

SOARING

Newsletter of Spalding University's MFA Alumni

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AND SO MUCH MORE...

Connections

Today I admired the brilliant red leaves of our maple tree against a clear blue autumn sky and thought about how quickly the days and years are pass. A little over a year ago, we were having our first discussions about an MFA alumni association and since that time, we've had a homecoming, produced several newsletters and have welcomed our newest group of alumni into the fold. Just this week, I received a note from the May 2008 graduating class representative, Jill Kelly Koren that read, "thanks for all your work you've done to keep us connected. As a new alum, I am only beginning to realize the importance of this." I'm grateful to Jill not only for the acknowledgement of the work everyone has put into getting the alumni association established, but also reminding me of the central focus of what we're doing and why we're doing it. Connectedness.

As we leave the program and reenter our respective lives, it is easy to lose touch with our colleagues and friends we made in the program. When I remain connected to writers, I remain connected to their energy and passions. It bleeds over into my life and my work. It encourages me to stay to the page, to keep doing that which I love to do. When I'm disconnected, too many days go by without writing, without that energy, without those friendships.

So, staying connected is what this is all about. Whether by email or Facebook, by attending residencies, AWP or StoryWeek in Chicago next year, by returning for Homecoming and class reunions in May, or just by reading this newsletter or checking the website every now and again, we can stay connected. Days and years shall always pass, but great friendships and relationships, like great art, are forever.

Best always, *Terry*
Terry Price, Spring of 2006

SOARING

MAYBORN
LITERARY NONFICTION
WRITER'S CONFERENCE
OF THE SOUTHWEST '08
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

A Report By
George
Getschow,
Joan
Donaldson,
& Myra
Bellin

The Mayborn Conference is now in its fourth year. We bring you three perspectives on this important nonfiction conference. George Getschow, MFA graduate from the Spring of 2005, is the writer in residence at the Mayborn School of Journalism that is part of the University of North Texas. He has organized the conference all four years. Two other Spalding alumni, Joan Donaldson (Spring 2008) and Myra Bellin (Fall 2005) give their perspective on attending the conference. The Mayborn Conference continues to gain respect and several visiting authors said that it was better than the conference held at Harvard and sponsored by the Neiman Foundation.

George Getschow, the organizer

At a time when many wonder whether print journalism has seen its last hurrah, the Mayborn's impassioned tribe of journalists and authors, educators and students, mechanics and farmers, gathered in Grapevine, TX this summer to demonstrate their fervent devotion to the cause.

For three days, the Mayborn tribe bantered about subjects seldom addressed at other writers' conferences: about the unfortunate trend in contemporary nonfiction that carries as its trademark or badge of honor the impulse to tell us much more than we need to know; about how to harness the precision, emotion and power of poetry in our nonfiction writing; about using narrative techniques to reveal the structures and strains of real life; about how to reconcile our own creative conviction with the realities of publishing; about the two-step dance that writers and editors have to learn to perfect; and about how to use immersion reportage to create more intimate, honest and powerful stories. It's this kind of high-level discussion that has, in just four years, made the Mayborn Conference "one of the most vital gatherings of writers in America," says David Granger, editor of *Esquire Magazine*.

But not every writer in America has heard about the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest. Bob Shacochis, an acclaimed literary journalist and National Book Award winner, came to this year's Mayborn Conference with low expectations. He considered

Dallas a "literary wasteland...a venue championing a seemingly aggressive disregard for fine books, writing and the writing life." But after spending three days listening to lectures and panel discussions and hanging out with the Mayborn tribe, Bob was hooked. "Now, thanks and ever thanks to the Mayborn tribe of storytellers, I have to think of Dallas as a preferred destination, a center of literary gravity, perhaps the very heart of the universe these days for nonfiction writers in America."

Perhaps this explains why Bob and a number of our writers who lectured at this year's conference are planning to return next summer to listen to other writers talk about our narrative craft. Candice Millard, for example, is a best-selling author and long-time writer for *National Geographic*. But after sitting through the conference, our Sunday keynote speaker says she "couldn't believe how much I learned about writing in that one weekend...I got much more out of the conference than I could have hoped to contribute."

Cathy Medwick, a contributing Editor at *O, the Oprah Magazine*, shares Candice's enthusiasm for the conference. "You've created something wonderful, and from the point of view of a diehard writer and editor, indispensable."

Creating a writers' conference now considered "indispensable" by the nation's literary elite is no small achievement.

But what matters to me most is what the conference has done for once-obscure writers like Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe, a journalist for the *Denton Record-Chronicle* who won her first book contract through the Mayborn Conference, or Craig Hanley, a struggling carpenter who won our second book contract, or Vance Gonzales, a Mayborn graduate student who won this year's second-place prize (and \$2,000 in cash) for his narrative about the struggles of a minor league baseball player to reach the Big Leagues.

For me, the most memorable moment of the conference was watching Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe stand at the same podium as our "Literary Lights" keynote speaker, N. Scott Momaday, a Pulitzer Prize winner and the present Poet Laureate of Oklahoma. Peggy spoke metaphorically, and bravely, about growing "new skin" as a writer, replacing layers she felt burned off the moment she was informed of her husband's recent death from a motorcycle accident.

Choking back tears, she told the Mayborn tribe that the conference and the publication of her new book, *See Sam Run*, has rekindled her love of writing and her belief in the power of our narrative craft to change lives, to give meaning and purpose to them, even in the midst of tragedy. Peggy's powerful testimony brought the tribe to their feet, their applause sounding like thunder inside the cavernous ballroom. And it reminded me that our mission to inspire writers to reach new heights in literary nonfiction and create a culture of storytelling in the Southwest matters, matters more than I had ever imagined it might.



SOARING

MAYBORN
LITERARY NONFICTION
WRITER'S CONFERENCE
OF THE SOUTHWEST '08
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

Report continued...

Joan Donaldson, 4x attendee

Both Myra and I participated in the manuscript workshops offered at the conference. Writers submitted a personal essay, researched article or a manuscript for a narrative nonfiction book. A jury reviewed the pool of manuscripts and selected the best submissions for the appropriate workshops. Like at Spalding, before attending the conference, the writers read through and commented on ten manuscripts. On the Friday of the conference, a professional writer or editor guided the critique sessions so that by the end of the first hour, the group of ten writers had relaxed and bonded. My critique group offered me a variety of points of view in a supportive manner, and their collective wisdom helped me to perceive weak spots in my manuscript and gave me ideas on how to revise it.

On Saturday, after a day of listening to stellar speakers, the conference featured the Literary Lights Night where a high profile writer such as Joyce Carol Oates spoke. Also the evening was when the authors of the ten best essays were announced. After participating in the workshops, all the participants knew that their essays were competing against other wonderful writers. Yet, twice my work was honored and my essays were published in *Ten Spurs*, the Mayborn literary magazine that features “the best of the best” essays. Seeing my work published in *Ten Spurs* has been affirming and rewarding. Each year I fly away from the conference, hoping I will return to next year's gathering that will abound with new and old friends and literary insights.

Myra Bellin, 2x attendee

Susan Orleans, the keynote speaker at the first Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference in 2004, joked that her friends thought she was crazy to go to Dallas in the middle of July, especially for an untried event. I could relate. Now, returning to the conference four years later, I see that it provides good reason to trade the swelter of the east coast for the sizzle of Texas, mid-summer.

Like a puppy that grows into his feet, the conference has not so much changed as it has matured. Narrative nonfiction is in crisp focus with a deep reverence for the art and craft of telling compelling stories. The speakers are writers and editors such as Gay Talese, Bob Shacochis, and Candice Millard whose work fuels publications like *Rolling Stone*, *National Geographic*, and *Esquire*. With professionals rooted in the world of the mainstream press, the pointers on craft such as character development are succinct and to the point—for example, advice like “make the morons human”, adds punch to the far blander caveat that characters must be well rounded. And there are valuable insights into the world of publishing from agents and editors. This is Real World 101.

I particularly appreciated the opportunity to make an appointment with a literary agent for a private meeting, face-to-face, during the conference — a recent Mayborn innovation. For a small additional fee, just sign up. You don't have to package a proposal with the hopes that it will make enough of an impression to trigger an email or phone call; it is a good idea, though to prepare questions and materials beforehand. You never know where a meeting may lead.



SOARING

PGRAs Share the EXPERIENCE *By Vickie Weaver*

Wasn't Gwen Broderick's article about the Post Graduate Residency Assistant experience (abroad) fantastic? Thanks so much, Gwen, for sharing with us.

I was a PGRA in Louisville this past residency (along with **Jennifer Sherlock, Tom Pike, Cyn Kitchen, Margaret Phillips, and Rosanne Osborne**) and we want to give a window to the 'home' PGRA experience. First off, Katy Yocom put us through a non-rigorous but very thorough training session, and then we were on our own. In addition to assisting in a workshop, we each had a day staffing the MFA office and a variety of other tasks like setting out lunch trays and snacks, making signs, recording lectures, delivering handouts to the ELC, guarding the first aid supplies, or helping with graduation practice and graduation—to name just a few of the varied duties of the intrepid PGRA.

It was a job with grand fringe benefits.

"Nothing beats being around others like ourselves, people that get us—what we do and why we do it," said Jennifer. Tom added that he enjoyed assisting a workshop leader, and that "critiquing other writers' work gives me insights about improving my own work. Overseeing the office for a day gave me a sense of the remarkable job the MFA staff does in handling the myriad details of a residency."

I, personally, never expected to volunteer as a post-grad residency assistant; in fact, those who know me, know that I opposed the idea. Basically, I'm a lazy person. But time passed, and homecomings were not enough to immerse me in the Spalding experience. I salted a piece of humble pie, gobbled it all up, and applied for the position. Take a look at the Spalding blackboard site under 'For Alumni' for details: <https://bb.spalding.edu/>

PGRAs are kept busy, but not treated as slave labor. In fact, every task I was assigned, I thoroughly enjoyed. Participating in workshop as a mentor's "right-hand person" was a responsibility and a privilege. It was important to me that students' workshop experiences be as positive as mine had been. In cri-

tiquing students' work, I learned about teaching, and yes, about writing. (If we're lucky in life, we never stop learning.)

Though I am tech-challenged, and was nervous about it, I found that recording lectures was simple. All faculty members were easy to work with, and I appreciated the opportunity to sit in on lectures. (No reports to write as a PGRA!)

PGRAs were given their own time slot to read from their own works. It was an honor for us to be a part of the Festival of Contemporary Writing. Spalding MFAers make the best audience! Being a PGRA is similar to being a student, but without the pressure. If you are considering applying, don't hesitate. I was overwhelmed with the proverbial "embarrassment of riches" of my experience, especially when balanced against my actual out-of-pocket expenses. After his tour of duty, Tom said: "I am back at work on my book with renewed energy and determination." As for me, I got back to life with renewed energy and determination.



MFA Scholarship Fund

Pathways to Success: MFA Scholarship Gifts Matched

Spalding University is involved in a challenge grant with the James Graham Brown Foundation to raise endowed scholarship dollars for our students with financial needs.



The MFA Program will receive a fifty percent match for each dollar donated to our graduate creative writing scholarships through December 31st. All gifts designated for the Spalding MFA Program will only be used for scholarships for MFA students. And

remember, donations are tax deductible.

To download a brochure with details go to:

http://www.spaldingmfaalum.com/MFA_Scholarship_Fund.html

For additional information or to contribute to the Spalding MFA Scholarship Fund, contact Kathleen Driskell at:

kdriskell@spalding.edu

SOARING

Chain Versus Indie Bookseller

FINAL INSTALLMENT By Loreen Nieuwenhuis

We've looked at some of the features that differentiate the big chains from the independent bookseller, explored the relationship between small publisher and the indie stores, and noted the decline of the indies in the marketplace. So have I forgotten anything?

In defense of the big chains, I should mention that Barnes & Noble has a 'Discover Great New Writers' program. You've probably seen the shelf in their stores where books are grouped under this heading. [Recently, at my local B&N, they moved this shelf from immediately on the right when you enter the store, to up-and-on-the-right-if-you-look-behind-that-support-column.] You may not know that there is a contest and award associated with this program. They judge over one hundred upcoming books for prizes of \$10,000 (details at www.bn.com/discover). This program, B&N says, "helps publishers introduce dynamic new literary writers to the reading public, highlighting the most impressive new works published each season. Each year we also recognize two of our exceptional writers with the Discover Great New Writers™ Award (one each for fiction and nonfiction). In addition to a \$10,000 prize, we promote the winning titles extensively in our stores and in the news media."

Borders has a similar program called the 'Original Voices Awards.' This program awards prizes of \$5,000 to winning authors. Supporting these programs at the big chains will help support emerging writers.

If you shop at the independents, you may have seen the Book Sense logo. This has recently been updated to the IndieBound symbol. The indies unite under this banner and at the website www.IndieBound.org. From this site, you can search for independent bookstores in your area and also see which ones sell books online. Yes, online, so you can bookmark their site instead of Amazon.com, if you'd like.

At www.IndieBound.org, they suggest that, at times, "...it becomes necessary for individuals to denounce the corporate bands which threaten to homogenize our cities and our souls, we must celebrate the powers that make us unique and declare the causes which compel us to remain independent." They also stress that more of your money stays in the community when you buy your books at an indie. With the re-branding to IndieBound, independent booksellers seem to have taken a more militant line against the chains. Can you blame them? More importantly, can we afford to lose them and have ONLY the chains buying and selling books?

All of this is food for thought the next time you purchase a book! Please send your thoughts or comments on this important topic to: SOARING@SpaldingMFAAlum.com

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO SUPPORT THE INDIES

- Support your local independent book seller. Buy your books there.
- Use www.indiebound.org to locate an indie near you or one that sells books online.
- Get in touch with your inner Oprah (even if it hurts). Talk about books, recommend books to your friends and family, gift quality books anytime you can.
- Request that your library buy the books you love and respect for their collection.

CORRECTION!

In some previous editions, we inadvertently truncated the e-mail address to contact us at SOARING! Sorry! Please send your ideas, comments, letters to the editor, etc. to:

SOARING@SpaldingMFAAlum.com

HOT LINK!

<http://fundsforwriters.com/>
Great site to learn about contests, grants, and paying markets for **ALL** genres of writing. Sign up for **free** newsletter, or pay for subscription to expanded version.



SOARING

Kentucky women writers conference

September 11–13, 2008

By Vickie Weaver
(with input from Aimee Zaring)

“Come to a place where the skylines move like creek-beds, where people understand craft as a way of life. One weekend the best women artists from around the world venture to this place to exchange ideas, process, performance—calling us to newly imagine what it means to be a writer.” – This invitation comes directly from the website for the 29th Kentucky Women Writers Conference, which was September 11-13, 2008, in Lexington, Kentucky. Joyce Carol Oates and Laura Benedict were keynote speakers. Aimee Zaring and I attended part of the conference, which is largely structured around workshops in creative nonfiction, travel memoir, poetry, and genre fiction. There are also readings and lectures. Take a look at www.uky.edu/WWK/ for this year’s schedule, prices, information about events and featured authors and speakers. I paid \$120 (no workshopping included in that fee) and felt that was a fair deal.

A downtown hotel is within walking distance of most events, and handy to restaurants. Some readings and lectures require a car—Transylvania University, and the University of Kentucky campus—though they are (I’m guessing) about a mile from downtown. I’m not too good with geography or reading a map, but hey, I did make it to Lexington from my Indiana hayfield all by myself!

~Friday~

Aimee and I attended a panel discussion, “The New Environmental Writing and the Politics of Feminism.” Debra Marquart, Jennifer Sahn, and Ginger Strand talked about the meaning and context of the word *environment*, and the thought that environmental writing in fiction can be more powerful than non-fiction or news stories in relating information about issues that face us today. Specific writers that were mentioned as being known for writing in terms of the environment: Wendell Berry, Rick Bass, Terry Tempest Williams, and Barbara Kingsolver.

The panelists argued that environmental, or nature, writing, should not be considered as a separate category of writing, because they feel that all writing comes out of an environment specific to the writer. Place as character, urban and rural environments, and alternative environments were discussed. One panelist highly recommended Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*, saying that it is a radical environmental novel. As for the *politics of feminism* and how it is connected to environmental writing, that portion of the discussion was not addressed in a straightforward manner, but rather, seemed to be overlooked.

Laura Benedict, one of the conference presenters, introduced Joyce Carol Oates at the keynote reading, “Mentorship and Collaboration in Women Writers’ Lives.” The reading was open not only to conference participants, but to the public. Aimee and I saw Pam Sexton (alum) and Kathleen Driskell (MFA staff/faculty) at Memorial Theater, which is on the campus of the University of Kentucky at Lexington. Aimee and I agreed that Laura took too much time to introduce Oates, rambling quite a bit, but I think this was in part due to Benedict’s great regard for her friend and mentor. Next, Benedict read a chapter of her own novel, which was good, but overly long to read, so that Oates, a delightful and exuberant reader (her big gestures added to the reading), seemed rushed. By the way, when Aimee and I called for a cab to get back to our hotel, we learned that apparently, in Lexington at least, a cab driver cannot pick up a fare at a street corner. In order to be legal and above-board, we had to stand in front of a rather rundown-looking Pizza Hut to wait for the cab. I felt safer on the street corner.

~Saturday~

Spalding’s Crystal Wilkinson was informed, considerate and professional as moderator of Saturday morning’s panel with Joyce Carol Oates and Lisa Williams, another one of the conference presenters. The topic was “Poem or Short Story? Finding Your Subject’s Form.” I enjoyed listening to Oates so much, I admit that my notes are few and those are illegible. Consequently, I really can’t be responsible for anything I claim to quote. You may read on at your own risk.

Oates, whose lively sense of humor set the tone for the panel, observed wryly that there are more poets than readers of poetry. Items mentioned: Virginia Woolf’s prose is more like poetic passages, little plot. Hemingway’s prose is not poetic. *The Canterbury Tales* is poetry. Oates said that the job of a teacher is to be a friend to the text, not to the writer. Words such as interesting, and promising, then, are useful to teachers, she advised with a chuckle. She also said that writers are allowed the use of only three exclamation marks in their writing careers. And that there is no virtue in a work about unattractive characters. It was mentioned that Oates liked to run, and she said that running for 20, 40, or 60 minutes gives a person time to get some mental writing done. I could have listened to her talk all afternoon. (I almost used an exclamation mark there.)

Aimee attended two lectures Saturday afternoon, and came away with some advice for us. How many authors take the time (or have the time) to read several issues of the publications to which we submit? The editor from *Orion* magazine, Jennifer Sahn, has a name for this practice: disrespectful. She said that editors should not be expected to read something we send to them, if we have not read something of theirs. [I admit that I rarely study journals before I submit, and my reason/excuse is that there are not enough hours in the day for me to do so. Does anyone out there have a comment on this?]

Another thought that Aimee wants to share is that she was reminded yet again of the perseverance and patience required to do this work we do. Author Debra Marquart took fourteen years to write her memoir, *The Horizontal World*. Laura Benedict took eight years to write her first novel and four to write her second, neither of which was published. She gave herself one year to write her third book, and the third time was the charm, as they say. Just reading over this paragraph discourages me terribly, but I’m stuck on this writing life, so what can I do? Keep on.

That’s what attending these conferences helps me do—keep on. (No exclamation point.)



SOARING

REPORT: *Writing Below Sea Level*

By Bonnie Omer Johnson

In the heart and humidity of St. Augustine, Florida, stands a stylish architectural lady named Casa Monica built at the end of the Florida East Coast Railroad and opened as a winter resort in 1888. The historic landmark, in the style of a Spanish castle and restored in 1999 to its earlier splendor, is the only AAA Four Diamond Hotel in St. Augustine. Across a brick courtyard, from June 1-8, twenty writing women gathered in two private rooms with Connie May Fowler and Dorothy Allison for Writing Below Sea Level's St. Augustine Project. For \$1500, the workshop promised "vigorous, focused instruction on all aspects of the creative process in a nurturing but honest environment with individualized instruction and attention to detail." The conference surpassed its promise. Heralded as a "full immersion workshop for serious writers," the St. Augustine Project was more than a workshop. Though writers had various educations, ages, and writing experience, each brought a high level of skill, making the experience as valuable to the writer with an MFA as to the writer attending her first workshop. With small numbers, participants quickly became acquainted with ladies in both groups. Scheduled lunches followed most morning workshop sessions, during which special guests addressed attendees and answered questions in a casual and friendly environment. Readings in the evenings provided additional insight into the writers; all were required to read and spots were assigned the first

two nights so that everyone had a turn. On subsequent evenings, women read in no particular sequence but as the "spirit moved them." The "spirit" often sought readers through persistent stares from Connie May or Dorothy, which was probably a good thing; some readers were too heavy for the spirit to move without assistance from the "eye."

At least once a day, usually after the readings, Connie May and Dorothy led discussions about the writing life, performing one's work, building



**Photo: Connie May Fowler
& Bonnie Omer Johnson**

confidence, ways to proceed in writerly fashion while coping with real life. The floor was always open for questions and the exchanges between faculty and participants were enlightening and applicable to everyone.

Joy Harris, president of the New York based Joy Harris Literary Agency talked about the publishing business during her lunch session and stayed for readings the following night. Kate Sullivan, Editor and Founder of *WordSmitten Quarterly Journal*, discussed the vast possibilities of change with technology and resources available to writers who become techno-savvy. Special guest Laura van den Berg is a former student of Connie May's at Rollins College, a graduate of Emerson College's MFA program, and an Assistant Editor of *Ploughshares* (www.pshares.org) as well as the Editor-in-Chief of *Redivider*: a

journal of new literature. She is the winner of the first annual Dzanc Prize, sponsored by Dzanc Books, a non-profit company "dedicated to literary excellence, community involvement and education" (www.dzancbooks.org).

Afternoons were free and some participants visited the Serenata Beach Club (www.serenataclub.com) available to guests of Casa Monica with free self-parking. Good food, shopping, nightlife and tourist-y establishments offered diversion and entertainment for the women at different stages in their lives, but connected at the core by shared experiences as women and a shared passion for wordsmithing. On the final evening, Connie May, Dorothy, and Laura van den Berg treated the audience with dramatic readings from their own works, which proved to be an unforgettable finale to the week-long class and was followed by a reception that included a champagne toast to one and all.

The week was bookended by a special dinner on opening night (another on closing night) and a poolside buffet breakfast on Sunday morning where friendships were sealed by hugs and promises to share work with each other and to maintain an e-mail community of like-minded women until they have a chance to meet again or to read one another's published works. Each participant left with direction, encouragement, gratitude, improved skills, and renewed affirmation and determination to grow and evolve as writers. For further information about the author/leaders, see www.dorothyallison.net and www.conniemayfowler.com
And for info on the conference:
www.writingbelowsealevel.com



SOARING



By *Jeanne Haggard*

Not all submissions lead to an actual reading or performance for playwrights,

but sometimes there are other benefits to be gained. One such opportunity presented itself at the Great Plains Theatre Conference, held at the end of May in Omaha, NE. Although the play I submitted was not chosen for a reading, I was invited to attend the Writer's Workshop, held in conjunction with the conference.

The Writer's Workshop was two days of intense workshops and play readings, which were not open to the public, so it was two days of playwrights and other theatre people concentrating on the text. It was invigorating to be with so many theatre artists and writers, and the workshops were very valuable. I attended two workshops with Larry Singer, an actor and acting teacher, and as a writer, I found them extremely useful. We worked on connecting with others – hearing their stories – in the first workshop. The second workshop was focused on self-exploration and opening yourself up to the possibilities. Sometimes I forget how important that is in the day to day grind that is my life.

After the two-day Writer's Workshops, the conference was opened to the public and every day was a smorgasbord of play readings – some great some not so great. Each reading was a learning experience though. You learn something from the bad as well as the good. The conference is also a great networking opportunity. I met playwrights from all over the country and it

was fantastic to hear them talk about how they deal with some of the same issues I deal with, even if they do live in New York, theatre capital of the U.S.

And of course, what's a theatre conference without performances? Doug Wright was the honored playwright so we had the opportunity to screen his film "Quills" in addition to attending performances of featured scenes of his work and of his play "I Am My Own Wife." Javon Johnson, founding member of the Congo Square Theatre Company in Chicago, was one of the workshop presenters and we also attended a performance of his play "Breathe" followed by a lively talk back session. Omaha has the oldest community theatre in the nation and they had two shows up while we were there. I chose to attend "The Crucible" and it was one of the most striking productions of that show I've seen staged.

Although this conference is young, its founder, Dr. JoAnn McDowell, started the Inge Festival when she was at Independence Community College and the theatre festival in Valdez, Alaska. When she came to Omaha she brought the theatre festival idea with her and I'm glad she did. The call for plays has already gone out for next year's festival. For more information: www.mccneb.edu/theatreconference. I've already sent my submission in – how about you?



HOT LINK!

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/aod/networks/radio4/aod.shtml?radio4/bookclub>

The BBC's BOOK CLUB features Gore Vidal and his memoir *Point to Point Navigation*. Worth a listen, especially for his impressions of people like Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and Greta Garbo.

This is YOUR newsletter. To contribute, please send story idea or letter to editor to:

SOARING@MFAAlumn.com

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HOT LINK!

<http://www.lulu.com/titlescorer>

Because the publishing world is so much about marketing now, there is a website which will 'score' your book's title to see how likely it is to be a bestseller! Fun to play with, even if the concept is a little disheartening.

SOARING

YOU WRITING WITHOUT PACKET DEADLINES?

or, *WE'RE NOT BUMS!*

by *Vickie Weaver*

I would like to thank all of you for the cards, letters, and emails you've sent to me about writing without packet deadlines. I would like to, but I can't. I did not receive one card, one letter, or one email on the subject.

In desperation for feedback, I begged for it. I emailed a few writer friends (in this article they will only be referred to by fictional names). One Sunday afternoon I asked the group: "Did you write today? And if the answer is **no**, why not?"

On Sundays, apparently, many writers set aside pens and laptops in favor of family time—especially those writers with young children. Some explained that they don't write on Sundays simply because they need a day to recuperate from the 9 to 5 weekday schedule. Others gave these reasons (you notice that I use the word *reason*, not the word *excuse*), which I expect could hold true for most any day of the week: lawn to mow, church activities, elderly parents need help, housework, fatigue.

Two friends told me that yes, they did write on said day. (They did not elaborate about their projects.) Others said no (reasons in previous paragraph), and I received two prize-winning replies. So it's too bad no prizes were offered.

The non-existent prize for second place would have gone to this reply from Sonny: "I've been writing for eight hours and my wife hates me." This email was immediately followed by another one to qualify the remark as an exaggeration—but because I know Sonny, his second email was not necessary. I know that he loves his family, and his wife definitely supports his writing. Sonny's initial remark, how-

ever, does have an edge of truth to it because it hints at the disruption to family routines and family expectations that we writers sometimes cause when we shut ourselves away to work on the great American novel, short story, poem, memoir, grocery list, etc. We are merely writing, while our spouses change dirty diapers, load the washer, dish out macaroni and cheese, rake leaves, buy groceries, take out the trash. Even when our families are genuinely supportive, I think many of us hoist guilt onto our shoulders about the time we need for our work.

The non-existent first prize goes to this email from Pearl: "I'm not sure I know, really [why I didn't write today]. The answer seems to shift as I try to think about it. I don't write every day because I'm a bum. Despite all the people who tell me to put my art first, I can't do it. Demands of everyday life have practical urgency which writing lacks. And writing is so full of unknowns. At least if I decide to do the laundry, the clothes will end up cleaner. Writing progress is less predictable. In summer, especially, I find it almost impossible to overcome the resistance which arises from doubt, lack of time, and lack of discipline.

"Maybe there just isn't a good reason that I can't answer the question, but I want there to be a good reason. Writing is this weird combination of something that feels like an indulgence and a duty and a form of torture and source of hope. It's too much for my brain to sort out, so, much of the time, I avoid it. Obviously, I'm over-thinking the whole thing, and I should take the NIKE approach."

I so appreciated this thoughtful reply (even though I had to beg for it). One telling sentence, for me, was this one: *Demands of everyday life have practical urgency which writing lacks.* When we were Spalding students, our deadlines provided practical urgency and justification for writing. By meet-

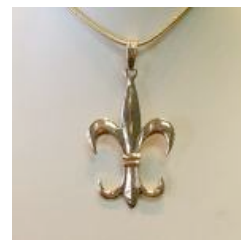
ing those deadlines, we reached our goal: the diploma.

I set up personal deadlines to keep myself productive, but I'm like everyone else: in a time crunch, writing is the activity that I postpone. I know that's due, in part, to the fact that (as Pearl shared) "writing is so full of unknowns." I agree with Pearl. X amount of creative time does not necessarily produce X amount of success, so how do we justify that time to others and to ourselves? Yes, we do set aside our laptops when someone in the house is out of clean underwear, or the dog needs to go to the vet. It's the proactive-reactive tug-of-war I spoke about in my previous column, but it's more than that.

As Pearl said in her email, it's "almost impossible to overcome the resistance which arises from doubt . . ." It seems that doubt is a hurdle as real as any other. I've often wondered if I'm subconsciously relieved when laundry piles up, or I have to take my dad to the doctor, so that the choice to write or not to write is taken out of my hands. I think that's a definite possibility. Because if I don't have time to write, I can't fail at it, can I?

The honesty in Pearl's response touched on my own fears as a writer, fears that I avoid acknowledging because doing so makes them all too heavy. I'm guessing that she could be right. We need to quit over-thinking it, and we need to leave off justifying and apologizing, even to ourselves. We need to learn to JUST DO IT.

Here's a suggestion for those of you who are not on a regular writing schedule. Try this for a month, and let me know how it goes: **write one sentence every day.** I'll be waiting for those cards, letters, and emails to tell me how/if this helped you. Don't make me come after you all!



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