong. I'm going to turn 80 next year."

I had obtained his birth date from several reliable places. MARC records (library lingo for MACHine Readable Cataloging, the foundation of Library of Congress bibliographic entries) tagged his birth year as 1936. The authoritative database historylink.org noted that though sources varied on Robbins' DOB and that they had settled on 1936: "Our date for Tom Robbin's date of birth was taken from the Washington State Voter Database."

Should I doubt the man standing right before me about his very own birth date, a guy *adding* four years to his age? He didn't look close to 80—nice hair, not many wrinkles, fashionably dressed in Casual Expensive.

Perhaps, he had applied the unconventional and creative exaggerations of his fiction to his own vital statistics. But for what reasons?

I let the question rest in my mind. A year later, trolling through the Internet, I read "Happy Birthday Tom Robbins!" in Alan Rinzler's blog *The Book Deal* (July 24, 2013). Rinzler, who had been Robbins' editor for *Jitterbug Perfume*, introduced a "Breaking revelation just in from Tom" in the middle of his column:

...speaking of birthdays, do you have any friends at the Library of Congress, someone to whom I could mail a copy of my birth certificate. You see I was actually born in 1932, not 36, and turned 81, not 77, on Monday. Neither Wikipedia nor my foreign publishers will correct the date at my request, because the Library of Congress has the date differently and—obviously—the Library of Congress is God. If you have any ideas how I might persuade the LOC to correct my birthdate, please advise. I didn't know the water in the Fountain of Youth had become so polluted.

Then I found NPR's "Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me" (June 5, 2010). Robbins told host Carl Sagan that he had "discovered the fountain of youth. It's Wikipedia," he said, noting that Wikipedia listed him as 74, "but I'm actually 77."

On the strength of these additional examples, I resolved, if I ever got the chance, to ask him again, and, though I don't have any friends at the Library of Congress, I decided to take action. I'm not a cataloguer, but librarians are trained, even if they're not fastidious by nature, to abhor errors. I drafted a letter to the Librarian of Congress.

⑥—Still Life and the Verploegen-Ferraiuolos

Meanwhile, on a hot October day in the Fall of 2013, my wife and I flew across the country to the wedding of two young professionals. Eric Ferraiuolo is a senior software search engineer mover/shaker, and my wife's nephew, Leslie Verploegen, is a public health provider in Boston. They had traveled to our wedding in March 2013 after same sex marriage had been legalized in Washington State. We wanted to join them at their wedding. The wedding was being held on a spacious piece of river front property not far from Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. White chairs were symmetrically placed on the lawn sloping down to the beach. A powerboat lazed at the end of a long dock. At tables under an expansive white tent with a polished wood dance floor in the center, there were 90 settings identified with place cards, promising a lavish dinner after the ceremony.

Ushered to our seats, we were handed the program, elegantly printed on cream colored, high rag content card stock. Everything was listed: the procession, the welcome, the marriage address, the ring warming, the familiar passage on love from First Corinthians, Etta James' song "At Last," the vows, and then... a selection from *Still Life with Woodpecker*! Really?! What would the selection be?

I waited patiently for the officiant, a bonafide cleric, the Groom's stepfather, with ministerial credentials, to complete his portion. He guided his voice through a sonorous, well-modulated message, casual and serious, circumspect and humorous. The words of Tom Robbins, sage storyteller of the sixties, a resounding gong and clanging cymbal (or symbol) if ever there was one, came after Corinthians and the vows. One of the bride's best friends stepped forward and began: "We waste time looking for the perfect lover instead of creating the perfect love."

When the ceremony was over, my wife told the bride how pleased we were that she was a Robbins fan. "Oh," she said, "I haven't read the book. I looked on the Internet for passages on love, and this one suited us."

Amory and I, exchanging glances, resolved to supply them with *Still Life*, and wouldn't it be cool if we could get it signed!? We figured we could send it, with return postage provided, to Robbins, at the address listed in the Gale's Contemporary Authors Online database. The entry had not been updated since 2004, but I knew that the accommodating LaConner Post Office would see that our package would find its way to Robbins.

In November there was a celebration for the LaConner Library's 20-year existence. We were not expecting Robbins to be there—surely his presence would have

been advertised—but we stopped off at Village Books, just in case, and bought the last copy of *Still Life with Woodpecker*.

At the event, I spoke with Library Director Joy Neal, who said, "Of course, we invited Tom. He was one of the first to RSVP yes." But, she had refused to capitalize on his reputation by advertising his possible presence. LaConner's commitment to Robbins' privacy was still in place. However, we did not see him among the 180 who attended.

When the program was almost over and we were about to leave, my Tom Spotting Alarm went off. Tom and Alexa came through the Garden Club entrance. Amory exited to retrieve *Still Life* from the car, and returned to recap the wedding story to the Robbins while I disentangled myself from another conversation, which had become less compelling. Amory asked Robbins about the passage Eric and Leslie had included. "Oh, that," Robbins said, "I stole it from Shakespeare."

He handed back the book signed "To Eric and Leslie—making love stay, Tom Robbins."

I asked the question I'd resolved to ask: "Most sources list your birthday as 1936. Is it really true you were born in 1932 and not 1936?" I waited for his answer.

"Yes," he said.

"I thought so," I said, "so I drafted a letter to the Librarian of Congress asking him to change it."

Looking surprised, he said, "I would be most pleased to have this matter cleared up."

⑥—Your Turn, Mr. Billington

I revised my draft the next day, ignored the government shutdown announced on

the LOC website, and mailed the letter (see appendix) off to James H. Billington, copying Robbins. A few days later, I received an envelop with The Union of Mad Scientists as the return address—one of those curious dispatches, I thought, from arcane vendors who assault librarians with ads for dubious cult books. Instead of executing my usual pointy finger rip tear, I scissored off the end cleanly, and extracted a sheet headed, in 36-point type, "Villa de Jungle Girl." The "jungle girl" was a dagger-wielding, super heroine in a slutty leopard print bikini leotard, fending off an attacking black panther, fangs exposed. Then I noticed the distinctively scrawled signature at the bottom of a perfectly typed letter: "Tom."

Dear Linda,
One million and twenty three thanks (adjusted for inflation) for appealing to the Library of Congress and the integrity of James H. Billington on my behalf. What a generous and thoughtful gesture! Let's see if it gets results.

Should Jimmy Billington suspect that I might have falsified my birth certificate (and were I to do such a dastardly thing, wouldn't human nature dictate that I would subtract rather than add years to my age?), he or one of his flunkies could always write to the Clerk of Watauga County, Boone, North Carolina and verify the date in question. Thanks again for your heroic efforts on behalf of truth, justice, and the ongoing struggle against creeping meatballism. In closing, I beg you to please. . . feel ridiculously fine.
—Tom Robbins

In March 2014, Tom wrote a letter to James Billington and sent me a copy.

Dear Dr. Billington:
For many years now, the Library of Congress has incorrectly reported the year of my birth. On several occasions, interested third parties have contacted your office in an attempt to correct the mistake: alas, to no avail. Therefore, I (an American novelist and journalist) am enclosing herewith a copy of my certificate of birth, correctly stating that the year of my debut was 1932 not 1936. Until the L of C is kind enough to correct the error, other biographical sources will continue to be disinclined to take that step on their own.

Should you require further legal proof (U.S. passport, Social Security profile, etc.) of my correct age, please don't hesitate to contact me.

While I was christened "Thomas Eugene Robbins," I've long written my books and articles under the name "Tom Robbins."

Respectfully Yours,
Thomas Eugene Robbins

The next time I saw Tom Robbins, at the Skagit Valley Poetry Festival in May of 2014, I asked him if he'd heard from the Library of Congress. As one of the Interested Third Parties, I was considering another ploy. Paul Hanson, Village Books manager, had said, "I know someone at the Library of Congress. I can give him a try."

Meanwhile, *Tibetan Peach Pie*, subtitled "tales of an imaginative life," was published in May 2014 and included clear references, from the flyleaf to the internal text, to his birth year, 1932. Surely, the cataloging fact-checkers at the Library of Congress would respect Robbins' references to his own birth and his editor Daniel Halpern at Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, with something so basic as an authentic birthdate.

I looked to see what the LC had done with its catalog entry. Entering "Robbins, Tom" in "The "Browse" search under Authors/Creator revealed "Robbins, Tom, 1932 (22). There was the new, revised birthdate and 22 items associated with his name. The next entry read "Robbins, Tom 1936 (0). That entry is the closest thing to admission of error that a catalog can convey. It admits that there used to be a heading for Tom Robbins, DOB 1936, but now there isn't. No items are associated with the entry.

Afterword

The LC catalog is not a usual stop for most library devotees, so I wrote Tom that his birthdate had been changed. He responded. "No, I wasn't aware of the corrected

birthdate until I received your epistle.” Then, he said:

As they say down in Dixie where I was hatched: bless your heart! Against all odds, you cleared inexplicable obstacles and struck a blow for biographical accuracy at the heartless of citadel of library record. Billingsley must be spinning in his coffin – and he isn’t even dead yet.

After such a triumph over bureaucracy it is only fitting that you retired. I hope Whatcom presented you with a new Cadillac and a big house in the south of France... With tanks of thanks, Tom R.

I have a special edition WCC watch, but my 2005 Honda still resides in my driveway. However, cool letters from Tom are better than a Cadillac any day and a nice finish for my career in librarianship. Besides, at a benefit for a new LaConner Regional Library, I won the last item in a drawing: a Tibetan Peach Pie, and I possess a picture of Tom, still following his agent’s no-smile directions, and me.

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Appendix: Transcript of Letters

James H. Billington
Librarian of Congress
The Library of Congress
Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20540

October 15th, 2013

Dear Mr. Billington,

If you take a look at the attached document the last paragraph of editor Alan Rinzler's blog, you'll see that Tom Robbins would like to have his DOB changed on the Library of Congress records.

Last Sunday, at a celebration for the LaConner Regional Library (where I was director 1998-2000), I told Tom that I had drafted a letter to you. Wherever one looks, whether in library catalogues, database articles, or newspaper columns, the July 22nd, 1936 date persists. Tom says he was born in 1932. So, as a Robbins fan and a librarian interested in accuracy (and assuming Mr. Robbins' presumption of the LOC's position as God is still in place), I echo Tom's question: could he send his birth certificate or pursue some other legal strategy to facilitate a permanent correction of the record?

Thanks for reading the presumptuous note of one of the thousands of librarians who appreciate the work you do for libraries and American culture in general.

Sincerely,

Linda Lambert
Library Director
Whatcom Community College Library
237 W. Kellogg Road
Bellingham, WA 98226
llambert@whatcom.ctc.edu; lindaleelambert@comcast.net

* * *

February 9th, 2014

Dear Mr. Billington,

This note is a follow up to my October 15th, 2013 letter. It, as well as a copy of Tom's response to that letter, is enclosed to jog your memory. Tom Robbins' new memoir, *Tibetan Peach Pie*, will be released in May. It includes many references to his age which I will quote shortly.

Tom was born July 22nd, 1932 not July 22nd, 1936 in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. I'm a (relatively) humble member of your profession, a profession that prefers precision, (although I personally leave it to the cataloguers and keepers of records), so I am hoping that you will take action to correct his birthdate on the Library of Congress records.

In the last chapter of *Tibetan Peach Pie*, Tom writes of imagination.

I'm in my eighties now, and if there is one thing of which I am most proud, it's that I have permitted not authority (neither civilian nor military, neither institutional nor societal) to relieve me by means of force, coercion, or ridicule of that gift. From the beginning, imagination has been my

wild card, my skeleton key, my servant, my master, my bat, my home entertainment center, my flotation device, my syrup of wahoo; and I plan to stick with it to the end, whenever and however that end might come, and whether or not there is another act to follow.

Imagination doesn't apply to dates of birth. As he approaches his 82nd birthday, it would be a fine present to make this correction. The address of the Clerk of Watauga County, Boone, North Carolina is as follows...

I have not asked Tom for permission to relay his address, but since that address is in his forthcoming book, here it is in case you would like to correspond with him directly.

Tom Robbins
P.O. Box 338
La Conner, WA 98257.

Granted, he gave this address for those who desire a more comprehensive explanation of the title of *Tibetan Peach Pie*, but I'm betting he'll respond. He'll have a heads up because I will also be mailing him a copy of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Linda Lambert
Library Director, Whatcom Community College Library
237 W. Kellogg Road
Bellingham, WA 98226

llambert@whatcom.ctc.edu; lindaleelambert@comcast.net

What We Might Have Learned

Once
When I was a
solo librarian
in a small town library
with a big sounding name,
a man from the Reservation
approached my desk.

“I want to work here,”
he said, nodding slightly
and smiling, handing
me two sheets of paper,
an elegantly penned epistle
with clear letters in ebony ink,
flourished capitals, tidy margins.
He named the library
“a sanctuary of learning.”

Though he was nameless to me,
I had seen him some mornings
behind a pyramid of books and paper
at the far end of the conference table,
an oak sacrament itself
for studious patrons.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

But, he had no library experience.
Then I thought: hire him!
Attitude is everything.
There’s art in his handwriting,
understanding in his experience,
promise in his passion.

But he never returned.

How Five Writers—Jaed Coffin, Nancy Pearl, Daniel James Brown, Jim Lynch & Laura Kalpakian—Use Libraries

“I’m a busy man, after all, right?”

I got into a bit of a tussle with Jaed Coffin, a faculty member in the Stonecoast MFA program, when I submitted an early draft of this article to him. Jaed, the author of *Roughhouse Friday*, a soon-to-be published memoir about the year he became a middleweight bar room boxing champion in Juneau, Alaska, will never step away from a fight. Describing himself as a “huge proponent of libraries,” he offered these challenges:

Why [should] libraries—besides being nice, big, quiet buildings where a person can go to read and learn—endure, despite the mass digitalization of information? Why is a library better than a laptop, with access to all sorts of documents? I have trouble understanding why being able to look up something on my iPhone in ten seconds is less meaningful than taking an hour to wander through a library. I’m a busy man, after all, right?

Increasingly, materials are born digital, printed materials are being digitized, and digital traffic is accelerating. The web is an excellent starting point, as long as an Internet aficionado is information literate—able to discern which sources are good and which are not. However, not everything is in an electronic format, and sometimes it is efficient to rely on the skills of a professional librarian to get to the best sources, whether printed or digital.

The American Library Association, through its “Libraries Change Lives” initiative, does a fine job of demonstrating the impact on individual lives and the continuing cultural significance and the viability of the library as a civic institution. Perhaps, as a librarian with twenty years experience, I will take on the defense of the libraries, but that’s not the boxing ring I want to enter right now. My task is to illuminate the activities of four more writers who have found value in the library as a place where research can be done and solace found.

At the end of this piece, some quotes from Jaed Coffin will reveal the cogent, creative and positive things he has to say about libraries. In a way, he rings the winner's bell by underling the importance of books, libraries, and research, and so do the authors quoted below:

It's not too much of an exaggeration if it's one at all to say that reading saved my life.¹⁰ — Nancy Pearl, author of the *Book Lust* series and model for the Nancy Pearl Librarian Action Figure

The library was a sanctuary, which kept the flame of learning blazing.¹¹ — Daniel James Brown, author of *The Boys in the Boat* and two other nonfiction works

Before the era of cell phones and constant intrusion, I loved being in a library and knowing no one could reach or touch me. The library was, for me, a bastion of books and solitude; only when you walked out could the world intrude.¹² — Laura Kalpakian, author of *Gracedland* and 13 other novels

Libraries give me comfort because they're a finite universe of information. I get a lot just by being there, by osmosis.¹³ — Jim Lynch, author of *Truth Like the Sun* and two other novels.

Whether the library is a source of salvation or sanctuary, a hideout or an osmotic delivery system, libraries in their brick and mortar form have informed and inspired the contemporary authors quoted above.

Nancy Pearl: Action Figure

Over the years, either as a library trustee, state library commissioner, or professional librarian, I have connected with Nancy Pearl. Our most recent meeting was in Seattle during the 2014 Association of Writers and Publishers (AWP). Nancy, small

¹⁰ Pearl, Nancy. *Book Lust*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2003. p.x

¹¹ Daniel James Brown, talk at ALA Conference, July 2014, Los Vegas

¹² Laura Kalpakian, email, August 8, 2014

¹³ Jim Lynch, phone interview, August 10, 2014

backpack on her back, walked several miles from her home to meet me at a Starbucks.

Hiking is a favorite pastime these days and her main way of getting around.

If you have read Nancy's books *Now Read This*, *Book Lust*, *More Book Lust*, *Book Lust to Go*, and *Book Crush* or heard her on NPR, you'll know that she brings energy and vivacity to her writing and speaking. She was *Library Journal's* Librarian of the Year in 2011. She inspired a bluegrass band, "The Nancy Pearls," who debuted on a library rooftop in Sydney Australia, and she modeled for an action figure. Someone remarked that her outfit was dowdy. "It was the most expensive suit I've ever bought," she said with disgust. "It was silk."

One of her major claims to library fame was the work she did at the Seattle Center for the Book. In 1998, she developed a community book club called "If All Seattle Read the Same Book," used as a model by cities and counties, including ours, throughout the country.

My wife and I have five Nancy Pearl action figures because five people, independent of one another, cleverly thought that a librarian action figure was the perfect gift. They were right and we aren't complaining that we have a squad of Nancys. Neither were the salespeople at the Archie McFee Store in Seattle who found that, for a short time, Nancy Pearl outsold Beethoven, Moses and Jesus action figures.

Nancy moved into library stardom gradually. She grew up in a middle-class neighborhood of Detroit in a family that she says would now be considered dysfunctional. She names her mother "a highly educated combination of fury and

depression."¹⁴ Being at home was difficult, so she spent her childhood and early adolescence at the Parkman Branch Library, part of the Detroit Library System.

Books allowed me to both find myself and lose myself within them, As a child, I read for escape from a miserable family situation. I discovered very early that books allowed me to live lives I never would have even known about traveling with Marcus and Narcissa Whitman; having Mr. Pudgins or Mary Poppins as a babysitter; climbing Mt. Cameroon with Mary Kingsley in the 19th century; living through the nightmare of the last years of World War II with characters in Mary Doria Russell's *A Thread of Grace*; reading the historical fantasies of Guy Gavriel Kay. Now I believe that every time I open a new book, it's like embarking on a voyage into uncharted waters.¹⁵

Librarians recommended books for her, sometimes delivering them to her table. By the time she was ten, she wanted to be a children's librarian, just like Miss Long and Miss Whitehead. She got her library degree from the University of Michigan in 1967, and, indeed, did return to Parkman as a children's librarian.

She also worked as an independent bookseller and in professional librarian positions in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Seattle, Washington. At Seattle Public her last assignment was as executive director for the Center for the Book. She retired in 2004, but continues to write and speak. She is working on a novel, a return to her literary roots: her very first publication was a short story, "The Ride to School," published in *Redbook* in 1980.

Daniel James Brown: Panic Attack & the Library as Panacea

Daniel James Brown goes by Dan Brown in his day-to-day life, but he made a practical decision to increase his accessibility by using his full name to distinguish himself from the author of *The Da Vinci Code*.

¹⁴ Pearl, *Book Lust*, p 6

¹⁵ Manley, *American Libraries*, 2004, p. 32

Born in the 50s (October 8th, 1951) and coming of age in the 60s, Brown fell in love with words when his mother read *Danny and the Dinosaur* to him. As a young person he was subject to anxiety and panic attacks. "There are diagnoses and drugs now, but not then. Fortunately, I eventually grew out of having anxiety."¹⁶ He found high school difficult and one day in class his anxiety was so great—he doesn't like to discuss the details—that "I got into my 1963 Impala, left school, and never went back."¹⁷ Fortunately, there was a high school teacher who made a deal with him: if Dan would complete a series of correspondence courses, he could graduate. Brown, who lived with his family in Berkeley, went to the Doe Library on the University of California campus and settled into the reading room for seven to eight hours a day. "It was a huge room with green shaded reading lamps." He liked the smell of books and the presence of oak. When he went to the Bancroft Library, also on campus, he even liked wearing the required white gloves while handling archival materials. The library," he said, "was a sanctuary which kept the flame of learning blazing."

After finishing high school, he went on to Diablo Valley College, then to Cal where he completed a bachelor's, followed by a Master of Arts in English at University of California, Los Angeles. He taught writing at San Jose State and Stanford Universities, and worked at Microsoft as a technical writer and editor until he decided to write full time. He co-authored *Connections: A Rhetoric/Short Prose Reader* and *Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894*. ALA named the latter one of the best books

¹⁶ Conversation with Daniel James Brown at Whidbey Island Writers Conference, October 25th, 2014

¹⁷ Presentation at American Library Association Conference, July 2014 Las Vegas

of 2006; it was also a finalist in the 2007 Washington State Book Awards. Then came his Donner Party book, *The Indifferent Stars Above*.

The book that currently has readers fixated on Daniel James Brown is the *New York Times* bestseller *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and their Quest for Gold in the 1936 Olympics*. Critic David Laskin called it “*Chariots of Fire* with oars.”

The Boys in the Boat is about nine University of Washington students, all from working class families, underdogs pitted against the best rowing teams in the country and then in the world. Brown's story of their success encompasses the personal histories of the boys, the coaches, a master boat builder, and the political climate in Hitler's Germany.

Brown traveled to Berlin. He went to the village where the boys stayed during their time at the Olympics. He gazed at the racecourse just as the boys did. He stood on the balcony of the massive stone boathouse from which Hitler observed the race.

Brown gathers information on site for all of his books. However, he says that he could not have written *The Boys in the Boat* if he hadn't had access to articles, photos and film in Suzallo Library at the University of Washington. His Author's Note at the back of the book gives a nod of thanks to Bruce Brown, Greg Lange, Eleanor Toews, and Suz Babayan "in the world of libraries and dusty archives."¹⁸

As for a post-*Boys in the Boat* project, he said in an June 27, 2013 interview, "I'm considering all kinds of possibilities. A book like *Boys* takes me about five years to research and write, so I don't want to act too hastily. I want to find a story that I really love, that I want to spend another five years with, before I commit to it."¹⁹

¹⁸ Brown, *Boys in the Boat*, p.375

¹⁹ Brown in Donley, Shawn, "The powells.com interview. June 27, 2013

In August of 2014, in response to the my similar email question, he wrote, "I'm afraid the answer is still the same. I'm continuing to look for a topic that really grabs me, preferably a personal story set against an interesting historical backdrop. I'm happy to take suggestions."²⁰ He says the following on his website: "My primary interest as a writer is in bringing compelling historical events to life as vividly and accurately as I can."²¹

He describes himself as “picky” about the projects he chooses. Sometimes, it appears, they choose him. The catalyst for writing his first book *Under a Flaming Sky: the Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894* came when he was helping his mother move out of the house in which she had lived for forty years. He found letters and newspaper clippings that talked about the fire during which his great grandfather died.

With respect to *The Boys in the Boat*, the idea struck when Brown was invited by Judy Rantz to meet her father and Joe Rantz, a member of the University of Washington rowing team that triumphed at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. When Brown asked his neighbor if he could write about Joe, Rantz said no, but Brown could write about the boat. He meant the rowing team members.

Perhaps Brown’s next project will also come to him unbidden and serendipitously. For now, he is spending a lot of time speaking.

Jim Lynch: Making Things Up for a Living

"I know a lot of writers who don't go beyond Google for their research,"²² Jim Lynch mused, speaking to me from his sailboat in August 2014. The author of *The*

²⁰ email from Daniel James Brown, August 27, 2014

²¹ www.danieljamesbrown.com

²² Jim Lynch, phone interview, August 10, 2014

Highest Tide (2005), *Border Songs* (2009), and *Truth Like the Sun* (2012) values accuracy, both by instinct and training. After graduating from the University of Washington, he spent fourteen years as a reporter for a small newspaper in Alaska, the *Spokesman Review* in Spokane, and the *Oregonian* in Portland, plus a four-year stint with columnist Jack Anderson in Washington, DC.

He took a six-month leave from his reporting job at *The Oregonian* to write his first book. Two days after his agent sold *The Highest Tide* to Bloomsbury Press, even though it was unfinished, he submitted his resignation. He loved journalism, "particularly stalking and describing big shots and politicians...I miss the adrenaline and camaraderie of journalism, but I'd rather make things up for a living."²³

Making things up does not preclude research. His second book, *Border Songs* (2009) is about Brandon Vanderkool, a very tall young man (6'8") who is a brand new border patrol agent. He's dyslexic, socially awkward, fascinated with birds, a sometime artist a la Andy Goldsworthy, and talented at finding drug smugglers, human traffickers and traveling terrorists along the Washington State/British Columbia border.

The writing of the novel was catalyzed by Lynch's post-9/11 reporting for *The Oregonian*. He was surprised that the border was a mere drainage ditch, for one thing, and he found that the border patrol wasn't finding many terrorists, but they *were* snagging illegal drugs. He rode along with Border Patrol officers, translating his experience into his novel. After the book was published, the officers said that they found the information in the book accurate and convincing.

²³ Adapting *Truth Like the Sun*: A conversation between the *Truth Like the Sun* author and film director Jane Jones. 10 April, 2014

"I also spent a lot of time in the Olympia Library, looking up marijuana growing, dairy farming (one of the sub-plots of the book), and U.S.-Canada border relations.

Libraries are an integrated part of my whole writing process."²⁴

Lynch grew up on Mercer Island, located west of Seattle and east of Bellevue. As a boy, he read through the entire library at Lakeridge Elementary School until he graduated to the island's large public library.

"It seemed enormous to me, and I thought of librarians as rather intimidating characters which might have something to do with the fact that, for a kid, I had a huge bill for overdue books. But later on, when I became a writer, I decided that librarians and independent booksellers were my favorite conversationalists."

His third book, *Truth Like the Sun*, is set in Seattle in two time periods: 2001 and 1963, the year of the World's Fair. It's about a female journalist who is writing a feature article on a mayoral candidate in 2001. She unearths some telltale shenanigans about the candidate's questionable involvement in World's Fair operations. Lynch's Washington DC experiences with politicians informed his telling of the story.

Born in 1961, Lynch was too young to remember the World's Fair, which I happened to attend as a young student enrolled in summer school at the University of Washington. Lynch researched the event at the Washington State Library; WSL houses World's Fair realia and documents in its collection. ("Realia is one of my favorite words, and means objects from real life, such as a bag of bones, kept in a library for, say, anatomy students to study). A few years ago, when I was at a meeting at the State Library, librarian/archivist Sean Lanksbury showed our group the section of World's Fair

²⁴ Phone interview with Jim Lynch, August 10, 2014

items—programs, models, photos, etc. Lanksbury referred us to WLS's mission “to collect, preserve and make accessible to Washingtonians materials on the government, history, culture, and natural resources of the State.”²⁵ The State Library in Olympia has been around since the territory of Washington was created in 1863 and Governor Isaac Stevens sent 2000 books, purchased on the East Coast, around the tip of South American to San Francisco and then to Olympia.

Lynch keeps his own boat in the Olympia Harbor, not far from his home. When he called me two summers ago, after three days of trading emails and dropping calls, he was conducting what he called "experiential research" for his fourth book, *Before the Wind*, aboard his 1970 Bristol 32 sailboat, "Shibumi."²⁶

"I'm on the Juan de Fuca," he said. "It's a difficult passage and I'm about to cross into Canada, so let's talk now."

The same boat was used for a book tour to promote the paperback release of *Border Songs*. He planned to do seven readings in eight days, traveling for three days from Olympia to Shaw, then on to San Juan, Orcas and Lummi Islands, finishing up at Bellingham and Anacortes. He presaged the possibility of misfortune in an interview with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter: "At some point if I have to hitchhike or call a librarian or a bookseller to pick me up, that will be the least of my problems."²⁷ After replacing first the fuel pump and then the bilge pump, other repairs sabotaged his trip, but not before

²⁵ Stroud, Jeremy, ed. Washington Territorial Library. Booklet "printed in conjunction with an Open House celebrating the Washington Territorial Library's 160th Anniversary, October 15, 2013. Foreword.

²⁶ "*Shibumi*" is the title of a book written by Trevanian, the nom de plume of Rodney William Whitaker (1931-2005), author of eight novels, and dubbed "the only writer more reclusive than J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon" by one of his admirers. *Shibumi* was a book Lynch found captivating and one of many he analyzed for its style and content to improve his own writing. The two authors crossed paths at the University of Washington when Jim was a student.

²⁷ Heyman, Marshall, "Books for Sail: One Author's Tour." *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2010

The Wall Street Journal, *The New York Times*, and *The Oregonian* had given space to his adventurous marketing idea.

I'd be happy for Jim to hitch a ride with me if *The Shibumi* ever falters in Bellingham Bay, because Jim is a friendly, open conversationalist. He has made many trips to Whatcom County where I live, speaking at the local independent bookstore, Village Books, as well as Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College. He energetically participated in ten events the year that *Border Songs* was the Whatcom Reads community book club selection.

I can't wait to read his next book, which, he said, is "about a family obsessed with sailing, Albert Einstein and online dating."

Laura Kalpakian: Stickler for Detail

In 1984, the year that Laura Kalpakian published her second book, a friend of mine took her Cub Scouts on a field trip to the local newspaper. The book editor, waving a copy of *These Latter Days*, said, "Do you know anyone at your church who could review this book?" Kalpakian was the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Western Washington University for the year. The editor called me and gave me a copy of the book. I interviewed Laura, wrote the review, and didn't see her for 25 years, until I took a memoir class from her through an extension series. As we took our seats, she looked at me and said, "I know you. I never forget a favor. You brought your son over to mow my lawn when I went to England, didn't you?"

I had forgotten the favor, but I had not forgotten her, reading most of her books as they were published. Her first novel was set in the Special Collections section of a library. The central figure in *Beggars and Choosers* is a lowly grad student assigned to

catalog "the detritus of a recently deceased poet whose estate has come to the university."²⁸

Kalpakian notes that she herself was "a lowly graduate student" at the University of California, San Diego, preparing for her Ph.D. exams, usually in the UCSD library.

(It was) an architectural wonder (which) rose like a spaceship, seven or eight glassed stories tall among the eucalyptus trees, all of that enormity on a rather narrow base. I used to go there every Friday and check out a ton...I began there a practice of always taking one book during my forays that merely struck my fancy that had nothing to do with what was I was actually reading or researching. I've kept to this practice, and, as a result have stumbled upon a lot of illuminating books I might not ever otherwise have read. Rather like meeting an interesting stranger in an unlooked for place.

As a child, Kalpakian's mother took her to the Reseda (CA) Branch Library, "a small narrow storefront with a peculiar smell and a checkout desk at the front, the walls on either side lined with shelves." One summer she won a prize for having read more books than any other kids. "I received a chart and a prize to show for it."

During the family's years in Reseda, Laura read through everything in the children's section. She discovered Esther Forbes, the author of *Johnny Tremain*. She felt that Cilla, a main girl character, was just as interesting as Johnny and she wanted to know more about what her life was like and what happened to her. She wrote a letter to Miss Forbes, suggesting a sequel. "Miss Forbes graciously replied that she had no plans for a sequel, but she thanked me for my letter."

Laura moved on to *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*. Fascinated with the 18th century, she wondered how Esther Forbes had gathered her information, and "thus my forays to the back of the book, the footnotes, and the bibliography. To this day I

²⁸ Kalpakian in a lengthy email, August 12, 2013 to the author. Subsequent quotes are from the same email.

remain a reflexive footnote reader." Miss Forbes cited many obscure books, but the Reseda library had a few of them, including the work of Alice Morse Earle, who wrote about daily life in colonial times, most published around 1905.

In one of Miss Earle's books, Laura found a reference to the diary of Anne Bonner, the daughter of an 18th century sea captain in New England. "I became convinced that if I could only read Anne Bonner's diary somehow all would come clear to me, and I would know how these girls lived, what they felt, and thought, and how they filled their days." Laura wanted that book.

I must have asked a librarian because someone told me of the wonders of Inter library loan! This struck me as absolutely wonderful! Really? You could get *any book in the world* or close to it.... you weren't confined to your own little library! I put in my order for Anne Bonner's diary and waited.

In the meantime, Laura's father, who travelled a lot, was transferred from the San Fernando Valley leaving, Laura, her sister, and their mother with babe in arms. The family would have to move. Laura learned that the storefront library was moving too. Finally, Laura received word that the Anne Bonner book was in, so she got on her bike to go get it.

The new library was a wonder, huge, air-conditioned, set about with potted plants and low gates that marked off the offices. I personally did not much care for it, preferring, naturally what was known—the narrow confines of the old storefront where you could smell the old ink, the old book covers, where the card catalogue was one squat box, where the floor tiles had been worn down to the cement.

The book was rare and it was old. She was convinced that it would take her back to the eighteenth century.

This book was a crashing disappointment. The diary did not speak to me across the centuries. It was not a glimpse into this girl's life, or at least, it was not the glimpse I wanted. In fact, her life seemed every bit as dull as mine. Duller since she didn't read novels. The diary was mostly one or two line entries with some

boring activity for the day (embroidery, perhaps...she was well to do so there were no chores) usually followed by some pious observation and a note about the weather...The insight I longed for was not to be had...She offered no introspection, no thoughts, or hopes or dreams, no longing; she was perfectly well behaved, composed.

Laura returned the book and never went back to that library again. She remembers the "deep disappointment I felt that a book I had so hungered for and believed in, could create a bridge for me, could not. Did not."

She still has "vast affection and respect for Inter Library Loan, and is amazed that libraries would trust mere mortals with books that had to be shipped from cold eastern vaults into eagerly awaiting hands in the far west."

She was twelve-years-old then, and she did not go to the library in their new city. The library was "unmemorable." However, she was not at a loss for books. A neighbor's family member had died. The neighbor, knowing Laura's mother, Helen Johnson, was an avid reader, asked Helen if she would like the books. There were dozens of books, so they took up residence in cupboards, the only place where there was room. Laura managed to read all of them by the time she finished high school. Except for the complete set of Mark Twain's works, most of it was popular fiction from the forties and fifties, "authors once renowned, now mostly fallen to the wayside."

She frequented the libraries of the schools she attended: UC, Riverside (BA, history); University of Delaware (MA history); University of California, San Diego (PhD ABD). When Laura found out that *Beggars and Choosers* would be published, she abandoned academics for the writing life.

By 1995, she was at the University of Washington as the Theodore Roethke Writer in Residence, taking advantage of UW's generous book loaning policies for

faculty, which meant checking out as many as you want for as long as you wanted, provided there was no demand. "Most of the books I liked were obscure, even unloved, and no one else wanted them. I kept some of them for a couple of years."

When she was writing *Cosette* (Harper Collins, 1995) she had as many as 200 in her office, as well as purchasing 50 or so at used book stores. She stacked them on her floor according to subject: Paris, Food; Paris, Sewers; Paris, Art; Biographies, Victor Hugo; 1848 Revolution.

As anyone who's visited the UW campus knows, there are many libraries besides the flagship Suzallo or the Odegaard Undergraduate Library. Laura liked the Drama Library, "a small library housed in what had once been a gym basement, so the windows were high and wired, and in truth, a bit of that old dank odor still clung to the place."

She became friends with the librarian. She'd email him a list of books; he'd have them for her in a few days. She ranged through the shelves of the library for all of the eight years she was at UW, mostly reading memoirs and biographies. The Drama Library itself had a small part in one of her unpublished novellas, *Mrs. Lear*. UW libraries were also a great resource for *American Cookery* (St. Martin's, 2007).

I was able to fashion vivid characters—stuntmen and cowgirls, a Philadelphia lawyer, the life of a WAC in wartime Europe, a screenwriter fled to Europe in the wake of McCarthy hearings. Even if some of these were minor characters, researching them provided me with endless entertainment, stumbling on oddball books full of (as they say) incident and character.

Kalpakian has written twelve novels, most published in the United States, some in the UK. Along with creating literature, she taught writing at the University of Washington, and fiction and memoir through Western Washington University's extended education program.

Her new books, *Three Strange Angels* and *The Music Room* were published in the UK in 2015. *Three Strange Angels* takes place in London, 1950, and is based on an idea she's had for 25 years.

Often I will read 'toward' a project for years before I ever start writing. That is to say, splash reading, stuff that interests me that will gather momentum over the course of years. I have at least three such projects now, wonderful ideas, for which I read deeply but sporadically, though I've written not so much as a word.

In the final writing stages of *Three Strange Angels*, she scoured Western Washington University library's microfilm file of the *Times* of London. "So when I say Michael Redgrave was playing in *Hamlet*, he most assuredly was."

Kalpakian identifies herself as "a stickler for detail and correctness in any kind of historical piece, even if I am writing about an era I can remember. I do almost no research online, save perhaps to check a minor detail that can't easily be found elsewhere."

Jaed Coffin: "Without libraries we would be less civilized"

Unlike Kalpakian, many writers and students use their iPhones, iPads and Airtags—or Samsung Galaxies, Android tablets, or Lenovo YOGAs—to hurtle through the information universe to find what they need quickly—and so do I. I have my three main devices in front of me now.

But I am also a habitual library user, especially since I have completed my twenty-year, late-in-life library career, and finally have time to hunker down in my favorite library bunkers. I hyperlink through sections in the stacks just as I do on the web, finding books that I wouldn't ordinarily see on a list or in a catalog. I tap into databases (paid for by libraries, not me, except as a taxpayer) that provide more in depth and correct

information than Wikipedia. I use *Writer's Market* so I don't have to buy it. I turn to the Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov) because the LOC has a baker's dozen of extraordinary goals, and resources, that resonate with me as both librarian and writer. Most of all, I use libraries, usually academic ones, as a physical place to write. Libraries are a place where I am anonymous, where white noise and quiet prepare me to do my best work.

Especially when we're traveling, my wife and I post pictures of libraries we're visiting—recently the National Library of Ireland in Dublin and the Ketchikan Library in Alaska, but we also post from our local libraries. When I say, “visit,” I don't mean poking our heads in the door tourist-style; I mean hunkering down at a table and reading, writing, or researching. Marilyn Zavorski, a history activist in Stowe, Massachusetts, cited and showed Facebook pictures of our visits to libraries as part of her presentation to persuade her local historical society to support the renovation of the local Randall Library.

More power to the busy man Jaed Coffin—two jobs (full time as an assistant professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, and part-time instructor at the University of Southern Maine) and a family, plus a front-loaded freelance writing and authoring career—and others like him who can write their stories without libraries. He used his own background to write *A Chant To Soothe Wild Elephants*, the story of his four months as a Buddhist monk in his mother's native village of Thailand.

And more power to the writers like Jaed who also use public libraries for other reasons and who value books. He and his wife take their children to the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick, Maine, where he lives. At his office at the University of New

Hampshire, he has stacks of books. “There’s something about collecting books in your office because it reflects your brain and creative consciousness in a way that having vast amounts of Internet info doesn’t. A big shelf of books is an extension of our minds and creative process. There’s paper trail in a way that a Google history can never be.”

Coffin has a healthy regard for libraries as institutions, regarding them as “spaces where we go to be with ourselves among intellectual relics. Without them, we would be less civilized. The library allows us to see how beautiful places enrich our culture in a way that placeless places—Wal mart, Target, etc.—don’t.”

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Fruits of a Fifties Childhood

Outlaw children, summertime brave,
the three of us, dashed for the outskirts of town,
away from fenced backyards, beyond the reach
of parent voices, to a small forbidden orchard,
contrails of dust rising from our heels.

We hurried there, unaware
of the racism of my father's words:
wetback migrants, they carry knives.
They are, he said, unhappy with their lives.
He wanted to secure our safety, contain us,
in our Dick and Jane neighborhood but we...
we belonged to daring and expectation.

Burnished yellow loquats, Japanese plums
glimmered in the dusk, waiting to be stolen
and folded, marvels of taste and succulence
into the dough of my mother's tarts.
We plucked them.

And then we ran.

POWERHOUSE QUINBY

Introduction

1

"Linda Lambert: purveyor of fine words and phrases. And also sentences, chapters, and a book." That's who I'd like to be. However, I can't use the first sentence of that tagline because I stole it.²⁹ Brody's quote and one by Pablo Picasso—"Put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die leaving undone" —has created a sense of urgency in me to write. But what?

Toni Morrison said, "If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." That's a little tricky with memoir. I don't want to read a book about me. I want to read about my grandmother who never married, the Civil War serving great grandfather I never met, and my great aunt who was a World War I Army nurse on the front lines in France. I want to read a book that references my mother who played a baby grand piano by ear, and my businessman father who was also the member of the Sorasis Club. I'm equally interested in findings that unveil the mysteries of my birth parents and my three found biological siblings. That's the short list. Those individuals will never write their personal histories because, except for my found birth siblings, they all reside in cemeteries on the West Coast.

I write my life because I am counting on the likelihood that a curious girl or boy in my family, or one of my seven children or thirteen grandchildren, will, one day, either before or after *my* address is a cemetery, wonder about me, as I have wondered about my

²⁹ www.dylanbrody.com

forbearers. There is one chapter that might elicit “ew” because no children want to know about elders’ sexuality, but one way or another sex is part of everybody’s history.

I would be pleased if there were an audience for my writing beyond my family, but the two f’s—fame and fortune—have never been of interest, resultant from a spontaneously articulated understanding, experienced one evening while sitting with a friend in the front seat of my mother's 1955 Buick.

Mary Jo Lewis, the oldest of six children in a missionary family recently returned from Africa, was a new friend. We were both sixteen, and had just attended Christian Youth Fellowship, a youth group for the Disciples of Christ church, and I don't remember the content of our conversation—probably something portentous and amorphous—that preceded her question: "Do you want to be famous?"

I paused, then said: "No. I just want to be well known in my circle of friends and family." That modest goal basically reflects and has guided the choices I've made for the last seven decades. I have not been one to set long-term goals and then chart my progress. However, living in the last quadrant of my existence, I have felt prompted to summarize the values that have informed my choices. Here is the distillation, which I refer to as my personal values statement.

I value productivity and adventure, health and longevity, the written word and reading. I seek to exhibit constant love to my wife, family, and friends, leaving a legacy of family history, curiosity, and faith for my children and grandchildren.

These are my values, however imperfectly I live them. They drive the family stories I will tell. They influence the book I’ve always wanted to read and the book I chose to write.

Author Erik Larsen said: “Beware of family histories unless you’ve got one hell of a story to tell. You may have loved your grandmother, but it is possible no one else will. Nobody cares about your trip to Paris unless it is as compelling as Adam Gopnik’s *Paris to the Moon* or Thad Carhart’s *The Piano Shop on the Left Bank*.”³⁰

I don’t have “one H of a story to tell,” though some might be interested in a Mormon who made the difficult decision to leave a 32-year marriage for a woman she fell in love with, and the salutary and pejorative effects that decision had on family life.

It doesn’t matter whether or not the reader loves my grandmother, but I expect a flowering of admiration when the reader becomes acquainted with her in the Black Madonna chapter, and also with her father, a Civil War veteran who returned home to Kansas, wounded, cranky and possessed of a fierce patriotism.

Unlike Gopnik and Carhart’s subject-specific discoveries in Paris, my Paris-based experience is limited to a one-week stay on the Rue de Rendezvous in 1965. I do have a story to tell about climbing a fence in Laugharne, Wales, to see Dylan Thomas’ Boat House and another story about driving around Washington state in a van with five Russian librarians singing the only English song they knew, “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.”

Larsen may be correct that “no one cares,” but what I really think he means is that a writer has to be pretty damn good to produce something that an editor will buy and publish. I plan to be one of the PDG writers.

³⁰ Larsen is the author of the current bestseller *Lusitania!* and delivered his remarks at a workshop titled “The Dark Country of No Ideas” at the 2015 Chuckanut Writers Conference.

It takes me a long time to work up to any topic at hand. Fellow MFA student Greg Westrich (*Hiker's Guide to Maine*) has a keen mind for evaluating manuscripts. He noted on one workshop piece, "You really like to talk about process, don't you?" Yes, I do. I learn something from others' paths, sometimes rendered in a single quote, as in these lines from Eudora Welty in *One Writer's Beginnings*: "I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well."³¹ I am equally interested in my own trajectory. A bad dancer, I like doing little pirouettes of prose that eventually land me on the shiny stage of narrative exposition. And I'm going to do it again with a

MEDITATION ON MEMOIR

I came to the memoir encampment slowly, prodded by my wife who, in 2012, found what she felt was the perfect class to provide focus for the writing I perennially talked about doing. The local university offered "Memories into Memoir," taught by novelist Laura Kalpakian, who had never published a memoir, though she sidled up to the subject in her novel *The Memoir Club*. The absence of a published memoir had no influence on her ability to teach and to apply the tools of fiction to memoir—dramatic arc, scenic detail, dialogue, and character development—and made me think about writing in ways that busted me out of the journalistic and expository prose that I used in my work as a librarian and occasional freelancer.

At the end of three quarters, Kalpakian described my memoir style as "vapor trail." I rather liked being associated with the steam clouds of condensation following a highflying airplane until I substituted the more accurate and unsavory word "exhaust" for

³¹ *One Writer's Beginnings*, p. 7

steamy clouds. Three years later, groping my way toward an MFA in creative writing, mentor t Fleischmann said that the forward movement, the motor of my writing, was “structured meandering.” Meandering suggests a relaxed approach along a twisted route, which is fine until one consults a thesaurus and finds “aimless” as a synonym. (He, of course, meant the description in a positive way.)

For better or worse, I own those two descriptions by writers I respect and admire, and I rest in Mary Ruefle’s assertion that “It takes courage to speak in fragments.”³² I recognize that circling the wagons of my prose may result in trapezoids and parallelograms and an occasional triangle (can you tell I got a “barely passing” grade in high school geometry?), so I pay attention to Fleischmann’s word “structure” as I am writing what my mentor calls “segmented essays.” When my wife asked, “Did you know you were writing segmented essays,” I told the truth: “No.”

I like the word segmented. It makes me reflect on the caterpillars we learned about in high school biology, their sectioned little bodies creatively twisting and snaking in odd directions—a strategy of movement representative of Fleischmann’s advice: “...think of it (this form) as another opportunity for play—see what you can get away with, how far you can move within the segments, what kind of weird links you can set up between one section and another.”

Vapor trail memoir anyone, a tale avoidant of aimless exhaust?

4

Now it’s time to begin, and where better to look for style than in Genesis. It took thirty verses of description for God to stand back and show some emotion: “And God

³² *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, p.83

saw everything he had made, and behold it *was* very good.” God’s stance seems to suggest there’s nothing the matter with humble pride.

After seventy plus years and many verses, mostly doggerel, I can stand back and say, behold, some of it was very good.” The “it” is the substance of this book, including the parts that were not so very good because excavating understanding from mistakes and regrouping from wrong turns are implements of personal improvement.

In 1614, over 400 years ago, a sage identified as T. Adams by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of my very favorite set of books, said this: “Every man that has his genesis, must have his exodus; and they that are borne must dye.” Yep, it’s a sad fact that everybody who lives also dyes.

My daughter Elizabeth is a color specialist who travels the country showing beauticians and salon owners how to mix and blend hair dyes. When she says “Sit down, Mom, we’re doing something different,” I respond positively because I respect her education, training, and experience in a field in which I have no background. Similarly, in writing, I look to those who can tutor me in person, as has occurred in my Stonecoast MFA program, or through their books. I am reading, with eagerness, Mary Karr’s newly published *The Art of Memoir*.

With respect to hair, I like change that is imposed upon me, which means that today a portion of my hair is purple and spiked. I also know that when I dye, decades from now, I’m going to look good in a casket.

Memoirist Richard Lischer (*Open Secrets: A Memory of Faith and Discovery*) says “Death is the unseen guest in every autobiography...Death makes a complete

autobiography impossible since no one dies with laptop blazing. We can never finish our own story. Death is the ultimate writer's block."³³

I plan to die with my laptop blazing, hoping that as I step out of the story, someone's footsteps—or rather pen—will replace mine. Perhaps that will be my son Jason who wrote poetry for his master's thesis, composes and performs his own songs, and has already compiled an anthology of his siblings' stories called *Growing Up Lambert*.

I'm not sure how a paragraph announcing, "Now it's time to begin" ended up on the topic of death, except to say recognition of mortality as a fixture on the horizon of life has always interested me. I am not preoccupied with death. I have never been nor will I ever be suicidal. Happiness has been mine—in my childhood, in my children, in my friendships, in my faith, in academic study, and now in married life.

5

One day my wife and I were at the Pickford Theater in downtown Bellingham. I noticed that Pam Helberg, Jolene Hansen, Tele Aadsen and Kari Neumeyer—the writers I most admired in memoir class—were sitting in the lounge area at a window table, computers open, backpacks clumped on the floor. I am loath to admit the immature emotion that swept over me, *Hey, they're getting together and I'm not included*. Then I thought, why *should* I be included, I hardly know them... except in a memoir class, one shares personal details, unrelated to the number of contact hours in a friendship. I did know them, so I walked over. After a chorus of "Hi's," someone said "Join us anytime." I did, pleased to set my backpack next to theirs and step into a group that met regularly to write and review each others writing. Kari (rhymes with Safari, as she says to new

³³ "Writing the Christian Life," *Christian Century*, September 2, 2015, 22-27

friends) kept asking, “What’s the skedge?” so we called ourselves Skedgers and set up a Facebook page to coordinate meeting times and places. Skedger Pam Helberg’s the one who extracted the title of this memoir from the following passage, which I had read aloud:

In the fifties in a residential area of Visalia, a smallish town in California’s central valley, kids could ride bikes, play football, or run races in the streets. Cars watched out for us and we watched out for them.

The Combs family lived a few blocks away from me on Race Street. Mary was my age, 10, her older brother Dick a few years older. I was cruising the neighborhood on my bike, when Dick yelled, “Wanna play with us?” He gestured toward two of his friends playing catch in the middle of the road.

“Sure,” I said, and climbed off my navy blue Rollfast, leaning it against a tree because the kickstand was broken. Dick threw me the ball in a smooth, slightly elevated arc. I tossed it back.

“No, not like that,” he said, “lemme show you how to throw a spiral.” We practiced. I could already pitch a baseball with some accuracy so it didn’t take long to learn. Two more neighborhood boys showed up, enough for an impromptu game. Nobody seemed concerned that I was a girl.

We played football, touch not tackle, but we played hard, and more than once I hit the asphalt, squishy in parts from the hot San Joaquin Valley sun. Richard found that I could catch the ball and run, so I became part of his winning touchdown strategy.

At the end of the day, Dick conferred a nickname upon me that amused my father and worried my mother, concerned about my femininity: Powerhouse Quinby.

I still relish that nickname, even though there is nothing in my current appearance, demeanor or resume, that links me to Dick Comb’s 1953 nickname, unless drinking something called a Powerhouse Smoothie of kale, hemp mylk, almond butter, and protein powder is a qualifier.

However, my favorable reaction to that complimentary handle, combined with my childhood reputation as a tomboy, were both positive contributors in forging my identity. One of the definitions of tomboy in the OED is “a wild romping girl.” An early use in 1656 referred to a tomboy as “a girlie or wench that leaps up and down like a boy.” Fun,

huh?! I participate in physical activities—particularly racquetball and swimming—but I am no powerhouse in either.

I am drawn to the stories of women who are athletically accomplished. Helen Thayer, a New Zealander living in Snohomish, Washington, made the first solo trek to the magnetic North Pole. Londoner Roz Savage is the only woman in the world to row solo across the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans. In only 25 minutes, Californian Lynn Cox accomplished a one-mile swim in the Antarctic, braving frigid 32-degree water that would kill most people within five minutes.

These women are modern day adventurers and I will keep reading about them, admiring their boldness and risk-taking in the face of uncertain outcomes. But. I do not plan to row from Seattle to Bremerton, let alone cross an ocean. I won't trek to the North Pole. I won't even walk to Lynden, ten miles away. I will not swim across the narrowest part of Bellingham Bay, or, to mention local heroine Cami Ostman (*Second Wind*) run on seven continents. I *will* play out "adventure" through small physical activities that involve minimal risk or hazard, like my January jump into Lake Whatcom (55 degree water) on my 70th birthday to remind me that my entry into this decade and retirement does not mean entering into an easy chair life, because, as Helen Keller says, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing."

What I gained from an athletic childhood and adolescence are confidence and a sense of adventure, especially in the pursuit of fine words and phrases, and I've not forgotten Powerhouse Quinby.

POWERHOUSE QUINBY

AhNunDut Adventures

1943. It was wartime. Franklin D. Roosevelt was president. The Pentagon was built. John F. Kennedy's PT109 was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. Gas cost 15 cents a gallon. Frank Sinatra was a new singer. The Great Depression ended. The Germans liquidated the Jewish ghetto in Krakow. The British developed the Colossus computer, which broke German encryption. Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* won Best Song at the Academy Awards. *The Fountain Head* by Ayn Rand was rejected by twelve publishers, but became a bestseller. An average house cost \$3600. The slinky was invented. Movie executives allowed The Office of War Information to censor movies. Coca Cola cost five cents. Mick Jagger, Bobby Fischer, John Denver, John Kerry, and Billie Jean King were born. So were thousands more like me who would not populate the pages of the *New York Times* or *People* magazine.

Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay overflowed with military personnel. Eugene Allen, 25, a marine from Illinois, dated Alyce Bower, 27, a domestic in the wealthy Pacific Heights area of SF. I do not know the duration of their relationship, but it was intense enough for Alyce to discover—after he shipped out for a year—that she was pregnant. Alyce made a choice: to surrender the baby. Another woman, Ruth, made a choice too. After four miscarriages and fifteen years of marriage, she and her husband, Les Quinby, turned to adoption. They were living in Porterville California where Les was the district manager for Southern California Edison. They received a letter from Native Sons and Daughters of California, saying a baby girl was available. Could they pick her up in San Francisco? They did, but six weeks later my adoptive father was drafted into

the army. He cried when he left. I have the letter to prove it, but my mother, always stoic, kept her tears within and coped.

She moved in with my grandmother and they struggled along. They saved steel pennies in a jar—the government did not have sufficient copper for regular pennies—and used their ration books to get cheese, butter, meat and even shoes. Times were tough, but my grandmother, a school nurse, supported them until my father came home from World War II service and resumed his career with Southern California Edison—a two year assignment as the manager of SCE's office in Torrance, California.

We lived in a two-story building, a long, white rectangle with a flat roof covering a series of identical apartments. The textured ceilings in our rooms sparkled as if sprayed with glitter. There were no trees on the property that butted up to a mowed field of yellow, bleached-out weeds. The property was home for an intact but abandoned chicken coop, built of rickety, grey wood and containing two cages. There were no chickens in residence, but both parents said repeatedly, "Don't go near the chicken coop."

I did go near it, half stooping, half-crawling under the structure, curious to see what was underneath. Suddenly, I found that both feet were stuck. I was affixed to warm black tar. The tar, overheated and liquefied by the Southern California sun, matched the tar from a newly patched road nearby. I have no idea how tar got under the coop.

"Daddy, Daaaaddeeee," I wailed until my father came and easily extracting me. The tar stained my feet for days, leaving my toes blackened reminders of the consequences of my disobedience. There was no need for my parents to reprimand me. I stayed away from the chicken coop.

My mother was a short woman, in her mid-thirties, beginning to lose her slender

figure, but still attractive: dark luminous eyes, black hair in bob. She wore bright red lipstick. In personality she was shy, loving, and, according to admissions in later years, uneasy in her mothering. Outside the apartment, she walked alongside me, putting herself between me and the road, as I rode my tricycle on the sidewalk next to our apartment. I loved the cracks that caused the trike to go bump-bump, so I went faster, and then swerved in half circles from side to side.

"Slow down, slow down, you might fall and a car could hit you, " Mom said, putting her size five shoe on the rear step-plate built just right for parental restraint. That made me mad. I broke free of her foot, peddling hard away from her, and propelling the trike onto the long sloping cement driveway that led to the apartment's parking garage. Unable to catch me, she yelled, "Be careful, be careful!" I arrived at the bottom safely, exhilarated by the blaze of speed. Wordlessly and not quickening her pace, she walked down the driveway and claimed me and the trike. At 5'2", she was small, but she could Mean Business. I said nothing, angry at her restraint, feeling a pre-school version of contrition because I knew I'd been naughty. I remembered the word naughty, used often to describe bad behavior. She put the trike away in the shed and relegated me to my room for a nap. That was the end of my tricycle trips down the driveway. Except when Judy was with me.

Judy, a tall, athletic-looking high school student, was my babysitter when my parents went out, which was not often enough, I thought. I looked forward to Judy's visits because she encouraged me to fly down the incline on my trike as fast as I could. I must have fallen a time or two, but I have no recollection of scraped knees or bruised arms. All I know, then and now, is that I loved Judy because she let me be free.

In the summer of 1947, we left Torrance. Southern California Edison had finally assigned Dad to the office he wanted in the location he wanted: Visalia, California. My mother was thrilled to learn that we would live in the big old Edison House at 505 N. West Street. Positioned on a corner in an older neighborhood, the house was a shingled two-story craftsman style bungalow built in 1909 with a wide veranda across the entire front of the house—good for roller skating in bad weather. A wide-branched walnut tree and the trestled grape arbor promised and provided many a good climb. The driveway was a half circle to the garage in back, perfect for trikes and bikes.

At the end of the summer of '47, when I was still four years old, my mother took me to Highland School. We walked the six blocks from home to school, moving across Acequia, Willis, and Oak Streets. On the first day of school, I wore a new plaid dress with a bright white Peter Pan collar. My pigtailed-hair was parted in the middle, white barrettes on each side. The kindergarten space, shared on alternate days by Mrs. Niday and Miss Cunningham, was a corner room at the far end of the school. I recognized letters—an A, a D, an L, and others—marching around the rim of the blackboard. I thought that the chalky lines on the blackboard were words, but I couldn't read them. I wondered what they meant. A scattering of mothers held their children's hands (that made me feel better because I was holding *my* mother's hand...hard) and entered the room, greeted by one of the two teachers. Who were all those kids? I didn't see anyone I knew, not even Francile, my first friend in the neighborhood.

A pretty young woman with a soft face, wavy brown hair, and a swirling dress approached, squatting down to my level. "I'm Mrs. Niday, your teacher. Are you Linda?" She took my hand. I knew that she wanted to lead me away to the circle of children on

the rug at the front of the classroom. How did she know my name? She was kind, the first of many teachers I fell in love with, but her kindness was not enough. Physical daring-do applied to me; social daring-do was absent.

"Don't go, Mommy." Tears came. It took many minutes, the two women using their best tools of consolation and persuasion, to convince me to join the rest of the girls and boys.

"We're going to do finger paints, wouldn't you like that?"

"It will be fun for you to play dodge ball at recess, don't you think so?"

"You get your own little desk with your own crayons."

"Do you know how to sing 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'?"

My mother stayed in the back of the room until I stopped looking back to see if she was there. My hesitancy, an overwhelming blend of shyness, insecurity, and fear, continued, in diminishing amounts, for two weeks—until the day arrived when my mother left me at the door. I had made friends, done art projects, sung songs, and decoded some of the chalky lines on the blackboard that would become such an important part of my education and future.

My report card, dated March 6, 1948, indicated progress in social relationships, and also identified a few problems and some interests, art and music, that would continue throughout my life.

She [Linda] gets along with the other boys and girls and enters into all our activities with enthusiasm. Linda has a great fear of starting something new. She seems so afraid that she won't be able to do it just right. After a few tears and a great deal of encouragement, she is able to go on. We try to help her see that things don't always have to be perfect and that everyone has to try things out before they can do them well. Linda is working hard to overcome this problem and is meeting with

success. We are proud of her...Linda's painting pictures have shown more advancement than any one else's in the group. They show more detail and thought each day.

Because I'm not particularly musical, I was amused by the observation that "Linda loves our musical activities and keeps very good time in our rhythm band," but my favorite comment was this one: "She skips, gallops, etc. nicely too."

My happy girlhood was less characterized by the light, bouncing steps of skipping than by the hell bent, feet-off-the-ground gait of galloping. My companions were boys.

The Swatzke boys, Dick and Carl, lived with their mother, grandparents, and an older cousin, Clifton, at 415 N. West Street. Their house, just down the street, had flecked paint and a slumping garage. The massive tree in their front yard held a sturdy tree house and was used as the main fort when we played army. The boys had a supply of helmets and wooden guns, readily dispensed. The heavy branches of the big tree in the back yard held thick rope swings. We liked to swing high enough so that our feet touched the roof of the garage, and then jump out. Repeatedly. No one ever broke a bone, but I had many sprained or sore ankles. I never told my mother how I got them.

On late summer evenings, Dick, Carl and Clifton's favorite sport was to catch the June bugs buzzing around the porch lights and pull off their wings. I sat watching as their faces ignited with devilish expectation. My love of animals was limited to Chessie, the Quinby family cat, and Amber, the cocker spaniel belonging to our friends, the Flemings. I sensed that their pursuit was beyond mischievous. They were mean. I could not participate in what I know now was cruelty.

I was mean in a different way. Judy Gentry and her little brother Jimmy, occasional playmates, lived around the corner on Murray Street. We'd been shimmying up the street

sign, when Jimmy teased me about my messy hair. I hated my thin, cowlicked, uncontrollable hair. I turned around and slammed my fist into his shoulder.

Yelping with pain, he screamed, "Quit picking on me."

Jimmy was freckle-faced, younger, and smaller than I. I felt immediately terrible. "Beat on my back," I said, "as hard as you can. I won't fight back." He dragged his arm across his teary face and attacked my back with a vengeance and kicked at my ankles with his tennis shoes. I didn't cry, but I was about to, when the noon whistle blew, a long blast that arced from low to loud and emanated from the fire station. The Gentrys were programmed to stop whatever they were doing and head home for lunch when they heard that Visalia-wide signal. I was literally saved by the bell. That was the first time I appreciated the strict Mrs. Gentry.

Mrs. Gentry's children were bound by precise times for meals, bedtime, and play. Neighborhood children were rarely invited to Judy and Jimmy's, but when the Gentrys acquired the first television in the neighborhood, that changed, and hospitality emerged.

Once or twice a week, Mrs. Gentry held open the back porch screen door and advised us to scrape the dirt off our shoes. Her impeccable posture and unflinching brown-eyed stare communicated that it was a privilege to be in the Gentry home and that we'd better behave. She led us in to the living room, where the television, a large Zenith console, a box with a rectangular screen with rounded edges like parentheses, was stationed. There must have been other programs, but the only one I remember watching was *Crossroads*, an ABC series about members of the clergy, struggling with personal and religious problems.

I was in a state of rapture, not over religion, but over television, beginning with the

flash of the numbers in the bold test patterns, indicating that programming for the day was about to begin. Mrs. Gentry, 30 minutes later, said it was time go home, sending me and any other visitors out the front door, as I looked longingly back at the TV, and reluctantly descended the long steps flanked by hydrangeas. The Quinbys didn't acquire a television until 1955, the last in the neighborhood.

In summertime, I played tetherball at school and sometimes my parents would let me go back to Highland School to use the school's equipment. At the height of my tetherball fixation, my father had a hole drilled in the driveway, surrounded it with concrete, and asked a friend make a pole. He special ordered a tetherball—not yet common in the fifties—so that I could play tetherball with my friends at home. It was a favorite Christmas present, my appreciation increasing over the years.

During the school year, there was more to the after school agenda than play. I took piano lessons for three years. My parents sought to give me a formal exposure to music, which neither of them had had. My teacher was Trieva Rae, the wife of an Edison colleague of my father's, and reputed to be the best teacher in town. I'm certain that it was embarrassing to my parents that I was barely above abysmal, with an attitude about practicing that I appear to have passed down my own children. My main goal was to get to the Rae's house early and stay late, because their daughter Linda, two years older than I, would let me walk on her stilts.

If I wasn't outdoors playing, then I was reading. My early literary landscape was littered with adventure stories, most not very literary, beginning with *Josephine and*

Gaston, the Little Golden Book about two French pigs that traveled from the mountains of France to America. Gaston and Josephine's faces on the cover were upturned and optimistic. I could never decide whether it was because they were traveling by themselves or because they saved their ship. The ship had a broken foghorn and they climbed into the crow's nest and screamed at the top of their little porcine lungs, thereby alerting other ships of their presence.

I also settled myself into the lives of Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny—the *Box Car Children*. Every time a box car rattled along the tracks in front of my grandmother's house on Oak Street, I wanted to jump aboard, direct the engineer to take it to a siding far out of town, and claim it as home. My dad pointed out that I might not want to find furnishings in the Visalia dump, like the Alden kids did. The Visalia dump on the edge of town, with its jumbled contents and smelly emanations, was not a nice place.

I liked that when the kids went to live with their grandfather, he moved the box car to the backyard so they could still play in it. I thought a box car could be parked right next to the grape arbor in our back yard and serve as headquarters for solving mysteries when the Swatzke boys and I went out looking for excitement. Perhaps we could use the box car instead of their tree house as a command post to dispatch help when we needed it, or, perhaps we could find a vacant house.

Our neighborhood was a mix of middle class and not-so-middle-class homes. When we rode our bikes around, we scouted for empty houses. One day, Dick said, “I found one. Six blocks from here,” which was beyond the boundaries prescribed by my parents. Dick, Carl and I got on our bikes and peddled to the house, throwing our bikes down on trampled shrubbery and thick, spiky grass. The front door was unlocked. Carl, the braver

of the two boys, opened the door. We peeked in. A guy was stretched out on the floor. He was covered with frayed blankets. There was a scattering of beer bottles around him. He didn't wake up, but we all ran like crazy. We continued to look for haunted houses; we just didn't go in them. Whenever a house in the neighborhood appeared empty, we made up stories about the ghosts who lived there.

The circulation records from the fifties of the Visalia Public Library—if libraries kept such histories, which they no longer do—would verify my preoccupation with the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mystery series. My first sustained attempt at writing included Joe and Frank type characters. I don't remember what I named my characters, but I know they had adventures involving haunted houses. Using a blunt 2B pencil, I filled 80+ wide-ruled binder pages, the kind with the red line demarcating a margin on the left. I don't know whatever happened to those much-loved pages that my mother kept for me next to the strawberry preserves in the dark walk-in pantry.

I rode my bike to the public library up through junior high. I entered author Howard Pease's unfamiliar world of tramp steamers and freighters in *The Black Tanker* and *The Tattooed Man*. Tod Moran, the main character, and his mates enriched my vocabulary with nautical terms like jib and scupper and yawl. I was fascinated with "fo'c'sle," the abbreviation of forecastle, sprinkled throughout his narratives. I was unable to ignore a word I didn't know. My eighth grade English teacher insisted that our book reports contain a definition of five unfamiliar words we'd learned, and that we write a sentence including each word, a habit that continues to be both a drag—because it seriously slows down reading—and a delight.

In addition to the imaginary adventures that books and the neighborhood provided, family vacations meant fun, and not just for me. Mom could eliminate her regular routine of cooking, washing, and ironing, looking after her own elderly mother and her sisters, and driving me around to school and church activities. She didn't mind skipping her bridge group or Women's Civic organization meetings because she loved the beach.

My father missed taking care of the sweet peas that climbed up the garage wall and the healthy red tomatoes he coached out of the ground nearby, but the break from his management job and for the charity work he did with Rotary International and the Cancer Society was welcome. When we went on vacation, he always said, "The company is in good hands;" work was not a topic of conversation. So, every year our family went to the beach or the lake, or both.

The summertime heat of the San Joaquin Valley was suffocating. Lots of Visalians went to one of several ocean side destinations—Cayucos, Morro Bay, or Pismo Beach. Pismo Beach was my parents' choice. We always stayed at a modest motel right on the beach, run by a friendly and talkative innkeeper, Delia Levin. Delia was a New York transplant, wore an armful of bracelets, and dark flowing skirts—so exotic. I loved seeing her every year.

The drive, three hours from Visalia, seemed interminable to me. I don't remember when I decided that Visalia was boring, but that judgment was early on. Visalia, except for the diversion of oak trees, was flat. I wanted to see new territory, find different friends. A cranky only child, I didn't want to be driving and made frequent requests for stops from the back seat.

"Linda," my dad said, his voice loud with impatience, "We'll be in San Luis Obispo

soon." My Dad had his favorite stops that were not to be changed. If we were going to Los Angeles, as we did in later years, the mandatory break was at Tip's. In San Luis Obispo it was—oh, I can't remember the name of the coffee shop—but it was downtown and had dark brown, cushy booths next to wood-paneled walls.

I settled back into my seat and read the billboards, the ones with Smokey the Bear declaring "Keep California Green and Golden." There was nothing green or golden about the blanched, sun-beaten Kettleman Hills, the low mountain range that meant we were leaving the quilted patches of farmland that was the San Joaquin Valley.

Once we got to Pismo, we unpacked and headed to the beach. Mom slathered Dad with Sea N Ski lotion because his sensitive skin turned bright red and blistered within hours of direct exposure to the sun. I headed for the waves. Mom did too.

"I'm going to get my feet wet and cool off, Les," she said, wading into the water up to her knees. Cooling off didn't take very long. Then she'd arrange herself on a beach blanket with a stack of *Ladies Home Journals*, *Redbooks*, *Good Housekeepings*, and *McCalls'* at hand. Absorbed in the fiction, inspired by new recipes, interested in household tips, she loved these magazines, and when we were home, I often came home from school to find her reading on the couch.

Once, exploring in my own house, I looked under my parents' bed. There were archived stacks of *Modern Romances* and *True Confessions*, a stash that introduced me to the concept of guilty pleasure. I flipped through the pages, never staying long, worried that I'd be caught under the bed snooping. These magazines were never in evidence around the house nor did they make it to the beach.

Next to swimming in the ocean, my favorite Pismo activity was clam digging. In

the fifties, clams in Pismo were plentiful. My dad read the tide charts and figured out the best times to go clamming, usually early in the morning before breakfast. It was one of the few times I saw him go off alone. He carried a rented clamming fork—none of those makeshift rakes that some of the locals used—and an old bucket he'd brought from home. He also liked taking me with him and teaching me how to dig.

"Push the fork into the sand, as far as it can go, Linda....That's right," he said, thrusting his own fork into the ground, and bringing up a cluster of clams. I did the same, excited when my first thrust brought up a tiny shell.

"Here's how you measure them against the caliper," he said, showing me the bracket-like implement on the side of the fork.

"If it's not at least 4 ½ inches long, we can't keep it. We have to bury it back in the sand." He was strict about that, never cheating. "Linda, those clams have to grow up just like you do." I persisted until I got one big enough.

He pointed to how clams "clammed up" when we tried to open their shells. He often popped a raw "button" into his mouth and laughed when I wanted one too. When we got our limit, which we almost always did, we took them home to clean. First, we soaked them in a bucket of water for 30 minutes.

"The clams do the work and push the sand out." Dad said. Then we separated the flesh from the shell—it was tough and hard to extract—and washed off the remaining granules of sand. Back in the small kitchenette of our motel room, he made chowder out of the buttons, a yummy, buttery broth thickened with cream and flour like traditional Boston Clam Chowder.

The year I was nine we went to Shaver Lake near Fresno, which I remember

because that was the year my continued cultivation of disobedience resulted in injury.

Settled in our cabin, we were ready to go swimming and I was eager. I ignored my parents' caution about running on the dock. I streaked to the end, and then couldn't stop, pitching forward, gashing my head on the chrome trim on the side of a speedboat as I fell into the lake. My dad extracted me from the water, examined the cut, and, with my mom, took me to a nearby hospital. The doctor put a white patch that covered my entire face except for the eye and stitched up the wound. The scar is still discernible. The doctor's name was Engelskirger. What a name! I asked him how to spell it. Memorizing its spelling was a great distraction from the needlework he performed on my skin.

In 1953, when I was 10, we resumed our regular trips to Bass Lake. I sat impatiently in the back seat as we took Highway 198 out of town for nine miles and then picked up "Bloody 99," so named because of the numerous car pile-ups in the winter. Fog swathed the San Joaquin Valley from November through February and crashes were common. The fact that it was summer didn't keep my mother from saying, "Drive carefully, Les." He nodded agreeably and kept his heavy foot on the accelerator of the old two-tone green '49 Pontiac that my mother thought was so stylish. I heard my mother's warnings, I knew that accidents were common, but fear was not a factor in my thinking. Nothing would happen to us.

Colorful reddish-pink oleander bushes decorated the highway median. I was permitted to open the window a crack. The sweet smell permeated the inside of the car. I forgot about the slightly queasy stomach I acquired on car trips.

"Don't forget, Lindy," my Mom cautioned, "Oleanders are poisonous. You should never eat any part of them." I ignored her. Why would I eat a flower? However, I

resolved that I would take just a little bite if we ever stopped by the road.

As we neared Fresno, turned onto Highway 41 toward Yosemite National Park, and then toward Bass Lake, I got excited. We were sharing a house with the Flemings.

The Flemings were longtime friends. Walter managed a local foundry. His wife Betty was a stay-at-home mom for their two boys, Steve and Jimmy. Steve was my age, Jimmy a year younger. Steve was musical and serious; Jimmy was fun-loving, a dancer, popular. Walter had a big voice, a stern appearance and looked like Walter Chronkite. Betty was buxom, vivacious and smart, respected for having attended the oh-so-Eastern Carnegie Tech. In fact, she was the only one of the adults to have gone to college at all.

Sometimes the Fabrios came up for a night or two. My parents played poker with Betty and Walter and Marion and Tony Fabrio on Saturday nights once or twice a month. They drank whisky and tonic water, and occasionally hired a babysitter to oversee Steve and Jimmy and me at one of our houses.

Betty Fleming had studied fencing at Carnegie Tech and she allowed us to use her foils and masks. We parried and thrust and pretended we were first-rate French swordsmen, acting out scenes from the classic comic books we read. The Fleming boys also had boxing gloves, and I bested them on a few occasions. I did not like to lose at anything and compensated for my awkwardness and lack of skill with grit and determination. Steve was also driven; Jimmy didn't care.

At Bass Lake, we kept ourselves occupied continually. We swam (seeing who could swim under the dock and hold his breath the longest—very dangerous!), hiked, (using trail signs that we had learned in Scouts), went on frog hunts, bought vanilla and chocolate phosphates at The Pines fountain, made "mixed" drinks by blending root beer

and Coke at home, and had a secret club.

About those frog hunts. We waited until it was nighttime, the three of us armed with flashlights. We followed the sounds of the bullfrogs around the edges of the lake. We watched for jumping frogs, shined the light directly into their eyes to stun them while one of us grabbed them, and then killed them by one of two ways. One of the boys either gigged them with a homemade spear or grabbed them by the legs and slammed their heads down on a log.

I liked the hunt, I used the flashlight like a laser, and I could manage to grab the frog by the legs, but sending them to their deaths by spear or slam? No. I had seen a frog eyeball roll out of its socket when Steve hammered its body onto the stump, and that did it. One night we caught six frogs. I liked hunting them down and testing my quickness, but there was no way I would pith them. Steve and Jim did the pithing and placed the dead little things in a bucket of ice water overnight. The boys, with help from their dad, then skinned and prepared the legs in an egg batter, and fried them up for breakfast. I managed a few bites, but couldn't get the sound of those little bodies hitting the stump or the single glistening eyeball out of my mind. I haven't had frog legs since, nor could I manage to pith our specimen in high school biology.

Steve and Jim, and a couple of other Bass Lake Only Summertime Friends, started a club. They met secretly in a tiny room with the door closed. Members were required to become blood brothers by cutting their fingers and sharing blood. I'm sure it was not intended that there be blood brothers *and* blood sisters, but I wanted to be included. Most of the time, I was a contented, introverted, only child, but in this instance, the need to belong drove me to commit a deed that I find embarrassing to reveal.

I was unwilling to slash myself, but I told Steve and Jim that I'd make the cut if they would leave the room. They did. Instead of using the knife they'd left behind, I concocted a different, devious approach. I had a small ugly wart on the knuckle of my middle finger of my left hand. I'd accidentally scraped it a time or two so I knew that it would bleed.

I bit it, just enough to draw blood. I smeared the blood around, and told them to come back in. They looked no closer than the red stuff on my finger. Jim smiled broadly. I was in the club, and was allowed to learn the special Pig Latin language they had devised.

Steve cautioned, "You can't ever tell anyone the code"

AhNunDutEyeNunEeeVuvEeeRurDudEyeDud. And I never did.

Deacons at the Door

"Lindy," my mother said, "answer the door! There are two men coming up the sidewalk and I think they're from the church."

"Chessie's on my lap, Mom." I didn't stir, nor did Chessie, the family cat. I was deep into Tod Moran's world of tramp steamers, unwilling to disengage from *The Black Tanker*. I was making my way through the library's collection of books by Howard Pease.

I glanced out the window as two deacons from the First Christian Church mounted the steps and rang the doorbell. Mom didn't know these Church People. She'd been dropping me off at church since I was five, but neither parent attended church.

The long sidewalk, flanked by rows of rosebushes, several tall evergreens, and a carefully tended lawn, ended at the wide porch of our two-story, brown-shingled craftsman. Built in 1909 by a prosperous dentist in Visalia, it had been purchased by Southern California Edison in the early forties to house the local SCE office manager, currently my father.

Dad went to the door and greeted them with the genial warmth he extended to all as a matter of course. My mother stood behind him, smiling, contributing her expected slice of hospitality. "Please come in," she said.

"Is Linda home?" one asked.

"Yes, she's reading, we've all been reading," she said. My father had the Sunday edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, my mother her stack of women's magazines, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*. Mother moved from the entryway toward the living room

The Edison house had shiny hardwood floors, a stage that housed a baby grand piano at the end of the living room, and built-in china cabinets fronted with leaded glass, all of which bestowed it with a grandeur that would not qualify as "faded" for decades. The mantle of the imposing granite fireplace had a phrase stenciled in Germanic lettering on its hearth: "I cannot warm thee if thy heart be cold."

"Please sit down," Mom said. Every fifties house that I recall had overstuffed armchairs and a davenport, including ours. She nodded toward Dad and I remembered what she often said, "Les can walk into a room and talk to anyone." She was shy, preferring to be a quiet, supportive wife and let him do the talking.

The deacons' purpose soon became clear. Easter was approaching. I had just turned twelve, the traditional age for children to be baptized in the Disciples of Christ denomination.

"Several of your friends will be baptized on Sunday. You know Francile, don't you? Wouldn't you like to join her?" Apparently, the deacons thought the way to a pre-teen's spiritual heart was by summoning up the decisions of like-minded peers.

I hadn't thought about baptism. I looked from the face of one parent to the other. Did my parents want me to be baptized? Their expressions gave me no clue.

My father said, "It's up to you."

My mother added, "OK, if that's what you want."

I first learned about church from my friend Francile Templeton, nicknamed Snookie, who lived down the street in our neighborhood. We rode tricycles, then sidewalk bikes together, played at each others' houses, walked to kindergarten at

Highland School, spent the night at each others' houses, and ate cookies in our mothers' kitchens. One day Snookie and I were playing in her sandbox. We were both five.

"Do you want to go to Sunday School with me?"

"O.K, but I better ask Mommy," I said.

Mom knew Francile and her family—Mr. Templeton worked for the Edison Company. She gave her permission right away. From that time forward, I either went to church with Francile and her family or my parents dropped me off.

As I think now about the ingenious tactics my own children devised to avoid piling into one of our series of battered cars regularly headed for the LDS Church on James Street in Bellingham, I'm surprised that I *wanted* to go. Maybe it was because no one made me attend. I liked sitting with one of my friends or with my Great Aunt Anna, who showed up for worship one or twice a month.

I liked the series of Sunday school teachers I'd had—especially Addie Turner, a misfit with frowsy hair and a squawky voice, bent on making the stories of Jesus relevant to us by hoisting colored posters high in the air and chatting up Jesus and Lazarus. She was so convincing, we all thought those Bible characters might talk to us. She had a strange power I still don't understand. That power extended to my mother. When Mrs. Turner called to remind me to come to Sunday School, Mom instructed me to avoid saying "Gosh" or "Gee" because "It sounds like you're swearing."

My initial uncertainty about baptism took a different course when I remembered what happened when I was nine.

It was a Sunday night and the three of us were seated around the kitchen table, having our once a week ritual: buttery cinnamon toast, cut in triangles, just right for dunking in hot chocolate. I watched the butter melt into the cocoa and create a tasty, slurpy skin saturating the toast just enough to flavor it without making it soggy.

"Gramma has to have an operation. She has a bad heart," Mom said, "And I don't want you to worry. We think she will be okay," Dad nodded.

I didn't miss the tentativeness of "We think." There was no one I loved more than my Grandmother. Upstairs in my bedroom, I prayed.

"Dear God, Don't let Gramma die." Then I cried. Prayed again. Cried.

Less than a week later, Gramma was fine and I was riding my bike to her house on Oak Street, playing Authors with her, and pulling art materials out of her bottom dresser drawer. With the uncluttered innocence that can characterize a child, I was certain that my prayers were instrumental in assuring her full recovery.

I turned to the deacons and said, "Yes."

My parents and Aunt Anna came to the First Christian Church, the church of my childhood, on the corner of Court and School Streets for my baptism. The First Christian Church has always seemed an audacious title. The First Christian Church, really? Is there a second? What about all those other Christian Churches? It's a good thing TFCC had Disciples of Christ in parentheses after its name, a much more modest identity.

I took family presence for granted, my father in his business suit, my mother in a shiny blue dress, both with smiles on their faces. Aunt Anna gave me a hug as I went off to put on shorts, readying for my immersion. The water was comfortably tepid. Any

memory of spiritual feelings has disappeared, supplanted by two other recollections: the sanctuary's new stained glass window and the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament that was handed to me by the Reverend Dr. George Tolman.

The Rose Window had been talked about every Sunday, beguilingly described to coax parishioners to slip extra dollars into the collection plates. The money had been raised, and the day of my baptism, I saw it for the first time. The San Joaquin Valley sunshine illuminated its bright colors and symbols: a Bible, four stars (representing the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), a lamp (knowledge) and a cross. Except for the ornately carved pulpit and communication table, there were few decorative touches in the chapel.

Then there was the New Testament George Tolman handed me. I recognize now that it was a cheaply printed, mass produced book, but I loved its hard blue cover imprinted with a thin gold border and the title page inscribed in the lovely, long-tailed, athletic handwriting of the Reverend Dr. Tolman. I promised myself that I would read that Bible to the end, book by book, chapter by chapter, and I would try to read it every day, even when we were on vacation.

The following summer, I sat in the back seat of our lumbering 1955 Buick. I was reading that New Testament and came across a word I didn't know.

"Mom, what does 'circumcision' mean?"

An awkward silence ensued and a look passed between my parents that said, "Who's going to answer this one?" I don't remember their explanation or who provided it, but when I heard "penis," a word neither had ever spoken out loud in my presence, I decided not to ask any more questions.

I looked up words myself in two of the books my grandmother had given me: *Harper's Bible Dictionary* and *Webster's College Dictionary*, books that are still in my collection. My gramma armed me with tools to launch my own investigations.

During my high school years, 1956-1960, I attended church regularly. At school, I tried "King's Teens," a Christian Club, but it was insufferably populated by Baptists and Assembly of God kids so strict that I abandoned my desire to interact with any other teenagers besides the Presbyterians and Methodists I already knew from our occasional joint fellowship meetings.

On Stewardship Sunday, I listened to the presentations and pledged \$4 of my \$10 monthly allowance, feeling important as I carefully printed my name on every single envelop in the box of envelopes each member received. I was president of CYF, Christian Youth Fellowship, edited the district newsletter, attended youth conferences, served on the church worship committee, volunteered during the summer for the Migrant Ministry, and gave a sermon on Youth Sunday.

When I was a junior, I came home from CYF with a flyer about a work camp near Modesto, California. The camp was started by kids my age in the late '40s who had the bold vision of doing something about world hunger. During the course of its existence, about a dozen years, it had gained the sponsorship of the United Christian Youth Movement and Church World Service. I didn't care who sponsored it, but my father thought a credentialed Christian organization would ensure my safety and provide an interesting experience for me. I suspect that he wanted me to understand physical labor, similar to what he had known growing up on farms in Orofino, Idaho and Ivanhoe,

California. So for \$14 a week, I went off to pick peaches with several dozen other high schoolers, a collection of Baptists and Methodists and other mainline Protestants.

We arose early every morning, and, after a modest breakfast, awash with prayers 88the orchard. We climbed ladders to get the highest peaches first, then worked our way down to the lower branches. By early afternoon our skin was peach-fuzz-pricked, and our clothes sticky and stained from sweat and peach juice. Afternoons were quiet, reserved for lunch, naps, and swimming. Before dinner, we halved the peaches, placed them on racks, and lined them up to pass through a drying shed and be processed with sulfur. Then they were packed away (not by us) and sent to underfed persons in lands unknown.

In the evenings, as the sun went down, we gathered for devotions in a simple space set aside for worship near the banks of the river that ran through the property. We arranged ourselves in a circle and joined hands for closing prayer. I tried to position myself next to Jerry, the Pacific School of Religion seminary student who was there, along with his wife, to serve as counselors, chaperones, and devotional leaders. He was dynamic, personable, prayerful, and self-disclosing. Once he sat on a rock just before devotions, flicking cigarette ashes from the tip of his Camel, and saying "I have to quit these cancer sticks." The phrase "cancer sticks" kindled my first awareness of the relationship between tobacco and cancer, which then made me worry about my father's cigarette habit.

I wanted to stay a second week, but my parents thought it best that I go home because I was going to another church camp that summer. I documented the experience by writing about it for *Vision*, the denomination's national magazine for youth. I was one thrilled sixteen-year-old when I received \$5 for my over-the-ransom submission,

although it's hard to mention the title of my first published article with a straight face today: "Christian Youth Fruit Camp."

Regular church camp was characterized by the typical cookouts, swimming, campfires and singing, the mention of which generates the earworm melodies of "Kum Bah Yah," "White Choral Bells," and "Dona Nobis." We had workshops too. One was about career paths. We were asked to pray about our future vocations and to think about attending a Christian college. I wrote down "Christian journalist or social worker" on the little green commitment card I was handed.

During my senior year, our new pastor, Howard C. Fowler, whom I liked just as much as his predecessor George Tolman, took a station wagon full of CYFers to Chapman College, our denomination's college in Orange County. For a while, I considered Chapman, but I really wanted to go to UC Berkeley—too liberal, too big as far as my parents were concerned, so I settled on the University of Southern California.

During my freshman year, I went to a Disciples of Christ church not far from campus. The building was grey (no Rose window), the service was dull, and the congregation composed of blue hairs. I didn't go back. I church-hopped, via bus, to a Unitarian church in downtown Los Angeles. I loved the guitar music and the casually dressed congregants, but a service without mention of Jesus was as foreign to me as the Eastern religions I was learning about in my Man and Civ class.

I felt adventurous going to Friday night temple (church on Friday night—wow!) with my Jewish roommates, and was equally interested in the lox and bagels or pastrami sandwiches and knishes we had afterwards at Kantor's, a popular Jewish deli in the area near Beverly Hills that my roommates called Kosher Canyon.

I immersed myself in the ideas presented by religion professor J. Wesley Robb in his "Human Values in Modern Society." Robb was a quirky and theatrical. He had dark heavy glasses, wore a jacket with no tie, and paced across the room, throwing out challenges, impressing us with his intelligence and his understated spirituality.

He was a professor of religion, though the curriculum for the Human Values class only tangentially included faith. Dr. Robb encouraged the thoughtful exploration of religions of all kinds when we discussed religion in the context of Maslow's Basic Hierarchy of Needs, the social category.

To one student who professed no belief in God, he said, "Really? Tell me more about what you think."

"I just don't believe God would let terrible stuff happen," the student said. "Why should I believe in God? Do you?"

Robb spoke more quietly then. "I do believe in God. I wrote a little book about it." Then he moved the discussion away from himself and back to Maslow. At the conclusion of class, I went to the book store and special-ordered his "little book," *An Inquiry Into Faith: a Statement for the College Mind*," published by the National Methodist Student Movement in 1960.

Under 120 pages, the book was a quick read. Its central message—that a student should be simultaneously skeptical and believing—has guided my religious investigations right up to the present time. Lost in one move or another, I ordered a new copy. I read it from time-to-time.

When I interviewed Dr. Robb five years later, doing research for the education publication *Change*, I expressed surprise that he was no longer requiring the Fromm and

Maslow books as texts. His response: "If my teaching didn't change, I'd be dead." His articulation of change, the concepts in *An Inquiry into Faith*, (later more fully developed in *The Reverent Skeptic: a critical inquiry into religious and secular humanism* (1979) was foundational in my own spiritual growth.

Despite irregular church during my college years, and the fashionably agnostic/atheistic influence of some of my fellow students, I remained a believer in the traditional sense, attending the First Christian Church in Visalia when I was home.

I stayed at USC for 2 1/2 years. In the early sixties, USC had a reputation as a party school, heavily dominated by sororities and fraternities. Everyone else—those of us who lived in the dorms and the substantial population of commuters—were called "independents." Despite some fine classes, I never felt like I fit in, and finally, parental approval granted, I transferred to UC Berkeley in the spring of 1963.

I walked around campus in a happy haze of disbelief that I was a "Cal Girl," mentally genuflecting at Sather Gate, as if mere admission allowed me to add "intelligent" to my resume. In high school, I often made the honor roll, but unlike my close friends, I was not a Merit Scholarship winner and never a member of the Mt. Whitney High School chapter of CSF, California Scholarship Federation.

My feeling of having "arrived," was short-lived. Despite my enthusiasm for English classes on Shakespeare, the American Novel, taught by the inimitable Alfred Kazin, and a reporting class taught by Pete Steffens, a former staffer at *Time* and the son of muckraker Lincoln Steffens, my academic record was mediocre. I was preoccupied with a boyfriend.

That boyfriend was a boy from my high school whom I had briefly dated, a boy rebounding from a break-up with his girlfriend of three years, a lapsed Latter-day Saint, who was to change the course of my life in ways spiritual and temporal.

Every Family Has its Lore

What do you do if you want to profile a man? You request an interview, you follow him around with Voice Memo activated on your iPhone and a notepad and a quiver of pencils for backup. Covertly or transparently, you make your senses alert to his every move, the way he looks, his conversations with others. You ask nosy questions of friends and, if he is famous, you search out any articles written about him. Then you construct a portrait, rich with description, interpretation, and insight.

That's if the person is alive.

It is a more curious enterprise to complete a cameo of a dead person. Approaching those who knew him is fair, but what if the investigator has waited, oh, much too long, and all who knew him are dead, leaving a paucity of family stories that you can't ask him about because he died before you were born? Do you take the few bones of information that you have and cover those bones with artificial muscles and nerves and flesh? Do you make rivers of blood flow through the body, and then invent emotions extracted from a single picture or infer meaning from the cultural and historical events that occurred during your subject's lifetime?

What if you imagine that person's resurrection in which he advises the writer that the lines you labored over and sculpted, though occasionally correct, are as waxen and lifeless as a Madam Tussaud creation? Knowing that it is impossible to converse with an unexhumed ancestor, you still respond: "Isn't that what memory and imagination do, reinvent, while aiming to be faithful to that which was once true?"

Such questions, such speculations, occupied my psyche when I became interested in, and eventually obsessed with, my great grandfather, George Reuben Anderson, whose birth predated mine by 96 years. He was most known for his service in the Civil War.

Although I have had little to do with war and might have been a Conscientious Objector had the draft included women during the Viet Nam years, I have been touched by war through my family members: my Great Aunt Anna's service as an army nurse in WWI; my father's World War II participation, leaving my mother alone with a newly adopted baby (me); and my former husband's clever avoidance of the draft and the Viet Nam War in the mid 1960s.

My few bits of information about George Reuben Anderson, "G.R." (1847-1938) were overshadowed by his wife, the center of most family stories. Elizabeth (Libbie) Kent (1857-1933) was described as "angelic," the mother of eight children, and the stabilizing influence on the family. She patiently put up with George's forays into politics and his excessive speechifying about patriotism.

G.R. came to mind when I was asked to speak at our county's kickoff campaign for the re-election of Sam Reed as Washington's Secretary of State. I thought G.R.'s support of the Republican Party and his love of the flag would provide an anecdotal framework for my testimonial.

As I stood on the podium, facing several hundred members of the Republican Party, I took a keep breath.

“I’m a Democrat,” I said, “but I come from strong Republican stock. Both my parents always voted Republican and made generous contributions to the GOP. My father always said, ‘I vote for the man.’” Me, too, and for the woman.

I explained why I supported Republican Sam Reed. He saved the State Library from extinction, a feat appreciated by my colleagues in the library profession. He also championed the State’s establishment of digital archives. I had come to know him as a fair-minded and civil man.

I continued. “I also admit to floods of emotions related to country, family and flag, more associated with the Grand Ole Party than with my liberal democrat kinfolk. So I’m going to tell you about my great grandfather, George Reuben Anderson—a story my father told almost every Election Day, but first a little background.”

George Reuben Anderson was a boy of sixteen from Topeka Kansas when he became a member of the rag tag citizen army of ill prepared recruits and volunteer soldiers whose lives were characterized by deprivation and difficulty. Despite those difficulties, he emerged from the war with an allegiance to country that he maintained throughout his life.

He joined the Grand Army of the Republic, a veteran’s organization that existed for nearly 80 years. The organization could have been called the Grand Army of the Republicans: most of the veterans were Republicans, and so was he.

When G.R. was nearing eighty, his body and eyesight were failing. He was impatient and cantankerous because he could no longer make his rounds on Election Day and other major holidays. Making his rounds meant that he walked around Visalia to

determine that all businesses in the town were flying U.S. flags. He mapped out a route and ordered his 22-year-old grandson-in-law, my father, Les Quinby, into action.

"Les, make sure the grocery store has the flag right out front."

"Don't forget about the shoe shop. And the hardware store."

"Remind the pharmacist to put out both his flags."

G.R. had a list of businesses and he wanted a report on every one. If Old Glory wasn't in sight, Les was sent back to remind the storeowners of their neglect. Les was an honest man, but after the first year, he quickly learned to say "Yes, George" when asked if the Stars and Stripes were prominently and properly displayed.

G.R.'s dedication to the flag was a useful red, white and blue tale for a sea of Republicans. After I told it, I realized that the story either hinted at or contained most of what I knew about the great grandfather who died five years before I was born. He was a patriot, father and husband. He was flinty, irritable, and demanding. Family members who knew him—my mother, my father and three of G.R.'s living children—indicated that he provided for his wife and eight children inadequately as a farmer and a blacksmith, and played the fiddle when he should have been working. There wasn't much to like about him. He was, by all counts, a "difficult" person whose jaded approach to life was offset and softened by his wife Libbie.

Yet, the three daughters I knew well—my grandmother and two great aunts, also called The Anderson Girls—were independent, educated, self-sufficient and strong-willed. None of them married and they all lived together at the end of their lives. Family members attributed their success to their mother, Libbie. George was rarely mentioned in

a positive light, but surely, I thought, his parenting had also contributed to their success. Driven by the belief that this man's history held clues to his character and his children's characters, I decided to see if I could augment the inadequate collection of impressions about him.

My quest took me to local libraries, the Family History Library in Salt Lake, and to state archives. I excavated material from federal records and genealogical sites, logging many search engine hours on my laptop. I became acquainted with historical societies in Illinois and Kansas, corresponded with an archivist at the college G.R. Anderson attended, and connected with a cousin I hadn't talked to in thirty years.

An 800-word biography of G.R. Anderson in the 1892 book *Memorial and Biographical History of the Counties of Fresno, Tulare and Kern* became the basis for an outline of his life and core to further research.

Anderson was born in West Chester, Ohio, the third of six children of David and Elizabeth Anderson. His forefathers, who had emigrated from Wales to America, were "Presbyterians and people of rare force of character and influence." When the Civil War broke out in 1863, George was only 14—too young to sign up. Two years later, his parents gave him permission to enlist, which he did on April 18th, 1863. He joined the First Kansas Light Artillery, serving as a private in Captain Tenny's battery.

He fought in three battles: Johnsonville, Cumberland and Nashville. Family members said G.R. always mentioned his service under George H. Thomas at Nashville. Historian Stanley F. Horn noted that Thomas's well-planned and well-executed strategy for Nashville was the turning point for the defeat of the Confederate Army.

It was heartening to read, in Horn's little book, that despite the early years of discomfort during the war, soldiers under Thomas were modestly but adequately equipped and cared for. While the Confederate army, led by John Bell Hood, was short on rations, eating "mostly parched corn" and clothed in only "threadbare uniforms to protect them from the icy rain, Thomas' men had no such trouble as this. They were well shod, well clothed, and well fed..." (154,155).

Over 600,000 lives were lost in the civil war, more than all other American wars put together. What a relief it must have been for David and Elizabeth Anderson to have their eighteen-year-old come home, slightly wounded in two battles, but safe at the end of his service. G.R. mustered out with an honorable discharge on July 17th, 1865.

G.R. completed his high school education through a special program for veterans at Lincoln College in Topeka. It took me awhile to find out that the name of Lincoln College was changed to Washburn College and to contact the current university archivist. She sent me a photo of the building where George attended his classes and the program of the first graduating class in 1866. G.R.'s name was included.

Upon his return, G.R. joined the Grand Army of the Republic, founded for and by veterans in 1866, for camaraderie first and then for political power. There were over 27,000 Civil War veterans in Kansas alone. George was a charter member of Post #1 in Topeka and held all of the offices of that lodge.

The acronym GAR passed over the lips of family members when they talked of G.R. Known for parades, war stories, monuments, and most importantly pension bills, the Grand Army of the Republic ended up being a powerful lobby that pressured congress into granting veterans generous benefits.

But to its members, the GAR was more than this. It was a standard Victorian fraternal order, complete with ceremonial ranks, and a secret, semi-religious ritual. It was an arena for business clientage and deal cutting. It was a provider of local charity in an age without significant public relief. And it was the purveyor of a preservationist, socially conservative version of the ward that had ramifications beyond the ranks of veterans. (McConnell in Vinovskis, 140)

In 1873, G.R. joined his father as a tanner and seller of manufactured leather goods in Topeka. In 1877, when he was 29, he married a Pennsylvania girl, Libbie Kent, 21, the grand niece of General "Mad" Anthony Wayne.

Their first child, Martha Louisa, my grandmother, was born on Halloween in 1878 in Louisville, Kansas, followed by Jessie, Anna, and William, all born in Ossawatimie, Kansas. George's father died in 1880, but G.R. continued in the harness/leather business until 1885. The 1880 census lists George's youngest brother David, 18, as living in Louisville with George and Libby.

David migrated to California and is listed in the "Great Register" as a harness maker in Visalia in 1884. At age 25, he married Lively Lee Hunt from nearby Tulare. George and his wife and four children traveled to California where George and David worked together as harness makers from 1886 until 1890. Oral family history has it that George was a blacksmith, but that has not been confirmed.

In 1890, G.R., described as a "strong Republican," was the party's candidate for city clerk in Visalia. The profile in the *Memorial and Biographical History* said that he lost because "he could not overcome the large Democratic majority in the city." In elections all over California, as well as at the federal level, Republicans lost.

He gave up his harness business, bought a 160-acre ranch, and farmed until the farmhouse burned down. He sold his stock and built a new house in town. Four more children were born in Visalia for a total of six daughters and two sons.

By 1898, all of the children had been born, their names entered into the family Bible, along with two who died shortly after birth. Seven of the eight, ages 2 through 11, were listed in the United States Census, 1910. William had moved to Los Angeles to be a cook. The record lists another child, three years old, as George's daughter, but George's age, 59, and Libby's age, 50, in 1907 makes that unlikely. The name stood out to me: Ruth R. Anderson. My mother.

Years ago, my mother, with a wry smile and a wink, said to me, "Your great grandfather told the census taker that I was his daughter and that's what they wrote down." I didn't think to ask "why." I simply believed her and I still do.

The story that I grew up with was that my mother was "a ward of the court." I heard that description many times. Severely malnourished at two, she was placed in the Tulare County Hospital. My grandmother, a registered nurse and the hospital administrator, nursed her back to health, and then adopted her.

Mysteries remain. My mother, who said she was born in Delano, never had a birth certificate. "When we went to Cuba," she told me, "Les [my father] had to pull some strings to get a doctor to sign off on my birth so I could get a passport." She never called her mother Mom or Mother; she called her Louie, the name by which everyone called my grandmother. When I told my wife that my mother was not listed in the family Bible, she observed, "There are many begats that aren't recorded in Bibles."

Despite the fact that Ruth as daughter was perpetuated in other public records, including both George and Libbie's obituaries, 1933 and 1938 respectively, I prefer the reference in my grandmother's obituary that lists Mrs. Ruth Quinby as "an adopted daughter." I believe that George and Libbie's identification of my mother as their daughter emerged for reasons that had to do with the moral climate of the time. My grandmother was a young single woman and adoption by an unmarried woman was unusual. However, my detective work to confirm or deny will continue.

George died when my mother was in her early thirties. She remembered him as a stern patriot and told me he had written a poem on the flag for the local newspaper. A few weeks ago, my cousin sent me a copy of "The Inspired Flag" which appeared in the August 15th, 1928 issue of the *Visalia Times Delta*. A rhyming poem, it began

The patriot dreamed of long ago
Of Valley Forge, and its blood stained snow,
Of an army camped on a field of white
Gathered in groups 'round the campfire's light.

There's no doubt that the byline belongs to George Rueben Anderson, but I wonder if the "All Rights Reserved" notice refers to his authorship or someone else's. I suspect that G.R. copied it, but I have not found any evidence or sources to validate my suspicion.

At the time of his death in 1938, George was the last remaining veteran of the Civil War in Visalia. His obituary in the *Visalia Times-Delta* said that he was "regarded locally as an authority on the history of the flag and methods of display." He received military rites at the Visalia Cemetery by the Visalia post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, of which he was an honorary member. In addition to an obituary in the local paper, there

was an article about his death on the front page of the June 20th, 1938 issue of *The Fresno Bee*.

As anyone who has delved into family history will tell you, the basic elements of family trees are facts and vital statistics, but questions and imagined stories arise. Who were those Welsh Presbyterians, “people of rare force and character?” What specific war experiences did George have? How did a family of six travel from the Midwest to the West and were his younger brother and his harness business really the main reasons? Was there shame in being a young unmarried woman and adopting a little girl, necessitating that the grandparents claim the child as theirs?

Every family has its lore—stories, reputations, opinions—repeated and embellished through the generations. When we are young, those stories, reputations, and opinions permeate consciousness. They may lay dormant, objects of disinterest until something stirs them from the dustbins of memory, demanding exploration.

I shook off the dust, I explored, and I found meaning. What I have unearthed of G.R.’s life demonstrates that the qualities of strength and forbearance evident in his daughters are derived from him. He is a force in my family history to be recognized and appreciated.

Having found a picture of him and Libby, I felt compelled to fictionalize George Reuben Anderson's life, blending fact and supposition into a poem called *Face Forward*. One day when I was sitting quietly by myself, musing on my great-grandfather, unaccountable tears came, and a sentence was placed in my mind: “You didn’t get it all right, but you did a good job.”

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Family photo of G.R. Anderson & Elizabeth Kent Anderson, circa 1920

Face Forward

In 1863, moments before I rode off
with the Kansas Light Artillery, my father,
a fierce Presbyterian of Welsh ancestry,
held on to my arms at the elbows,
admonishment in his voice and eyes.
"You may be exhausted and hungry.
You may be wounded. You may feel hopeless.
But hang onto your character,
hang onto your soul,
and always face forward."

His words gave me direction,
but it was fear that drove my bravery
and brother soldiers who bound my wounds.
At Johnsonville, with General Thomas,
the Confederates caught us off guard.
The wharf became a mile-long sheet of flame,
destroying four gunboats, twenty barges,
and \$6 million worth of supplies.
Near Nashville I was one
of many young soldiers,
in our 50,000 man army,
swarming over rebel trenches.
I carried out my duties
and I faced forward.

In '65 when the Signal Corpsmen
waved the last flags of surrender,
the battling contingents of North and South
in an uneasy chime, I wept.
I had been fighting for Lincoln,

and he had died, unaware that the union,
his union, our union, lived on.
Mustered out in July,
I went home to Topeka,
enrolled in Lincoln College,
and finished my education.
This was the way I honored my president
the way I honored my father
the way I faced forward.

I worked with my father
tanning hides, making harnesses,
selling leather goods.
I joined the Lincoln Post
of the Grand Army of the Republic.
A charter member, I held all the offices.

Then, Libbie, the grand niece
of the famous Revolutionary general,
Mad Anthony Wayne,
came into my life and we married.
She brought me joy,
she and the eight children
who called me "Papa" and
the two who died,
neither able to offer up
those soft syllables.
Their deaths, the death of my father,
the beckoning of my brother,
urged Libbie and me to California
and to face forward.

On the strength of my successes
and work with the Grand Army,
the Republicans made me
their candidate for County Clerk.
But: we could not overcome
the Democrats. I lost the election,
our farmhouse burned down,
still we faced forward.

I relied on Libbie,
kind and patient,
to teach our daughters.
They grew up strong,
independent, and educated.

Annie, a WWI nurse on the front lines in France,
Louie, a public school nurse and hospital administrator,
Jessie, a physical education and health teacher,
Ria, an interior decorator, and Cre and Paralee mothers.

I wanted my sons to be
strong, tough and responsible.
Over time the demands of my trade and
the tools that I used, knives, anvils and fire,
had hardened me. My ways of fathering
proved to be implements of harshness,
obscuring the love I had as a parent.

Reuben Wayne, wanting flight from the family,
reluctant to be a soldier,
served as a chauffeur in World War I.
He was not equal to his noble namesake,
save only in his version of madness:
pouring whisky down his throat.
William/Bill/my Willy drifted
south to Los Angeles,
coming back only once
for his mother's funeral.
My sons were lost to me,
my wife was dead.
How could I face forward?

Blind now in my old age,
diminished in limb,
I send my grandson in law
to walk the streets on all holidays.
Are the flags flying over every business?
Is the courthouse closed in recognition?
Are my countrymen remembering their fallen?
I am perceived as demanding,
I am perceived as irascible.
but certain qualities are
stamped on my soul, love
embedded in my stride, patriotism
marked on my twice wounded body, sacrifice
etched on my being, persistence.

I give these words to you: face forward.

Accidental Poet

I worshipped Mr. Agol, my high school English teacher, a big man with an easy laugh, a shuffling walk, poor posture, Coke bottle glasses with flesh-colored frames, and a love of students. One scorching afternoon in our un-airconditioned classroom at Mt. Whitney High School in Visalia, California, he stood in front of the class and belted out “The **boy** stood **on** the **burning deck**.” Mr. Agol, with sweat dribbling down his face, looked as hot as that boy on the burning deck.

“That’s Iambic!” he continued. “Say it with me.” We repeated the words, overemphasizing exactly where we should. He told us that iambic pentameter was the main rhythm for poems in English. Or, maybe I misremember because “Casabianca,” the boy on the burning deck poem, by Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793-1853) was not written in iambic pentameter. Mr. Agol would not have been wrong, could he? His emphasis was on our learning rhythm and meter and poetry, and that stuck.

“If you write poetry,” he said, explaining verisimilitude, “and some of you will, please tell the truth! Be believable! If you think good fences make good neighbors, like Frost, say so.” Agol, with his bent back and forward-thrust neck was shaped like a parenthesis. He leaned into his sentences.

On one of my essays, he scrawled, “Pure poetry, but your handwriting is atrocious,” and awarded it an A+ for content and an F for penmanship and grammar. Getting an F was overshadowed by the notion of being an accidental poet. I was filled with pleasure. He’d opened a vein of receptivity toward poetry, both the reading and writing of it.

Several of my friends and I resurrected Scribblers, a club for writers that had been dormant for a several years. We asked Mr. Agol to be the faculty advisor. He agreed, and

came to the first meeting. We must have exhibited a certain linguistic flair. Afterwards, he looked at several of us and said, “Delightfully fey.” I smiled happily because it felt like a compliment even though I didn’t know what “fey” meant.

We produced a slender, mimeographed volume of poems and essays, *Scribblathology*, and dedicated it to him. He laughed when he saw that there were two typos on the dedication page. He chose to applaud our overall effort, rather than frown at the errors, though he was a relentless editor when he evaluated our papers. Always courting teacher approval, I paid attention to his edits and to those of my high school journalism teacher, Mr. Koroch, and I emerged better prepared for college.

The University of Southern California had its Mr. Agols too. Dr. Kennett Moritz, who taught a British Literature class, was a charismatic English professor, sitting on the floor in the back of the class on the first day until someone figured out that he was the teacher. He arose, jubilantly, to take his place at the lectern, never standing in front of it for long. His hyperkinetic movements would probably garner him an ADD diagnosis today. When he read poetry, he did it with rousing passion. No fun, sing-song, burning deck fervor, but compelling emotion, the words of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” and “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower” bold and loud. He high-jacked serious discussions with jokes and segues—forays into politics and comparisons of literature with films that made my head spin with admiration.

Meanwhile, confusion characterized my first living away from home relationships. My roommate Lee, with whom I thought I had a solid friendship, announced all too matter of factly, “I’m going to room with someone else.” Our late night chats, chatter about classes, and meals together appeared to mean more to me than to her. I concealed

my sadness, not understanding that my reaction might represent an investment in something more than friendship.

The next year, I formed another relationship with a girl down the hall. Sitting in one or the other's dorm room, Donna and I read e.e. cummings out loud to one another, enjoying his zany punctuation and strange line breaks:

you shall above all things be glad and young.
For if you're young, whatever life you wear

it will become you;and if you are glad
whatever's living will yourself become
Girlboys may nothing more than boygirls need:

...
I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.

We bought each other flowers, exchanged love notes, and were inseparable except when she spent time with her boyfriend Michael. When Donna hung in my room a brightly colored mobile with a poem written about me attached to it, I lived in a dreamy state of yearning. It began "Girl child with the depthless eyes, why do you love me?"

I could pass sophisticated judgments on that poem, but that would not nullify my sophomoric (well...I *was* a sophomore) love-struck response or change the devastation I felt when her boyfriend protested, less than six months after we'd met, that she and I were seeing too much of one another. Instead of becoming my roommate, as planned, she transferred to another dorm.

I was not finished with poetry, however. During my last semester at USC, I was at Doheny Library, sharing a table with an older student who had stacks of books and papers in front of her just like I did. She asked what I was working on: a revision of a paper on Milton's "Il Penseroso."

“Oh,” she said, “I know that poem. I’m finishing up my master’s in English.”

I showed her the note the teacher had scrawled at the bottom of the last page: *You will receive an F if you do not redo this paper and explicate this poem.*

“I was afraid to ask what ‘explicate’ meant.” I said. “I’ve looked it up in the dictionary, but I still don’t understand.” I did not explain that the teacher intimidated me.

“Oh,” she said, “Explication just means looking at the structure and the rhyme scheme and the imagery and stuff like that,” she said. “Let’s go through it.” She got me started. I finished a rough draft by the time the library closed at 10 p.m.

“Do you need a ride somewhere?” she asked. We had by then exchanged names.

“Sure, thanks, Marie.”

We sat in front of College Hall, enclosed in the darkness of her Volkswagen. Did I know the poems of Theodore Roethke? No. She switched on the light, reached into the backseat for a book, and began reading, “I knew a woman, lovely in her bones / When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them.” She read to the end.

“Isn’t that romantic?” she said. Yes, I thought, and I feel romantic about you. But I didn’t say that. Despite the intimacy of sitting together, I had the sense that Marie, older than me by eight or nine years, was tutoring me, sharing her deep love of poetry as an enthusiastic, empathetic teacher. I don’t think I even knew the word homosexual, but I was beginning to understand that my attraction to other girls was not because I was an only child who missed having a sister.

“And what about this,” she continued: “I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow / I feel my fate in what I cannot fear. / I learn by going where I have to go.” I felt the rhythm, I loved the rhythm, but I didn’t have a name for either the poetic form or the

poetic attraction. Sharon told me that she'd taken a class from Roethke at the University of Washington where she had obtained her bachelor's. Right then, I wanted to go to Seattle. And the following summer, 1963, I did, but I did not see Marie. I had been too timid to suggest another meeting.

Theodore Roethke, who had been a member of the English faculty since 1943 and a poet-in-residence, was not on campus that summer. The next year he had a heart attack in a friend's pool, and died. I missed meeting him, but I read more of his poetry. I also spent time in Suzallo Library, reading Dr. Moritz's dissertation, "Visual Organization in Dickens," stumbling through the unfamiliar territory of scholarly work. I exited his mixture of literary and film arts with one takeaway: although movies were not in existence when Dickens was writing, Dickens used the film technique of montage in his writing. I wrote several papers on montage for English classes and eventually I began writing film criticism.

In my final year of college, taking Middle English, I read *The Canterbury Tales* at San Francisco State, the school to which I had transferred. I sent a long distance nod to Alan Agol for teaching me about iambic pentameter. The *Tales* are primarily composed of heroic couplets in iambic pentameter. Knowing that, and factoring in the storytelling contests of knights, nuns, and squires, wasn't enough for me to enjoy *The Canterbury Tales* as poetry. I was too busy trying to overcome the difficulties of learning Middle English. I struggled through with a "C," and graduated on time with a B.A. in English in 1964.

Meanwhile, I hooked up with Mark, a Mormon boy from my hometown. We had had senior English together in high school. He was widely read, curious, entertaining, and

constantly turning around to talk to me. I invited him to a Sadie Hawkins Dance. We had a great time. I was sure he'd invite me to the prom—yet another example of my inaccurate understanding of relationships. He took one of my friends. They dated until she broke up with him three years later. By that time, Mark and I were both in the Bay Area and he asked me out. After a year of dating, he said, "I guess we'll get married."

I designed our wedding invitations, using a woodcut of a cypress tree created by a North Beach artist, with the words of the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran inside: "Love one another but make not a bond of love. Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your two souls." I still like those lines.

After a year, we left San Francisco to live in Germany. During the time Mark worked for an American film company, I took intermittent trips. I traveled for three weeks in the UK, hitchhiking from one hostel to another. Inspired by Dr. Moritz' reading of Dylan Thomas, I made my way to Laugharne in Southern Wales. A bartender at the Browns Hotel gave me directions to the Boat House where the Thomases had lived. The property appeared to be vacant. I hopped over the fence, and peered through the windows of the place he called his "word splashed hut"—a spare space with a simple desk, a colorless rug, and a scattering of books. I felt enveloped in reverence. I sat on the ground with the book I'd bought, enchanted that I was reading Dylan Thomas' poems in the very spot where they might have been written. My time there was short—no more than 20 minutes. I was aware that I was a trespasser, an interloper, and feared that someone would kick me off the property.

Later in my trek, I sat at a pub in Rye, the town where Henry James lived, and cobbled together enough material on the experience in Laugharne to write and merit publication in a little literary magazine called *The Laurel Review*.

Back in the States, with a rejection letter in hand from USC's graduate school in library science (a year later the school later communicated that they had miscalculated my grade point average and invited me to reapply), I went to Cal State LA to pick up prerequisites for USC's grad school in journalism.

Statement, Cal State's literary magazine, published "The Odd Hot," my poem about transitioning from a manual typewriter requiring finger-pounding touch to the light strokes and heat of an electric IBM—experiences derived from my first, post B.A., full time library job at SF State. The *Statement* editor, a woman in her early forties who'd left a career in advertising to finish her degree, called to tell me of the poem's acceptance. It was not as cozy as that late night in the VW, but the conversation went on for an hour and her encouragement was palpable: "I want to know that in ten years you are still writing poetry."

Ten years later I *was* still writing poetry—bits of doggerel³⁴ to entertain, persuade, or distract my children—but I certainly didn't call it by that name. Once, at a stoplight, to squelch backseat squabbles, I concocted this rhyme:

ABC Up in a tree / DEF There's a chef / GHI Say Hi / JKLM His name is Clem/
NOP Stung by a bee / QRS What a mess / TUV Oh, don't you see / WXYZ Never
cook in a tree / Never cook in a tree / Never cook in a tree.

³⁴ When my eight-year-old daughter Leslie was still sucking her thumb, I composed this ditty: "Extract your digit from your oral cavity; sucking your thumb's not good for you or me." She grew to hate this song. What *was* effective was her grandmother's bribe of \$10 "if you'll quit sucking your thumb for two weeks you can buy that pair of toreador pants you want." Leslie quit.

“Stung by a Bee’s” durability exists not in publication, but in its repetition by grandchildren in the 21st century.

The seventies and eighties were Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss, the Wizard of Oz and Winnie the Pooh years. I had loved *Winnie the Pooh* since my aunt, the only librarian in the family, gave me a copy when I was nine. I wanted to have a “two-four-six-eight-who do-I-appreciate” party when four of our kids turned that age, but the exigencies of motherhood overwhelmed me. I did have one “Now we are six” birthday party, using the last lines from the last poem, “The End,” in Milne’s book, *Now We Are Six*: “But now I’m six, I’m as clever as clever. So I think I’ll be six now forever and ever.”

Motherhood meant lots of reading. I always read aloud the title pages because I wanted my children to know that a book was more than a story; it had an author, a title, an illustrator (sometimes), a publisher, and a date. None of them liked sitting through the credits; I usually insisted, unless full court rebellion of not listening at all emerged.

Jason, my first son, was born in 1971. My friend Maryruth Bracy wrote a song for him. Maryruth and I were partners in an editing and writing business we called Two’s Company. We did not advertise ourselves, but we had business cards printed up and managed to have as much part time work as we could handle. We were correspondents for *The New Era*, a magazine for LDS youth, and we wrote for and proofread *Dialogue*, an independent, scholarly LDS journal originated by Eugene England, a faculty member at Stanford. We also wrote for and worked on a homegrown anthology published by the congregation’s organization for women. The publication was called *The Paper Plates*, a word play on Joseph Smith’s golden plates used in the creation of *The Book of Mormon*. Maryruth’s song was included.

During the same time period, a friend gave my husband and me a bilingual edition of the *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral*. Her poems captured maternity for me. I read them as I held babies and nursed them, and as I reflected on the blessings of having children, the elemental blessings that Mistral said so well:

“I comb a little boy’s hair with my hands.”

“God, the Father, soundlessly rocks / His thousands of worlds, / feeling His hand in the shadow I rock my son.”

...A sequined goldfish, and still more I’ll give you/if you’ll only sleep / till morning.”

“When I am singing to you, / on earth all evil ends; as smooth as your forehead / are the gulch and the bramble.”

“The table, son, is laid /with the quiet whiteness of cream.”

I am convinced that the rapture of a few lines of poetry can offset the upsetting disturbances of interrupted sleep, colicky babies, and drastic rearrangement of routines and priorities that accompany the entrance of children into the timeline of a couple’s life and relationship. There was room and perhaps necessity for the presence of poetry in my thirteen years of bearing seven children.

In the mid-seventies I leafed through an issue of *The New Era* and a word attracted my attention. I had forgotten it until one night recently. I drifted off to sleep thinking, *There’s something missing in this essay I’m writing on poetry, but what is it?* I woke up at 3:15 a.m. with a word on my mind. In the morning, I set out to write about it. I got up, and, as I usually do, put on my bathing suit and gathered my gear so, no backing out, I would be ready to swim after spending time at my desk.

Glancing at the flippers and goggles in my hand my wife said, “You’re going to swim now?”

“No, I’m going to write first.”

“Oh, you’re going to record dreams?” She knows that I follow Irish author Kevin

Barry's advice to write immediately upon arising, almost in a dream-like state.

"No, I said. "Chiasmus."

She paused in her stroll to her favorite chair, decaf and toast balanced in her hand, then said, "Gesundheit to you too."

Forty some years ago, that word was in the *New Era* article "Chiasmus in the *Book of Mormon*" by John W. Welch, a Ph.D candidate at Oxford.

What was chiasmus? It was a rhetorical device, a poetic device used in ancient Semitic writings to deliver principles more attractively to readers or listeners. It had to do with repetition and using the same words in reverse order. From ordinary parlance comes this example: "He who fails to prepare, prepares to fail." Other examples are all around us. Politicians are fond of the device: "My job is not to represent Washington to you, but to represent you to Washington." (Barack Obama); "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." (John F. Kennedy).

Biblical scholars had identified chiasmic techniques in the Bible to authenticate the Bible's Hebraic origins. For example, "For *my* thoughts are not *your* thoughts, neither are *your* ways, *my* ways saith the Lord." In 1967, Welch, a young missionary serving in Germany, had identified the presence of chiasmus in the *Book of Mormon*. Religious scholars of other faiths had validated his work. His discovery gave credence to the idea that, like the Bible, the *Book of Mormon* had Hebraic origins and was not a phantasmagoric construct of Joseph Smith's mind, as some supposed. One could safely assume that chiasmus was a technique unknown to the under-educated Smith, who translated the *Book of Mormon* and published it in 1832. For me, it was further scaffolding for the veracity (or should I say verisimilitude?) of the *Book of Mormon*.

Although I am no longer Mormon (unless one adds the adjective “excommunicated” to the noun), I have resumed study of chiasmus, taking a special interest in Welch’s article “The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: 40 Years Later,” published in the *Journal of Mormon Studies* in 2007.³⁵

I will save the story of my excommunication for another time, except to say that excommunication occurs when members are not following the standards of the LDS Church—in my case, falling in love with a woman, Amory, and committing adultery. One could say there was much poetry in Amory’s and my courtship but none in the courts of church excommunication, which are also called “courts of love.”

Subsequent to my divorce, I earned a library degree (MLS) and, in a few years, obtained a position as a community college library director. I established a marketing committee and we launched a poetry contest in 2007. We invited students, faculty and staff, or anyone with even a tenuous connection to the college (we even included a 12-year-old girl who had gone to the college’s preschool eight years earlier) to submit a poem that used ten words of our choosing. We called it *The Kumquat Challenge*, because one of the words was “Kumquat.” Subsequent contest words have always included a word starting with “K.” Next year will be the 10th anniversary.

Of course, I had to support my own program with a poem, “Fruits of a Fifties Childhood,” which along with others will be included in this thesis. For the next seven years I composed a poem for the annual *Kumquat Challenge*.

³⁵ It can also be found at [http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/16/2/S00012510c47d56edfb8Chiasmus Wel.pdf](http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/16/2/S00012510c47d56edfb8Chiasmus%20Wel.pdf)

Last year my friend Pam Helberg issued a Helberg Challenge. She challenged me to join an online group called The Haiku Room.

“I don’t know anything about Haiku and I don’t like formulas and fixed patterns,” I said.

“Just try,” she said. “If you don’t like it, you can stop.”

I liked it. I got into the syllabic rhythm of five / seven / five. The Haiku Room was a sympathetic and supportive place for practicing. Besides, what did it matter since I had little emotional investment in a reputation as a, gulp, poet. I used the words for *The Kumquat Challenge* as my stimulus.

My methodology for *The Kumquat Challenge* was always the same. I looked up each word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and made a copy of the definitions, letting them sit with me until one of the definitions leapt into animation. The result, “Haiku, How Do I Write You?” married research I’d done about Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), a Japanese samurai who abandoned his status to devote himself to poetry, to my anxiety about writing haiku. Here are three of the eleven stanzas:

Five seven then five
haiku how do I write you?
Come syllables come.

Key for poets now
Basho: sixteen sixty two,
his first verse birthed.

Who will carry poems
light as Basho’s hiking bag
bursting with quick truth?

I think it's true what Robert Frost said: "A poem is never a put up job so to speak. It begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a love sickness. It is never a thought to begin with."

Maybe it's because I'm a librarian, but when curiosity drives me toward research, the more focused and condensed my poem becomes. After I listened to an audio version of Basho's "The Narrow Road to the Interior" and discovered some additional forms of haiku (senryu and haibun), there were simply more touch points and ways to integrate the Kumquat Challenge's ten words.

Acquiring "necessary" background can also be a form of procrastination, so I'm careful to avoid tunneling into the rabbit hole of over-avid research, turning investigation into a curiosity curse. Nevertheless, last year I felt the need for a beginning course in poetry, especially since the summer residency in the MFA program I would attend in Ireland would be taught by two poets, Ted Deppe and Jeanne Marie Beaumont. I signed up for a 5-credit Introduction to Poetry class at Whatcom Community College, knowing that Dr. Ron Leatherbarrow, formerly my boss as the vice president of instruction, was a teacher not to be missed. He had already introduced me to Linda Pastan, read her "Love Poem" at Amory's and my wedding, and given me *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry* when I retired.

He walked into class, a well built, posture perfect, bearded man in his early seventies. As a vice president, he wore suits or a tailored jacket and dress pants, and ties; his night class attire tended towards jeans, a starched, but open collared shirt, and sometimes a sports jacket and a leather hat.

At the first session, he said, “I have looked at other books, but *Sound & Sense* is the best. I’m just sorry that it now costs \$125 instead of the \$8 when I first taught this class in the Fall of 1965...now... tell me what you think poetry is.”

That was the way the class began, a discussion-based, student-focused, respectful but strict environment.

“I’m obsessive about being on time. Try not to be late.”

“Be prepared for flash quizzes every couple of weeks, so make sure you read the material.”

“You’d like to read some of your poems? Sure. Nobody has asked to do that in my fifty years of teaching.” He listened thoughtfully to each poem, remarking positively about specific components he liked.

I remembered Dr. Moritz’s reading of “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” sounding like a half-inebriated, thunderously beckoning, street corner poet evangelist. When Ron read Dylan Thomas, the poem was memorized, his voice solemn, cadenced, and slow.

“My father died in 1977,” he said. “We had a complicated and difficult relationship. I read this poem at his funeral.”

At the end of quarter, in a kind of farewell speech, Dr. Leatherbarrow confided, “I’ve told you more about myself than I usually do. And, though I feel positive about every class I’ve ever taught... This one has been the best.”

Selected class members and other friends of Ron’s were invited to “The Last Word,” an open mic at a downtown pub celebrating his retirement. I took what we had

learned about Occasional Poems during the quarter and wrote—and presented—“Wise Guy with Gravitas.”

During and since class, I have read poems and biographies sent daily from the Poetry Foundation. I’ve taken time and interest to explore the line (“The boy stood on the burning bush”) from “Casabianca” that Alan Agol read, and to find out more about the author Felicia Dorteia Hemas, whose voluminous productivity of 24 volumes of poetry helped to sustain her family. She married at 19, divorced seven years later, and produced two-dozen volumes of poetry during her lifetime, managing to support her five children.

Amory and I have added more poetry books to our collection including the following favorites of mine: Mary Oliver’s *A Poetry Handbook*, Robert Pinsky’s *Singing School* and Billy Collins’ *Aimless Love*.

When Billy Collins writes a poem, he thinks about a reader who is in the same room with him. He tries to be hospitable, talking to that reader neither fast, nor glibly.

“Stepping from the title to the first lines,” he says, “is like stepping into a canoe. A lot of things can go wrong.”³⁶ His poem, “Introduction to Poetry,” is the enigmatic work of a teacher who wants his students to learn how to read a poem—to understand it, to get inside it, without overanalyzing it. He also gives fine advice to those who wish to write poetry:

Read as many poets as you can until you find one (or more) who make you jealous. Then try to imitate his or her voice. One of the paradoxes of the writing life is that the only way to originality is through imitation. If you don’t imitate others, you will sound clichéd and flat. You find your voice by trying on the voices of others. Almost every poet can teach you something about writing.”³⁷

³⁶ “Billy Collins,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/billycollins>

³⁷ Billy Collins, Gale Literary Database, accessed 5/26/2016

I chose Linda Pastan, the former poet laureate of Maryland, as the object of my jealous admiration. Her work is characterized by ordinary but enigmatic subjects and unexpected endings, reminding me of Emily Dickinson, another favorite poet.

I will make poetry pilgrimages as well. I'm planning a visit to the San Francisco Poetry Center, housed at San Francisco State University. It was founded in 1954 when W.H. Auden spoke at the college and surrendered his honorarium to launch the center. Some sources list local poet and Buddhist rabble-rouser-anarchist Kenneth Rexroth as a cofounder, and at other times as an advisor to the founding director. Worse than my lack of awareness about the very existence of the poetry center was my lack of awareness that Rexroth taught at State in 1964—the year I graduated.

As for writing poetry, I want to fasten style to memory and write a villanelle like Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Thomas, and Seamus Heaney. I want to shower syllables of a rhyming nature upon my grandchildren, aided by Clement Wood's *The Complete Rhyming Dictionary*, a book I've consulted since the date I marked on the inside page: 1982. One never knows when there will be the occasion to rhyme "bouquet" with "Bordelais" or "archpriest" with "artiste." I'll step into that canoe of poetry and fall into the water a few times by forgetting to wear the life jacket of free verse, straitjacketed instead by unfamiliar forms with names like ekphrastic, lunes, and ruba'i.

Even though I've never considered poetry my first love in the world of writing, I'm happy that Mr. Agol's labeling of my essay as "pure poetry" aided my accidental introduction to its enjoyment and to its making.

Oscar Wilde's Perch: Discovering Ireland

A perch is a place where a bird sits, elevated and secure for resting or roosting. The verb “to perch” can mean “to sit precariously somewhere,” and that’s how I felt when we walked into our AirBNB room in the financial district of Dublin.

A nine-story building isn’t significant to an urban dweller, but this single room on the 9th floor of the tallest skyscraper in the area was floor to ceiling glass and hung out over the city. The windows opened to a two-inch crack. If they jarred loose, which of course wasn’t going to happen, a person would fall to instant death into the garden courtyard below.

I felt exposed and a little acrophobic. I tried not to think of the obsolete definition of a percher, a dying person, as in this 1886 sentence from the Brits: “the Queen is well, though the Whigs give out that she is, what they wish her, ‘a percher.’”

As my wife and I watched darkness settle into the skyline and, after a good night’s sleep, observed the first light of morning, my irrational fear subsided. I adjusted my thinking, remembering that a perch also means “an advantageous position.”

What could be more advantageous than to spend ten days in Dublin, “The City of Words,” after nine days of the Stonecoast MFA program in Dingle?

At a workshop³⁸ at the January 2015 Residency in Maine, faculty member Nancy Holder, talking to students, said, “One day, when you have seniority as a faculty member, you get a happy phone call saying you’re assigned to Ireland. I became a changed writer

³⁸ Irish Identity & the Narratives of Ireland: the Quaint, the Uncanny, the Irish Revival, and Contemporary Literature.

and a changed person after I went to Ireland. I endorse it with no hesitation. Everyone should go to Ireland.”

My wife Amory and I had been to Ireland in 2004. The green, the hills, the misty skies, the rain, the days of grey enchanted me. I am drawn to such colors and climate. I feel a mystical and magical connection, perhaps because of my roots. I was born in San Francisco, but adopted shortly after my birth. Years later, I discovered that my birthmother, whom I never met, loved The City. I also learned that my birthfather, whom I never met, was part Irish, his surname, Allen, possibly derived from the Gaelic O hailin. I was already predisposed to go to the Ireland residency, and, Stonecoast in Ireland was a persuasive reason for my original application to the MFA program.

We American students of writing go to Ireland familiar with some prominent names in Irish Literature—Beckett and Behan, Shaw and Synge, Swift and Stoker, Yeats and Joyce, not to mention C.S. Lewis and Jonathan Swift. At the residency, those authors may be referenced and studied, the Nobel Literature Laureates may be noted,³⁹ but the residency director, poet Ted Deppe, brings contemporary writers to Dingle and to Howth. Students have an up close and personal opportunity to interact with them during lectures and workshops, to listen as they read at the Dingle Bookshop, and, sometimes, to share a meal with them.

The Dingle Bookshop, the venue for four readings and the source for a wide range of material, was central to the Stonecoast experience. I’d emailed ahead of time to ask if the shop would procure *Three Strange Angels*, a new novel published in the UK, written by American author and friend Laura Kalpakian. I heard back immediately from the owner,

³⁹ Yeats, 1923; Shaw, 1925; Beckett, 1968; Heaney, 1995

whose name amused me: Camilla Dinkel. She told me how the shop came to be: “My husband was a builder and came over to build a house in Dingle for an Englishman. We decided to stay. We bought the bookstore and business has increased every year.” A successful bookstore in a small locale, even one with a significant influx of tourists each summer, is a modern anomaly.

I went to Ireland with a Big Question on my mind. Why has Ireland produced so many fine authors?

Was it the environment? J.R.R. Tolkien used the lunar like landscape of Burren and the Hole of Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*. Yeats last poem, “Under Ben Bulbin,” was about a brooding plateau mountain of the same name.

Was it governmental incentives—the fact that Irish authors are not taxed for their creative work produced and sold in Ireland?

Was it that the Irish Literature Exchange pays for translations, which resulted, for example, in Colm Toibin’s work selling 100,000 copies in China?

Was it the cultural climate of Ireland—the Writers Museum, the Abbey Theater, the National Library, the existence of statues and bridges and ferries named after writers? The existence of Dublin’s Literary Pub Crawl? The marriage of writerly tradition and alcoholic products reflected in the names Writers’ Red Ale, Writers’ Tears Whiskey and Writers’ Block Lager?

Or was it just the climate?

Kevin Barry, one of the visiting writers at Dingle, proclaimed the latter:

Irish Literature was invented to get us through long dark nights, to keep out of the God awful weather, to entertain

us. Look out the window—it explains our rich literary history. This is an island of fabulists, making up crazy stuff all the time.

Kevin Barry's climatological explanation satisfied me. I stopped wondering about *why* Ireland has produced so many great authors and opened myself to the transformation to which Nancy Holder testified. I defined success as learning about Irish writers and their craft at the residency, reading their work post-Dingle, and seeking experiences in Dublin to stimulate my own creativity.

My Artist's Statement in this collection explains how Kevin Barry's early morning writing practice has become my own. I found another useful concept in "Jumping Off a Cliff: An Interview with Kevin Barry." Barry looks for the "hot spots" in his writing—"the stuff that embarrasses you, that isn't trying to sound like, you know, cool prose."⁴⁰

Barry is one of the fabulists himself, an assumption I make based on my reading of Barry's *Dark Lies the Island* and my expectation of his forthcoming novel *Beatlebone*. When Kevin discovered that in the late 1960s John Lennon ("Yes," he said, "*that* John Lennon") had purchased an island off the coast of County Sligo where Kevin lives, he set out to write a novel blending reality and fantasy. He learned everything he could about Lennon and spent four years researching and writing *Beatlebone*, scheduled for publication in the U.S. at the end of 2015.

The residency's focus on short story and novel writing, Kevin's genre, shifted to poetry when Harry Clifton arrived. Clifton had been the Ireland Professor of Poetry, the Irish equivalent of America's poet laureate. He discussed his entry into poetry. His generation was

⁴⁰ Lee, Jonathan. *Paris Review*. November 13, 2013 accessed October 10th, 2015

super saturated with the emotionalism of the early Yeats. We had to fight our way out of that in order to find ourselves. Dublin really didn't have a poetry until the sixties when Patrick Kavanagh, kicking around in the pubs of Dublin, wrote his 'disillusioned city' poems. Yeats was all about emotion. Thomas Kinsella was all about precision in what you're saying.

I had never heard Yeats described in anything but adulatory terms, particularly by the professor of the poetry class I completed last spring. He named Yeats "the greatest poet of the twentieth century." I was stunned by Clifton's assessment of "The Song of Wandering Angus" as "enormously appealing but it also anchored a person in a kind of Ireland that didn't really exist anymore."

The Ireland that no longer existed in quite the same way, he said, was rural Ireland; older poetry did not account for the city rhythms of urban Dublin, which Thomas Kinsella (1928) and Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967) brought to life. After Clifton read Kinsella, he said that he began to write "small, everyday pieces to see what would happen when I wrote simply."

Kavanagh once said that "All great civilizations are based on the Parish," indicating his desire to reveal the universal in the small and the parochial. During this term, t Fleischman has often referred to the value of the "quotidian," both in my work and in others' work, an idea in sync with Kavanagh.

During a workshop, Ted Deppe asked us if we knew Kavanaugh's work. There was head-shaking all around. None of us knew his name, except for Clifton's reference to him. But I do now.

Kavanagh was a farm boy from a poor family, the fourth of ten children. His education ended when he was twelve. He was apprenticed to his father, who was a cobbler and shoemaker. As a young man, Kavanagh encouraged his parents to buy more

farmland, which they did, so that he could earn a living off of it. Twenty-three years later, in 1949, he sold that farmland. He had mined enough images from the land to generate poetry that earned him the moniker “peasant poet,” a description he did not like. He moved to Dublin and worked as a journalist, managing to turn out small amounts of poetry, and becoming responsible for a resurgence of a new kind of poetry, those “disillusioned city poems.”

It’s hard to think that the unforgiving landscape and poor living conditions on the Great Blasket Island, the destination of an all-day field trip, would inspire writers, but it did—three major authors who lived on Blasket: Thomas O Criomhthín (*The Island Man*), Muiris O Suilleabhán (*Twenty Years A Growing*) and Peig Sayers (*Peig*).

We wandered over the sloping hills—a three-mile boat trip from Dingle—and saw the ruined school buildings run separately by the Protestants and the Catholics. The Protestant school was built from the stones of a castle that had existed since the end of the 13th century. When the Protestant school closed in 1840, the Catholic Church started a school, requiring that children attending convert to Catholicism. If they did, soup was provided for them and convert students were called “souters.”

No one lives on the island now, although there are lots of rabbits and a sheep population. The people population peaked in 1916 at 176; the number of houses was 30. In 1953, the Irish government required all inhabitants to leave the island.

As I walked the treeless paths on the Great Blasket, I thought about the fishermen who barely provided for their families. I imagined the storms that ravaged that jutting out

piece of geology. I looked at the ruins of buildings, curious about who lived there and what life was like for them.

But, mostly, as a mother of seven children, everything I saw was overshadowed by Peig Sayers' birthing of eleven children in a stone house with an earth floor and a primitive fireplace. At the end of Peig's life, she was alone. Five of her children had died, and the rest, plus her husband, had migrated to the United States.

During her lifetime (1873-1958) Peig Sayers earned a reputation on the island as a storyteller. Encouraged by the Irish scholar Maire Ni Chinneide, Peig dictated her life story to her son, Micheal. The book begins, "I'm an old woman now, with one foot in the grave and the other on its edge. I have experienced much ease and much hardship from the day I was born until this very day."

While I saw the landscape and the sea surrounding as lovely, I could not imagine surviving in such a lonely, desolate, treeless place, but Peig found solace in the landscape after burying her fourth child:

I sat on the bank above the beach where I had a splendid view all around me. Dead indeed is the heart from which the balmy air of the sea cannot banish sorry and grief...The whole bay was as calm as new milk, with little silver spray shimmering on its surface under a sunlight that was then brilliant.⁴¹

The world now has her story, describing a hard scrabble life, intermingling prayers, poems, drinking songs, anecdotes and stories, and demonstrating again that good stories come from the rural as well as the urban.

One could not get more rural than Great Blasket Island.

⁴¹ p. 177

Or more urban than Dublin. Literary Dublin is part of Patricia Schultz's *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. Dublin is a designated UNESCO "City of Literature," of which there are now eleven, including disparate places like Reykjavik, Iceland; Krakow, Poland; and Dunedin, New Zealand. The "Dublin City of Literature" Facebook page lists festivals, readings, and book publishing events. The "City of Words" pamphlet and map lists 33 items, and was a guide we used constantly.

Travel writer Pol O'Conghaile says in a YouTube video, "The literature isn't always on the page; it's almost as if it's in the air."

Like many tourists, we obtained a two-day pass for a Dublin Hop On Hop Off Bus Tour. Wandering around Dublin is not quite as simple as wandering around the Great Blasket Island. A good percentage of riders piled off at the Guinness Storehouse and the Kilmainham Gaol. We used our pass for multiple trips to the National Library, the Chester Beatty Library, James Joyce Centre, and the Dublin Writers' Museum and Irish Writers' Centre.

One of the drivers, Brendan Clarke, embellished his remarks with personal antidotes about great uncles and cousins and other relatives who played a part in Ireland's political coming of age during the Easter Rising of 1916. When I engaged him in conversation at one of the stops, he pulled out his iPad and showed me pictures of those very relatives.

When I asked him what sights he liked best in Dublin, he said, "You should go to Sweny's."

Sweny's is the pharmacy where Joyce's character Leopold Bloom (*Ulysees*) bought lemon soap. Sweny's, no longer a pharmacy, is staffed by volunteers who sell second hand books and lemon soap, and who host daily readings of Joyce's works.

“One day when I went,” Clarke said, “I heard someone behind me reading. I thought, *I know that American voice.*” He laughed, “I’ll give you a hint. His initials are H.F.”

“Harrison Ford?” I said.

“That’s right.”

A small chalkboard in Sweny’s front window announced the day, time, and title of the readings. “Tuesday, 1 p.m., *Dubliners.*”

The bustle of Dublin’s overcrowded summer streets receded as we entered a tiny dark room with wood-paneled walls and stacks of old books.

A white-haired gentleman greeted us as we came in, “Here for the reading?” He handed us paperback copies of Joyce’s *Dubliners*. “Would you like tea?”

Ten of us, strangers all, filing in at different times, sat on long wooden benches. The reading began promptly at 1 p.m. Each of us read a page at a time from Joyce’s story “The Dead.”

Most of us, an equal collection of men and women, had ordinary voices and reading skills, but there were two whose utterances made me wait with anticipation for their turns to come around.

Killian, dark-haired, good looking, well dressed in an open collared shirt and jacket, was a PhD student in English literature from Cork. Deep voiced, he read with studied seriousness, leaning into the words, showing reverence for Joyce’s prose.

Sean, wearing a t-shirt with “Anonymous” and a quilled pen depicted on the front, sprang into vocal action, athletic and energized as if he were an actor in a one-man play. His dialects and volume changed from character to character. I was sure he was attached

to a Dublin Theater. But no, I found out later, he was a public relations guy for a whiskey association who was waiting for his first book to be published, a history of whiskey in Ireland.

This was intimate space occupied by residents of a high tech world who took pleasure in the simple act of reading to one another. Amory and I both name it as a high point of our Ireland visit.

I wrote a positive Trip Advisor review and identified Brendan as “a writer.” The next day as we boarded the bus, we were happy to discover that Brendan was our driver again.

“Listen,” he said, “All the drivers are saying to me, ‘We didn’t know you were a writer.’ Turning to us, he said, I’m *not* a writer. Maybe you can take that out of the review. I’m just *interested* in writing.”

But I couldn’t. Trip Advisor makes reviewers wait three months to edit. By the time I was home in Bellingham, he had sent me his family pictures and promised a copy of the family history he is working on. Maybe by now he considers himself a writer.

Brendan gave us directions to Hodges Figgis booksellers, not far from the National Library. Founded in 1768, Hodges Figgis in Dublin is Ireland’s largest and oldest bookstore. Sadly, it is no longer independent, but the booksellers were knowledgeable and friendly in ways characteristic of independents. For a presentation on literary Ireland, I wanted an Irish English book. I know a young professor who teaches in New York. She knows Irish and agreed to read a selection in the Irish language for my presentation. A bookseller named David said “Yes, we have two and led me straight to them. “I would

choose this handsome volume newly published by Yale University Press.” He handed me Sean O Riordain’s *Selected Poems*.

Sean O Riordain—perfect! I did not know his poetry, but I remembered a reference to him in another of the Great Blasket Island books that my wife had purchased, *The Loneliest Boy in the World*. Subtitled “the last child of the Great Blasket Island,” it was written by Gearoid Cheaist O Cathain, along with Patricia Ahern. The book is his remembrance of growing up without a priest, a doctor, a school, a church or even electricity. The person closest to his age was his uncle, thirty years older.

When Geroid finally left the island with his mother to live in nearby Dunquin, he was befriended by the poet Sean O’Riordain. O’Riordain drove “a small black Ford, wore a hat and always had a pipe dangling from his mouth.” Geroid said he “had time for the islanders especially for writer and storyteller Peig Sayers and her son Maidhe Pheig, whom he often visited.”⁴²

“She Poet” is the poem I chose to be read. It begins, “I find women poets strange. / It’s stud hard work, I think, / a man’s duty, a devotion granted, / to draw poetry from language.”

I may never return to Hodges Figgis, but just in case I do, I carry a Loyalty Card with me. Eight more stamps, representing 10 pounds each, to go, until I’m granted a discount.

Oscar Wilde’s statue was kitty corner from Sweny’s. Oscar’s perch is a bit more secure and earthbound than our AirBNB aerie. The lanky, sardonic Wilde is recumbent

⁴² Lee, Jonathan. *Paris Review*. November 13, 2013 accessed October 10th, 2015

on a 35-ton quartz boulder in Dublin's Merrion Square, across from the very house where he spent his childhood. A handful of tourists waited to take pictures of the urbane and quick-witted playwright, known for his scathing social comedies and for his flamboyant behavior. Before my wife snapped a picture, she said, "What do you think of Ireland's vote on gay marriage last May, Oscar?" Victories are long in coming.

Wilde was a bad boy of the Victorian Age. One thinks of his quote, "We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars." He was a master of the bon mot. The society of the time judged his gutter to be "gross indecency" (homosexuality) for which he was sent to prison and two years of hard labor in 1895. The repercussions ruined his life: his wife and children fled in shame to Holland and he never saw them again; legal expenses required that he declare bankruptcy, and complications from a fall in prison contributed to his death in 1900. His only comfort in his last years came from his relationship with a male friend, Alfred Douglas (it was Douglas' father whose charges resulted in Wilde's conviction), and from his deathbed wish to be accepted into the Catholic Church, which he was.

Oscar's trousers shimmered in the bright Dublin sunlight. His smoking jacket was a cool shade of jade with turned up pink cuffs matching a pink collar. His shoes looked as if they'd met up with the best airport shoeshine guy, who'd no doubt received a big tip and a click of the heels from O.W.

Wilde's statue is one of many literary figures honored in Dublin. Poet Patrick Kavanagh looks out at the Grand Canal, long legs extended, arms folded, a pensive expression on his bespectacled face. His bronze likeness sits on a bench along the Grand

Canal, about which he wrote a poem that begins “O commemorate me where there is water, canal water preferably...”

A jauntily posed bronze James Joyce is adjacent from the General Post Office. The GPO was the scene of events in 1916 that led to the formation of an independent Irish state, and a place important to Brendan Clarke’s relatives.

On our first visit to Ireland, I noticed a *Librarian Wanted* sign in the Dingle Library. Enthusiasm, anticipation rippled through me—wouldn’t it be wonderful to work in a small town library and to submerge myself in the community? Ten seconds later, I noticed the enthusiasm-dashing minimum requirement: Gaelic language skill. I noticed the children’s books in Irish placed around the room. English was the major language spoken, but Irish is important to the country’s cultural history.

Of course I don’t speak Irish, but I did pay attention to the Irish language, the look and the beauty of it. We were in Dingle, An Daingean, and we were in Dublin, Baile Atha Cliath. We were in a country with a complex and rich literary tradition. I did not go home with an answer to my original question, why has Ireland produced so many fine authors, but I am certain that Ireland changes people. I can’t explain why, but Ireland changed me.

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