

# FIRST DRAFT

THE JOURNAL OF THE ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM • FALL 2009

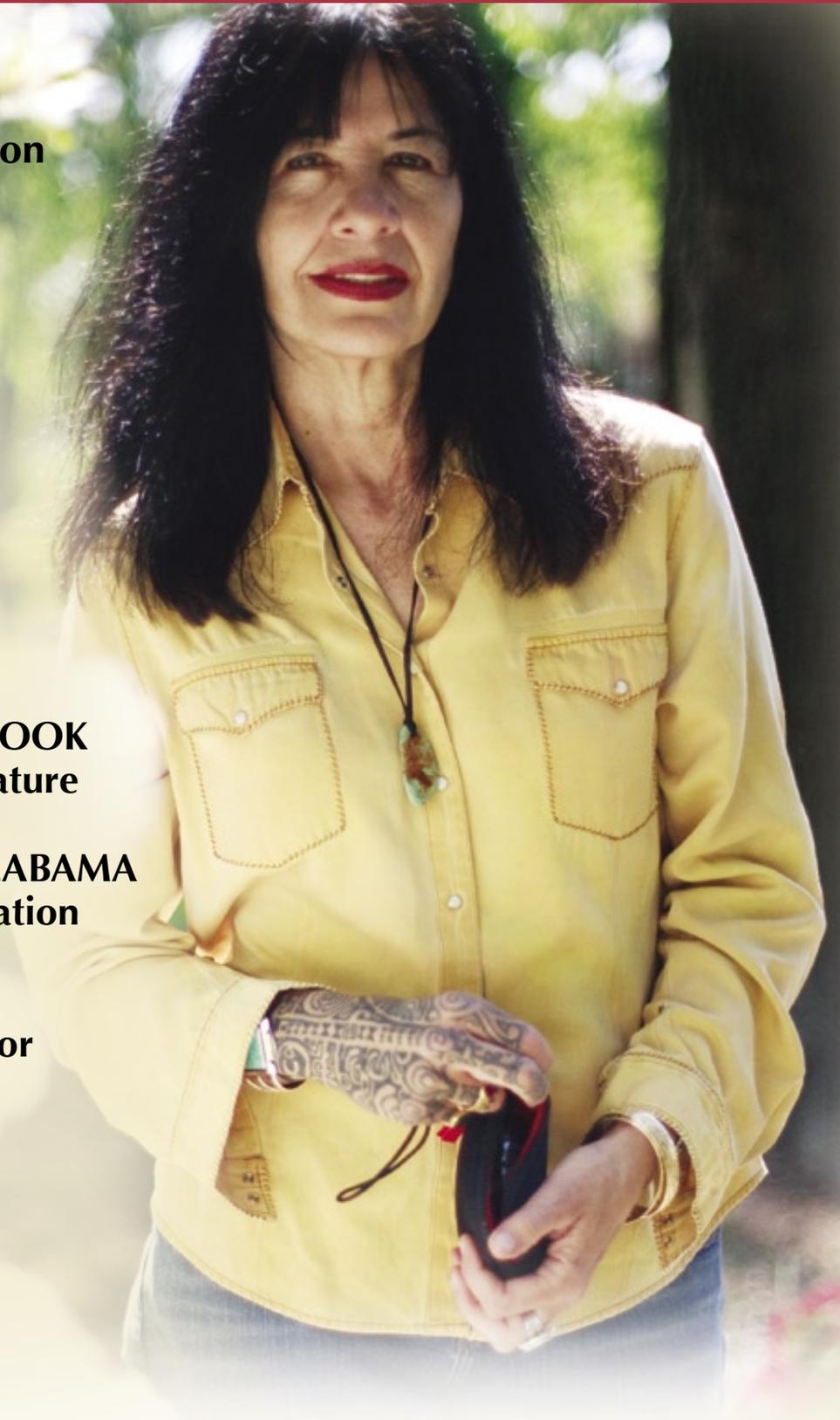
**JOY HARJO**

**The Muscogee Connection**

**THE ART OF THE NOTEBOOK**  
**Turning Tablets Into Literature**

**TUSCANY COMES TO ALABAMA**  
**Pact of Friendship Celebration**

**HSLAA 2009**  
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*First Draft* is a journal for writers, readers, editors, publishers,  
and those who support and work in the literary arts.

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Sue Brannan Walker is the  
Alabama Poet Laureate.

## The Alabama Writers' Forum

### *Past and Present*

The Alabama Writers' Forum (AWF) began at the urging of Al Head, Executive Director of the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA), who envisioned an organization that would serve the literary arts community in Alabama and to which the Council might direct some programming and administrative funds. This had been an interest of Mr. Head since 1984, but finally in 1992, at the Council's statewide conference in Orange Beach, he gathered writers, educators, and publishers to talk informally with Joe David Bellamy, then National Endowment for the Arts literature director, about why and

how a writers' forum would be useful for ASCA and, concomitantly, the entire state's literary community. From this gathering of like minds, the Forum's initial steering committee was formed, and during eighteen months of meetings, it was always attended by Mr. Head or one of his staff members. The Alabama Writers' Forum immediately became an organization that would distinguish the state and encourage and promote its literary artists.

In December 1993, the Arts Council granted enough money for the Forum to hire an executive director, and Jeanie Thompson accepted that position, leaving her post at the University of Alabama College of Continuing Studies. Thompson managed the Forum from her home in Tuscaloosa for a year, and then accepted Jay Lamar's gracious invitation to have it housed at the Auburn University Center for the Arts and Humanities, where the Forum and the Center created joint initiatives, including the Alabama Voices series. In 1997, when ASCA moved to the newly constructed RSA Tower in Montgomery, the Forum relocated to the state capital where it continued to develop its partnership relationship with the Council. In 2005, the Forum relocated to Old Alabama Town, a few blocks from the Tower, and is currently sharing space in the historic Haigler House with the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education.

AWF is a partnership not just with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, but a partnership between those who esteem the written word, who value the talent of those who name themselves Alabama writers, and those who wish to keep abreast of current literary events.

Members receive the twice-yearly print journal *First Draft*, the monthly *Literary News* e-newsletter, *First Draft Reviews Online*, and access to a dynamic Web site. They also benefit from informal advising related to grants and other literary arts and education programs in Alabama. Individual tax-deductible memberships are an affordable \$35, \$15 for students, but there are other levels of support from \$100 up to \$2,500.

It is a privilege to be a part of the Forum Community. The Alabama Writers' Forum is a premier organization that all Alabamians who esteem the literary arts can be proud to endorse so that AWF may continue its work on behalf of its numerous members, patrons, and authors.

*Sue Brannan Walker*

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Founded in 1992, the Alabama Writers' Forum is a not-for-profit, statewide literary arts service organization whose mission is to advance the art of writing by promoting writers, educating young writers, and cultivating Alabama's literary arts. The Forum partners with other not-for-profit arts organizations, schools, libraries, and like-minded entities across the state in a range of public programs and educational endeavors. Some of its partners include the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education, the Alabama Center for the Book / Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities, Auburn University College of Liberal Arts, the Alabama Department of Youth Services, and Alabama Southern Community College. In addition, the Forum works in communities to promote local literary arts programming and to support teachers of creative writing.

Sustaining funding for the Alabama Writers' Forum comes from our major partner, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, with additional funds from our extensive membership base, education contracts, individual contributions, and corporate commitments. Additional funds for special projects have come from the Alabama Children's Trust Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, and the "Support the Arts" Car Tag Fund.



SHANNON WELLS

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On the Arms of Music and Dance

# AN INTERVIEW WITH JOY HARJO

*by Pam Kingsbury*

SHANNON WELLS

Joy Harjo, the author of seven collections of poetry and four CDs, is the first to admit the risks she's willing to take in her work. In performances, she divulges that "Harjo" means "so fearless you're crazy." She took up playing the saxophone in her forties, canoeing in her fifties, and she has gradually turned her poetry readings into performances combining her love for words, music, and storytelling. This spring she visited the Muscle Shoals area, spending two days at the University of North Alabama's Writer's Series, and exploring the area's musical heritage. While Harjo has never lived in Alabama, she's always acknowledged that her roots—both personal and professional—will always be entwined with the region. Pam Kingsbury conducted this interview during Harjo's visit.

**You've been spending more time in the South in recent years. What's your family's connection to Alabama? Are you active within any of the remaining tribes in the state?**

I'm the seventh generation from Monahwee, or "Menawa," which is the spelling I've seen in Alabama historical records. He was the leader of the Red Stick War and fought Andrew Jackson and his forces at Horseshoe Bend against the forced removal to Indian Territory in what is now called Oklahoma. So my roots always return me to Alabama. The Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma is actively involved in the sacred sites in Alabama and Georgia.

I recently made a trip to Alabama and Georgia with tribal members to visit at Horseshoe Bend. The first time I went to the massacre site I got a terrible case of bronchitis, something I hadn't had previously or after that visit. The lungs carry and process grief. My first visit was in connection with a visit to Auburn University. I'll never forget the terrible quiet when I announced that I was Menawa's granddaughter. I realized that for most of the audience I was a ghost. We were all assumed dead. There are many descendants now living in Oklahoma and across the United States. Many of the Poarch Band Creeks come to my ceremonial grounds and participate.

The poets, writers,  
musicians, and artists  
naturally lead the  
visioning process.

**You have familial connections to Alabama, you grew up in Oklahoma, were educated and have spent much of your teaching career in the Southwest, and now live in Hawaii. In what ways does place—where you're from and where you're living—influence your work?**

I came out to Hawaii about eleven years ago. Though

I felt a kinship to these lands and the people—actually there are stories at my ceremonial grounds that link us with Hawaiians—I was a little lost at first. I had depended so much on the grounding of the place in which I was living to define my voice.... It was difficult at first and a huge adjustment. I learned the water, and am still learning the water. The water says, "Don't fight. Just go with the power." If you follow that you'll stay afloat and the water will

continue to teach. Because I am between Hawaii and New Mexico with forays into Oklahoma, I have had to learn that I carry my home within me. Think about it. Our lives are very short in this place. What happens when we die? What do we take with us?

**Looking back thirty years, it's possible to see that you were at the University of New Mexico during an unusually creative time for Native American writers. (Do you use the phrase "Native American," "indigenous peoples," or "first people"?) That time frame seems very important in your career, in Leslie Marmon Silko's career, in Simon Ortiz's career, and the list goes on and on. What do you think caused that critical mass?**

First, I use "American Indian," or "indigenous peoples." "Native American" always feels so academic, and I understand that the term first appeared in academic circles. Now a younger generation uses it. I started at the University of New Mexico as an undergrad in 1971 and began writing poetry around 1973. Simon Ortiz was the first contemporary native poet I had ever heard. His presence and voice in the world suddenly brought poetry up close and possible. I had always loved poetry in books as well as the poetry in song lyrics. Poetry, for me, in books was in the realm inhabited by Emily Dickinson and European men in trench coats in rainy countries. Simon introduced me to Leslie Silko, who in the mid-seventies was in Ketchikan writing *Ceremony*. I was aware of Jim Welch, the Blackfeet poet and novelist. Leslie returned to Laguna and taught at UNM. Ishmael Reed began supporting the native writers of Alaska and the Mainland. Early



PAUL ABDOO

Joy Harjo performs her poetry and music.

multicultural gatherings and readings began to take place around the country, many in the Southwest and California. The women's movement also had an energetic effect. I'm not sure what caused the critical mass. The civil rights movement garnered much energy and it spilled over to all oppressed groups in this country. The poets, writers, musicians, and artists naturally lead the visioning process.

***She Had Some Horses* has been published in a twenty-fifth anniversary edition. Did you have any idea how much acclaim/attention that collection would bring to your work?**

I had no idea. The horses came to me at the beginning of my work on that collection of poems. I was driving up from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to help release my first chapbook of poems.... That book made a doorway for me, and I honor it and the horses. I always have to add that I have written poems, books, and CDs of music since then. Some readers/listeners stop at *She Had Some Horses*.

**Performance has always been an extension of poetry for you. There's an old school notion among readers that poets are shy, retiring people. Describe the process of having moved into a more multi-disciplinary approach to poetry.**

It has been a process. My first performances of poetry were straight readings. And I had the page to hide behind. In the late seventies, I was inspired by the poetry of Jayne Cortez, whom I first saw perform in New York City with a full jazz band behind her. Around the same time I saw Linton Kwesi Johnson rock an auditorium in Amsterdam without his band, with just the rhythm of his Jamaican English in his poetry. When I was a student at the University of Iowa, it was made clear that performance distracted from the words, and that in a reading of a poem the poet should not perform, rather let the words stand without any sort of vocal embellishment. When Robert Bly performed with masks and drama, students were tightly divided between those who were moved and those who were offended. Reminds me of the admonishment against saxophones in the classical music realm. They "dirtied" the clean, classical waters. I started learning saxophone when I was nearly forty. I'd wanted to learn in my early teens but was prevented from playing by a band teacher who refused to allow girls to take up saxophones in his band. I always heard music with my poetry.

I'll never forget the  
terrible quiet when I  
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Around the time I started my band—Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice—and set out on a journey of a kind of native dub poetry I began participating in the traditional ways of life in my tribe. I grew up in church like many of my tribe, and many do both traditional ways and church. I realized that for my people and for most of the world, poetry was not captured in books. Poetry was/is oral and most often came/comes into the world on the arms of music and dance. This freed me to follow my instincts. Even most European poetry is rooted in song. The saxophone led me back to singing, and on my most recent album, *Winding Through the Milky Way*, I've developed the singing and have added native flutes and even ukulele on one song. The one-woman show puts it all together.

**How did the one-woman show begin?**

My one woman show with music, *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light*, just had its first run in Los Angeles at the Wells Fargo Theater for three weeks in March (2009) as a part of the Native Voices at the Autry Series. We plan to take it on the road. The project started because during my solo and band performances I began to get ideas for creating a story arc to link the songs, to make a show with a trajectory. I had lots of material I'd been collecting with this in mind. In September 2007, I learned of the Native Initiative at the Public Theater of New York and agreed to have a play ready to feature in a reading for three days of performances and panels on native theater in December 2007. There's nothing like a deadline to motivate. The first reading of the play premiered December 8, 2007, under the direction of Lisa Peterson. The play transformed through many, many rewrites, under the direction of Randy Reinholtz and with the assistance of dramaturge Shirley Fishman. The play is a ceremony for the protagonist Redbird Monahwee, who has "hit bottom," so to speak. She goes for assistance. The storytelling is her healing. The process is ongoing. After performing it I have other rewrites in mind. And I'm always working at perfecting the acting and musical performances. I wrote most of the songs for the play—the lyrics of one was adapted from one of my mother's songs, and another was an arrangement of Jim Pepper's "Witchi-Tai-To"—and was assisted by brilliant guitarist Larry Mitchell who created the transitions and mood pads for the show. I'm looking forward to taking the show on the road.

Continued on page 25

“A quietly bold debut, full of heart.” —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

# The Well and the Mine

by Gin Phillips

In a small Alabama coal-mining town during the summer of 1931, nine-year-old Tess Moore sits on her back porch and watches a woman toss a baby into her family’s well without a word. This shocking act of violence sets in motion a chain of events that forces Tess and her older sister Virgie to look beyond their own door and learn the value of kindness and lending a helping hand. As Tess and Virgie try to solve the mystery of the well, an accident puts their seven-year-old brother’s life in danger, forcing the Moore family to come to a new understanding of the power of love and compassion.

A novel of warmth and true feeling, *The Well and the Mine* explores the value of community, charity, family, and hope that we can give each other during a time of hardship.

“Gin Phillips has a remarkable ear for dialogue and a tenderhearted eye for detail; you can hear the pecans and hickory nuts falling from the trees and feel the stillness of a hot summer night.”

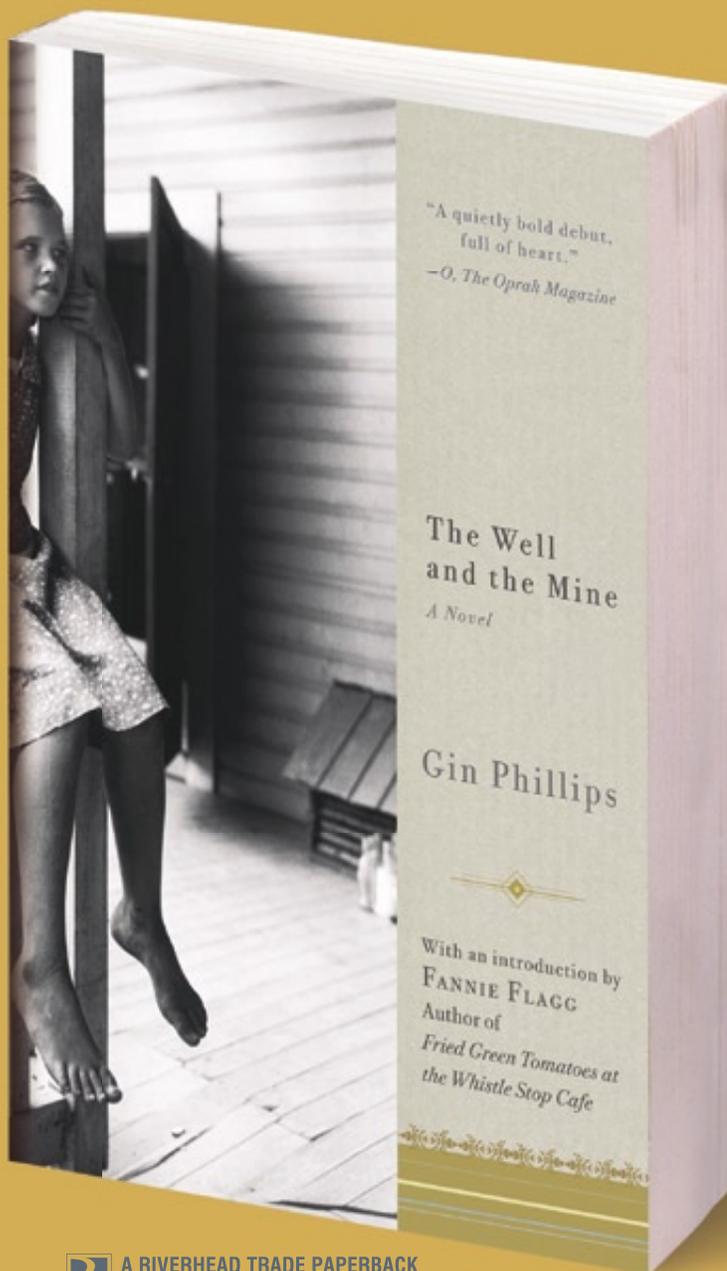
—*Los Angeles Times*

“When you close the book, you’ll miss these characters. But *The Well and the Mine* doesn’t just give you characters who’ll stay with you—it gives you a whole world.”

—Fannie Flagg, author of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

“An unforgettable tale of small-town southern life during the hard knock days of the Great Depression....haunting...a superb first novel.”

—Beth H. Wilder, Alabama Writers’ Forum



978-1-59448-449-0



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#### WANT TO CONNECT WITH THE AUTHOR?

Gin Phillips is available to speak to your book club. Please contact [melissa.broder@us.penguin.com](mailto:melissa.broder@us.penguin.com)



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# Notes on Notable NOTEBOOKS

## Their Role in Writing Poetry

by Hank Lazer

Poets often act out a joke I've heard told equally effectively about Jews or Baptists. Q: What do you get when you have two Jews? A: Three temples. Applied to poets, we often notice and emphasize first and foremost our differences. Living in a capitalist, consumer society, the work and products of poets are not the most respected and admired commodities. In fact, very few people in U.S. society care about what we do, and thus perhaps among ourselves, we get to articulate and act out (with exaggerated and compensatory intensity) the importance of our different beliefs. In fact, yes, among poets we really *do* have significantly different beliefs, assumptions, and principles about how one might proceed in this unusual genre. But I think I have discovered perhaps the only thing that poets have in common: a love of notebooks. This essay—with thanks to Danny Gamble—is a story about notebooks.

I have always collected notebooks. I'm an admirer of the University of Alabama's Book Arts Program, and when the students hold their annual sale, I'll always end up buying a couple of notebooks. I'm an admirer too of the notebooks created by Standard Deluxe and by Amos Paul Kennedy. I've been given some remarkable (and intimidatingly beautiful) notebooks as gifts. My aunt and uncle gave me a notebook bound in Hawaiian koa wood; my mother gave me a soft leather-bound notebook that was made in Venice. Sometimes, a notebook is simply too good to write in it.

My more interactive engagement with notebooks—i.e., writing in them rather than simply accumulating them—began five or six years ago when I embarked on a collaborative poem-

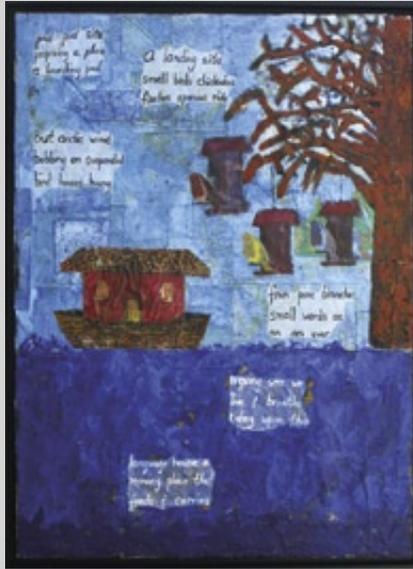


painting project with outsider artist Pak. (For examples of Pak's paintings and for a brief bio, see [www.marciaweberartobjects.com/nichols](http://www.marciaweberartobjects.com/nichols).) We decided that we would work together on a series of poem-paintings that would incorporate poems from my series of fifty-four word compositions called *Portions*. For the first series of five poem-paintings, I wrote the stanzas on pages torn from the Tuscaloosa phone book. But for the second series (which turned out to be four poem-paintings), Pak asked me to go in search of interesting notebooks. It so happened that about that time

I had been invited to give a reading in Paris, and I figured that I would have no trouble finding some unusual and appropriate notebooks there. I found two that we experimented with and eventually used. After six years of writing the fifty-four word poems of *Portions*, I began to think of another way to write. That is the way that I work. I call it *serial heuristics*—meaning that I invent a particular form, and dwell with that form for either a specified period of time or for a specified number of poems. I think of these invented forms as being like the lenses of a pair of glasses: a very particular way of seeing and knowing. The poems that result constitute a kind of experiment—an effort to find out what I might see or know in and through a particular way of writing. *Portions*—which I never expected would engage me for six years—left me sick of fixed form; I wanted to find something much more malleable and variable, while still arriving at a somewhat pre-determined way to proceed. It was then that I turned to my collection of notebooks and found an interesting path.

The notebook project that I developed is called *The Notebooks (of Being & Time)*. I ended up writing (sequentially) in ten notebooks of varying sizes, qualities, and length. I treated the page as a unit of composition, and thus the form of the writing would often vary radically from page to page of the notebook, as if the writing on each page were a kind of new performance of the possibilities on that shape for the page/stage. For the prior ten years of my writing, I would say that sound or the musical qualities of the language was the guid-

LAURA SHILL



"House" from *Portions*

ing force. The book *Days* explores a range of lyric possibilities, as in the opening lines to poem #84: "slow to slogan / voracious to / veracity amen / to mendacity / flesh to pleasure." The book *The New Spirit*, which begins "any one could be the one the sudden / stun you'd waited for / arrest again / a rest against the elements," moves toward a more symphonic or suite-like model of composition, based in part on John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*.

But the work in *The Notebooks* was driven by a vision of what each page would look like. I would see the page—black sections on a white background, not the specific words but simply a relationship of black and white on the page—and then write words to actualize the shape as envisioned. (As with the poems led by sound or music, the writing of the notebook poems too was a process of exploration, not the expression of pre-determined content or thought.) The shape of the notebook itself became a crucial factor in composition, as different page sizes offered different possibilities for the poem.

Continued on page 15



# INTERNATIONAL PACT OF FRIENDSHIP Celebrates Michelangelo and His Heirs

by Jeanie Thompson

Continuing a cultural exchange officially begun in Spring 2008, a group of sculptors, artisans, musicians, and dancers from the Tuscan city of Pietrasanta, Italy, traveled to Alabama last spring. Along with four exhibitions, film presentations, and a delegation of city officials, they took part in an international cultural exchange, hosted by the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA).

Their hometown of Pietrasanta is nestled along the Mediterranean coast and has been a major center for the production of stone and cast sculpture, as well as a variety of other art processes, for centuries. Michelangelo worked in the area using Carrara marble from the nearby Apuan Alps above the town, thus leading to the theme of this year's exchange: Michelangelo and His Heirs.

Events of the exchange were based in Montgomery, where a Sister City program was signed and celebrated on April 29 featuring the mayors of both cities—Todd Strange of Montgomery and Massimo Mallegni of Pietrasanta. Prior to the Montgomery events, a two-week Marble Festival was held in Sylacauga that included exhibitions and an opportunity for American sculptors to carve with an Italian master. Sylacauga capped its Marble Festival on April 28 with a Pact of Friendship ceremony, in which Mayor Sam Wright and Mayor Mallegni signed an agreement. The gala celebration concluded a day of demonstrations in marble sculpting and was followed by a recital at the First United Methodist church, which was packed with townspeople and guests.

During their visit to Alabama, the traveling Italian artists and musicians also participated in the Magic City Art Connection in Birmingham, taught master dance classes and performed at Alabama State University in Montgomery, and attended the production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Monroeville.

ASCA Executive Director Al Head commented that “even though separated by great distance, language, and history, the State of Alabama and the City of Pietrasanta, Italy, have much to share and celebrate. Our people appreciate great art, know the arts elevate the joy of living, and value culture as an essential element of community life. Our common threads bring us together and our differences present opportunities to learn from one another.”

On their last day in Montgomery, Mayor Mallegni and his delegation paid a visit to the Alabama State Senate, where they were welcomed by Lt. Governor Jim Folsom during a special joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate. They also spent more than an hour with Governor Bob Riley discussing further economic and cultural exchange possibilities. This fall, Mayor Strange and a delegation from the Capital City will visit Pietrasanta. Going forward there will be exchange projects involving dance, photography, music, and

other arts under the auspices of the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the City of Pietrasanta. These projects will take artists from Alabama to Italy as well as bringing some back to Alabama.

The Alabama-Italy arts exchange began in 2008, when an Alabama delegation consisting of artists, musicians, and arts community representatives, as well as exhibitions of Alabama art and photography, travelled to Italy for a series of events focusing on the civil rights history of Alabama. This event was featured in the Fall 2008 issue of



Pietrasanta Mayor Massimo Mallegni with Alabama Governor Bob Riley. (Photo by Robin Cooper)

*First Draft*. ([www.writersforum.org/FirstDraft](http://www.writersforum.org/FirstDraft))

For more on the arts exchange between the state of Alabama and the City of Pietrasanta, Tuscany, Italy see [www.arts.alabama.gov](http://www.arts.alabama.gov) or contact Program Manager Georgine Clarke: [georgine.clarke@arts.alabama.gov](mailto:georgine.clarke@arts.alabama.gov).



Children's Choir at First United Methodist Church in Sylacauga welcomes visitors with a song during the Italian music and opera performances. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



The Birmingham Sunlights, 2009 recipients of a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship, sing during the Cultural Exchange closing ceremonies. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



Mayor Todd Strange of Montgomery looks on as Mayor Massimo Mallegni of Pietrasanta signs the official Sister City agreement. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



Flutist Stefano Moriconi and trumpeter Riccardo Pasquini perform at the First Baptist Church (Brick-A-Day) in Montgomery during the Cultural Exchange. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



Italian sculptor Rino Giannini demonstrates his craft during the 2009 Flimp Festival at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo by Georgine Clarke)



Italian sculptor Giovanni Balderi introduces children to marble carving during the 2009 Flimp Festival at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo by Georgine Clarke)



Mayor Massimo Mallegni of Pietrasanta presents a book to Mayor Todd Strange of Montgomery while Alabama State Council on the Arts Executive Director Al Head and ASCA Board Chairman Ralph Frohsin Jr. applaud. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



Adria Ferrali, Artistic Director and Founder of New Dance Drama, performs a scene from *Hamletus Stirps Virilis*, during a residency at Alabama State University. (Photo by David Campbell-Alabama State University)



Angelica Stella (r) from New Dance Drama teaches a master class at Alabama State University. (Photo by Julian Green)



Dr. Daniele Spina, Pietrasanta Counselor of Culture, looks on as Al Head, Executive Director of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, speaks at a dinner party at the Capital City Club in Montgomery. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)



Montgomery City Council President Charles Jinright with noted Italian soprano Mimma Briganti. (Photo by Steve Grauberger)

# New Songs and Old Standards

## Alabama Writers in Post-Katrina New Orleans

by Christopher Chambers

*The peculiar flavor of New Orleans...has something to do with the South  
and with a cutting off from the South, with the River, and with history.*

—Walker Percy

In the small overgrown courtyard in the back of the Maple Leaf Bar in the Carrollton neighborhood of New Orleans, beyond the wrought iron patio tables and chairs that cluster precariously on the uneven bricks, a modest slab of marble settling into the soft earth commemorates the life and work of Everette Maddox, an Alabamian who moved to New Orleans in 1976 and became one of the most infamous and celebrated poets in New Orleans' recent history. Every Sunday afternoon this courtyard hosts one of the oldest reading series in the country, a series that Maddox founded in 1979. During the week, the bar is quiet and the courtyard usually empty, a good place to write, and like many places in New Orleans it lends itself to looking back.

When living in Tuscaloosa in the mid-nineties, I would escape to New Orleans as often as I could. My friend Alex, a classmate of Rette at the University of Alabama, had lived for a time in the French Quarter before returning home to Alabama and liked to refer to New Orleans as "the elephant's grave-



yard," always with a smile as if to say he was only joking that writers don't write in New Orleans, they go there to die. I did not quite believe him then, but I was intrigued by what I'd heard of Maddox. The Maple Leaf, one of the first places I visited, is still a favorite haunt.

The heat this summer is the kind of heat that seems to stop time. I stare at an empty page, a little piece of eternity. A bottle of Abita sweats on the table. I recall Maddox's poem "New Orleans" in which a native warns a newcomer to the city: "...You're sunk. You won't / write a line. You won't make / a nickel. You won't hit / a lick at a snake in this / antebellum sauna-bath...." Though he died here in 1989, homeless and

broke, Maddox did write several books of poetry that are read and celebrated to this day.

I moved to New Orleans from Tuscaloosa almost ten years after Maddox's death, but his spirit was then and remains a palpable presence, especially at the Maple Leaf where he held court as he had at the Chukker back in Tuscaloosa. In these early uneasy months of yet another hurricane season, I am struggling to finish a novel set in Alabama, a novel I began in another world and time. Characters in the novel travel to New Orleans, as characters from Alabama are wont to do. And in these scenes the setting becomes unavoidably historical, nostalgic even: the city as it was before the disaster of August 2005. New Orleans absent the physical and psychic wound of Katrina is a place that no longer exists, a place we can return to only in memory and in literature.

In the *Oxford American's* 2008 issue on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, William Caverlee contends that the three giants of New Orleans literature are *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Confederacy*

of *Dunces*, and *The Moviegoer*. I am not inclined to disagree, but I find it noteworthy that *The Moviegoer*, winner of the National Book Award in 1962 and arguably the quintessential New Orleans novel, was written by Walker Percy, a writer who was born in Birmingham. In addition, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, for which John Kennedy Toole received a Pulitzer Prize in 1981, was discovered by Percy who first published an excerpt in the *New Orleans Review* where he was a contributing editor. New Orleans has always offered what Percy describes as “a sense both of easement and of unspecified possibilities.” This is a place where people can re-imagine themselves and their lives, start over, or disappear.

A new generation of New Orleans writers was living in the city in August 2005, some natives but many of us from elsewhere. An untold number of books, manuscripts, and works-in-progress were lost in the deluge. The floodwaters turned them into pulp and ruined typewriters, computers, and keyboards, destroying both the work of these writers and the tools of their trade. Nonetheless, almost immediately after the storm, when the floodwaters had barely receded, there began a storm of writing, first online and very soon in print as well: elegies, defenses, memoirs, histories, novels, stories, screenplays, plays, and poems written by residents, former residents, newcomers, and by outsiders. And the writing continues even as the aftermath continues to play out. The only thing to do it seems is to write and rewrite to try to make sense of it all.

Jennifer Davis, an Alabama fiction writer living in New Orleans in 2005, moved to Florida for a temporary teaching gig a few days before Katrina ventured into the Gulf. She has not moved back. She writes, however, that “the city’s languid hedonism always felt like coming home...and it will always feel like a lost home to me.” Certainly much has been lost but the essence of the place remains, what she calls “the spell that is New Orleans...a luxury of rewriting and forgiveness that is one of the city’s greatest gifts.” That spell is far-reaching, and we find New Orleans appearing in the

work of writers who view the city from a distance.

“Twilight Call, Louis Armstrong Park,” the final poem in Jim Murphy’s new book *Heaven Overland*, concludes: there is “No telling here at the hinge of twilight, where / old and new songs cross.” Murphy, English Department chairman and director of the Montevallo Literary Festival at the University of Montevallo, has been back to New Orleans twice since the storm, and he returns “in a musical sense almost every day thanks to WWOZ on the Web.” He acknowledges the human tragedies of Katrina, but he also tries to fit Katrina into a larger context: “the yellow fever epidemic, the largest slave market in the western hemisphere, previous hurricanes, etc.—the pain that’s a part of the city’s history that finally is transformed in music, in art, in ways of seeing the world and ways of living that don’t exist anywhere else in this country.” This process of transformation is a messy one, particularly for those writers living in the city where the grind of day-to-day life is a part of the equation.

Michael J. Lee, a fiction writer who moved from New Orleans to Tuscaloosa nine months after Katrina to attend the creative writing program there says, “Katrina slammed the door on me being able to see the world in realistic terms. The absurd level of tragedy reconfigured my mind in such a way that I could not write stories that featured plots, settings, and characters drawn from my everyday life because at that time I felt a stranger to everything: New Orleans, Alabama, my own mind.” He moved back to New Orleans this summer and observes that though the city is still very much in flux, the literary culture seems quite vibrant, that it is still an attractive place for a writer: “I’m inspired by its nebulous state, its murky and unwritten future...I live and write in a dream here, a state in which my self is constantly dissolving and dying and reforming and changing.”

Four years after the disaster, New Orleans continues to recover and change, and perhaps to die as well. In too many ways, the city *has* returned to the way it was—corruption and incompetence at all levels of city government, rampant violent crime, and substandard schools (as I write this, a former state senator is on trial, the mayor and the police department under investigation of wrongdoing). Nonetheless, the inimitable culture of the city has not only survived but is enjoying a kind of renaissance. The music, the food, the festivals large and small are back. An influx of Hispanic workers and their families are making their mark on the city’s landscape and culture. Honduran pupuserias and taco trucks have appeared alongside po-boy restaurants and daiquiri shops. Latin music alternates with the brass bands, blues, and trad jazz on WWOZ. The art and literary scenes are thriving. Bookstores and art galleries and performance spaces have sprung up in the Bywater, the Marigny, and elsewhere in the city. Installations by international artists from the Prospect 1 biennial remain in locations all over the city while graffiti artists and a fanatical anti-graffiti crusader have made the city itself an ever-changing canvas. Most of the city’s independent bookstores, small presses, and reading series have returned, and new ones have emerged to join them.

There is the sense today in New Orleans that history is being written, that we are not only witnessing a crucial moment in the life of a great American city, but that there are opportunities to participate in the writing of the next chapter. Writers from Alabama continue to drift on down to New Orleans and add their voices to the mix. These new voices

join with the old, sing new songs and new versions of the old standards, and in this way New Orleans still has to do with the River, and much to do with the South.

---

*Christopher Chambers teaches creative writing at Loyola University, where he edits the New Orleans Review.*



DAVID RAE MORRIS

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This project is supported by the City of Hoover, the Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities and by the Friends of Hoover Public Library.

Continued from page 13

I've lived in several neighborhoods, uptown and downtown, in four different houses in New Orleans, each of them built in the 1800s, none of them more than a few blocks from the river. I am drawn to these old houses, and to the unseen but nonetheless palpable presence of the big river. In late 2004, I began renovating a run-down turn-of-the-century Victorian near the levee in Algiers, and in April 2005 moved into it with my family. This house, a two-story Victorian double, faces west and from the balcony offers a view of the downtown New Orleans skyline. In 1949, long before the high-rise office buildings and hotels that now define that skyline, the view from the balcony in the cool winter months of January and February would have been one of a smoky sky hanging over the old city, a result of the coal smoke from all the city's fireplaces. Looking north from the balcony to the end of my block, I can see Pelican Street where it crosses Belleville at the public library, an Italianate building built in 1907, and beyond that the levee. Pelican continues past the old Belleville School with its flagless flagpole and broken windows. The school, a stately four-story brick building, was built in 1895 and closed some years after Kerouac and friends drove past. It has stood vacant and in decline for years, but according to a weathered banner on the rusted chain-link fence, it is soon to be renovated into luxury condominiums. The windows remain broken and tattered blue tarps flutter around gaping holes in the mansard roof....

The old rooming house across the street from [Confetti Park] has been renovated into apartments, and the storefront bar on the corner is now a yoga studio. The galleried building across Verrett that was the grocery store is vacant, but faded advertisements for Whiskey & Wines and Sunbeam bread are still visible where they were painted on the windows. Blue ceramic tiles set in the concrete in front of the door still read M. Abascal & Bro. I sit in the park in the evening and squint across the street, and [I] can almost see Neal and Jack and LuAnne at the Gulf Station, the grocer closing his shop, and the laborers heading into the bar on a similar drowsy evening more than fifty years ago....

Jack Kerouac's elegant and simple descriptions of Algiers now resonate for me in a way they did not in earlier readings, and one in particular seems eerily prophetic: Drowsy, peninsular Algiers with all her bees and shanties was like to be washed away someday. The sun was slanted, bugs flip-flopped, the awful waters groaned....

The peculiar glow across the river in the aftermath of the hurricane and flooding last fall was from the fires that raged through the warehouses along the wharves across the river. I watched those fires in a seemingly endless loop on a television screen hundreds of miles away. Today, from the top of the levee at the end of the street, I can see the specter of blackened and twisted ruins of the burned-out warehouses stretching for blocks along the east bank. Though it's a fine clear evening with soft breezes on the levee and the massive river sliding silently by, I cannot help but imagine the waters' awful groaning when these levees one day fail. Some days I hear sirens in the distance, and some days the clouds are strange. And I look to the west toward the wounded skyline, into the sad red dusk, and wonder what it was across this river that Sal Paradise could not see.

Christopher Chambers  
*Copper Nickel*, Issue 8  
September 2007  
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Continued from page 9

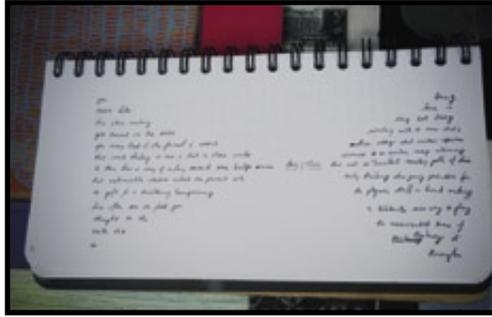
The other key factor that I introduced into the process had to do with the duration of the project. For many years, I have read the work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, but mainly with an emphasis on his later writing. As I get older, I realize more and more acutely the finite nature of what I will be able to read, and I begin to ask myself which particular books will I read. In the case of Heidegger, I had never read his daunting, massive early work, *Being & Time*. My own fascination with the elements of being and time recurs throughout my writing. I decided to write the notebooks project beside my reading of Heidegger's *Being & Time*, and that the allotted duration for the notebooks project would be the length of time it took me to read Heidegger's book. It turned out that the book, and thus the notebooks project, took me nearly two and a half years. I completed ten notebooks, a total of 583 pages of writing.

By granting the notebooks a key role in the composition of the poems, I gave up some of my own autonomy and governance of the poem and granted a shaping force and role to the notebook itself. The first two notebooks were ones that I had acquired in Paris for the project with Pak. The first notebook, with the intriguing product name *le thé des écrivains*, had a sparkly cover and a large page size (6 3/4" x 8 3/4"). The second notebook, with an equally intriguing product name, *Carnet de rêves*, had a radically different shape—a vertically formatted rectangle (4 3/4" x 9 1/2"). Overall, the notebooks varied in size from 3 1/2" x 8 1/2" to 4" x 4" to 5" x 8 1/4", and in length from eight pages to 142 pages.

I think that focusing on the notebook as a key constitutive element of the poem (rather than as something merely incidental to the poem's composition) asks us to reconsider the role of handwriting in a digital age, as well as our love of paper and binding. Two of my favorite notebooks are favorites because of their binding: one is an Ethiopian binding; the other is an accordion binding. I am still struggling to think through the many options available as these poems and notebooks make their way from handwritten items living in particular notebooks to poems and possibly a book (or books) that will (perhaps) be digitized and printed in a format that normalizes the peculiarities and differences crucial to notebook-based composition. A number of selections from the notebooks have begun to appear in various magazines and journals. Sometimes, the editors have been able to print both a standardized digital print version of the poem along with an image (usually a pdf) of the handwritten notebook page beside the printed version.

I'll finish this musing on notebooks with a few examples from the notebooks. My ongoing collaboration with Janeann Dill, animation and visual artist, helped me to see the visual possibilities—and to give these possibilities priority in the composition. Thus Notebook #6, the Ethiopian binding

notebook, became very much like an animator's flipbook. A reader or viewer can learn a great deal about that notebook by flipping through it rapidly—a different approach than reading it word by word. And Notebook #9, the accordion notebook, when I decided to write on both sides of



Laura Shill



each page/panel, became very much like a moebius strip—a work that continues from one side to the next, and thus can provide a kind of never-ending reading experience. (A reading of the full accordion book can be seen at the PennSound Web site, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lazer>, near the end of my Reading at Kelly Writers House, March 17, 2009.) The notebooks have helped me to re-think how I present readings. Two examples: the funnel-shaped poem leads to a two voice performance that explores several ways to read the poem aloud (Track 19 of the radio show for Art International Radio, March 18, 2009, Close Listening, Program One: Full Reading, at PennSound, includes a two voice version performed by the author and Charles Bernstein); the spiral-shaped poem I've read while walking in a spiral shape through the audience (winding up in the middle of the audience) thus making the shape of the poem itself apparent and tangible to the audience.

I'd like to think that all that I've been describing comes from valuing the notebook itself as a full partner in the making of the poem rather than treating the notebook as merely a means to an end. My advice is to pick up a range of differently

shaped notebooks, to write in them, and to let the notebook (and the texture of the page) become a key part of your writing.

*Hank Lazer has published fifteen books of poetry, most recently Portions, and several books of essays, including Lyric & Spirit.*



ANNY BALLARDINI

## Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards Celebrates Its **SIXTEENTH YEAR**

by *Danny Gamble*  
Photos by *Jamie Martin*

The Alabama Writers' Forum hosted its sixteenth annual Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards on March 11 at the Alabama Department of Archives and History Alabama Power Auditorium. A diverse group of students from the Alabama School of Fine Arts, Booker T. Washington Magnet High School, Briarwood Christian School, Crossroads Christian School, Eufaula, Lee (Huntsville), Mountain Brook, Opelika, and Pelham high schools attended the event to receive their awards for drama, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. The audience also included teachers and parents. The Honorable Tammy Irons-Hallman, Alabama House of Representatives (D-Florence, District 1), gave the keynote address.

Alabama State Council on the Arts Executive Director Al Head welcomed the audience. "This is a program we look forward to every year," he said. "We congratulate the winners and thank the teachers who work with these talented students. We also thank the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other support groups for allowing these students to write. There are so many good things going on in our schools, and this program is clearly an example of one of those good things."

"For many of you, this will be one of many awards and honors bestowed upon you in your lifetime," said Rep. Irons-Hallman, addressing the students. "Your talent in writing will help open doors for you. The art of writing did not come easy to me. I didn't know until law school how important writing really is. You will use your talent daily, and you will have a leg up on others."



"For many of you, this will be one of many awards and honors bestowed upon you in your lifetime. Your talent in writing will help open doors for you," said Rep. Tammy Irons-Hallman.



"There are so many good things going on in our schools, and this program is clearly an example of one of those good things," said Al Head, Executive Director, Alabama State Council on the Arts.

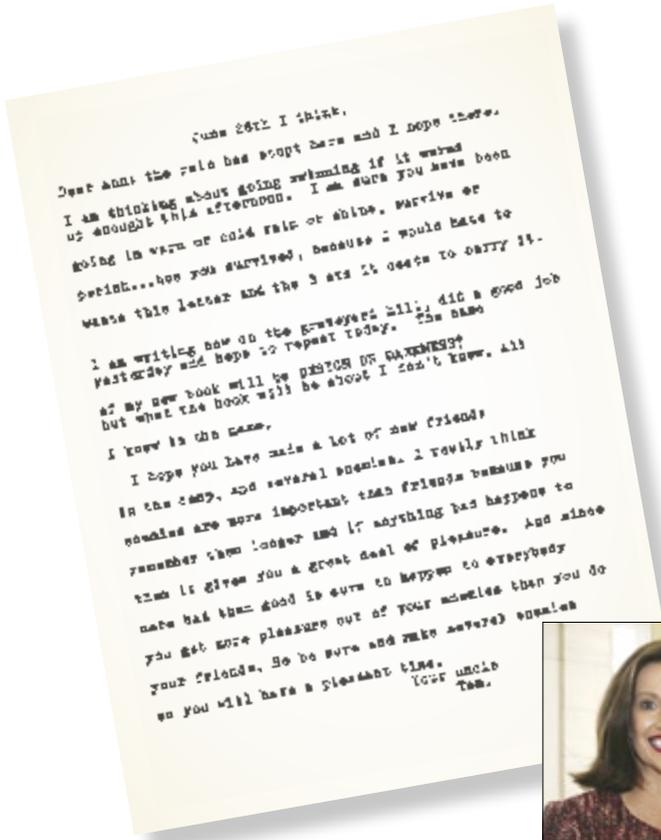
Rep. Irons-Hallman then read a letter from T.S. Stribling, recipient of the 1933 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his novel *The Store*, set in Florence, Ala. Stribling wrote the letter to his niece, Ann Stribling Alley, a friend and client of Rep. Irons-Hallman, as a young Alley was preparing to leave for camp.

"I wanted to share that letter with you because each of you have been given a gift as well," said Rep. Irons-Hallman, noting that Stribling worked as an attorney, a teacher, and a newspaper editor while writing his fiction. "You may use it to become a Pulitzer Prize winner like T.S. Stribling, or you may use it to become successful in whatever career you choose."

Closing the ceremony, AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson said, "The High School Literary Arts Awards is one of my favorite AWF programs because through it we encourage young writers to appreciate themselves and their talents. We applaud their efforts and tell them that it's okay to be a writer. I always remember writing poetry in high school with no instruction and little encouragement, and how it took me years to get to a level of craft that these students sometimes achieve before they are even seniors."

After the event, a beaming Erika Wade, a student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts and recipient of the B.T. Thompson Senior Portfolio Scholarship, said, "I'm very humbled to win this scholarship. I appreciate the positive reinforcement for my art and future career."

Visit [www.writersforum.org/](http://www.writersforum.org/) programs for a complete list of winners.



T.S. Stribling's letter to his niece, Ann Stribling Alley. (Used by permission.)

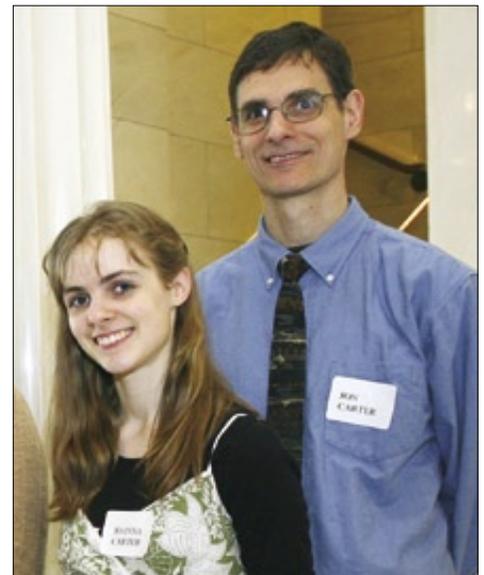


(l-r) AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson with Erika Wade, Alabama School of Fine Arts, recipient of the B.T. Thompson Senior Portfolio Scholarship.

(l-r) Rep. Tammy Irons-Hallman with Senior Portfolio Scholarship recipients Michael Lambert and Erika Wade, Alabama School of Fine Arts; Mallie Froehlich, Briarwood Christian School; and Joanna Carter, Crossroads Christian School.

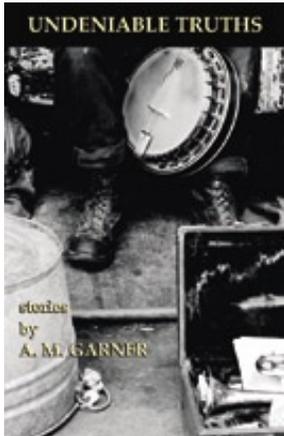


(l-r) Chelsea Teague, Poetry Judge's Special Recognition; teacher Foster Dickson; and Katherine Tucker, First Place-Drama, Booker T. Washington Magnet High School.



(l-r) Joanna Carter, Crossroads Christian School, Mozelle Purvis Shirley Senior Portfolio Scholarship recipient, with teacher and father Jon Carter.

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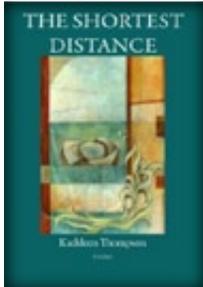
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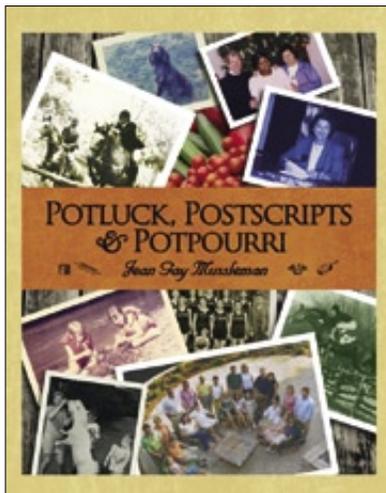
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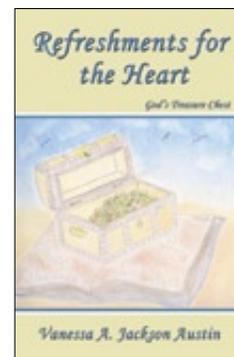
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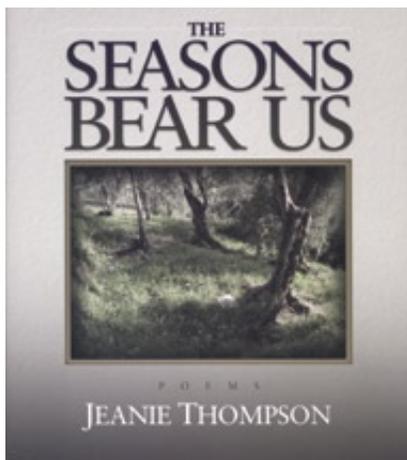
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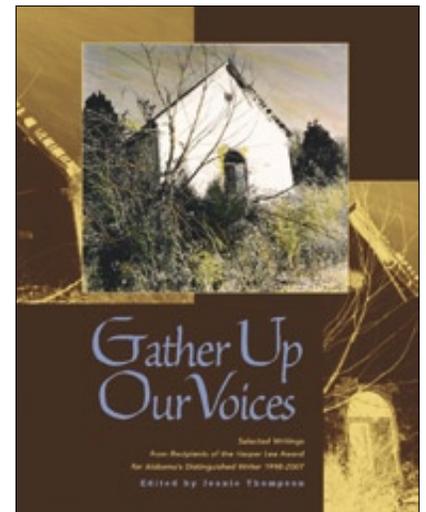
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# A Few Conversations With Oneself

## THE SOLITARY PATH TO WRITING ●●●●●●●●●●

by Phyllis Alesia Perry

Not that long ago, in another essay about writing, I sent this message out to my colleagues who were new to the struggle: Be alone. Get quiet. You might as well get it over with at the beginning to see if you can stand it.

In sending this rather terse advice, I wasn't trying to be mean. I promise. I am a tender-hearted person. I think that most writers are. And because we are, I am often afraid for us.

Too often we tender-hearts go out into the world seeking credentials, permission, laudatory slaps on the back. Just like any other seekers we want someone to point us in the right direction, tell us what to do, assure us that we have what it takes. Such yearnings are natural for anyone embarking on important work. For writers, who are often looking for a clear path to an unclear destination, the need for validation can be particularly deep-felt. Yet those who experience such validation have the same challenge as those who do not. We all have to sit and stare down the demon blank page in our search for a self that speaks and lives through writing.

That is why I am ambivalent about writing programs and downright hostile about writing groups.

Perhaps I should pause here and make clear that this is a *personal* essay, not a wholesale critique of the efficacy of any kind of program, group, workshop, etc. I just know that when I am struggling to pluck narratives out of the ether, it's hard enough trying to hear the voices in my own head without the noise and clamor of other people.

While I certainly support training and education for writers, I also know that there are as many ways to become a writer as there are people who want to write. I would suggest to novice writers who have been considering enrollment in a program or group that perhaps it would be better to shelve the idea until they have really tried to work on their own.

Every writer knows how to become a writer. We have been told over and over: "You must read and read. And you must write." But what we also soon find out is that writing takes more than desire. What we are rarely taught is how to muster the *will* to write, to keep going, to sit by ourselves and create new people, new lives, and new worlds (or at least new twists on the old ones). That's what people are looking for in those writing groups: the will.

It was at the newspapers I worked for that I learned that I had it in me. I learned that I could write coherently, in a short space of time, and see something through to completion. And I learned how to let what I created go out there in the world. (I was often cringing, but I would let it go.) Maybe some

people do find this kind of experience sitting in classrooms and groups. But all of us eventually come to a moment when we are alone with ourselves and our story.

For me those moments first came when, after working through the last deadline every night at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I would come home and write. Then I would tear up pages and write some more. I was always profoundly exhausted and profoundly excited at the same time. Some people would say that I tortured myself with these shenanigans, but at least I wasn't allowing someone else to do it. And when I was ready, when I thought I really had a book that had something to say, I went to someone I trusted, someone with the critical skills necessary to give me an honest and worthwhile critique, and handed over to her my bloody, sweaty pages.

I felt a little crazy during that whole process. The good kind of crazy. I cannot imagine being in a writing group, where that energy could have been smothered by the kind of ongoing critique and endless conversation that I expect goes on in such settings. I had to give my work some form and some life of its own before I let it out of the house to fend for itself. I had to hold it whole before giving it over to be taken apart.

Now for some people, I know, the completely solitary path is the wrong one, and we all need to know from time to time that we are not alone in our struggles. The best "writing group" I was ever involved with consisted of one other person. We would phone each other every day and ask one question: "Did you work?" Whatever the answer was, we were fine with it, and that was the entire business of the group.

So, to be clear: If a class, group, or program is what keeps a writer going, she should find one immediately. But if it's not, why should she sit there gritting her teeth, enduring it just because other people say she should? What that writer might need is not a lot of people talking at her, but a few conversations with herself. When everything is stripped away, that's all writing is anyway.

On a daily basis, it is the relationship with the self, the conversations with the self as it observes, digests, and reinterprets its inner and outer environments that create our unique voices and perspectives. In my opinion, writing groups, where it's possible that the seams of precious work could be picked apart every time someone comments, where you might be called upon to explain yourself before you know what it is to be yourself, don't answer this need.

Okay, another pause. By suggesting that writers must

Continued on page 29

The Alabama Writers' Forum,  
a statewide literary organization promoting writers and writing, wishes to thank its  
generous partners and friends who have supported the literary arts in Alabama.

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# She Ate a Bagel

## THE GESTURE IN FICTION

by Allen Wier

In the Preface to *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, novelist and philosopher William Gass cites the widely reflective prose pieces of Paul Valéry—many of which, Gass points out, were Valéry’s replies to requests and invitations. Gass concludes his Preface with a quotation of Valéry’s reply to yet another request for a lecture: “Dear Sir, I shall be happy to lecture to your group on the day you suggest; I shall speak on the subject . . . well, I shall speak on any subject that you like.”

The point being, I think, that one should be suspicious of the manufacture of opinions. The occasion to speak or write often occasions opinions where the speaker or writer had none before. Sometimes these opinions last only as long as it takes to declare them and in the hearing or reading discover how off the mark they are.

When Liza Zeidner invited me to join her and Richard Bausch on an Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) conference panel on the fictional gesture, the gesture that came first to my mind was the one Jay Gatsby makes early in Fitzgerald’s great novel, Gatsby stretching out his arm toward the green light that we later learn is at the end of Daisy’s dock. I would guess that is one of the best known gestures in all of American literature and that that green light is one of the best known symbols in all of American literature.

I did a Google search, “gesture in fiction,” and I was surprised by how many items came up. Though I had not thought much about the fictional gesture, several others clearly had. In a blog by writer Maud Newton—[maudnewton.com](http://maudnewton.com), a blog that seems to me both credible and sane—a writer/teacher named Annie writes:

As both a product of, and teacher of writing workshops, I love to complain about them . . . workshops seem to drum in a sort of “Find and Replace” instinct for substituting physical gesture for felt emotion, or abstractions, on the page. In general I think this is a good thing, as tangible sensory detail is usually more engaging than abstraction. Usually.

Annie goes on to say:

As a teacher of tentative, new writers, I find myself encouraging them to break out of simple abstractions (“David felt sad about what happened to Sarah.”) to describe complex emotions. Often, externalizing the emotion into action or

dialogue is a good way to do that. But increasingly I’m feeling [a] sort of overkill. At [maudnewton.com](http://maudnewton.com), we call it the “tea-towel” school of literature.

The “tea-towel” link led me to Katherine Viner’s account of her experience reading seventy-one novels as a judge for the Orange Prize, a £30,000 literary award for women in Great Britain:

There were two particularly low points. One was when I had a run of books about nothing. These were usually by authors from the US, who have attended prestigious creative writing courses, often at the University of Iowa. They are books with 500 pages discussing a subtle but allegedly profound shift within a relationship. They are books where intricate descriptions of a man taking a glass out of the dishwasher, taking [a] tea-towel off a rail, opening out the tea-towel, then delicately drying the glass with the tea-towel, before pouring a drink into the glass, signify that he has just been through a divorce. At one point, I rang a friend and

GEORGIA CAROLYN ROSE RICHARDS



shouted at her, “I wish some of these bloody writers would write about Iraq!” Or anywhere with a bit of politics or meaning.

I imagine many of us have uttered similar complaints.

Here are a couple more nuggets from my Google search. A Web site called the Poetry Resource Page suggests this assignment for beginning writers:

**Character Gesture Exercise:** Create a character from gestures alone. Describe in as much detail as you can the particular/peculiar/individual gestures your character makes—perhaps she runs her fingers through her hair or curls her hair around one finger or tucks loose strands of hair behind one ear, or perhaps he rubs his chin or cracks his knuckles or drums his fingertips on the countertop. The idea is to give your character a defining gesture that reveals something about his or her personality.

And from wikibooks.org at Writing Adolescent Fiction/  
Describing physical characteristics:

**Avoiding the easel gesture:** The easel gesture is a gesture or tic that the character does to give the writer a convenient excuse to add some physical description.

According to this Web site, the way to avoid the easel gesture is to make sure your character’s gestures are genuine:

When your character makes a facial expression that represents the appropriate emotion, you may describe the parts of the face that are moving. If your character has bushy eyebrows, you can write: Brian listened to Whitney repeat what she had said, and his face looked truly puzzled. His bushy eyebrows arched high up above his eyes.

In the blog I mentioned earlier, [maudnewton.com](http://maudnewton.com), the writer/teacher Annie cites Francine Prose’s essay “Learning from Chekhov” in which Prose recalls commuting by bus two hours each way in order to teach a class: “. . . she discovered a pattern: she’d tell her beginning writers that they shouldn’t do something: write a story in which the POV character dies, etc., and then she’d get on the bus and read a story by Chekhov in which he’d done, quite beautifully, precisely what she’d just told students they ought not to do.”

Here is an excerpt from an article by Jay Rowles who writes for the *South Jersey Local News*. Rowles confesses that before he became a journalist he was a writing arts major at Rowan University where he learned that the axiom for good creative writing is “show, don’t tell.” Rowles writes, “I call it the ‘Grand Canyon Rule,’ meaning that the writer’s charge is not to tell the audience how standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon made him feel, but to take readers there to experience those feelings for themselves.”

It’s easy to poke fun at writing rules and exercises, yet I often give my writing students rules I have come to believe are, generally, helpful. But I point out that the first rule is that there are no hard and fast rules for successful fiction writing, and the second rule is that any of the rules may be effectively broken—if you are a good enough writer. You generally have to know and understand a rule before you can effectively break it. “Show, don’t tell” is probably the most ballyhooed of all rules for creative writers. However, I often read stories and

novels in which good writers get away with quite a lot of telling. “Go in fear of abstractions,” poet Ezra Pound admonishes, yet, for just one example, Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction is chock full of earned abstractions. In an undergraduate fiction writing class a few semesters ago I was talking about how dialogue is not like actual conversation, that it is a conjured illusion. Almost by rote, I recited one of the golden rules for writing good dialogue—that you should not use dialogue for exposition. Immediately after saying that, I passed out copies of the Richard Bausch story “Aren’t You Happy for Me?” in which the writer makes dialogue achieve several different things at once, not the least of which is some fairly overt exposition. “Notice,” I said, “how Bausch breaks that so-called rule I just gave you about dialogue and exposition.” Nowadays, I tell my writing students to show *and* tell, to read Kathryn Anne Porter to see how she effectively uses abstractions, and to read Richard Bausch to see how good dialogue may dramatize an important moment *and* reveal character *and* offer expository information, so long as it is done well.

I recall the poet Allen Tate writing about what a good poet can make happen: “. . .the sea boils and pigs have wings because in poetry all things are possible—if you are man enough.” Or *poet-enough*, Tate might have said.

In the *South Jersey Local News*, Rowles goes on to write that two of the tools the creative writer can use to show rather than tell are “markers and gestures.” Markers, he says, are “descriptions easily identifiable to the reader to show the nature of a character to the audience,” such as whether a man has wild hair and a beard and drives a rusty pick-up or is clean-shaven and well-dressed and drives a luxury car. To Rowles’ credit, I believe, is the example he takes from Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog” to illustrate how to use gesture to show rather than tell. He cites the scene in which Anna bares her soul to Dmitri, describing her guilt over the affair they have had, and Dmitri responds by cutting a large slice of watermelon and eating it slowly.

Film may come by gesture more honestly than fiction does. Film more naturally shows a character’s action than it tells his or her thoughts or feelings. Because of this, film may be helpful in demonstrating the use (successful and unsuccessful) of gesture in a narrative. Gestures are often the longest-lasting memories I have of a movie. I recall a moment from a film I can’t otherwise remember, except I think it is Fellini, in which a husband is hurrying across a hospital lobby to the elevator that will take him up to his wife who has just given birth to their first child. The husband is already suspect—he was not with his wife for the birth. Crossing the lobby, he sees in his peripheral vision a row of phone booths. He hesitates, then walks over and palms the coin return of each telephone before getting on the elevator. Now, he is definitely a cad.

Sometimes, a stage direction is a gesture. At other times, what I have heard playwrights call “stage business,” something (such as the lighting of a cigarette) to occupy the body of an actor in a credible way during certain lulls in the action or dialogue, may be a gesture. Often, stage directions are

neither gesture nor stage business, but they testify to the writer's inability to describe his characters in action, or to the writer's inability to decide what to include and what to leave out. Here's an example, also from my lazy Internet research, from Writing Tools: WEbook Writing Secrets "Cut the Stage Directions" by Melissa Jones of this kind of stage direction:

Melissa arrived at the office five minutes late, as usual. She opened the door and walked down the hall. She put her laptop down on her desk and sat in her chair. She double-clicked on her Outlook folder and brought up her cluttered to-do list. Stage Directions Blog was written right at the top. Great. She'd been looking forward to this for a long time. But first, she had to do something about breakfast. It was no good writing on an empty stomach. She pulled her whole wheat bagel out of her backpack and unwrapped it. She put a napkin in her lap. She tore off a chunk of bagel and put it in her mouth. She chewed. She swallowed. Soon, the bagel was gone, and it was time to write the blog entry. She opened Microsoft Word (despite the program's nightmarish incompatibility with Typepad's text editor), and put her hands on the keyboard. She began to type.

When a beginning writer writes stage directions like these, she hasn't yet realized what *she* needed in an earlier draft in order to see the scene clearly but that her reader can now do without. Such overwriting is choreography for the final draft; it is like the faint pencil lines I used to draw on posters so that the letters I printed with colored markers would not slant up or down. When I finished coloring the poster, I erased the pencil lines so the lettering appeared to be naturally perfect. If a writer leaves in all the mundane details *she* needed in order to picture a scene fully, she is not trusting her reader to fill in the blanks—to know what the writer has been able to leave out (if she was, as Hemingway says, writing truly enough).

Young writers may see this more clearly when they think about transitions in film. Most readers today grew up with film and television and are used to "the jump cut." In a movie, if a character stands in a kitchen drinking coffee in one scene and, immediately after, is driving a car down an expressway, no one asks how he got from the kitchen into the car. The writer describing Melissa getting sidetracked from her blog by her bagel has Hemingway's "iceberg theory" reversed. In the description of Melissa at her desk, seven-eighths of the iceberg is above the surface. Compare Hemingway's use of stage directions in "Hills Like White Elephants":

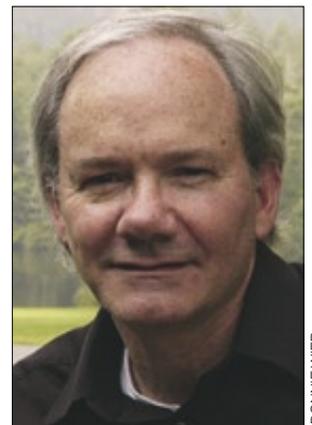
He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

A good reader will see these stage directions as meaningful. This paragraph contains the only moment in the story in which the reader overtly enters a character's consciousness. Mostly

dialogue, "Hills Like White Elephants" would be in the objective or dramatic point of view without the word "reasonably" that reveals the man's judgment (though "heavy" and "could not see" may imply his consciousness). The weight of the bags is emotional weight the reader feels. Carrying the two bags, crossing to the other tracks, looking for the not-yet-visible train, stopping in the bar for an Anis, seeing how reasonable everyone else is, going through a curtain, and seeing the girl smile at him—none of these gestures is empty, none is without meaning. As the man separates himself from the girl, we are, through these gestures, drawn closer to his perspective until the word "reasonably" confirms the felt emotions the gestures have led us to share with the character, regardless of whether we empathize or sympathize with him.

All these notions about gesture in fiction add up to something we already know: That in literary fiction the way of saying may be as important as the thing said. A writer may substitute physical gesture for felt emotion, may give gesture instead of substance or meaning. But, when written well, a physical gesture can be substantive and meaningful. As soon as anyone comes up with a rule, or even a guideline, for good fiction, some good writer comes along and beautifully ignores or breaks it. That there is no formula for literary art is a blessing for readers and writers and for those who teach writing. If the unpredictability of good fiction makes it difficult to teach, it repays us with the pleasures of teaching something that demands we read each fiction on its own terms, looking closely for the notation of how this particular word, this emotion, this gesture is to be read.

*Allen Wier taught for fourteen years in the University of Alabama's creative writing program before going to the University of Tennessee where he was awarded a Hodges' Distinguished Teaching Chair. His most recent novel is Tehano (SMU Press, 2006). This essay first appeared as part of the panel presentation "Then She Lit a Cigarette: Strategies for Rethinking the Fictional Gesture" at AWP's 2009 Conference & Bookfair in Chicago.*



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Continued from page 6

### What other projects are you working on?

I have a children's book that will be released from the University of Arizona Press in October of this year. I am finishing up a kind of memoir, *Learning How to Fall* (working title), that will be released from W. W. Norton eventually. I have two new albums I'm at work on. One is a traditional album of native songs, and the other album will be a jazzy, bluesy kind of thing. I will be touring my play and have another one in mind. I am also working on a performance project with tribal members.

### On your recent trip to the Shoals area, you were reminded of the many songs/artists you'd loved from the state. Unfortunately, the native influence is often ignored. What did you hear/see that was traceable to your roots?

When American music took root in the South, it has always been attributed to African and European influences. The indigenous influences are left out. If you listen to Mvskokean music, you will hear the beat, the call and response, the blues. We were there. The Shoals area carries music magic. I heard all of those influences and how they came together.

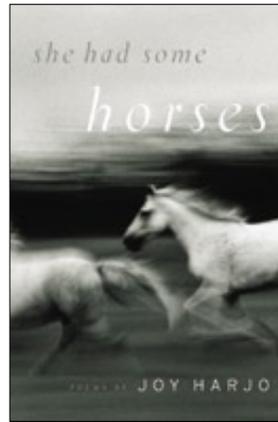
### Do you think e-mail, texting, and blogs have changed our storytelling skills? Should we be concerned about the rapid changes in language?

I don't see that our storytelling skills have evolved. Rather, we appear to interact less and less with each other and the world at profound levels, and superficially with many across the world with networking on MySpace, Facebook, and other Internet portals. Our messages are abbreviations. What happens when inner power sits stagnant? I've noticed that these younger generations initially have difficulty imagining beyond the flat screen. The world has become smaller. Yet, when they have the opportunities and the tools and shown the way, they are able to create.

Joy Harjo's performance at the University of North Alabama (UNA) was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. The UNA Writer's Series, which has also been known as the UNA Writer's Conference and the UNA Writer's Festival, has been in continuous existence for twenty-five years.



*Pam Kingsbury, author of Inner Visions, Inner Views, teaches at the University of North Alabama.*



## JOY HARJO

### BOOKS

*Learning How to Fall* (working title), a memoir from W.W. Norton, forthcoming  
*She Had Some Horses*, reissued by W.W. Norton 2009; originally by Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983  
*How We Became Human*, W.W. Norton, 2002  
*The Good Luck Cat*,

Harcourt Children's Books, 2000

*A Map to the Next World*, W.W. Norton, 2000

*Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (co-edited with Gloria Bird), W.W. Norton, 1997

*The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, W.W. Norton, 1994

*Fishing*, Oxhead Press, 1992

*In Mad Love and War*, Wesleyan University Press, 1990

*Secrets from the Center of the World*, Sun Tracks and the University of Arizona Press, 1989

*What Moon Drove Me to This?*, Reed Cannon and Johnson Publishing, 1979

*The Last Song (out of print)*, I. Reed Books, 1975

### CDs

Traditional indigenous music, forthcoming

*Winding Through the Milky Way*, Mekko Productions, 2008

*She Had Some Horses*, Mekko Productions, 2006

*Native Joy for Real*, Mekko Productions, 2004

*Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century*, Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice, Mekko Productions, 1997

### ONE WOMAN SHOW:

*Wings of Night Sky, Wings of Morning Light*, 2009

### AWARDS

Woodcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, for *How We Became Human*, 2003-2004

The Arrell Gibson Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Oklahoma Center for the Book, 2003

The New Mexico Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, 1997

The Oklahoma Book Award in Poetry for *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, 1995

The William Carlos Williams Award, the Poetry Society of America, for *In Mad Love and War*, 1991

The Delmore Schwartz Award, New York University, 1991  
 American Book Award, 1990

The American Indian Distinguished Achievement in the Arts Award, 1990

On the Web at [www.joyharjo.com](http://www.joyharjo.com).

# The Quiet Man

by Sandy Morris

Furniture covered the floors of my grandmother's house. Homemade tables, bookcases, worn sofas, art deco chairs, corduroy recliners. Their placement had no rhythm of feng shui, no consideration for room-to-room travel, no thought. They were merely dropped in their place on the day of arrival and there they remained to fulfill my grandmother's purpose of un-emptying the house.

Seven days a week, my grandfather sat in the plaid orange and green recliner that leaned, crooked, against the corner of the wall. It faced the television that was situated less than two inches away from the front door across the room. From the recliner, he watched football games and the local news until my grandmother, as matriarch of the house, took the remote and turned the channel to the shows that she faithfully followed—*General Hospital*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Lifetime's Movie-of-the-Week*. He never stood up to defiantly leave the room. He just held tight to the arms of the chair and clenched his jaws that were packed full of chewing tobacco, his only connection to masculinity since she had banned his pipe smoking years ago.

He never spoke to me. I found him restlessly quiet and grew bored with him until his flannel shirts blended into the recliner and I forgot that he was there. For years I rollerbladed through the house and barely missed running over his toes. I leaned against his legs when my grandmother and I sat in the floor to play Chinese checkers. At Christmas, I covered his socked feet with shreds of wrapping paper as I opened my gifts. He never spoke a word.

*No one in my life  
had ever died.  
I couldn't imagine  
the concept of not  
existing. It was  
unnatural to me.*

Like all of my cousins, I grew up and moved away. And like most of my cousins, when my grandfather had a stroke I didn't come back as soon as I should have. When I did, the furniture was gone. No more eclectic mesh of dated fabric and wood that proved that I had been there, my father had been there, my father's father had been there.

A metal hospital bed sat in the perfect center of the living room correctly perpendicular to the wall. And he lay in it, as quietly as he had sat in the recliner. His eyes moved slowly back and forth, back and forth, as my grandmother glided across the living room in her walker back and forth, back and forth. The left side of his lip drooped and he whispered

almost inaudibly, "Waaa-eer."

My grandmother rolled across the kitchen linoleum and showed me how to mash my grandfather's dinner. When we were done, the banana resembled baby food, and I wondered if I would always think of my dying grandfather when I fed my future children.

I propped his head up into the crook of my arm and fed him one teaspoon full at a time. At that time, if I had experienced holding an infant, feeding it, being locked in its gaze like I was the only person of importance in this world, I would have felt comfortable in their sameness and their consistency to the cycle of life. I wouldn't have moved my eyes away from the constant gaze of his. I would have touched his bald head for the first time or searched his face for my imperfections, like my nose or the dent in my chin.

That night, his kidneys shut down, and all of the other

organs followed. The ambulance took him away to die in a more modern room. The family followed behind in a procession of pick-up trucks and minivans.

In the hospital bed, his bright blue pajamas shone apart from the sterile pale, white sheets. We surrounded him, and listened to his slow breaths that seemed to hang in the air. No one in my life had ever died. I couldn't imagine the concept of not existing. It was unnatural to me, and I felt guilty that it seemed like such a science experiment, to watch someone die. But as we circled the bed and heard the loud breath that wasn't followed by another, it felt tribal. I held hands with people who shared my blood—whom I hadn't seen in years—and cried because we had lost the elder of our tribe, not because we had seen him die.

At the funeral, we made quiet comments about his suit, the casket, how good his make-up looked, but our eyes were on the droop of his mouth that still remained open. The funeral director, who had buried twenty years worth of old men, stood on the corner of the stage crying.

I got to know my grandfather during his funeral. He lay in the coffin in a gray suit I'd never seen him wear as someone else told pieces of his story.

When he was just a teenager, he had reluctantly become a farmer after his father died. He wore suit coats over his overalls. He married my grandmother the day he was shipped off during World War II and didn't come home until his leg was burned while he was fueling a plane. He had piled his children onto the orange and green recliner every night and read them Keats.

The past nine years, I have felt my grandfather lingering quietly. His shoes and flannel shirts still reside in his closet and the recliner was carried up from the basement and positioned back against the wall. Alzheimer's came to my grandmother and brought him back to life for her. He is young again, and he sits in the recliner thinking to himself and reading Keats while her eyes blankly stare at the TV screen. If I want to visit with him, I know that he will be there, both in the house and in her mind.

Because of my grandfather, I have fallen in love with Keats. His soul-baring love letters to the wishy-washy Fanny Brawne. His passion to stay part of the living, to write it all down, to be known. I imagine my grandfather was like him once. Before the furniture came.

ANITA GARNER

*Sandy Morris is a student of Anita Miller Garner at the University of North Alabama. This essay received the 2009 Mary Evelyn McMillan Award for Undergraduate Writing, sponsored by the Association of College English Teachers of Alabama.*



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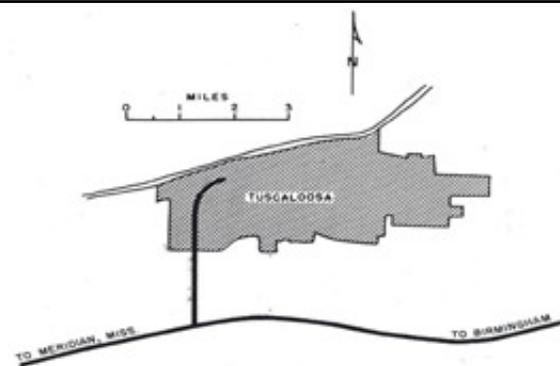
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# Greetings, Salutations, & Goodwill

## WRITING STIMULUS WORKSHOP

Dear AWF:

I thoroughly enjoyed taking a break from academic/legal writing to try my hand at fiction and to work on my poetry skills at your Writing Stimulus Workshop (April 17 in conjunction with the Alabama Book Festival).

Andrew Hudgins (poetry workshop leader) used words like “polished,” “powerful imagery,” and “excellence” in his critique of my twenty-minute poem based on his prompt. His comments regarded my tendency to work line-by-line, a peccadillo he said he himself has had in the past, since I find it more likely to find a poem in the midst of the words that I spew onto the page and to narrow from there to create a poem from those words.

Hudgins and Erin McGraw (fiction workshop leader) both found me after the workshop sessions to tell me that



I had a rare gift for writing. As you can imagine, I was very pleased with this feedback. The words “relevant,” “fresh,” “intuitive,” “gifted writer,” and “darkly humorous” came up in those fleeting conversations.

I appreciate people who are so dedicated to their craft/art that they want to share their skills and perspectives.

I applaud the Alabama Writers’ Forum’s dedication to writers and their perpetual quest for improvement. This particular event afforded exposure and access to two incredibly talented writers who shared their passions, frustrations, experience, and skill to bolster and improve the participants’ writing.

Catherine Alexander  
Montevallo, Ala.

## WRITING OUR STORIES

Dear AWF:

I work with two teachers who work with students on conflict resolution/anger management. The students have challenging behaviors that pretty much keep them in trouble. I gave those two teachers copies of your book *A Long Time Coming* (McNeel School, 2008).

I walked into one of their classes today, and they were reading one of the poems, “The Day I Blow Up” by J.W. The teacher was using it as part of her lesson by discussing the poem with her students. I was so impressed with her initiative!

I was back in that teacher’s classroom later, and she said that her class loves the book. She said that the students like for her to read them a poem, and then they relate their individual experiences to it.

Thank you again for sharing your Writing Our Stories anthologies with us.

Jan Harvill  
Exceptional Education Supervisor  
Jefferson County Schools  
Birmingham, Ala.

## FIRST DRAFT

Dear AWF:

A lovely article on chapbooks by Jennifer Horne! (*First Draft*, Spring 2009) I am grateful to be included, and I appreciate the kind words.

I was happy to see Glenny Brock’s piece as well (“Alabama Adaptations: Turning Homegrown Stories Into Major Motion Pictures”). I’m always amazed at how much literary stuff is going on that I never even hear about, except in *First Draft*.

The quality of the writing/articles in *First Draft* seems to be a notch higher these days!

Kathleen Thompson  
Birmingham, Ala.  
www.wordspinningby  
kathleen.blogspot.com

## FIRST DRAFT BOOK REVIEWS ONLINE

Dear AWF:

I would like to thank and commend *First Draft* Book Reviews Online ([www.writersforum.org/books](http://www.writersforum.org/books)) and the Alabama Writers’ Forum for the wonderful work you do reviewing and promoting books by Alabama authors. I was extremely pleased with the review of my recent book of poems, *I Wish That I Were Langston Hughes* (March 2009), and I have also been impressed with the insight and intelligence of many other reviews published on the site. This important work brings not only recognition to the excellent writing being done in the state, but it also provides much needed publicity. Keep up the good work!

Robert Gray  
Mobile, Ala.  
[www.redroom.com/  
author/robert-gray](http://www.redroom.com/author/robert-gray)

Dear AWF:

Thank you and your staff so much for taking the time to read and review my book (*The African Book of Names*, August 2009). This review was more detailed and better written than the reviews I received from major newspapers. It is obvious Colin Crews actually read the book and then formed an informed opinion, which is what reviewers are supposed to do. However, it seems any little thing passes for journalism and book reviews these days.

Anyway, I truly wanted to thank you and your staff for upholding the standards of writing and professionalism. I appreciate your time and energy. Please pass on my best to Mr. Crews and to your entire staff.

Askhari J. Hodari  
Birmingham, Ala.

Dear AWF:

Just a quick note to thank you for reviewing my novel *Dirty Little Angels* (April 2009). The book is selling extremely well (much better than I ever anticipated), and I attribute its success, in large part, to journals like yours.

Chris Tusa  
Baton Rouge, La.  
www.christophertusa.com

## LITERARY NEWS

Dear AWF:

Thanks so much for the *Literary News* e-newsletter (April 2009). I appreciate our conversation even more now that I see the length and breadth of your newsletter. So much information that I never realized was available. *Literary News* really is opening a doorway to a new world for me. Suddenly, it's not what to do, but how to fit it all in! The newsletter alone is certainly worth the price of membership in the Writers' Forum.

Cynthia Ford  
Lapine, Ala.

Dear AWF:

I want to commend your staff on its work on your *Literary News* electronic newsletter (February 2009), a very well done piece, both technically and in content. AWF not only does its job well, it reveals how things are alive in the creative ventures in our state, and that these ventures can be presented in a first-class, professional manner.

Theron Montgomery  
Troy, Ala.

## MISCELLANY

Dear AWF:

I've appreciated the publicity the Alabama Writers' Forum has given my writing retreats on your Announcements page ([www.writersforum.org/announcements](http://www.writersforum.org/announcements)). It's probably going to be tough sledding for all of us in the arts for a while, so I think the more we can plug each other, the better off we'll be.

Yes, sometimes you feel as though you are sending info into outer space, and then someone says, "Oh, I read about that event." It's reassuring.

Persis Granger  
Adirondack Mountain Retreats/  
St. George Island Retreats  
Thurman, N.Y./Trenton, Fla.  
www.persisgranger.com

Dear AWF:

I'm so impressed with *First Draft* and your *Literary News* electronic newsletter. What classy publications. I read the newsletter and look forward to reading the articles in *First Draft*. Congrats on your good work!

Barbara Williams  
Montevallo, Ala.

Send your letters to Danny Gamble  
Alabama Writers' Forum  
PO Box 4777  
Montgomery, AL 36103-4777  
or e-mail [gambledanny@bellsouth.net](mailto:gambledanny@bellsouth.net)  
Subject: *First Draft*

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endure this solitude, must go into their little cubbies and pound away on their keyboards, I do not mean that they should never allow others to read and critique their work. When they have something that speaks both for them and to them, that is the time to put it out into the world.

So yes, once or twice a year, writers should attend conferences, those that provide opportunities to be in conversation with other writers. While there, it's worth it to try to develop relationships with writers and editors who might be willing to read work with a loving, but critical, eye. It may take some time to connect with such people. This may take years. But this is our life's work, isn't it?

I go to conferences and retreats occasionally. I go to sit with other writers, to drink with them, to laugh and be foolish with them. I go to look into the eyes of others who understand what it means to be alone in rooms with just themselves and their wayward thoughts, their snatches of imagined conversations, their searches for some version of truth. I go not for validation, but for solidarity. And I often find it because I have already done the work and so have they.

And those who have done the work understand that what we are experiencing in community, while wonderful, is not the work itself. They understand when I have to—need to—turn away, turn inward. Given the choice between the push and pull of a group and the gentle tug of my own quiet voice, I will always choose the latter. When in doubt about what I need to write and how I need to write, it is always better to go home and close the door. It's always better to just sit and try.

Often the sitting and trying is enough for us tender-hearts.

*Phyllis Alesia Perry is the author of two novels, Stigmata and A Sunday in June.*



M. SHAWN DOWDELL

# THE WRITER IN THE COMMUNITY

## *Exalting the Written Word*



JAMIE MARTIN

In American poetry there is a fine tradition that we trace back to Walt Whitman, and perhaps further back, of the poet taking his work to the community directly, of the poet offering her work to the world, unbidden.

Publishing poetry is an act of faith, not of economics. Only a few poets and presses turn a profit from poetry, and *profit*, in the vernacular sense of that word, is not what poetry is about. Those

few poets who are fortunate enough to have strong sales and command high fees carry the banner for the rest of the poets who till the field in another way—who plow a single row, who scatter a handful of seeds.

Recently I have had the honor of talking about poetry in community libraries and schools. Begun as a tour for my new poetry collection, as events unfolded it was clear that my mission was to reach others who were writing *their* poems, *their* stories, *their* memoirs and to bring encouragement. Of course, this is the Alabama Writers' Forum's original mission: to connect the literary dots, to help writers find resources for publishing and marketing, but more importantly, to find each other.

Here are a couple of snapshots from the travel album: At the University of South Alabama in Mobile, on the Tuesday after Labor Day when students and teachers alike were making the adjustment from end of summer into the beginning of dutiful fall, I met with combined classes of composition and creative writing students.

In a wide-ranging conversation with students of Deborah Ferguson and Dr. Sue Brannan Walker, I talked about poetry in Alabama, my own work, and the work of the Alabama Writers' Forum. At one point, I noticed a young man listening intently, and I later learned he was trying to organize a spoken-word presence in Mobile. If I had not seen the flash of interest in his eyes in that room, how would I have known about his passion? How would I have known that this is an area that the Forum might nurture? Another young man was accompanied by his guide dog, a quiet black lab that I didn't even realize was there at first. Later I was told that this student commented after the class that he wanted to be a writer and "sound like that." I can't

think of a higher compliment. But if I had not been in that room this young man would not have heard me.

Toward the end of the class a young woman asked a question about revising drafts of poems and, in the explanation, I found myself giving a "what if" example about using form to shape our images. The next thing I knew I was at the blackboard, dusty white chalk in hand, diagramming how a pantoum works and then calling out for lines from the students. We spontaneously jumped into writing a group pantoum! Dr. Walker told me later that her creative writing students were working on pantoums of their own because of this chance discussion. Although they could have certainly come to the pantoum form on their own, if I had not been in that room, if we had not had that collective conversation, perhaps they would not have felt quite the ease of entry into a new form. And they certainly would not have witnessed a poet, who's written for more than thirty years, become energized by the process of bringing a form to life just by sketching its line pattern on the blackboard.

Although I thought I was promoting a book, I have learned, again during the past six months that this isn't about me. It's about bringing the written word to the community, about offering hope to someone who thinks that what she writes is "just for her," about offering a little light in someone's darkness—whether literal or figurative. It has been my privilege to direct the Alabama Writers' Forum for almost sixteen years now, and yet on this book tour I was reminded again that writing happens *in community*, and that through community we exalt the written word.

Look around your community and find others who write, who read, and find a way to connect. Whether it's a book group, a writing group, or an afterschool writing class you can offer as a volunteer, the community of Alabama writing needs you, and is looking for you. And the Alabama Writers' Forum, the state's literary arts service organization and ambassador, is your stalwart ally and resource.

Read more about Thompson's visits to Alabama communities on her blog *The Seasons Bear Us* at <http://jeaniethompson.blogspot.com>.



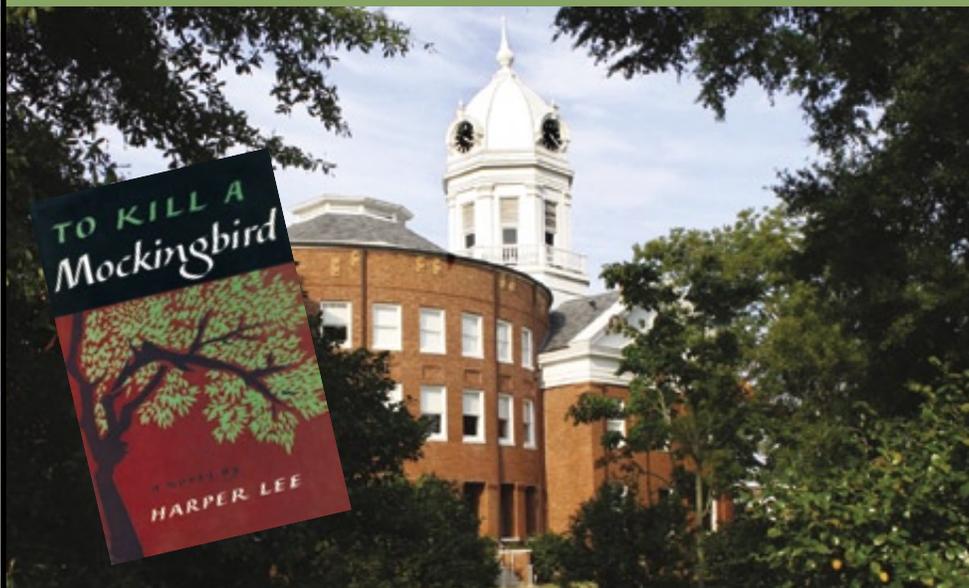
# Literature on Location

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For information, call Melinda Byrd-Murphy at (251) 575-8226 or email [mbmurphy@ascc.edu](mailto:mbmurphy@ascc.edu)  
**WritersSymposium.org**

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