



THE WORD WEAVER

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A NEWSLETTER FOR WRITERS AND EDITORS
PRODUCED BY
THE WRITERS' CIRCLE OF DURHAM REGION

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A Few Observations About Wordplay

By Antanas Sileika

Will Ferguson's satirical novel *Generica* portrays a jaded book editor who, in one scene, decides to attack the slush pile in his publishing house. He opens a covering letter that reads, "I am sending you my fictional novel..." and immediately rejects the manuscript without reading it. He opens another letter, which reads, "I am sending you the first of a three-part trilogy..." and rejects that manuscript as well. The editor recognizes that the writers are clearly amateurs, because they have permitted redundancies in their work. Every novel is fictional, and every trilogy consists of three parts.

Since I run a writing school, I come into contact with hundreds of manuscripts a year by aspiring writers; the vast majority give themselves away as amateurish within the first page, so much so that we regularly run a winnowing exercise. We invite editors and agents to look at anonymous first pages and ask them whether they would turn to the second page if they read the first in the slush pile. The responses are almost always negative. However, some months ago, one of the editors was so impressed by the prose on the first page that he agreed to look at the balance of the manuscript and subsequently made an offer to publish it.

Aspiring writers are not accomplished yet, so there is no need to blame them for their awkward first pages. The important thing that aspiring writers should understand, though, is fiction attempts to cast a spell, and as we all know, if the spell is not uttered perfectly, the illusion will not take hold.

Forget, for a while, about plotting, characterization, description and dialogue. Those are all important to novels, but not as important as searching for what the French call *le mot juste*, the right word.

Think of the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, remade as a film called *Roxanne* with Steve Martin. In that film, the besotted Chris is in love but incapable of expressing his feelings in words to Roxanne. Charlie (*Roxanne's* version of Cyrano) has to provide him with the right words, and when he does, Roxanne comes to love him.

You must make the reader love you, and you can

only do it with the right words. No matter how strong your idea, no reader will read you long enough to come to love you unless you learn sensitivity to the right words.

Patrick Crean, an editor now with Thomas Allen, once told me that he bases his decision on a manuscript on the strength of each sentence. He is ready, in the first few pages, to turn down a manuscript if the language falters even for a moment. Once he is sure the language is strong, he goes on to read more confidently for "the story." In short, it's the sentences and not "the story" that usually carry a piece of fiction over the first hump with an editor.

Poets have extreme sensitivity to the language, and the spells they cast are very strong. In Ian McEwan's latest novel, *Saturday*, a potential rapist and murderer is soothed by the recitation of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." Prose writers are usually wedded to narrative, another type of spell, but the wording must still be right.

How to make it right? One has to train one's ear. Most successful prose writers do not act intellectually in their search for words (although I regularly rely on a thesaurus). They can tell when a phrase is too long, when the rhythm is off, when the nuance, the colour of an adjective is imprecise. But one can make some generalizations of the kind that exist in every writing primer: avoid clichés and tired phrases. Do not generalize. (A student writer was once furious with me when I told her the word "nurture" was bad in the following sentence: "My grandmother nurtured me.") If you are a report writer, you have inhaled so much jargon that you can't even see it anymore. If you are a teacher, you have likely been trying, unconsciously, to be delicate with your language for so long that your writing is in danger of being bland.

One can be any kind of stylist, but when in doubt, use the tips offered by George Orwell: be simple, be direct, be concrete. If you wish to be lyrical, avoid anything that rings of Hallmark cards or standard sentiments. Do not tell me what I already know. Tell me what I don't know.

In my last novel, I had five extended conversations with my line editor about the following title:

Seasons' End. I put the apostrophe after the *s* because I wanted to indicate the end not of one season but of all seasons. She agreed that I was grammatically correct but felt the title looked wrong. It had the wrong feel. I say, without exaggeration, that we spent two hours wrestling with one another about this apostrophe, finally settling on a compromise that neither of us was entirely happy with: *Seasons End*. In this latter formulation, the lack of apostrophe makes the title into a sentence, with a subject and a verb.

My point is that this sort of detail, this sort of insane attention to nuance, is what makes a piece of writing convincing. And it is hard. My last novel came out at 250,000 words in first draft. After a minimum of a dozen rewrites over seven years (about three million words, by my count), I published a novel 160,000 words long. Even now, I wish I could change a few of those words because I'd like them to be more precise, more apt, more able to convey a particular tone.

Some writers are born with so much talent, their prose sings. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* at 28, and Jonathan Safran Foer wrote *Everything Is Illuminated* at 25. The rest of us need to practise, in the same way that musicians practise their scales. In the United States in the '80s, the median age of a first-time novelist was 47. The average novelist, in short, needs to practise his scales for some time.

Can this really be said to be wordplay? Maybe not. "Play" implies wit and lightness, and the search for *le mot juste* is more often a desperate search.

But hunting is a desperate search as well, and it has its own pleasures: the thrill of the chase and the exultation of success.

I can think of no better advice to an aspiring writer than this: *bon chasse*. And if you don't find the right word the first time, keep looking until you do.

Antanas Sileika is the artistic director of the world-renowned Humber School for Writers in Toronto. His most recent novel, *Woman in Bronze*, was published by Random House.

A Message from THE BOARD

By Annette McLeod

By the time you read the next Message from the Board, the WCDR will have a new president and some new board members.

Our AGM in June will wrap up my run as president and mark the end of my third year on the board. While I will stay on at least another year as past-president, it will bring a shift in focus—both mine and the WCDR's.

Boarders who have worked alongside me will probably tell you that I sometimes display a maddening schizophrenia, wherein the control freak in me wants a hand in everything, while the slacker side of me has trouble keeping track of administrative details. The fact that only they, and not you, know about my duality is a credit to them. They make sure that everything runs smoothly, while I often have time only to attend meetings and play social convener at breakfast (roles I love), leaving the daily runnings in their capable hands.

To Vicki, Rich, Barbara, Karen, Rose, Sherry, Sue and Sue, I extend my heartfelt gratitude. My thanks also to the members of WCDR who have embraced my role as president and made it such a pleasure to help run this organization.

New blood always means new ideas, and I look forward to seeing what the future of WCDR holds. Now celebrating its 10th year, this group continues to delight me, as the ability of members and boarders both sustain and reimagine it.

You'll find out who your new president will be when we convene for brekkie in July, but I know whoever it is will bring considerable expertise, heart and effort to his or her new role. I don't say this because I have insider information—I say it because the WCDR couldn't go wrong with any one of our fine current boarders at the helm.

I wish the group and its managing board continued joy, success and inspiration.



P a e a n s

Go to www.durhamregion.com/dr/east to see our own **Sherry Hinman's** first cover story in the magazine *East of the City*.

The Spring '05 issue of "There's No Place Like Home" was inserted in most Metroland community newspapers the week of April 20, 2005. In addition to articles by editor **Dorothea Helms**, you can read features by fellow WCDR members **Lois Gordon, Andrea Adair-Tippins, Kathleen Smyth, Valerie Mutton, Catherine Daley and Ruth Walker**.

As the recipient of an honourable mention in the Full Circle Poetry Contest sponsored by the Scarborough Arts Council, Etobicoke Arts and Lakeshore Arts, **Dorothy Sjöholm** was invited to read at Todmorden Mills on April 13, 2005. Dorothy's poem "in torre del mar" was published in the Special Second Anniversary Edition of *Aesthetica*, a literary and arts magazine published in the U.K.

Kevin Craig's poems "Elephant Keeper" and "Abandoned" were accepted by *Regina Weese* for inclusion in both its upcoming on-line edition and fall print edition. Way to go, Key!

Dorothea Helms had a first-person account of her trip to Paris in the May 2005

issue of *Homemakers* magazine. Be sure to turn to page 31 to read her heartfelt account of that inspiring experience. In addition to fulfilling her lifelong dream of visiting Paris, the trip made possible her decade-long dream of having an article appear in *Homemakers*.

Jonathan van Bilsen's account of his Russian rail adventure was featured in the magazine *Travel On*.

Graham Ducker's poems "Timeless Anticipation" and "Ripples in Time" were selected for inclusion in the 2005 *Ontario Poetry Society Anthology*.

Sheila Reesor had an article published in the March/April issue of *Moxi Femme* magazine entitled "To Pierce or Not to Pierce," about the dangers of body piercing.

Bette Hodgins's acrostic story "Along the Shore" received honourable mention in *The Leaf's* sixth annual Acrostic Story Contest! Bette's story will be published in the forthcoming issue #16 of *The Leaf*.

WCDR president **Annette McLeod** took **FIRST** prize in the sixth annual Bruce Dale Press Acrostic Story contest!

Graham Ducker is this month's featured poet of the Canadian Federation of Poets.

www.federationofpoets.com/featuregrahamducker.htm

Graham Ducker had a poem, "The Swallowtail Butterfly," published in the winter edition of *The Ambassador* of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance.

Rich Helms had his article about the February '05 Smart car parade, "It's Braining Smarts," in the March 5, 2005 *Toronto Sun's* Drive section.

Elan, the print journal from the on-line publisher *Regina Weese*, was recently launched and the inaugural issue held the work of two WCDR members: **Graham Ducker** (*Don't Wake the Teacher*) and **Ruth E. Walker** (*Lichen: An Arts & Letters Preview*). Published by Wingate Press out of Stratford, *Elan* features short stories, essays and poetry gleaned from work first published on-line at www.reginaweese.com.



GrammarPuss

GrammarPuss has been a regular addition to your *Word Weaver* for a while now, and she hopes you've been paying attention. Some of this should come easily, as we've covered it explicitly. (You well know how obsessed GrammarPuss is with the common comma.) Some of it may be new. See if you can spot the errors in the following sentences.

1. Gardening expert, Joe Brown will be a featured speaker at the Tuesday night session.
2. It is scandalous to say so, but as far as highly-overrated writers go, I'd put Shakespeare near the top of the list.
3. I can't understand a thing she says. However, she seems personable enough.
4. The service at the new salon is first-rate.
5. He said "Oh, I do hope she'll come".
6. Their mission was simple; try to spread as much cheer as possible.
7. They were supposed to come in time for Christmas, they showed up well after New Year's.
8. It seems that a handful of actors get all the meaty roles, like Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks and Russell Crowe.
9. Over 200 people showed up for the book signing.
10. His use of colour was—as impressionism goes, pretty radical.
11. Just between you and I, I don't think he'll last long.
12. There are already daffodils pushing up through my grass.
13. Sylvia assured him she would try and get there on time.
14. She should of just said so right off the bat.
15. You can't judge a book by it's cover.



So, how did you do? Answers to GrammarPuss quiz above.

1. Gardening expert Joe Brown will be a featured speaker at the Tuesday night session. Although currently ubiquitous, this habit of putting a comma before a name in this manner is incorrect. Commas are either used on both sides of a name (when the name is extraneous to the meaning of the sentence, usually because there is only one such person so no name is necessary) or omitted, as should have been the case with Joe.
2. It is scandalous to say so, but as far as highly overrated writers go, I'd put Shakespeare near the top of the list. Although we do use hyphens to create compound modifiers, the "Iy" ending of such adverbs as highly is sufficient to tip off readers that the adverb is modifying the adjective that follows it.
3. I can't understand a thing she says; however, she seems personable enough. When we are using words such as "however," "therefore" and "in fact" to link two related sentences, we put a semicolon between them.
4. The service at the new salon is first rate. Hyphens are used to create compound modifiers only when the modifier precedes the noun it modifies.
5. He said, "Oh, I do hope she'll come." When punctuating direct quotations, we need a comma after the attribution; periods go inside quotation marks.
6. Their mission was simple: try to spread as much cheer as possible. When the information following the semicolon in the example is a) not a complete sentence and b) explains the claim in the first part of the sentence, we use a colon.
7. They were supposed to come in time for Christmas; they showed up well after New Year's. Before the fix shown here, this was an example of a comma splice: the use of a comma to separate what are in fact two separate sentences. A big no-no. Use semicolons to link two separate but related clauses.
8. It seems that a handful of actors get all the meaty roles, such as Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks and Russell Crowe. The word "like" is often thusly misused. When we are offering examples, we should use "such as"; "like" should be used only as a synonym for "similar to."
9. More than 200 people showed up for the book signing. The words "over" and "under" should be reserved for spatial relationships: over the rainbow or under the table. When we are referring to numbers, we correctly use more than or less than.
10. His use of colour was—as impressionism goes—pretty radical. Both em dashes and commas have their uses when setting off interpolated information, but one should use one's choice consistently. The difference lies in the flavour of the sentence: the use of em dashes has a more interjectory flavour than commas do, although either is correct.
11. Just between you and me, I don't think he'll last long. Another frequent offence in current usage, but still heinous, the personal pronoun "I" is a subject; "me" is an object.
12. There are already daffodils pushing up through my grass. There's nothing really wrong with this, except that it uses a passive voice. As writers, we should always see red flags when the phrase "there is" or "there are" pops up. A more active way to say the same thing would be, "Daffodils are already pushing up through my grass."
13. Sylvia assured him she would try to get there on time. Oh, the oft-misused phrases over which GrammarPuss could beat her head against a wall. One tries "to" do something; one does not try and also at the same time do something.
14. She should have just said so right off the bat. And you should have caught this error.
15. You can't judge a book by it's cover. Possessive pronouns, its included, don't use apostrophes.

Who's Who: Suzanne Elston's "Stirring the Pot"

By Philippa Schmiegelow

It is a wild day in early January. I have rung back and front doorbells and hammered on the barn door that houses Suzanne Elston's office without response. As I start to climb back into my car I hear a voice and turn to find Suzanne, clad in a thick high-necked sweater and warm slacks under a down jacket, making her way through the blizzard. Dressed warmly in the interests of energy conservation, she welcomes me into her home explaining as she goes that, absorbed in her attempt to meet a deadline, my efforts to rouse her had gone unheard.

In 1986, disturbed by the ongoing debate over uranium waste at Port Granby, and by potential health problems posed by the world's largest nuclear generating station situated just south of her home, poet/songwriter/singer Suzanne Elston became an articulate and impassioned environmental activist. Three years later, frustrated by the lack of information available to the public, she sent two test columns to the *Oshawa Times*. To her surprise, they were taken up and her weekly environmental column, "Your Earth," was born. She hasn't looked back since.

Words spill out of Elston as she peers into the

pot of soup she is stirring. The pioneer members of her husband's family, who built the 1827 farmhouse, might have eaten the lunch we shared in the warmth of her kitchen. "The column has expanded and contracted over the years," Elston explains. "At one time I was writing for 10 papers, many of them, like the *Oshawa Times*, now defunct." Musing about the path her writing has led her on since starting her column, Elston continues: "I wrote online. That experience led to a journalism conference through the Society of Environmental Journalists. Somebody there was the producer of public radio in the States. They liked my approach and offered me a job doing commentary."

Networking and exposure in a variety of media, a result of public speaking engagements and extensive volunteering, led to demands for feature articles and background papers for books and journals. Fifteen years after starting her ongoing column, radio commentator and syndicated columnist Suzanne Elston is as passionately dedicated to educating the public on a wide variety of environmental issues as she was then. She is currently chair of the Durham

Environmental Advisory Committee, a member of the Conservation Council of Ontario's Board of Directors and an active member of the Society of Environmental Journalists. Her weekly column appears in the *Belleville Intelligencer*, the *Niagara Review* and the *Western Catholic Reporter*.

Elston's column pulls no punches, stressing the urgent need for environmental stewardship and for corporate and personal accountability. At the end of each column, she lists pertinent Web sites for further research. Her most recent published work is a contribution to *Sweeping the Earth: Women Taking Action for a Healthy Planet* (Ed. Miriam Wyman, Toronto; Women's P., 1999; ISBN 0-921881-48-7).

To receive "Your Earth" by email, add your name to Elston's distribution list, by contacting her at selston@sympatico.ca.



A Warm WCDR Welcome to Our Newest Members

March/April 2005:

**Janet Boccone
Nienke Hinton
Carole Enahoro
Lorri Cobitz
Tyler Beattie**

Professional Development Spring 2005

Write With the Five Senses: A Sensual Scavenger Hunt

By Ruth E. Walker

Sunday, May 15, 2005
9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Location: TBA

Event Fee: \$100 (\$90 for WCDR members)
Includes workshop, lunch and snacks.

Event Registration: Register in advance.
Contact: Ruth Walker 905-728-7823 or at
walkwrite@sympatico.ca or Sue Reynolds at
wcdrworkshops@wcdcr.org

Sign up for a six-hour immersion into the senses. Stretch your imagination and explore your sensual self. Discover what happens when you include the power of sensual elements in your creative work. Join award-winning writer Ruth E. Walker for a one-day workshop.

Bring your notepad, dress comfortably and be prepared to lose yourself in an exploration of sight, sound, taste, touch and scent. Combine the fun of a scavenger hunt with the energy of a day-long creative space.

Enhance works in progress or begin a completely new project. Non-fiction writers can play with their creative selves and enrich their prose. Fiction writers can uncover down-to-Mother-Earth techniques to enhance character and setting. Poets and songwriters can up-end overused ideas.

In-class writing exercises throughout the day

will build on the senses explored during the opening scavenger hunt (rain or shine, you're going outside). Sharing and discussion will spark excitement and ideas.

Tucked away in a private setting on several acres west of Port Perry near Utica, between Highway 12 and Lakeridge Road, this day promises all the elements of a great retreat: exploration, inspiration and relaxation.



WCDR offers an exciting lineup of workshops. The leaders for each workshop are specialists in their fields. We're always looking for ways to better serve our members (and non-members too!). Popular workshop topics span a wide range, from inspiring right-brain creativity to learning the left-brain nuts and bolts of running a writing business. Whether your interests lie in poetry, short fiction, novel writing, non-fiction or even what writing-related receipts to keep for tax purposes, you'll find workshops that will help you along your literary journey.

For additional information, or to register for any of these workshops, call the **WCDR HOTLINE** at **905-259-6520** and leave a message for our **Workshop Co-ordinator** or send an email to: wcdrworkshops@wcdcr.org.

**Workshops will be cancelled 7 days before the start date if registration is insufficient.
Payment in full is due upon registration, by cheque or credit card.**

If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not a poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Odds & Eds

By Deborah A. Rankine,
Word Weaver Editor

There's been unauthorized wordplay at my house—the word magnets on my refrigerator have been rearranged, creating disturbing sentences like *“I slow dance smashed onstage in smelly raucous spandex screaming I'm a rock star”* and *“The bands lyrics go between my sweet heavy alcohol amp.”* Formed from the “Rock & Roll” edition by Magnetic Poetry (whose company slogan is “...find creative parts of yourself you never knew existed”), these word magnets were *supposed* to inspire lyrics to my son's first smash hit.

I think this was the work of my pesky brothers-in-law, up to their old tricks when my back was turned basting the Easter bird and glazing the carrots. Those guys will make a game out of anything. Last Thanksgiving, in a pseudo sideshow guess-your-weight game, I caught them pilfering my vegetable crisper in search of things to pile onto my antique kitchen scale; loser had to eat the parson's nose. Then my wonderful (sincerely) mother-in-law got into the act,

because, traditionally, she'd always laid claim to “that end of the bird.” My sisters-in-law sat silently 'round the kitchen table, shaking their heads in telepathic boys-will-be-boys agreement.

Words are all around us: on buxom T-shirts; on the backs of love-lost-and-found bathroom stalls; on the subway car, read when you're staring up at the ads to avoid looking at the guy across from you whose got a zit so humongous it looks like a third eye; and, yes, even on my refrigerator door. So, how is it that one can experience writer's block in a world filled with words? Personally, I think it's fear—fear of giving and not getting.

This is where writer's craft comes into (in to) play. A craft, by definition, is a trade or an art that produces handiwork—and the *act* of writer's craft is to hone in a skilful way. But how can one expect to become a skilful writer if one is afraid to play with words every day? What's the worst that could happen if after a couple of hours at the keyboard one produces nothing but

strings of disconnected prose? Think of it as two hours of inspired mind-mapping! Or fragments for a gut-wrenching poem! The point is, one only thinks one is blocked because one has forgotten how to have fun and play with words.

So, your **themed** writing challenge for the July/August issue of the *Word Weaver* is to take a cue from my brothers-in-law and write about the life of a touring rock band.

NOTE: You must choose one of the two **boldfaced** sentences shown at the beginning of this column as the opening line to your story submission.

Email to: wcdwordweaver@wcdr.org.

Maximum word count: 400
Deadline: June 20, 2005

Please **paste** your submission in the **body** of your email if not in **MSWord doc** file format.

July/August Writing Challenge

Choose a vivid memory from your childhood and write a narrative that allows your reader to understand why this event was so important and memorable in your life. It may be as simple as a broken arm on the first day of summer holidays or as life-changing as the death of a close relative.

Word Count: 250 maximum

Deadline: June 20, 2005

Send your submission in the **body** of your email to: wcdwordweaver@wcdr.org.

Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.

– Will Rogers

May/June “Themed” Challenge Submissions: Spring Is in the Air....

Lynde Shores Ramble

By Heather M. O'Connor

Birdsong at sunrise—how I've missed it! A primeval need surges, beckoning me to explore the woodland, to observe firsthand as spring frees itself from the bonds of winter. Shaking off the lethargy clinging to me like a growth of hoarfrost, I swing on my coat and leave for the woods.

I brave the March cold licking around me. The air is wet, redolent with the smell of fresh mud and the fecundity of life.

Pussy willows, first harbingers of the season, are

already budding. Green mists the trees, but so faintly, I wonder if it is real or imagined. Though May flowers slumber still below, Mother Nature is beginning to stretch, like the untested steps of a newborn lamb. She will emerge soon, alive and renewed, from the frigid vault of winter.

Songbirds tango and salsa through the sky. The interlaced flight of finches is as intricate as a waltz and as romantic. How free to be a bird! Robins and cardinals, chickadees and sparrows; each charms my ears with its own unique trill. Their courting dances charm me, too. Proud males stake out territory, challenging other males, seeking females.

A chickadee perches on a bare branch above me, head cocked, taking my measure. I dig in my pocket for a handful of black oil sunflower seeds. With arm outstretched, reaching for the sun's blessing, I hold its fruits like an offering to its nurturing warmth. The chickadee lands on my hand, as light as a kiss, bobbing its head in gratitude for my gift. A fleeting stillness, then the birds, too, welcome spring's coming with joyous hymns of praise.

Heather M. O'Connor is a freelance writer and author, with three children's books to her credit. She is currently writing a novel for young adults.

April Showers

By Shelagh Damus

She smelled mud today, that sublime smack of newborn decay. Its rank perfume was the essence of spring. A summons to the senses long deadened by winter's killing force.

In response, she retrieved a rake from the shed and began the chore that would take twice as long this year. The wet mud released its organic captives to the rake's gentle tug and fresh lines appeared over the tulip bulbs' winter crypt. Repetitive strokes soon removed marigold corpses, pulling loose remnants of what the Aztecs considered the symbolic flower of death. Their pungent odour was believed to aid returning souls in finding their way home. "You'll never be rid of me," he had once joked while planting them alongside the pathway that led to their front door.

Each bed in her circuitous route housed an array

of dried-out skeletons in need of removal. And despite the beginning sting of blisters, she continued clearing the debris.

Untested at chance conversation, she bristled when approached by a neighbour who said the things we all say when we don't know what else to say before walking on, no doubt wondering what drives a man to suicide. Hers was a measured response, polite but succinct. It stopped the neighbour from proceeding to the crossroads of what if and why.

Tears sniffed back, she renewed her effort. Each pass of the rake playing percussion to her internal rhythm, to the mad riotous requiem that had played in a continuous loop for weeks.

Slowing the rake, she paused to marvel at the growth of the magnolia tree. He'd always loved that tree. Planted when green thumb naiveté plagued their every attempt at gardening, it wasn't meant to thrive in a zone this far north, they'd

learned years later.

Glancing through a slender windowpane, she noticed the day's sunshine exploring her cluttered desk, showering light on a budding collection of letters and cards. Skirting a medley of dirty coffee mugs, it lit upon a child's rendering of a princess with curlicue hair and a lopsided grin standing in a field of flowers. She seemed to relish the sun's warm rays, as if she too needed to feel the changing of the seasonal guard.

Later, storm clouds moved in. Blisters blooming, she returned the rake to the shed before sitting down, prepared to welcome the first rain of April, confident in its ability to bring May flowers.

Shelagh Damus is a stay-at-home mother of four who lives and writes in Uxbridge, where she is happily rediscovering her adult vocabulary.

Birdsong

By Myrna Marcelline

The frivolous songs and poems that I learned in a tropical land did not prepare me for the renewed growth that spring, hard on the heels of winter's welcome death, can engender in us.

We arrived in Toronto during the clamminess of a July heat wave and sweated our lives into a fall of new beginnings and cooler temperatures. I started university and he began full-time employment, so we had little time to ponder the vagaries of seasonal weather. Soon, we were wearing thick winter coats, lined boots and the ugliest woollen hats that our new Simpsons credit card allowed.

I was prepared for the frigid weather but was untested in dealing with an affair, his. I knew intuitively that there was someone else, and there were

signs that confirmed my fears. Without the cherished warmth of his body, I filled the icy winter nights with music and the inane chatter of radio hosts. I discovered the mellow voice of Anne Murray and the raspy songs of Gordon Lightfoot and felt their power to comfort and sometimes to induce sleep.

Winter dragged on, oblivious of my nightly tears and our daily quarrels. As the days grew longer, melting snow tumbled off the earth into the creeks and gutters, giving way to green sprouts. From my tiny kitchen window, I watched the budding twigs of a large maple tree. With an unexpected measure of delight, I savoured the arrival of each newborn day and waited for the promised May flowers that I saw in the nursery catalogues: daffodils and hyacinths, crocuses, tulips and narcissi. But that first spring in Toronto, it was the cacophonous music of

the robins that awakened in me the possibilities of renewal.

Every morning, I listened to the family nesting above the window of our tiny flat in the Beaches. The cheerfulness and persistence of their bird-songs permeated my room and enveloped me with the joy that I had lost through the harrowing, lonely winter. One morning, as they began their matins, I jumped out of bed, opened the window and inhaled the fresh, cool smell of spring. I packed my books and clothing, placed a note on his dresser and with the tweeting serenade, I walked downstairs to the waiting cab. I was ready to explore my new life.

Myrna Marcelline has been a member of WCDR for the past three years. She has written several short stories, poems and an outline for her first novel, in preparation for the Giller Prize.

May/June Writing Challenge Submissions: Building Character...

Guess Who #1

By Anne Nielsen

Intelligence and leadership were hidden behind high cheekbones, pointed nose and hooded eyes. The conservative three-piece suit and signature red-rose lapel were part of flippant, offhanded or clever remarks. Accountable to no one, when questioned if his decision was justified, the response was simply, "Just watch me."



Guess Who #2

By Breda Rooney

The smooth newborn's face belied the athlete's body trapped in quivering age and pain. Rounded shoulders rose as if to shield the fertile mind that sparked and glowed with youthful, youth-bound zeal. The inward-seeing eyes peered out upon the world in love, and urged "no fear."

Guess Who #4

The woman with a cat's grace and voice monotone as a bride reciting vows began surfacing, became an oracle in the wilderness of stringing together a good tale and before long outsold every other lady and man in this country. She has no alias but is sometimes a little moodie.

Guess Who #3

By Heather M. O'Connor

With his trademark fedora tipped rakishly, he seduced me with his eyes. The boyish half-grin he flashed my way offset his rough-sculpted features and unshaven face. His stance radiated virility: shoulders square, hands resting on the bullwhip and pistol tucked for easy access in his leather belt. I melted.

Guess Who #5

By Melanie Boivin

Her deadpan commentary and wooden demeanour were worthy of a coma pandemic. Yet, almost overnight, she became the omnipresent queen of domesticity. With a wave of her polished serving spoon, she turned homemaking into an art form and proved that a perfect pie crust can make even the lacklustre likeable.

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.

—Pablo Picasso

Memories of Errant Wordplayers Busted in Uxbridge

By Dorothea Helms

Last Sept. 14 will live long in the memories of several people who were privy to a “first” in the Town of Uxbridge. I swear we were innocent, and it was unnecessary to call the police on us. On behalf of the Northword Edition writers’ circle, I’d like a chance to explain.

Northword Edition launched in Uxbridge over eight years ago, and we hold our meetings in the Joseph Gould Room of the Uxbridge Public Library. We’ve enjoyed some particularly exciting meetings, like the one when Cathie Daley and I (and later Sue Reynolds and Aprille Janes) were tapped on the legs and shoulders by the ghost that haunts that historic building.

I admit our group has been a bit too rowdy at times, but our problem on September 14th was that we weren’t noisy enough. I spent an enjoyable evening sharing writing with Lana Cutrara, Sherry Loeffler, Bev Irwin, Barbara Hunt, Brian Peters and a brand-new member, Pat Ladisa. As it was nearing 9:00 p.m., Barbara completed reading us the final chapters in the fabulous creative non-fiction book she was writing. We were captivated by her brilliant weaving of words and her lovely voice.

We finished the meeting and opened the door into the main section of the library. The lights were out, there was no one at the desk, and we realized we were locked in. Usually whoever works the front desk knocks on the Joseph Gould Room door at 8:55 to let us know the li-

brary closes in a few minutes. On the 14th, no one did that, and none of us noticed.

Thinking I was being resourceful, I turned the lock mechanism on the inside of the front door, and it opened. We were free.

NOT.

Two things happened. One, we realized that we couldn’t relock the door, so if we left, the library would be easy prey for book-stealing scum. Two, my little feat of daring set off a silent alarm. Barbara was still inside when the alarm company called. She explained that we were a harmless group of writers who were locked in against our will. The nice but suspicious woman on the other end of the line said she would contact the appropriate people and take care of it.



We gathered outside, determined to stay until someone showed up to secure the library. We plotted various Plans B in case they decided to throw us in the slammer. None of us knew how the penalty for breaking out of a library compared to breaking in. I was hoping for some jail time, as it would give me an opportunity to do some writing without constant interruptions.

Strangely, the others were hoping for a severe reprimand at the most.

After maybe 10 minutes of tomfoolery, during which Sherry tried twice (unsuccessfully) to flag down passing police cruisers, we decided we should take matters into our own hands. Barb, Lana and I went back inside, and Lana located a notebook with “Staff Directo-

ry” on the spine. We found the head librarian Ruth’s number. I called her, and she let out a yelp when she realized who I was and why I was calling. She said we were so quiet that she’d forgotten we were there, and assured us she’d come and lock up right away.

So, back outside we went, and who should come along but two police officers, one male and one female. We explained what happened, apologized for breaking out of the library and word player loitering, and mused that it was probably the first time in Uxbridge history that anyone broke out of a library, and we hoped there was no penalty for that, but that at least we cared enough to stay until Ruth came and locked up.

Neither officer as much as cracked a smile. I think they were impersonators anyway, because they were just too darned gorgeous to be on foot patrol in small-town Ontario. The man, probably in his late 20s, was a muscular blond hunk, and except for the fact that she wasn’t showing any cleavage, the woman could star on *CSI Miami*.

Well, the police left before Ruth got there. They seemed to think they could trust us, which is really kind of funny, considering we’d just broken out of the joint. But, well, maybe there were more sinister things going on behind Shoppers Drug Mart up the street.

Ruth showed up and apologized again. We thanked her for forgetting us, because we lead sheltered lives, and this was one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to us. OK, to me.

On our way to the Fox & Fiddle for refreshments and some more laughs, I called my husband to tell him he wouldn’t have to worry about bail that night. He was relieved.

Wordplay at 80

By Betty Nodder

What is it about waiting until you’re 40 to be a writer?

Before 40, most people are busy working at some high-minded activity like raising children, keeping a roof over one’s head and providing food for the table. Who among us is smart enough to combine those pleasures with recording these experiences on paper? The ideal would be to hire cleaning people and, during their stint, put pen to paper (or fingers to keys) and ignore the rest of the world. Get-

ting those first few words on paper is the stimulus for the remainder of the story, memoir or whatever. Then fill in the rest of the writing intermittently. Time for editing and revising will follow out of the mind’s necessity to present a readable write.

Now, if you wait until you’re 80, you’ve had another 40 years of experiences to write about.

Think about that. All those years of griping, suppressing and procrastinating will provide fodder for the mill. And you don’t give much of a shit about what other people think.

Writing can bring financial dividends as well. But that’s a whole other endeavour. While there’s no doubt that writing for profit can also

help hone one’s writing skills, it is daunting.

The realm of merchandising the finished product demands another set of skills—skills that conflict with the state of mind that allows people to write. How does one transfer from writing to salesmanship? That must be learned. A dream would be to have literary angels floating about to help with this task.

Where are these angels? They’re the 40-year-olds who have begun their writing careers and encourage us 80-year-olds to write.

Breakfast Information

May 14, 2005 guest speaker... Sherry Coman: "Plays Wright."

Sherry Coman is an experienced writer, story editor, critic and teacher. Produced as a playwright in Canada, the U.S. and England, she has been nominated for an international playwriting prize (Susan Smith Blackburn Award); has written, produced and directed a short film that was aired on CBC; and has worked as a story editor to independent short- and feature-length filmmakers. She helped to create cyberfilmschool.com, an interactive on-line film school, and assisted in the creation of its published CD-ROM while also serving as movie critic for the site. As well, she consults on design and serves as administrator to Web sites. She currently teaches screenwriting, film production theory and digital media theory to students of different academic levels at the International Academy of Design and Technology (a.k.a. The Toronto Film School) in Toronto. She holds an MFA in film (screenwriting) from the American Film Institute Center for Advanced Film Studies in Los Angeles and a BA in English and film from McGill University. She has just completed her first novel, after a 10-year development!

Sherry will speak about diversity in writing craft and how to determine which story belongs to which medium. She will also explore the distinctive technique, vision and craft required for different media and how to work effectively with clients who cross over applications. The inspiration has struck; now which form best serves its expression? Stay tuned.

June 11, 2005 guest speaker... Richard Scarsbrook: "A Kid at Heart."

Richard Scarsbrook lives in Toronto, where he teaches, plays the drums and writes fiction and poetry. His novel, *Cheeseburger Subversive* (Thistledown Press, 2003), was shortlisted for the Canadian Library Association 2004 Book of the Year Award and the 2005 Ontario Library Association White Pine Award. Richard's next two books, *Featherless Bipeds* and *Destiny's Telescope*, will be published in late 2005/early 2006.

Scarsbrook's short stories and poems have been published widely in literary journals, magazines and anthologies, and have won a number of prizes and awards, including the Hinterland Award for Prose, two New Century Writer Awards and first prizes in the Lawrence House Centre for the Arts Short Story Competition, the New Orphic Short Story Competition, the Scarborough Arts Council's Poetry Competition and the Cranberry Tree Press Poetry Chapbook Competition.

Learn more about Richard's writing at www.richardscarsbrook.com.

Breakfast meetings run from **8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.** at the **Sports Garden Café** in the Iroquois Park Sports Centre, intersection of Victoria and Henry Streets, Whitby
Cost: WCDR members \$13; guests \$16

If you are ***not*** on the "**Regrets-only**" list, you must reserve a spot no later than the **Wednesday prior** to the next meeting.

Contact **Karen Cole** at **905-686-0211** OR at wcdrbreakfast@wcdr.org.

Writers' Circles

To join one of the circles below, please call the contact.

Christians Who Write

The second Saturday of each month after the breakfast meeting
Call for location
Sherry Loeffler
905-640-6315

Circle for Children's Writers

First Wednesday of each month
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Oshawa Public Library
Northview Branch
250 Beatrice St. E., Oshawa
Mike Ward
wardswords@hotmail.com

Durham Write-On

Tuesdays, every other week
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Call for location
Cynthia Green
cymwriter@rogers.com

Markham Village Writers' Group

Monthly
Donna Marrin
donna.marrin@staples.ca

Northword Edition

Tuesdays, every two weeks
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Uxbridge Public Library
Dorothea Helms, 905-852-9294

Richard Ferrier Writers' Group

Formerly *Volume Two*
Third Tuesday of each month
2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
History Room at Pickering Central Library
Tina Ivany, 905-427-1270
or *tdivany@sympatico.ca*
Ron Dixon, 416-284-5673
or *retro@pathcom.com*

Senior Scribes of Uxbridge

Second and fourth Friday of each month
1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Township Hall, Uxbridge
Marion Owen 905-852-3204

Word Players

Every other Wednesday in member's homes.
7 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. for free-fall and critique.
David William McKay: dwmckay@sympatico.ca
Currently not seeking new members.

Write in Whitby

Second and fourth Tuesday of each month
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Whitby Public Library
Lloyd Blair, 905-430-0075

Write Now

A group for on-the-spot writing
Every second Thursday
7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Uxbridge Public Library
Vicki Pinkerton, 905-473-1284

Writers' and Editors' Network

Breakfast meeting
Third Saturday of each month
9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.
Canadiana Restaurant and Banquet Hall
5230 Dundas St. W.
Six Points Plaza
Toronto
Mickey Turnbull
905-824-5035
or mickeytc@ica.net

The Wordsmiths of Ajax/Pickering

Every third Tuesday 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Free-fall writing exercises and critiquing. Meeting location varies.
Patricia Smith
the.wordsmith@sympatico.ca

The Tale Spinners

The Tale Spinners are aged 55+ and meet every Thursday in Oshawa to write memoirs, fiction and poetry.
Barkley Fletcher: 905-571-1348

Writes of Passage

Group serves Whitby/Brooklin area. Focus includes writing exercises, feedback, and Q & A's regarding writing life. Group meets second Monday of each month. Everyone welcome.
Jan Seppala
jseppala@rogers.com

Oshawa Scribes

First and third Tuesday of each month
1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Oshawa Library, Northview Branch
250 Beatrice St. E., Oshawa
Grace Stevenson, 905-725-0760

Oshawa Young Writers (Ages 13–19)

Oshawa Library, McLaughlin Branch
65 Bagot Street, Oshawa
Call/email for dates and times
Nicole Patterson
905-579-6111, ext #221
npatterson@oshawalibrary.on.ca

Note to circle leaders:

The *Word Weaver* wants to know changes to meeting times/venues etc.

Please send to
wcdwordweaver@wcdr.org.

Joy is but the sign that creative emotion is fulfilling its purpose.

—Charles Du Bos

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Membership Notice

Dear WCDR members,

Some of you have been asking and finally, yes, it's time to renew your WCDR annual membership. The letters are in the mail! ALL members will receive a membership renewal letter, even if you don't owe anything because you paid in advance or won a free membership.

PLEASE NOTE: If you have *not* received your letter by Monday, May 2, please contact Sherry Hinman at wcdrmembers@wcdr.org or by phone at **905-686-0211**.

Answers to "Guess Who" on page 8:

1. Pierre Elliott Trudeau
2. The late Pope John Paul II
3. Indiana Jones
4. Margaret Atwood
5. Martha Stewart

The Word Weaver

The *Word Weaver* is published by the Writers' Circle of Durham Region as a service to its members and other interested parties. No one should act upon advice given without considering the facts of specific situations and/or consulting appropriate professional advisors. Publications are invited to quote from *The Word Weaver* upon obtaining written permission from the President, The Writers' Circle of Durham Region, P.O. Box 323, Ajax, ON L1S 3C5
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