

Fall/Winter 2023

A Publication of the South Coast Writing Project

Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California at Santa Barbara

POSTSCWRIP

How I Wrote a Book

by Judy Garey ('98)

When I retired from Ventura College as a theater professor, aside from finally enjoying some leisure time, I renewed my association with SCWriP and had the pleasure of serving as a Returning Fellow for the Summer Institute 2014-2018. In the SCWriP Summer Institute we started every day with...well...writing, and I had no idea what to compose. Everyone else seemed to have an abundance of emotional stories; I was stumped.

As I sat there one morning wishing I could read a good book rather than having to write something, I reflected on my language arts colleagues' comments about reading: that their students would read, but often lacked an understanding of the content of what they read. How, these teachers wondered, could they improve their students' reading comprehension? And this conundrum sparked an idea for me: could language arts students learn from the way theater students read?

As a theater professor and stage director, I have always recognized how much theater students learn about a piece of literature when they participate in creating a stage production of it. They don't "study" the text as they would in an English class, but through participation in the rehearsal process, their comprehension is substantial. How is this possible? What do they do in the rehearsal process to illuminate the text?



What I realized is that theater students don't "study" the text; they *inhabit* it. They know the meaning of the dialogue because they use the words to achieve their characters' objectives; they understand the era in which the story is set because they embody its style, mannerisms, and customs, and they recognize how the sequence of actions in the story builds from the inciting incident through the rising action, the climax, and denouement because they experience it.

And thus, I found something to write about and the seed of a book: defining and simplifying the rehearsal strategies of actors, designers, and directors into a reading approach to facilitate comprehension for all students.

Getting an academic book published is no easy task, involving, among other things, finding a publisher even interested in your work, and a proposal process, including why you are qualified to write about this topic and how your book will differ from others already published in the field. Also needed are an annotated table of contents, sample chapters, peer review, changes, modifications, and rewrites, second peer review, more rewrites, extensive work with an editor for syntax and grammar, integrating graphics, and a variety of additional tasks too numerous to mention.

But finally, it came together as *Theater, Drama, and Reading: Transforming the Rehearsal Process into a Reading Process*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), December, 2021 and available through NCTE Publications and Amazon.

Text on the back of the book will tell you:

In the same way that theater artists engage in a rehearsal process to transform printed words into a world of people, space, sound, and action for the stage, readers can learn a modified version of this process to make text visible and concrete, unlocking its meaning.

If you would like more information, I would love to hear from you at jfgsb@cox.net

It has been a pleasure to have the time in my retirement years to continue the work I started at VC and have continued through SCWriP: connecting the wonderful world of theater to the subject matter of other disciplines.

I never thought of myself as a writer, and now I have published a book. Thank you, SCWriP. I hope my story encourages others to write.

"The purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself."

Albert Camus

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PostSCWriP is a now-and-then publication of the South Coast Writing Project

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From the Editor

by Cynthia Carbone Ward ('01)

I have a sincere conviction that this journal matters, even if only to a few. We send it off each time like a message in a bottle, and I am never sure who reads it, but I picture a few folks out there on the other shore—writing, and curious, and receptive. Thank you. You're out there doing your best, even if no one is paying attention, and you are kind enough to share what you've learned. In fact, the number of submissions we've received has taken me by surprise. More than forty pages' worth, the writing runs the gamut from poems to lengthy essays, from tongue-in-cheek to heart-in-hand, all of it prompted by a healthy desire to talk to one another.

There's an old Joni Mitchell song about an unknown musician she heard playing his clarinet on a city street: "I heard his refrain as the signal changed/He was playing real good, for free." I like that spirit. I like the idea that there are people quietly writing and connecting, living life attentively, playing their music for no one in particular, and doing good work because they refuse to do otherwise. I like the idea that the act of writing has its own intrinsic worth, which sharing can deepen if it happens to resonate with a reader or a listener. I like the idea that PostSCWriP can be a venue for this.

And I think a sense of community and camaraderie emerges on these pages. Judy Garey tells how she surprised herself by writing an actual book; Peggy Kelly describes a battle against those who would arbitrarily ban books, and an encounter with T.C. Boyle. Matt Demaria grapples with the lost art of letter-writing, and Michael Tapia shares a letter he sent in response to a matter of profound importance. Kristin Jensen Dodge debuts a chapter from a YA novel she is writing; Erika Cobain and Ron Hertz describe brushes with fame; Ian Foutz revisits his stint on *Jeopardy*; Kevin Buddhu takes us along on a five-country trek across Europe by gravel bike, musing along the way on how the experience relates to teaching. And there are poems by Chella Courington, Lucia Lemieux, Kerri Yim, and others.

Naomi Shihab-Nye has described poetry as a house with thousands of glittering windows: "Our words and images, land to land, era to era, shed light on one another," she writes. "Our words dissolve the shadows we imagine fall between."

Maybe PostSCWriP is a little house with glittering windows, from which we beam our lights, and maybe our words will matter to someone, maybe not, but we'll keep playing, real good, for free.

So thank you to all who contributed to this quiet little journal or are reading it now. I don't think we are numerous, but we understand each other, and it's good for us to connect. The darkness around us is deep.

This edition of PostSCWriP is dedicated to the memory of Darlene Green, forever beloved by her family and the wide community of friends, colleagues, and former students whose lives she touched.

Cynthia

Director's Message (A Missed Oprah-tunity) by Tim Dewar

The idea of offering the theme, "Brushes with Fame," for PostSCWriP appeared this summer, as ideas often do, at a SCWriP event. As several of us gathered to write and learn together, someone reported that Ian Foutz ('13) had appeared on "Jeopardy" the night before. We all wanted to know the backstory. How did he get selected? What is it like behind the scenes? Soon we were sharing our own stories of TV appearances, dinner parties, restaurant sightings, and the like. Everyone had a story to tell. Here's mine:

It is summer, school is just out, and I have gathered with some mountain bike riding teacher-friends for a mid-week, mid-morning ride. We meet downtown, then set off for the Romero trailhead in the hills above Montecito, which means a lot of road miles before we even get to the dirt, but we are young, eager to enjoy summer. None of us has ridden to the Romero trail before. More typically, bikes get loaded in cars and driven to the trail. I know how to get there if I am driving, but one of my friends claims to know a shorter way, along the less-travelled, tree-lined, quasi-private lanes of mansions and estates. This will allow us to ride side-by-side, chat, and wonder what lies behind the elaborate gates.

A mile or two later, we are climbing the steepest street this side of San Francisco's Lombard. I have dropped to my lowest gear and am cussing my "friend" between panting breaths. He is a few yards behind me, the others are scattered behind him. Sweat is running off the tip of my nose in a steady stream. I can't imagine climbing the dirt trails of Romero Canyon. I'm not sure I'll even make it to the top of this hill.

I lift my head just enough to look forward, hoping to see the top. Instead, I see a phalanx of women spread across the road. They are power walking down the hill, shoulder-to-shoulder. I glimpse smiles and color coordinated velour warm-ups before dropping my head to continue grinding away.

I want to "paperboy," swinging back and forth across the street to avoid the incline, but their presence and my ego make that impossible. Instead, I purse my lips to control my exhalation, slow my cadence, and pedal steadily. My friends close from behind; we are now a column. The women have closed the distance between us. I look up again at the row of exercising women. I am nearly cross-eyed with the effort of climbing and looking cool in lycra. They are grace and beauty and money.

Another five yards and I will be past them. Head down, I let them have all the roadway they want. As I move to the curb, I give a head nod to acknowledge them.

"Hello, boys," a single voice calls out.

Breathless, speechless, I keep pedaling. So do my friends. As we top the climb, we are alongside each other.

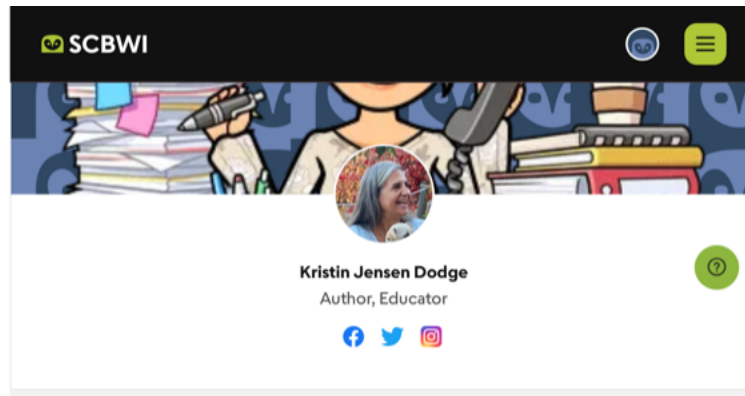
"That was Oprah."

"Yeah."

If I were in that situation now, I would stop to tell her about the Writing Project, sweaty bike gear and all. Who cares about being cool about celebrity sightings when we have such a good thing to brag about?

Write soon,

Tim



Hiding Ugly by Kristin Jensen Dodge ('04)

The following is an excerpt of a Young Adult novel that Kristin started during those Summer Institute morning pages. She is currently working on final edits, tortured with the need to cut 10-25,000 words. She will retire in June 2024 and hopes to have an agent by then. In the meantime, she has had students reading the drafts, and they are her best source of good feedback and advice about where to cut. But there's a lesson here: you never know what you may be starting when you sit down with your journal, and when you heard the scratching of pencils or tapping of laptops during those daily morning pages, you may well have been overhearing the prelude to a substantial work.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Day One at Hastings Middle School

We enter the front gates a few minutes before the first warning bell. "Can you find your way to your classes, Lana?"

"What? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Okay, fine," and the exhaustion of the morning floods over me. "I'll meet you at the front gate after school. Unless you want to meet me..."

But Lana has already walked off before I can finish. I don't even know why I bother to ask Lana if she wants to eat lunch together. How could two sisters from the same mom and dad be so totally different? We don't like any of the same things. We don't even look like sisters. Lana is green-eyed, blonde, athletic, hates school and is super funny. I have brown eyes, olive skin, dark brown hair, and although I love to dance, I am terrible at almost every sport. And funny? Nope...way too serious, at least that's what Mom always tells me. I'm much happier sitting quietly drawing, reading, listening to music, and doing homework. No wonder teachers seem to love me.

At that moment a young and bubbly teacher appears at my side, like I'd made her magically appear with my thoughts. Her hair is black with hot pink highlights and she's wearing a black leather jacket over a vintage dress from the sixties with shiny black flats. "Are you lost?"

“Oh...” I gather up my energy and give her a big smile.
“Maybe a little. I think room 12 is over that way?” I hold out the printed schedule the office gave me when we registered.

“You got it. I’m heading that way too. Oh, I’m Ms. Wexler. I’m a student teacher with Mr. Garcia for this semester.”

“Mr. Garcia? I have him for math.” I look at my schedule again. I’d memorized the teachers’ names and their subjects, but not the class periods. “Third period.”

“Well, then I’ll get to see you again later today,” Ms. Wexler says to me, and her smile lets me know that she’s going to be a great teacher.

We keep on walking. My face feels hot when I realize my bad manners. “Emma,” I say to her. “Sorry. I’m Emma. Emma Hansen.” Mom would have given me a glare or even a sharp pinch. Appearances matter. You have to present yourself in the right way to the world if you want to get anything from it.

“Very nice to meet you, Emma. And here you are. I’ll see you third period.”

I smile and wave at Ms. Wexler as I eagerly walk to the open door of room 12. My favorite subject, Language Arts, first period.

As soon as I walk inside the room, the teacher greets me. “You must be Emma. Welcome. I’m Mrs. Daniels. Once I get class started, I’ll get you caught up with what we’re doing, okay? You can sit right here.”

I get the perfect seat. Front row center. Mrs. Daniels is wearing leggings with an Indian tunic blouse over brown leggings and very cool leather sandals. I like her style. A long silver braid hangs down her back. I take in what’s on the walls. One of my favorite quotes, “Be the change.” An academic word wall. And bookshelves. Lots and lots of bookshelves. Heaven. For the first time in weeks, I am really aware of my breathing, but in a good way. I can feel the warm flow of oxygen moving through me, and the stillness inside. It’s like every muscle in my body has suddenly released its hold on me. As promised, as soon as she gets the class started, while the rest of the students begin writing in their journals, Mrs. Daniels pulls up a stool right next to me.

“So, Emma, we’re already halfway through our reading circle books. I’m sorry you weren’t here when I let students choose their groups, but it’s not a problem if you’d like to pick your group.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. You can put me wherever.”

“Well, how about you look over these five books and see which one calls to you? Like I said, we’re already about halfway through the books. I can get you an audio book if that helps you to catch up.” Mrs. Daniels says this as she places the stack of books on my desk. None of them are more than two hundred fifty to three hundred pages.

My mouth opens to let it all spill out, and then my mouth closes knowing that I won’t, or can’t.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I love reading. I’ll get the book half read by tomorrow.” I shrink a bit. Did that sound like I was bragging? It definitely did. Mom’s voice rings in my head, “You think you’re so perfect? So smart? Might be true, but you know what happens to the show-offs.” Perfect, Emma, you forgot your most important rule. DO NOT make a bad first impression. You are NOT a show-off.

But Mrs. Daniels gives me a big smile and a little pat on my arm. “Ah...wonderful, another bookworm is exactly what this class needs.”

Out of the Dust is the only one of the five books I haven’t already read. I choose that one and Mrs. Daniels jots down my name and the book number in her notebook and then hands me a purple folder with information about her class inside. “You can use this class period to go over all of that,” and she gestures to the purple folder, “and if you have time left over you can start the book. Good choice, by the way.” Mrs. Daniels’ large wooden peace sign earrings sway with the nod of her head. “Your group will be up to page 112 by tomorrow. You’ll find the guidelines and writing prompts in that folder. Don’t stress out if you don’t get to page 112. And please, don’t worry about the reading response prompts dated before tomorrow. Okay?” Her wrinkle lines show up as she knits her eyebrows together. “It can’t be easy starting a new school at this point in the year.”

Poor Mrs. Daniels looks way more stressed than I feel. Sure, first day at a new school when everybody already knows everybody and they’re all sizing you up...yeah, that could be stressful. I’d seen it on tv shows, the bullies and the cliques, but it really isn’t that bad. Teachers, especially the ones like Mrs. Daniels, they can see me. I can feel that.

And for a split second I think about telling Mrs. Daniels about all of it. Mrs. Daniels for sure feels like the kind of teacher who would wrap her arms around me. I could tell her about the chaos. About the broken promises. About the booze and the drugs and the men. About having to keep it together when Mom isn’t around. It was a little better with the Doc, but even he let things get out of control with the crazy parties they’d have. My mouth opens to let it all spill out, and then my mouth closes knowing that I won’t, or can’t.

They, the teachers, they see what I want them to see, and they like it, they like me. I can breathe at school. It’s hard to explain, but school is my “happy place”. And all I want anyone to see is Emma the good student, the hard worker, the respectful, responsible, sweet young lady from a good family. I know I have to hide the stuff that’s ugly.



Night Music by Lucia Lemieux ('16)

For Lois Nettleton (1927-2008)

I met her in the alto section of the church choir.
Lois is such an old-fashioned
name, but she was ageless.

Perfect skin—smooth, pore-less, glowing.
A strong inner light shone through,
visible in her smile.

I was new to Hollywood then.
She made me feel welcome,
and became part of my new life here.

*Oh! You read music?
I like to be near singers
who read.*

It took a month before I realized who she was.
You're Lois NETTLETON! I said at one rehearsal.
She smiled, and even blushed a little.

I told her how much I loved her in
The Midnight Sun, one of *Twilight Zone's*
most memorable episodes.

Thank you. I was seventeen, she said.
I felt dumb that, of all her credits, I mentioned that one.
She was a major Broadway and television actress, after all.

She sang a solo at our concert, and it was the first time
I heard her live. I never realized how great she was
until she sang Sondheim: *The coffee cup, I think about you...*

For a wedding present, Lois gave us the key
to her New York apartment. *I heard you were honeymooning there. Enjoy!*
Her place on East 57th overlooked the Hudson, had a doorman and everything.

It was a little odd making love amongst her
most personal possessions—her figurines
from her travels, her lace tablecloths.

*I have an idea for a sister movie, I said, one day at rehearsal.
It's for you, and Joanne Woodward.
You look a bit alike.*

It was so presumptuous of me.
*Oh, how lovely, she said. I know Joanne.
That would be such fun!*

Lois was a frequent guest at the gatherings
in our Hollywood home, and trekked
out to Thousand Oaks when we moved there.

She only declined one event.
For some reason,
I kept her voice mail message:

*Oh, my darlings, thank you for always including me,
but I'm not able to make it. Sweetie, please give my love
to Ray, and a big hug to precious Zoe. Happy New Year!*

A month later, she was gone.
She never said she was ill.
Very few people knew, except her very closest friends.

The Lois I knew was real. Genuine.
And is now gone.
The screenplay I wrote for her is too.

No one else can play that part.
For me, Sondheim tunes, New York and
Hollywood will never be the same.

A note from Lucia: Thinking about "brushes with fame", I could have written about Warren Beatty speaking at my graduation from the American Film Institute and shaking his hand. I could have discussed my encounter with Kirk Douglass in a seminar, him saying in front of the entire audience that I was an intelligent woman, and my question (about the film *Lust for Life*) was one of the best he was ever asked. Not that I can remember the question. Or I could write about working at ABC in Century City and riding the elevator with Robert Urich and Richard Chamberlain or being on the *Moonlighting* set and getting a hug and a picture from Bruce Willis. But I chose to write about a famous person that I knew pretty well: the actress Lois Nettleton.

T.C. Boyle and The Book Ban

by Peggy Kelly ('98)

When I began my sixth year of teaching, I had no way of knowing that before the year was out, I would be confronted by angry parents hell-bent on disrupting our curriculum, nor that I would come face to face with a literary rock star, but that's exactly what happened, and the events of that year are etched in my memory.

Once the local conservatives got wind of freshmen being assigned a story about pot-smoking teens attempting to rape a young woman, all hell broke loose. They were on the warpath to ban the book.

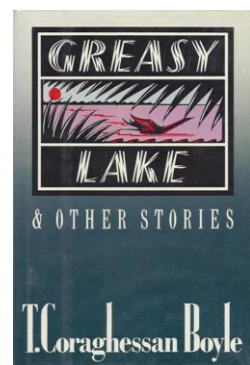
Back in the winter of 1994, I was teaching English at a public high school in a rural valley in Southern California. It was a great place to teach, in part because the department philosophy was to give teachers a lot of autonomy in selecting the works their students would read. We had class sets of hundreds of novels and we could choose to teach different books every year if that's what we wanted to do.

The only place this became a challenge was with the freshman curriculum, which was an introduction to genres. Our freshmen studied short stories, poetry, plays, and novels, and we wanted their teachers to have the same abundance of texts to choose from. Our solution was to adopt X. J. Kennedy's *Literature*, a college freshman anthology with over 1500 pages of poems, stories, and plays. With one purchase, we acquired thousands of new texts, and the freshman English teachers were happy with the book.

One of our young English teachers was particularly excited about the options the anthology contained. He was an interesting guy who played in a rock band on the weekends and was often attired in black leather. Some students had nicknamed him "Dr. Death," I assume for his clothes, and also his rather dark outlook on life.

Things had been going smoothly with the curriculum and our literature anthology until the day Dr. Death chose to assign his freshmen to read "Greasy Lake," a short story by T.C. Boyle. It's a gritty story about three self-professed bad boys who get into some serious trouble, and it was more suitable reading material for seniors than freshmen. But it was definitely on brand for Dr. Death.

It is important to note that Dr. Death just happened to decide to assign "Greasy Lake" at the height of the voucher movement in the United States. Conservatives were pushing hard to discredit public schools and encourage legislation that would allow them to use public funds to finance their students' private school educations. Once the local conservatives got wind of freshmen being assigned a story about pot-smoking teens attempting to rape a young woman, all hell broke loose. They were on the warpath to ban the book.



I had only been teaching for a few years, but I was the department chair, and I had to lead my department in fighting the ban. We got attacked hard. I remember sitting in a Student Study Team meeting after school when a livid parent stormed in, book in hand, to register her displeasure with the anthology. By this time, parents had been scouring the book for more offensive works, and she had come across John Updike's "A & P," a much-anthologized story about a young man who makes the grand gesture of quitting his job when his manager ejects three young women for wearing swimsuits in the market. This mother had interrupted our meeting to inform me that Updike's narrator, in describing one of the young women, had likened her breasts to "two scoops of vanilla ice cream." She found the comparison and the focus on bikini-clad breasts to be highly inappropriate. I have no recollection of how we got her out of the room, but I do recall being taken aback by her anger, and I realized that this whole thing was blowing up.

This was a serious and painful time, especially for me as a young leader, but there was an interesting silver lining to it. Students would take the anthology home at night and their parents would look for offensive material, which they would often bookmark to find more readily and refer to it when it came time to storm the school board meeting. I don't think our freshmen students ever read as much as they did that year, and we didn't even have to assign it. They were of course drawn to read the works that their parents found most offensive.

I freely admit that "Greasy Lake" had been a questionable choice, but their banning efforts soon expanded to include "A & P," several other short stories, and even the poem "Carnation Milk":

Carnation Milk is the best in the land;
Here I sit with a can in my hand—
No tits to pull, no hay to pitch,
You just punch a hole in the son of a bitch.

The horror of mentioning "tits," bovine or otherwise, and the use of the expression "son of a bitch" were considered too much for their innocent freshmen children to handle. It didn't matter to them that no one had ever assigned the poem. It was there in plain sight on page 557 of the book.

As the parents cherry-picked passages for evidence, it struck me that in order to fear these texts, they had to assume that their children were incapable of using critical thinking and interpreting literature. Sure, the bad boys in "Greasy Lake" do some terrible things, but any reader with an iota of sense will realize that their lifestyle is not one to emulate. If anything, it's a cautionary tale, but the parents were only interested in what the stories said, not what they meant.

As things in the valley were building up to the climax of our story – a standing-room-only board meeting with loud voices on both sides – an interesting event occurred in a wealthy enclave about thirty miles to the north.

I had waitressed my way through college, and I still liked to moonlight on Friday nights. I enjoyed the camaraderie, the occasional free drinks, and the extra money (since, as I frequently pointed out to my friends, one of the drawbacks of teaching was that kids don't tip). I have a hard time now imagining how I managed to teach all week with a thirty-minute commute each way from the beach town where I lived and then show up every Friday at six to waitress all night, but I did it, and I enjoyed it.

The town I was waitressing in could be swanky, but I was working at a bar and grill that served burgers, nachos, potato skins, and a lot of liquor. It was a Friday night and I had set aside my worries about the upcoming board meeting to serve rum and cokes and mud pie to the locals. Standing and waiting for my drink order, I overheard a conversation between two patrons sitting at the bar.

One guy was saying that he read a lot of Tom Stoppard, and the other guy replied, “You should try reading T.C. Boyle.” Of course, my ears perked up at that, as T.C. Boyle was the author of the story that was the source of all my troubles.

What were the odds?
Here I was in the midst
of a book banning
crisis, and the author of
the offending story was
right in front of me.

Now, if you’ve ever seen a photo of T.C. Boyle, you know that his appearance is distinctive and unforgettable. He is tall, gaunt, with a goatee, a frizzy pompadour, and a stray lock of hair that rests on his forehead. As I recall, he had a rattail and faded blue dye in his hair, and his sartorial style was not unlike Dr. Death’s. I looked up to see who was recommending Boyle’s work to discover that it was Boyle himself. I couldn’t help but interrupt with “You’re T. C. Boyle!” which he admitted was true.

What were the odds? Here I was in the midst of a book banning crisis, and the author of the offending story was right in front of me. Clearly fate had stepped in to lend a hand. I told him all about what was happening at my school, and he listened attentively. Then I made my plea. “Will you come to the board meeting to speak up for your work?” I asked.

His answer was no. He explained that his presence at the meeting would be counterproductive and, looking at the man sitting in front of me, I realized that he was right. My department and I would have to fight this battle on our own.

The night of the board meeting, the room was packed – standing room only with more people outside. Angry parents shared their views, and we teachers explained our choices. I was surprised to see several senior citizens get up to speak, as they were clearly too old to have children at the school. I assumed that they were there to share their old-fashioned ideals that had been offended, but the opposite was true. Instead, they spoke of having seen censorship and repression first-hand and cautioned against allowing McCarthy-like ideals to take hold in our district.

The system worked as it was supposed to. The board listened to the arguments and then determined that proper procedures had been followed in the adoption of the text. The time for public input had been before the book was approved, and it was too late to complain now. Parents could opt their students out of reading certain works within it, but the book would stay.

And that was it. We all accepted the decision, things returned to normal, and we put the incident behind us. I have to admit that for a long time I harbored some resentment for Dr. Death. If he just hadn’t assigned that story, I thought, none of this would have happened. But I was being naive. Those people were spoiling for a fight, and if he hadn’t taught “Greasy Lake,” they would have found something else to protest.

I wonder how this story would play out if it happened today. For one thing, parents back then didn't have social media or texting. They had to rely on email, phone calls, and clandestine meetings to organize, and the fight stayed confined to our small community. How might things have blown up if it had gone viral on social media?

For another, we had the law on our side. Ed Code prescribed certain procedures that we had followed correctly. I look to states where legislation is now being passed to stop teachers from teaching anything that might make students or their parents uncomfortable, and I despair. Provoking a certain amount of discomfort is what so much literature is designed to do. How will our students learn to think if they never encounter ideas that challenge them? And how can our teachers teach when a single word or image in a book can result in public outcry and possible dismissal?

I didn't stay at the school or the bar and grill much longer. My husband and I moved to a different rural valley, not too far away, where we could afford to buy a house just two miles from my new school. Before I left, I ran into Boyle a few more times at the bar. He came in often and was known as "Doc" to the regulars. His novel *The Road to Wellville* was being made into a movie at the time, and I was interested to hear all about the process, but I soon realized that he came there to just be Doc, and not to talk craft with a literary fan girl, so I mainly left him alone.

Still, I know that he understood and appreciated what I had gone through. One day he brought me a copy of his book *"Greasy Lake" and Other Stories*, and in the front, he had signed it:



Peggy,
Thanks for defending me in the valley.
T.C. Boyle

How Do I Say Goodbye? by Matt Demaria ('04)

Okay, just to clarify, this is not an article about how to plan a retirement speech or how to end a toxic relationship. Rather, it's a desperate plea sent out to you, my colleagues, for guidance on appropriately concluding my letters to students' families. Like many teachers, I am in the habit of regularly sending out notices to the caregivers of my middle school students. You know. The normal stuff. *The school jog-a-thon is on Friday, so let's keep those pledges coming in!* Or, *Mesa's 3rd academic quarter ends next Wednesday, so all missing assignments are due on the 13th!* Never anything too demanding, like *Please confiscate your child's cell phone and make them sit down and READ A BOOK!* (which is what I really want to write).

I've been teaching for more than three decades, so I've sent out several hundred letters to families by now. The problem is that I still end most of these messages with *Sincerely, Matt Demaria*. It feels so formal. Signing it, I feel like I am holding on to some Victorian-era writing practice or clinging to some habit that I should've released years ago. I've tried replacing *Sincerely* with *Cheers*, but that doesn't feel natural; it seems like I'm trying to pass as a recent visitor to the UK (which would be a lie) or as an Australian (which I'm not). I've also tried phrases such as *Wishing you well* and other Hallmark-sounding closings, but then it feels like I'm trying too hard. The problem is, I know most of my students' families fairly well, and I'm on a first-name basis with many parents, so *Sincerely* just seems so formal. I'm curious if any of my colleagues have similar feelings of self-doubt when signing off on their letters.

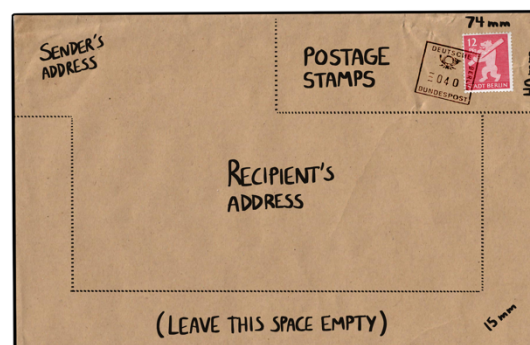
The idealistic me imagines a resurgence in letter-writing, even with today's youth. However, is the need to receive immediate feedback in communicating with others too great?

Perhaps the larger problem is that letters are becoming antiquated. Now that so much connecting is done via texts and social media postings, it's rare to send or receive a personal letter these days. I became acutely aware of this recently when I gave my 8th grade students an assignment to write a letter of thanks to the kind woman who had visited our class as part of our community's "Women in History" program. The students were enthusiastic about writing to this guest, who had done a fabulous job portraying Harriet Tubman for us earlier in the week, telling us all about her amazing life. However, many of them needed direct instruction on how to date their letter, where to write the greeting, and how to correctly format their writing. When it came to the closing, I showed them how to properly end it. We came up with some variations to *Sincerely* that seemed appropriate for this task, such as *With Appreciation* and *In admiration*. The letters were heartfelt and well-written, and it tickled me to imagine the smile on the face of the recipient when she opened the large manila envelope full of the students' hand-written thank yous.

The idealistic me imagines a resurgence in letter-writing, even with today's youth. However, is the need to receive immediate feedback in communicating with others too great? Also, the minimum cost of sending a personal letter via the U.S. Postal Service is currently a whopping \$0.66 (something I didn't realize until I just now looked it up). Earlier this year I read a short book, *84 Charing Cross Road*, a collection of letters written back and forth between a freelance writer living in New York and a London bookseller through the 1950s and 60s. It's a beautiful story of a friendship that develops between two very different people who share a common love of books. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could get our students to begin writing letters to young people on other continents, perhaps initiating life-long friendships? While it might be too far-fetched a wish to hope that letter writing will experience a renewal, trends do return...so you never know what might become the newest fad.

Recently, my 7th grade students have begun wearing baggy jeans that are reminiscent of the ones I wore as a young man in the 1990s. One boy wore a pair with big side pockets, designed like ones we used to call "painter pants." While I wove between desks, distributing papers to him and his classmates, I commented on the style. "I used to wear a pair of pants just like those, Jose!" I excitedly shared. The look of panic on his face revealed the concern that I had somehow removed the "cool factor" of his new jeans, so I immediately switched to a different topic, asking about his recent football game or something else that could hopefully restore his dignity.

Maybe I am ready to retire. It's getting harder for me to connect with my students. I am no longer as quick to pick up on those cues of what to say (and, more importantly, what not to say) in my classes. Now that my own two children are in their mid-twenties and I'm not receiving their regular counsel across the dinner table about what's hip and what's not, or what's acceptable and what's taboo, I'm more prone to inadvertently use expressions or phrases in class that will evoke twitters or raised eyebrows due to their new meanings. It's always interesting to discover what novel associations are made with words I've been safely using for decades! Until retirement, I guess I'll keep signing off my letters with *Sincerely*, knowing that I'm at least being safe. I just hope that my students' families know how much I love teaching their children, even with its insane ups and downs and its constant challenges....and I do mean that, sincerely.



In Loving Memory of Darlene Green ('06)

Darlene (Jones) Green passed away peacefully from ALS on Sept. 3, 2023 with her husband Harvey and loving children Shane and Chantel at her side.

Darlene and Harvey were married in 1979 while Harvey was employed as a teacher and coach at Santa Ynez High School. The next year the family moved to Lompoc and Darlene was hired as the bilingual community liaison for the Lompoc Unified School District, then enrolled in the field of elementary education at Cal Poly SLO, receiving a teaching credential. She taught at Mary Buren Elementary, Hapgood Elementary, Fillmore Elementary and Manzanita Elementary schools during her 34-year teaching career.



Darlene was a force, known for her distinctive and full-bodied laughter, her enthusiasm, energy, creativity, deep knowledge of language and literacy, instant friendships, love for learning, sports, and a singularly outrageous sense of humor. In the words of her son Shane, “Like a concierge in the multilingual, multicultural hotel of life, she brought people together, introduced people to new things, and tirelessly helped them to achieve their goals and better their lives.”

She remained active in many arenas long after her retirement, fought her cruel diagnosis with bravery and grace, and is forever beloved by family and a wide community of friends, colleagues, and former students whose lives she touched. She was passionate, kind, and unforgettable.

“Heaven has gained a new activity coordinator,” writes Shane. “Expect angels to be getting stuck in trees they probably shouldn’t have climbed, jumping from dangerously high ledges, and getting lost on hikes that are too advanced, all while having the most fun they’ve had since entering heaven and discovering they are capable of way more than they realized.”

For more information about Darlene’s remarkable life, please refer to this link: <https://www.noozhawk.com/darlene-green-of-lompoc-1954-2023/>



A Letter I Wrote About Something That Matters

by Michael Tapia ('94)

I wrote this letter to my local newspaper editor after reading a letter from a reader supporting school board policies requiring educators to out transgender students to their parents. It brought back memories of my own experience coming out to my mother decades ago when I was 29. It was shortly after having met Steven during my birthday celebration with friends at one of the gay clubs in Long Beach. I had a feeling that something serious was going to happen between us so I decided to come out to my mom with that expectation. Please keep in mind that I was raised in a pretty strict household during a time when being gay was not only ostracized and unacceptable but viewed as a psychological illness until 1973. I will spare you additional details but will let you know that although I know it was challenging for my mom, she accepted me as I was (and am), and over time, grew to love Steven as another son. We are now in our 41st year together.

Mr. Gallagher's letter not only confuses gender ideology with the long existing broad spectrum of human sexuality but also fails to acknowledge educators' primary responsibility of meeting student needs. His comments reflect a broader and carefully orchestrated political movement that has grown over the last 3 years by conservatives across our country intent on turning the clock back to a time when only heteronormative, Eurocentric, Christian values were reflected in all aspects of our lives including in our educational systems, not reflective of today's diverse and generally, more accepting citizenry. Whitewashing history, banning books, ignoring racism, and inserting right-wing ideology are also part of this effort.

He doesn't mention that LGBTQIA+ children are already marginalized in school because they're different than most of their peers and that LGBTQIA+ children of color face additional challenges. Nor does he recognize that student data across the U. S. and in our own state for those who identify as LGBTQIA+ show they regularly endure much higher levels

Coming out as LGBTQIA+ is difficult for many who identify as such, no matter the individual's age; it is particularly challenging to come out to a family member, especially if there is a lack of trust, strongly held religious beliefs, or a weak relationship.

of harassment, intimidation, violence and discrimination compared to their “straight” peers; the data is even more pronounced for those who identify as transgender or non-binary. No mention is made of current restrictions on best practice medical care for transgender youth or bans on transgender youth participating in school sports in U. S. states currently dominated by conservative politicians eager to appease their narrow minded constituents and dark money-funded PACs or misleading organizations.

Coming out as LGBTQIA+ is difficult for many who identify as such, no matter the individual’s age; it is particularly challenging to come out to a family member, especially if there is a lack of trust, strongly held religious beliefs, or a weak relationship. For many years now, our schools’ staff have been working hard to provide safe and secure learning environments for our diverse student bodies and though there is still work to be done, progress has been made. Forcing school personnel with whom students have developed trust to “out” their transgender students to their parents without their consent, may not only put these students in possible danger of additional mental and physical abuse if parents are unaccepting but can also lead to compromising previously established safe school environments, student homelessness and, in worst case scenarios, suicide.

Those few California school boards who are adopting transgender/non-binary student outing as a parental rights policy are neglecting to reveal the implicit goal of such policies: to alert parents who are disconnected from their own transgender child so they can intervene and try to change who they are. Clearly, these policies are not child/youth-centered and are counter to educators’ “children first” focus in their work as educators! Mental/physical health professionals and educators recognize that these children deserve our support so they can thrive in school. Students can’t learn in constant fear; forcing school staff to break the trust built over time with students is a lose/lose proposition.

**"Not everything that is
faced can be changed, but
nothing can be changed
until it is faced."**

James Baldwin

Summer Cento Poetry with Ron Alexander and Cie Gumucio



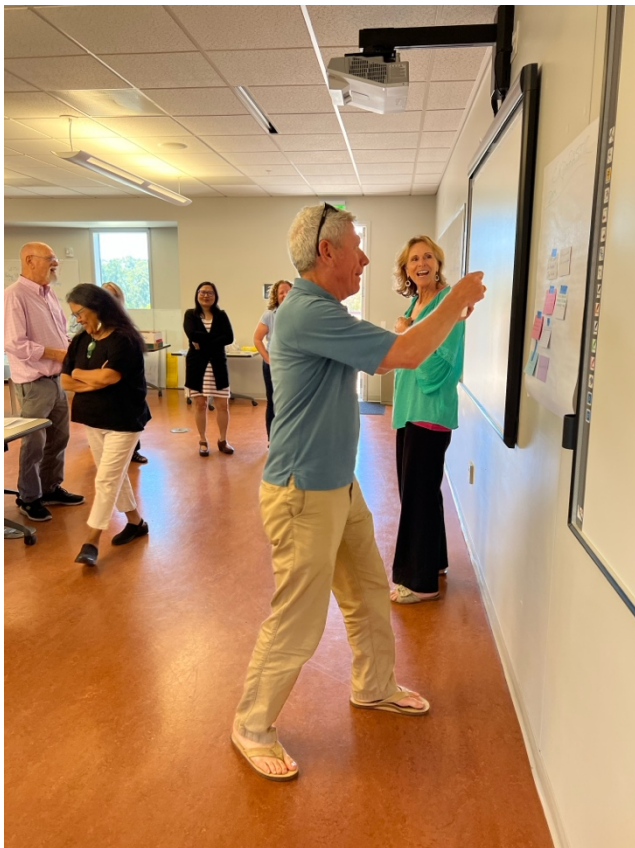
These poems are among the collaborative creations that began with deliciously random phrases on index cards assembled by nine poets at SCWriP's summer poetry extravaganza. Participants were Cie Gumucio, Ron Alexander, Tim Dewar, Henny Kim-Ortel, Jenn O'Toole, Nance Chaubell, Annette Cordero, Camille Despain, and Lori Anaya.

Wisdom of the Wild

Ah joy! You wake with me each dawn.
An iridescent orchestra of red and orange.
Filled with delight, my heart wild
for this tiny, fierce, dazzling thing.
The diminutive midge has a pernicious bite.

I found you in Avila Bay
where the kelp beds offer otter a place
for their pups and crabs still hide.
Reminding me to honor where I am from.

Gliding within the vast liquidity emanating
its corporeal presence in ironic quietude
and its quest for survival.
Diligent, committed to transformation.
Unconditional love.



Ekphrastic Poem

What are they thinking?
I'm just a pony after all.
You will never pat my head
with those big hands the way he did.

Gather your skirts like so many daffodils.
Were your girls bold or ragged?
Were you soft-spoken or loud?
If this were for freedom?
Just think!

The blue communion comingles
its blooms in momentary magic.
Magical, mushroom-y like Mabel's house,
flaming edges, not one blunt tip.
Her universe exists.

Out of the Ground: Poets Respond to Santa Barbara Botanic Garden

A book launch will be held in the Blaksley Library of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden on November 12th, 2:30 to 5:00 pm. To join us, reserve your spot. There will be an introduction by the editors and the Garden's Director of Education and Engagement, and select poets will be reading.

Peggy Kelly's "Wildflower Hike" and Lori Anaya's "Landscapes" are both included in this anthology of poems. The authors thank their SCWriP writing group for reserving space for creative writing each month.



Date & Time: Sunday, November 12, 2023, 2:30-5:00 pm

Cost: Free with admission to the Garden. Registration is required.

Location: the Blaksley Library at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden

[Register to Attend](#)

/ˈfɪ(ə)r/

Brushes with Flame by Erika Cobain ('13)

I love puns, I hate wildfires. The smell of campfires now nauseates me. I am an art teacher and a writer, I mix things up. As I wrote the title for this piece, a deliberate mishearing, of Tim's prompt, "brushes with fame," I thought about how funny that would be—paintbrushes on fire.

Fire is my students' new slang term these days, everything is fire. Ms Cobain that shirt is so fire. They spell it fir in texts. Too lazy to write the e? I had to ask. But they don't ask. They know, they just accept that fir is fire, the vowel sound is long, there is no magic e, Mrs. C. we don't need it.

I feel like I am holding a handful of brushes on fire lately- ethnic studies curriculum, the school's Rainbow Alliance club, new visual arts standards, the grading for equity strand of WASC, and a generation of students so plugged in and pandemicked, I am competing against Clash Royale: not winning.

I walk over to the sink and douse the brushes, scrub them with soap, until the water runs clear. Over my shoulder, I say for the hundredth time, "please put your phone in your backpack or your pocket."

They don't move. I hesitate, what are you playing? I am used to art being the most engaging subject.

It is a card game, in a digital space, like war, they challenge friends to play while they should be working on X, Y or Z. They are working on Hog Rider Knight Firecracker Bomb Tower.

Okay...

Brushes with Fame

I introduce myself, "I'm Erika, Cobain, *not* related to Kurt," I have a famous name. Sometimes I continue, "and my father-in-law is Tom Brady, but not *that* Tom Brady." Sometimes, we are trying to extricate ourselves from what we are and what we are not. Actors are like everyone else this way.

Brushes with fame? You mean like the time I saw Kiefer Sutherland driving by my school in Beverly Hills, chewing on a toothpick exactly the same way he did in the movie, *Stand By Me*? Man the crush I had on that film, chiseled jaw, tough kids, based on Stephen King's *The Body*. Such storytelling! I connect actors with their parts, and see them only as such. Kiefer, the bully with a baseball bat, hitting mailboxes; then Kiefer, the *Lost Boy*, roaming around as a vampire across a train trestle in a town I happen to live in now. Kiefer, the actor, driving down the road in LA, hunched behind the wheel trying not to be noticed, for when he is seen, he isn't, *really*.

Stars out of context, just trying to go about daily living, get mobbed. I step out into the hallway for my next parent conference, and see a camera crew trailing them, the man and his wife. They duck in. Quickly, I shut the door. "We so appreciate all you do for the arts," they tell me. I am looking at a face I recognize, but can't quite place. "Larry King," he holds out his hand, I shake it, and try to shut my brain up, *your kids go here and you have a wife*. Who knew? At home that night, say, "I saw Larry King Live today," and burst out laughing, as if that were his name and not his show. Well, actually I did see Larry King *live*. I never watched the show, I recognized the face.

I have trouble with this star struckness, these *are* regular folks after all. Jim Jacobs, one of the writers of the original Broadway musical, *Grease*, lived across the street from me when I was growing up. He stood outside with his two ambling black labs every night, and kept an eye on the neighborhood. He kept an eye on me, especially: I snuck out at night after my mom thought I was asleep. I'd roll the car out of the garage, and down the street before starting the engine. A Volkswagon rumbles. "*There goes Erika's car again, rolling down the street driving by itself...*" he would say, loud enough for me to hear. I would duck down behind the wheel, pretending he didn't see me. He would be there, when I returned coasting into the garage. "Safe and sound," he'd say, "goodnight, Erika."

Famous people live on forever because we can watch them over and over, we cannot repeat or replace an in person moment. That community, that space has an empty chair.

"Goodnight Jim, and *thanks*."

Denise Nettleson, Jim's wife, played the Pink Lady with a rolodex of boyfriends, Marty, on Broadway. Junior year, I earn the same role in our high school's performance of the musical. She shows me the blocking and dance moves for the song I am singing, *Freddy My Love*. I take too big a sip from the bottle on stage, cranberry juice goes up my nose, and I snort/sing my way through the song. The show must go on.

In 1998, when I first started teaching, I lived in an apartment building in Santa Monica which typified Hollywood: upstairs lived a screenwriter whose best friend would become the new *Superman*, below me, a sound editor. Next door, a girl who gave me awesome hand-me-downs, worked for Capitol Records. Once, she gave me a stack of shirts with a singer's name I had never heard of, *Nelly Furtado*. The screenwriter dated a woman who had been married to *Mick Jagger*, and said it with pride.

The apartment was tiny, the building 1920's style, flaking paint windows, creaky hardwood floors. My roommate and I mopped the white stairs each week because black soot from Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards made them dull grey. On Saturday nights, the neon lights and noise from the bar down the street echoed on the Magritte cloud painted ceiling in my room. The screenwriter and I attended the same Spanish class at UCLA, he told me about the opening in the Santa Monica apartment building. He's got a new desk chair, would I like his old one? I say yes, and claim the IKEA Jules chair with holes like swiss cheese, hoping a little writing magic will rub off on me.

My roommate, Mexican actress, *Lumi Cavasos*, rounds out the Hollywoodness of the building. One day she is hired *for* her accent, another time she asks me to help her speak *without* one. She won a few very big awards for that movie about *Water* and *Chocolate*. She worked all the time, saved every receipt and tracked her miles just like I did for teacher conferences.

I didn't envy her. That job seems like so much work. I tried not to mention who she was in the movies, to many people. She was my roommate, who happened to be an actress. I was a teacher, and a few weeks later a role came up for her to *play* a teacher character. She asked if she could shadow me at school. I said sure, how do you want me to introduce you?

"Miss Cavasos is here to learn what it is like to be a teacher," I told my class. I didn't tell the sixth graders her real job. They ignored her, or asked for help like they would with any student teacher. She seemed delighted. "Your job is so much work!" she told me at the end of the day.

The next day, a few of my students asked me, "Who was that lady here yesterday?"

"Why?"

They bombarded me, "I think I saw her on TV!"
"Why didn't you tell us she is an actress?" "I would have asked for her autograph!"

"That's why I didn't tell you."

Maybe it's because life and teaching have become more complex lately. Everything is fire, or seems to be *on fire*.

1989. I sit next to Ted Danson and Tom Hanks at the premiere of a funny little TV show about lifeguards on the beach. I saved a man from drowning once, and he was "not waving but drowning" for real. The story ran in the school newspaper, *The Sword and Shield*, and then, the local paper, *The Daily Breeze* (as small town as it sounds). My story stars in a commercial called *Surf 'n Survival* to promote the Junior Lifeguard Program. It plays on PBS, late at night, and few have ever seen it.

But the commercial benefits the LA County Junior Lifeguard Program, so I am invited to Manns Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Surfrider Foundation and Heal the Bay folks are in the audience, at the pilot screening. I sit next to my mom and a couple other famous folks. I am 16, I turn to look at the shoe propped up on a knee next to me. *Cool socks*, I notice. I look to see who has such a sense of humor.

I lean over to mom, then whisper, "Mom, that's Ted Danson,"

"What? Who?"

"Sitting next to you, the guy from *Cheers*! Sam!"

Blank look on her face.

"Hello," she introduces herself, "I am Ginger."

"I am Ted."

She doesn't know *Cheers* at all, but it doesn't matter, she chats with *anyone*.

At that moment, they call me up to the stage, Mom is left to talk with sock guy.

She turns to the guy next to him, "and who are you?"

"I am Tom." *Splash!*

"Thank you for accepting this check on behalf of the Junior Lifeguard Program..." I shake hands with the star of the show *Knight Rider*! I hold one side of an extra large check with the guy who drove a TALKING CAR! The Hoff says, "would you rescue me if I was drowning?" The audience laughs.

"Yeah, of course." I feel ridiculous and strange.

I used to connect with fictional stories à la Stephen King and Anne Rice, and actors who played at make believe: vampires, mermaids, talking cars, think Tom Hanks in *Splash* and *Big*. Now I'm drawn more to movies about real people, Captain Sully and Captain Phillips both played by Mr. Hanks. Something about surviving hard things: like landing planes on the Hudson; and connecting with Somali pirates resonates more with me now.

Maybe it's because life and teaching have become more complex lately. Everything is fire, or seems to be *on fire*. The air smells like smoke tonight, my FB feed reminds me two years ago today *and* seven years ago today we evacuated our home for wildfires. One year ago it was for extreme flooding in our area. The arrival of President Joe Biden in Henry Cowell State Park put our town on the map, because of a natural disaster. One disaster is enough. One star sighting would have been enough.

We look to stories to navigate life, we write stories to explore life.

I still feel a ridiculous and strange these days, but now I recognize imposter syndrome when it rears its head. I am seated in a rolling desk chair combo thing on the top floor of the education building at San Jose State University. I shake a little, shiver my paper flat to read it aloud, everyone in the room, but me, is a professor, published with Heineman, is somehow emeritus or other, invited to this amazing Advanced Summer Institute by Dr. Jonathan Lovell.

Jonathan writes about his suitcase, then John Wu writes about his new favorite bag. I imagine the affair John Wu is having with the new bag and write from the point of view of the old bag forgotten in the closet. This point of view writing comes from what Jonathan calls Elbow-esque Responses. I feel like something is working, but I am not sure. Laughter roars around the room and I feel connected, buoyed up. The writing works. I feel seen and heard.

2020, I am eager for the next ASI and barely register when Jonathan Lovell says he has a “touch of the flu.” His daughter, a nurse, is caring for him. Not to worry. The very next post is his obituary and I am rocked to the core. FB is no place to learn your mentor dies. I feel like my guts have been pulled out and strewn across the floor by some vicious monster. Nooooo!

The faces of our group, 1 by 1 inch weeping. Our first mourning on Zoom. I am grateful when Nancy Kennett, the writer who came up with my favorite Anthology title: *Menopause Without Teachers: An Homage to Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers by the 16 K-college participants*, pulls out the story of Jonathan's Saab. “You all are getting so maudlin, do you remember the time Jonathan lost his new car in the lake?” Laughter fills the tiny tear streaked faces. In that moment, we celebrate his life with a mix of grief and joy.

Famous people live on forever because we can watch them over and over, we cannot repeat or replace an in-person moment. That community, that space, has an empty chair. Shot through with holes like swiss cheese.

Over three years, 2016, 2017, and 2018, through the *Advanced Summer Institute* of the San Jose Area Writing Project, we read the work of teacher writers: Tom Romano's *Fearless Writing; 180 Days* by Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher, another year, Peter Elbow's, *Vernacular Eloquence*. We read, discuss, and write Elbow-esque responses to the writing, share the writing, write about each other's writing, and then compile the best of those pieces into an Anthology.

In the ISI, we meet *the people, who happen to be authors*. We ask questions, understand their thinking, and of course, we play the name game, the mnemonic way, so we can connect with and learn the names of who we are sitting next to, and know them as full humans. Afterward, we meet for dinner at a restaurant called the Caspian. Peter Elbow holds my child on his knee, we take a group photo. Baklava and books break down the proscenium. We all fret and strut upon a stage, until we pause, reach out for a handshake, help uplift, hear each other, see each other, watch out for each other in the darkness, bring a life preserver to someone in distress.

Connecting with actors is typically a one way connection we connect emotionally with the work they present, but not with them as people—teachers and writing groups connect both directions—here's how to paint a portrait, craft a sentence. Here's clash royale.

One mentor is enough. I got to meet Jonathan Lovell. (“That's *fir!*”)



Dish by Kerri Yim ('08)

We refuse to acknowledge
We are frogs.
And Earth is the pot.
Heat dome lids slapped down
Round our outdoor heads and second floor beds
Pushing us past livable swelters.
Absent cool air control
Takes a deathly toll.
We're in a slow roil boil.
Two steps forward
Breaking heat waves.
One step back
Followed by flooding rains.
This dance step lulls our brains.
Everything is going to be
A-Okay.
Except it's not.
June was the hottest month on record.
July was the hottest month on record.
Raise your hands
Short attention spans.
You weren't listening.
It's not going to reverse
In our lifetimes.
Crickets anyone?
We'll be lucky to eat frogs.

Forged In Resistance by Chella Courington ('03)

Chella Courington's new poetry collection, entitled *Hearts Forged in Resistance*, is being issued by Finishing Line Press on November 10th—

<https://www.finishinglinepress.com/product/hearts-forged-in-resistance-by-chella-courington/>.

Following are three of those poems.

Job's Daughter

I do not skulk from God He has no lip for me
only for my father—tall and brown

Hurling insults like thunderbolts God calls him *harelip*
Mooncalf Father hides seven days under three sheep

God forces a camel to sit on the cold earth head down
hands Father a flint *Slice the thorax* He bellows

Father turns away—not a butcher
The camel lives two hours My father crawls inside

the camel's skin and folds it over him—flesh still warm

Claudia Patricia Gomez Gonzalez Is Returned to Mother Earth

Children cry in cages at the border Drenched in dark dreams I wake
My mother reaches from the grave Nails catch the hem of my dress

I fall on granite Red streaks my shins Wrapped in a gray Mayan shawl
her mother sits silent My father sobs Dust spots his black suit

Dried red roses lay across his legs Thorns pierce the wool Her father weeps
#Claudia Patricia Gomez Gonzalez #Say her name Just turned twenty

Taking flight from violence in Guatemala Shot in the head by a Texas border agent
May 23 2018 Her mother and father receive the white coffin carrying their daughter—

cover lifted partway



“Chella’s Sunflower” by Robin Gowan, an acrylic and gouache work on paper created for the cover of Chella’s book.

Strength

I buy sunflowers today fuzzy faces canary yellow petals
stand them one by one sturdy stalks in an azure vase

7000 miles away tanks roll across Ukrainian borders
trying to wipe them off the map

grandmothers aunts fathers sons
throw their bodies against bully armor

hearts forged in resistance

Trekking As Teaching by Kevin Buddhu ('96)



At the Bread Loaf School of English twenty years past, John Warnock tasked us with a “Cultural Inventory” that asked for a written expression not of how we see the world, but *why* we see the world the way we do. The assignment asked us to note our perceptions and know from where they originated.

Writing the “Cultural Inventory ” cemented a notion for why I view the world as a teacher, a traveler, a surfer, and a cyclist. Riding a bicycle differs from seeing the world as a cyclist. Teaching your child to “play nice” with the neighbor's puppy differs from seeing the world with the eyes of a teacher—these two ideas do not mutually exclude each other, but instructing kindness differs from classroom instruction.

Perhaps we’ve all had a moment when a noticeably complex class of students leaves the room on the first day, and an unsettling apprehension arrives: What will the next nine

Teaching gave me the time to ride, and riding kept me sane and focused as a teacher.

months bring for me and these children? How will we mesh? What kind of community can we build? How effective will the structures, processes, and methods prove?

After and before this day, we collectively have our wits, our experiences, our compassion, and our grit brought forth by the clear understanding that, like the first pedal stroke of a three-thousand-mile trek, the year will roll forward of its own accord without our ability to stop its progress.

As high school teachers, we will “travel” for one hundred and seventy-nine more days with five classes, one hundred and seventy-nine students all told, and on its surface, this can make for a daunting and tremulous effort when seen as a whole—not unlike trying to cross Europe by dirt paths, farm roads, and single-track trails through the woods. For teachers, the Mondays arrive without asking, the Fridays appear of their own accord, and the months tumble inexorably toward June.

So too did the historically torrential rain, the searing heat, and the relentless winds that denoted the summer of 2023 in Europe heartlessly blast this rider as I passed through five countries on a loaded gravel bike. A school year and a bike tour somewhat parallel the travails and joys of teaching. Ditching the beloved mountain bike for a road bike to accumulate hours and build miles prior to departure reminded me of prepping in the summers for a more organized school year. Route planning 4,600 kilometers of travel on two wheels shares qualities with building an arc of instruction over ten months for a landing in June with an intentional notion of which genres students can write, how effectively they can speak and present, how relentlessly they pursue research, and how they build skills to work-through difficult texts. Course changes on the road mirror the ways we tweak our lesson plans between one day and the next in response to what seemed workable one day and once tried seemed less so.

John Warnock’s “Cultural Inventory” allowed this rider to understand that the qualities needed to cycle daily and for most of the day also helped this teacher remain engaged with teaching: endurance; patience; resolve; strength, humor; acceptance of and redress for failures; a love of logistical planning and its execution; an all-consuming desire to wring joy when possible; and to find existential pleasure and satisfaction from a grueling and challenging means of making one’s way through the world. I rode through thirty-six years of teaching with metaphorical wind howling over the handlebars or at times having currents hurtle me magically along by a euphoric tailwind.

Pedaling out of Stockholm’s old city eighty-three days ago to reach Spain does not the perfect parallel make to working through a school year. All parallels fall apart eventually, but when I faced a particularly daunting class or squared-off with a noticeably indifferent or incapable administrator, forty years of dark morning commutes, summers crossing continents, and years suffering endless days of searing heat, heartless rain, and leg-

breaking mountains steeled me to the common problems public and independent schoolteachers face daily. Teaching gave me the time to ride, and riding kept me sane and focused as a teacher.

Now retired, I chose to ride The European Divide in late summer and early fall. What follows are excerpts from Strava and Instagram, which collectively give a sense of my journey:

- European Divide, Day 1: Trust-in the Garmin: Maybe 5 kms of sharing the road with cars: the route took me on bike paths, single track, gravel roads, and importantly, the "long distance" bike trail: a car lane wide dedicated bike lane on every road. God bless the civil engineers and the cycling culture in this country!
- European Divide, Day 3: An Unfortunate Diversion: Rain ushered in the sunrise today and continued unabated for hours. Made for some serene riding. Decided to head south and west, away from the forest tracks...more thunder and lightning.
- European Divide, Day 5: Summer, right? Torrential wind awakened me at 4:00 AM, and abated very little until early afternoon, then the wind freshened to a stout head/side pressure to help me keep working and stay "warm." Wouldn't want to ride here in the winter if this is summer.
- European Divide, Day 6: Fishbelly White Hands: Raindrops on the Garmin screen as well as my iPhone display. Aside from puckered and pale extremities, stalled abilities to navigate due to water-ed screens, the skies shone gray and flat. Crossed a line and listened with one ear to podcasts, which kept the mind otherwise occupied from the rain's ingress. Cable-locked the bike to an extinguisher inside the grocery to put a moment of doubt into would-be thieves' minds.
- European Divide, Day 9: Sail Assist / Block Headwind: The rig spun-up nicely with a following wind, but as the wind clicked to a side, then a side/head, and finally a head wind the all-day rain grew to almost secondary concern. Almost. Even the lakes white capped. Running south trying to distance the worst of these fronts.
- European Divide, Day 10: Sidewind Stem Chewing: Blasting winds all day to the point that when exposed directly to shrieking gale from my right, I channeled my inner Froomie, gripped the drops, and ate my stem to provide the lowest amount of freeboard. Had to bank the bike over to the right as well on a perfectly straight road to keep outta da weeds.
- European Divide, Day 12: One Hand Giveth, Another Taketh Away: Overnight rain pelted the tent, making for a sodden pack of tent and rain fly. Yesterday's tail/cross clocked around to a head/cross. Leaden skies. Tweener weather. Pulled the plug after four hours to hang and dry the sleep kit. Trouble ahead for a few days.
- European Divide, Day 17: Slow Motion Melodies: The utter slowness of cranking through mud, moss, sticks and thick foliage grew weary by end of day. What felt initially adventurous proved frustrating six hours later...but a roll through a happening town alight with music and revelers capped a sweaty, hot, and challenging trek.
- European Divide, Day 18: Mucking About in the Woods: In forty years of cycle touring, I've never expended so much energy going so slowly and making so little distance: In granny gear on muddy inclines, shoe sucking bogs, carting a mud clearing stick all morning. As the early Aussie road pros of the 90's called early Europe: CBT: Character Building Tour. I had other expressions, none suitable for a public forum.

Managed to bend my pinky tip backwards, karooming off a tree in a slimy downhill MTB track. What fun resetting the digit while standing on a muddy hillside!

- European Divide, Day 21: Roadish: Rolled out in the mist on a Komoot route synced with an ED finish. Rolling farmland, pitches of 23%, and downhills matching the rises- a winch up and fly back down kinda day. A dearth of camping platzes will see me pass through Cologne tomorrow, instead of staying there the night.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 23: River Run: Borrowed a card from Florián's pack and ran the river bank south: hamlets, small family vineyards, industrial parks, and finally the smooth trail that snakes along the Rhine on the way to Mainz. Lightning, rain, and thunder pulled me up short. Hoping for a break this evening.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 24: Something of a Mainz Field: A rave across from the campground last night didn't stop, even during the showers. Rode to Mainz, and unsuccessfully looked for a decent tail light. Taking tomorrow off to reassess my route and visit some Roman Ruins (Dave Boyden!).

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 25: Mannheim Steamroller: Traded meters in elevation for kilometers in flatness. Cruise ride along the Rhine. My pre-selected and only campground nearby turned out to be a "Natural" (read nudist) encampment closed behind metal doors. Hoofed it into the city and nabbed a cheap room in an 130 year old hotel downtown.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 27: If It's Wednesday, It Must Be France: Thought I'd have a rolling recovery day by staying way below aerobic threshold, but the last three hours needed some grit. The urban French drivers show all the same aggression as Americans: they ride my rear wheel, they race to pinch points, they look straight at you, then pull out in front of you as you head for their left front quarter panel. The politeness and deference of Scandinavia, and the orderliness of Germany are gone.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 28: Chocolate Elvis to Start the Day: Crunched amazing croissants beneath a towering chocolate Elvis in the heart of Belfort. A flat river run took me into steep ravines, a coursing river, and a dynamic up and down road. Stunning, green, and refreshing. Arrived early at 4:00 after eight hours traveling. Luxury.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 30: Juking Through the Jura: Angling down through the Jura between Switzerland and Lyon, on the way to the coast: Rolling hills, meadows, stands of woodlands and a searing blue sky. Would love to ride here on an unloaded bike. Near the halfway time point-taking an extra day to chill in this little town and give the ischial tuberosity a break. Bike cleaning and clothes washing on the morrow.

- (Alt) European Divide: Day 31: Simmer 'till Done: While tightening bag straps in the pre-dawn light, I didn't reach for arm warmers or a wind shell: a first in six weeks, and not a good sign. Komoot took me up the only hill for a viewpoint, then through farmer's fields-so much for cranking kilometers in the morning window. Some lovely valleys, reasonably short climbs, and snaking descents broke the metronomic cadence of flat ground cycling. French pharmacies flash two important bits of info in their green cross: time and temperature: at 16:20 today, 39 degrees Celsius. That's 102 at 4:20 in Freedom Units. F-ing done for the day at a campground that advertised a pizzeria with beer...which closed 9/1. And, dodgy wifi...

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 33: Like a Raisin in the Sun: Folks who build Grand Tours in bike racing often face the question of how to get riders to stages of consequence. Hence, the Transition Stage. Today and tomorrow seem destined to transition me closer to the coast and the possibilities there. So warm, my phone shut down and Garmin registered 87 in the shade.

- (Alt) European Divide, Day 34: The Tyranny of Destination: At some point today, I made a temperature range:40-85 Fahrenheit. Above 85, and the road or rocks or soil radiate and make this rider displeased. It was 87 at 9:00 AM today. Seeming endless vineyards, pine forested hills, waterways, and speedy descents made for a seven-and-a-half-hour ride to this tiny village where I'd booked an Airbnb, a true challenge. Otherwise, I'd have bailed somewhere back in 98 degree territory. Awesome town. Gonna like the stay.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 35: A Bridge Too Far: After replacing a nicked wind shell in Montpellier, rode the coast and saw a salty body of water (albeit an ocean and not a sea) for the first time since June 23. An all-time displacement of this kind in five years. Tried to back door the campground through some wetlands and a bridge crossing turned out to be a defunct ferry, backtracked into a gathering lightning and thunder shower.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 36: The Best Medicine: A morning start with sprinkles and a stiff headwind couldn't dull the beauty of the Coastal grasslands, the silver reefs of clouds, and the glowing light. Past Narbonne the wind turned quarter tail, sending my rig like a sail bound vessel down the road. Guess all that surface area from panniers came into play, and the 15 extra kilos melted away in the 37 degree heat. Might just make the Brava tomorrow.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 37: Un Returno: '85, '93, '98, 2018, and Today: Left the flatlands of coastal France for the serpentine roads of the Costa Brava: nary a flat section, heaps of recreational cyclists, searing heat, and stunning vistas. Hunkering down in Cadaques for a few nights.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 39: Me Encantan los Pripirineos: Broke camp in the dark with a headlamp to find both tires near flat after inflating them last night. 😞 more sealant and a few hundred pumps led to more leaking. In go the tubes after a messy cleanup. Hours passed. But, leaving the coast brought long climbs, pines, stunning vistas, and a simmering political and historical edge absent on the coast. Tough riding, but a warp back in time. Heading north to San Sebastián- the interior toward Portugal too darn hot.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 40: Catalán Trifecta- Mist & Wet, Headwinds & Hills, Heat and Humidity: Morning broke wet and slick, with an automatic reach for shoe covers and pink Rapha reflective vest. Rollers all day, like the Ardenne around Spa- a bit disheartening when a stiff wind slowed ascents and muted the descents. Súper chulo people all day. An abuela fussing over me at a gas station stop warmed my heart. Encantado España.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 42: Huesca Homecoming: Six years ago, Jim Little tipped me to Zona Zero (Ainsa) and the riding here proved a refuge from Zaragoza during the 2017-2018 school year. To get here found this rider scaling backcountry roads after dawn reminiscent of San Luis Obispo county, and once on tarmac, winching up climbs and descending at inexperienced speeds on this rig. Entering this mountain town brought a flood of nostalgia and comfort-a first in almost two months.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 43: `Ta Luogo: Mountain air before dawn brought-out the down jacket; breathing made mist. Headwind out of town flanked by steeply sloped valley walls took away some of the sting. Skirted two of the tunnels on broken roads, but the last felt interminable, and sketchy: over an hour of pedaling in granny gear just below aerobic threshold. Pushed more wind to Jaca after a roaring descent.
- (Alt) European Divide, Day 45: Étape Final: Lingered over café con leche and pan tomate in Plaza del Toro this morning, knowing full well this day's start would be the last of this kind in this journey. The rugged mountains leading to the coast simply stunned me in their emphatic majesty. Few other places on this earth move me like País Basque. Big surf, warm water, and fine IPA will season the next six days to help stave-off the sadness that always accompanies the end of a cycle tour. Wandering the old city in the coming days will prove a fitting end.

· European Divide, By the Numbers: Hung in a campground for three nights, and now in the Old City- whew: a lot going on. Just made the math on the 45 Étapes: 4,228 kilometers or 2,968 miles in Freedom Units. 34,357 meters of climbing, or 112, 719 feet in those same Freedom Units.



I am sitting in the teachers' sala at the School Year Abroad in Zaragoza typing this piece, departure in three days looms. The ride has finished, and soon I'll awaken to the hollow echo of surf on the Oxnard shoreline.

A lot of folks have expressed surprise if not outright shock when asking me about this bike ride, yet the simple fact remains for this kind of cycling and for the way we have all made our journeys through a school year: we plan, we prepare, we adjust as necessary, and we see our way to the end of the day as best we can.

And with no effort on our parts, we see our students, as they arrive each day—and the sun dawns in a Scandinavian sky.

Machines

Dearest, note how these two are alike:
This harpsichord pavane by Purcell
And the racer's twelve-speed bike.
The machinery of grace is always simple.
This chrome trapezoid, one wheel connected
To another of concentric gears,
Which Ptolemy dreamt of and Schwinn perfected,
Is gone. The cyclist, not the cycle, steers.
And in the playing, Purcell's chords are played away.
So this talk, or touch if I were there,
Should work its effortless gadgetry of love,
Like Dante's heaven, and melt into the air.
If it doesn't, of course, I've fallen. So much is chance,
So much agility, desire, and feverish care,
As bicyclists and harpsichordists prove
Who only by moving can balance,
Only by balancing move.

Michael Donaghy, from Shibboleth (OUP, 1988)





Shows That Start With the Letter J

by Ian Foutz ('13)

My phone dinged loudly on the nightstand, jarring me awake. It was 4am on a Thursday.

Nothing good could come of this. I thought about going back to sleep, but the text reminder sounded. "Pay attention to me!" I looked at my screen dumbly for a moment, then pumped my fist so hard that I almost fell out of bed. I would have screamed, but it was 4am. (Decorum, people.)

A dream that I had harbored for over 35 years had finally set itself firmly in my sights. I was going to be a contestant on Jeopardy. And on my birthday, no less.

"You should try out for Jeopardy!" I had heard that refrain throughout my life, and it both gladdened and frustrated me.

Gladdened because yeah, I'll admit it, I always do great when I play at home. There's no buzzer, no crowd, no throat-clenching fear...just you and that big board. Frustrated because it was a joke at this point in my life how many times I had taken the online test, only to hear nothing back.

Thankfully, my stepbrother knew something I didn't. He spent months bugging me about it in 2021, so I tried one final time, just to appease him. I took the online test, sat back, waited to hear from someone, and...nothing. Again. I shook my head at him extra forcefully the next time we hung out. I told you so, bro.

But then, incredibly, something changed. I received an e-mail telling me that I had made it past the first phase of the screening process. Maybe this was actually going somewhere! My mind yo-yo'd to extremes. Would I win big, like my friend Nick had done in early 2021? Or would I flame out and not even make it to Final Jeopardy? I could just imagine myself saying something completely ridiculous and ending up as a meme. Did I want to put myself through the stress and potential humiliation?

I talked to my friends and my husband about it, and they all encouraged me to go for it. I was still on the fence, but then I thought of my mother, who had passed away in 2012. I could almost hear her voice in my head, clamoring for me to give it a shot. I had been playing Jeopardy at home since 1985, and I knew that if I said no to this opportunity, I would never get another chance. So I took a deep breath, swallowed my fear, and forged ahead.

Several months later, I finally heard back. It was time for the personal interview stage of the process. I ended up being placed in the contestant pool. There was an 18-month window where I might be called, but if that didn't happen, I'd have to start the whole process over.

I just did what I did best. I waited. I got radio silence for the next sixteen and a half months, but one magical day in March 2023 I was waiting for my oil change to finish when I got a text from the contestant producer, who wanted to book me for an appearance. After a few false starts, I was "booked" as an alternate for May 16 and 17, but even that fell through. I just had to hope for a slot

on Season 40 in the fall. But with the writer's strike now in full swing, who knew what the reality would be a few months from now? Had I come so far, only to fall just short at the 11th hour? My brain told me to remain optimistic, but my heart knew where this road was leading.

Until 4am on Thursday, May 18th.

At first, I kept my news close to the vest. I told the people I'd be taking as my guests and let my boss know I'd need a day off from work, but other than that I stayed silent. I figured I'd share the big news after taping had ended. If I didn't embarrass myself, then I'd let people know about it. And if embarrassment struck, well, I could always hide until a pile of old coats until it blew over. My husband Patrick and I went to my dad's house the night before taping to watch one final episode together. I killed it, as per usual, and while I knew it was a totally false data point it still gave me a little confidence boost going into the big day.

After about five hours of sleep, my alarm screamed me awake at 3:30 a.m. on May 19. My birthday. I grabbed my quintet of freshly pressed outfits and got prepared as best I could, which for me meant a thorough breakfast, a big cup of coffee, and 10 minutes of failed meditation. My dad rang my doorbell at 5:15am, and we piled into Patrick's car for the trip to Studio City. I got dropped off around 7:15 and wasted some time playing games on my phone until the other contestants arrived. Then I played games some more, because...you didn't think I would interact with these people, did you? Despite what my career choice and appearance on this show might lead one to believe, I am introverted to a fault.

7:45 came, and the show people brought us all together for hellos and introductions. Then we walked ourselves and our stuff over to the staging area, where we finally took a collective breath and allowed our bubbles to widen enough to let each other in. I wanted to take my friend Nick's advice, who said, "It's like a little one-day fraternity rush, but the good news is that everyone has already been accepted, so just enjoy the ride. You're a part of the Jeopardy brotherhood now, and you're going to regret it if you sit off to the side and try to 'ice the competition' or do last-minute studying. You've already made it! The hard part's over, so just have fun with it."

And I did. They were great people, and talking helped us calm our nerves, and I began to actually (Heaven forbid) enjoy the day. If these were to be my single-serving friends (as Tyler Durden would say), I got stuck with a great bunch.

Eventually, it was time for hair and make-up. As a bald man, I found this hilarious. When I sat down in the chair, I winked at my make-up artist. "Great choice," I said. "You knew I was going to take the longest, so you saved me for last." She chuckled before she shushed me sweetly and grabbed her gear. I spent about 15 minutes with her, getting regaled by stories of Alex Trebek and Ken Jennings (my host for the day) while she lovingly filled in my massive face wrinkles with some of her magic cream. Now I was less a Shar Pei and more a man. A contestant! A potential Jeopardy champion, even. As she dusted my cheeks the final time and used a lint roller on my jacket, I could feel myself drinking the confidence Kool-Aid.

We were walked over to the Alex Trebek Studio, spread out among the studio audience seats, and then got called up three at a time for a practice session. I thought I had banished my nerves, but that was disproven about two minutes into my game when one of the producers stopped us and said, "Ian, you're buzzing in way too fast. Relax and slow it down a little." Thank you!

But also, ouch. Way to single me out there.

They did a great job making sure everyone got a chance to get their nerves out, and I learned lots of helpful facts. Like why people smash the buzzer like a maniac instead of just giving it one polite little tap, when and where articles can be omitted while still granting you a correct answer, and what to think about when making the Final Jeopardy wager. I thought people just picked a random number and added lots of zeroes, but I guess there's actual math involved. Who knew?

Once everyone had taken a turn, it was time to find out who would be playing in the first game. As we exited the studio to head back to the staging area, I saw my father and husband staring right back at me. They had finally let the studio audience onto the lot, and they were first in line. Because of course they were. The smiles I got from them will warm my heart until the day I die, and that was the moment I knew I could let my negative feelings go. I just hoped they wouldn't have to wait too long to see me play. Jeopardy tapes five episodes a day, and if my episode was last, they might be sitting and waiting around until 5 or 6 pm. That is no bueno.

But the universe, knowing it was my birthday, decided to give me yet another present. My name was called for the very first episode, along with the returning champion Taylor Clagett and Simona Fine (a grad student from New York). I inhaled a snack bar and was walked back over to the main stage, where my mike was attached, and my makeup refreshed. My podium was closest to the audience, so I walked out last. We were introduced, and the stage manager told Ken Jennings and the audience that it was my birthday. I didn't expect it, but that's just the kind of sweet people they were.

I must admit, I went into my game with all the swagger of someone who is ready to kill it just like he does at home. This feeling took an instant hit after I missed the first clue and found down \$1,000. Thankfully...? A recurring theme of my game was, "I don't know any of the questions in these categories!" Half of the ten categories were things about which I had zero knowledge. A sixth, about the Vice Presidents of failed electoral tickets, had three questions that I knew, but I choked on all of them. Ken made fun of me for that after the episode. "Ian, you missed all of the Presidential questions. I thought a history teacher would have done really well there." I tried to defend myself by saying that, as a 5th Grade history teacher, Revolutionary War history was much more my thing. But we both knew I was trying to cover shit with sawdust.

The game went by ridiculously fast, as my friend Nick had told me it would. "Hold on to the podium, because it'll be over before you know it," he had said. And it was.

There were several standout moments that I will always be proud of, such as:

- Getting 4 out of 5 right in "Space Men & Women"
- Having Ken and the entire studio audience sing "Happy Birthday" to me
- Being in the lead for several clues during the Jeopardy round
- Answering a clue about Steve Uriel's alter ego that made my friend laugh so hard I heard him all the way from my podium

- Getting a score correction in my favor on a heavy music-themed question (which, as the people on the Jeopardy subReddit very loudly pointed out, was a completely wrong answer, and I shouldn't have gotten credit for it at all).
- Seeing the look on my father's face when I returned to the studio audience after my episode and he pulled me in for a huge hug

At least I can stand proud, knowing that no matter how I might have faltered during the episode, 2nd Place was the best I could have done. I missed the Final Jeopardy clue, which asked for the only African country with Spanish as an official language. I guessed Sierra Leone, whose language is apparently Portuguese, and Taylor got it right with Equatorial Guinea. I would never have forgiven myself if I got 2nd because of a Final Jeopardy betting error or a spelling mistake, but not knowing Equatorial Guinea? I can live with that.

After my game was over, I went back to the staging area to gather my stuff. I hung out in the studio audience crowd for the next two games, chatting, playing along in my head, and trying to come down from the high of it all. After the third game, they took their lunch break, so my husband, father and I headed home to grab food on our own. No point in staying now - the main attraction has burned itself out, folks. Besides, a fellow teacher won games 3, 4, and 5 that day, so the integrity of my profession was safe in his hands.

Looking back, it's still hard to believe that it actually happened. My friends congratulate me, and contestant Ian tries to be confident and happy, but introvert Ian shies away and wishes people would stop talking about (yet here I am writing about it, so who am I kidding?). I know that my former students who watched are proud of me, as are my friends and family. That erases most of the sting of losing. I'm seeing Nick soon, and I'm sure he'll give me a big hug then brag about how he won \$30,000 more than me. But that's okay. I'm glad one of us won.

Besides, I got to tell millions of people about my exploding bowling shoes, and then had lunch at a falafel place where I was stared at by everyone because I'd forgotten to wipe off my stage makeup. But no matter. For the rest of my life, I can know that my family was right about me. I should have tried out for Jeopardy, because I did great on it. I made my family and myself proud, I got a birthday present that will never be topped, and I got \$2,000 for 25 minutes of fun. (Minus taxes, of course. Don't come for me, Mr. IRS man! I'm setting 40% aside!)

And I know that somewhere, somehow, my mom is looking down on me and smiling. And shaking her head, because how in the WORLD did I miss those questions about Romney, Dukakis, and the Yankees?

All I can say is, "What is, 'I'm sorry, mom?'" I promise I'll do better next time.

Sandra Day O'Connor and Me by Ron Hertz ('88)



My interaction with a famous person was brief, confrontational, and memorable. We were in the first days of December 2007, and large color posters promoted Sandra Day O'Connor, our first female Supreme Court justice, as the keynote speaker at a San Diego convention of California social studies teachers. Recently retired from teaching high school English and in San Diego for the birth of my first grandchild, I noticed the posters of Ms. O'Connor as I entered the convention hall. With secret delight, I imagined meeting Ms. O'Connor and asking her, in front of thousands of teachers, a few questions that had tortured my mind in the months since I'd been relieved of reading high school essays.

I confess that in my post-retirement months, I'd become a "9/11Truther," a whole-hearted "conspiracy theorist." Though I'd been appalled by the lies involving the Vietnam War, the Kennedy and King assassinations, and more, it seemed to me that the lies connected to the 9/11 attacks eclipsed all previous national deceptions. If the 9/11 attacks were indeed an "inside job" far beyond whatever Osama Bin Laden planned, then several thousand Americans were murdered, and we were hurled into seemingly endless wars all because of a lie so huge we could not perceive it.

I hoped to confront Ms. O'Connor with a few agonizing questions about 9/11. After she finished her keynote speech full of predictable platitudes, she said there would be time for a few questions. I pushed myself past a mass of people rushing to a spot where would-be questioners lined up. About fourth in line, I pondered how I might word my inquiry, as those in front of me took their turn and lobbed their softballs that drew easy responses from Ms. O'Connor.

With her colorful scarf and her soft, gentle demeanor the former Supreme Court justice seemed comfortable and confident as she responded eloquently in front of the packed, gently mesmerized audience of teachers. Easy questions, easy answers, and then it was my turn.

I focused on the Twin Towers and blurted out something like this: “Ms. O’Connor, thank you for addressing us here today and sharing some of your thoughts, but I have some profoundly disturbing questions about September 11th and the official story. As secondary teachers, we’re supposed to prioritize critical thinking, but how can we possibly accept the government story about the twin towers? Since when do massive steel skyscrapers disintegrate—literally turn into dust—because of fire and gravity?”

Ms. O’Connor was undeterred in defense of our government’s 9/11 story. She calmly replied, “I stand by the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission.”

I probed deeper into the issue. “But the 9/11 Commission never came close to explaining how those “magic towers” in ten seconds each, simply turned into powder...500,000 thousand tons apiece...each one four football fields tall. And the 9/11 Commission never even mentions Building 7 and how its forty-seven stories, untouched by any jet, slam to the ground...Magic tower number three!”

My questions appeared to irritate Ms. O’Connor. She glared at me, repeated that she stood by the 9/11 Commission’s conclusions, and declared there would be no more questions. As she was thanked again by the convention moderator, she received more applause, and I thought I caught her scowling at me a second time. Was she actually doing that, or looking at someone else? I couldn’t tell for sure.

I do know that as I left the convention hall, I felt satisfied that I had confronted Ms. O’Connor and ruffled her cocky, evasive demeanor. I hoped I’d inspired a few teachers to investigate 9/11 for themselves—and to remember the importance of critical thinking, asking questions, and speaking truth to power.

As for me, I needed to get to a hospital to witness and celebrate the birth of my first grandchild.

