



# Creative Wisconsin Magazine

*Develop your craft. Discover resources. Expand your network. Build your audience.*

June 2023

## Calendar of Events

Coming up TBD

**WWA online Social**  
Meet and greet fellow  
WWA folks

**Summertime  
Open Mic**

***Save the Date!***  
**October 6-7, Waukesha**  
**75th anniversary**  
**WWA Fall**  
**Conference**

<https://www.wiwrite.org>  
for specific information  
and registration details.

### In this edition:

The Student Writing competition results are in! WWA is pleased to sponsor this wonderful contest meant to encourage our school-age writers around the state. Meet intrepid WWA Events chair, Christy Wopat, and enjoy a new column of writing tips and advice from Kim Suhr of Red Oak Writing. Rounding out this edition is your wonderful prose and poetry and sage advice and lots of imagery.

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*Founded in 1948, the Wisconsin Writers Association is a creative community dedicated to the support of writers and authors. WWA sponsors and hosts year-round workshops and events throughout Wisconsin, offering discounts and exclusive resources. We aim to share experiences and knowledge while encouraging our members in their pursuit of this most noble art.*  
Lisa Lickel, editor

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## From the Editor

Lisa Lickel



I've enjoyed reading your submissions this spring, as well as the entries of the Student Writing Competition

winner and placers. A little background on the Student Writing Contest which originated in 1951: "A committee headed by Edna Meudt researched and created a competition for students..." an article in the fiftieth anniversary booklet explains.

The contest has waxed and waned ever since, but this year seemed particularly bountiful with entries by international students. Congratulations to all who entered...a brave first step for motivated writers.

Motivation for writing has been a common theme for annual conferences. I chuckled when I came across one of the conference speakers' topic forty years ago, back in 1983: "Do It...Write Now!" Sally Lynn Johnson said at the Spring Conference. "You know you could be highly successful, well-known, widely read, best-selling author—IF ONLY you had more discipline, were motivated, stimulated, inspired, or had someone telling you 'You can do it!' Get ready! Sally Lynn can motivate you right out of your easy chair, up to a typewriter, and will have you jogging to the post office to mail your manuscripts!"

Sitting at a computer, where we can edit without white-outing our duplicate copies, research on the internet, and push "send" instead of jogging to the post office...how many more excuses can we come up with today to avoid submitting? I've offered you several motivating prompts throughout this edition of *Creative Wisconsin Magazine*.

Finally, when an unusual submission crossed my desk, I thought a long time about whether to start a conversation about the latest controversy to unfold. If only it was as simple as taking sides in the royal British family dispute...how involved have you gotten with learning more about or even using AI chatbot writing tools? What do you think about it? Let us know and I'll print some of your opinions or stories—just use your own words, please.

Keep sending your stories and news. The next edition, September 1, will include the winners and placers of the annual Jade Ring competition. Deadline to submit is August 10 this time—a few days earlier than usual.



## From President of WWA

Barry Wightman



British playwright Tom Stoppard, in his 1982 play *The Real Thing*, wrote,

“I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If

you get the right ones in the right order, you might nudge the world a little or make a poem that children will speak for you when you are dead.”

And that is what we present here, in this new issue of *Creative Wisconsin*—the right words in the right order—over and over again. These words, these stories, essays, and poems, are by some of the best Wisconsin writers working today. And it is our distinct honor collecting them, presenting them to you, knowing that these words and writers have indeed nudged our world to the good, made it a better place.

Story, truth, and beauty, baby.



WWA at Ridges and Rivers Bookfest in Viroqua, May 6 - Debbi King, PJ Fullerton, Karen and Steve Wilton

## Around Wisconsin



NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS  
**BOOKCAMP**  
& WRITING RETREAT  
.....  
[www.NovelBookCamp.org](http://www.NovelBookCamp.org)

[www.Novel Bookcamp.org](http://www.NovelBookcamp.org)

June 18-24

Siena Center, Racine



Thursday, July 13, 2023

7:30 PM - 8:30 PM

Find more from HerStory <https://herstryblg.com/>



Discover **Classes and Events**

Kids and Adult classes and news

About the 2023 conference

<https://writeondoorcounty.org/events/>

## Shakerag Alley Center for the Arts



Check the **calendar** for readers events, Pathways to Publication and other workshops.

<https://shakeragalley.org/product-category/adult-workshops/voice-page-ws/>

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*Editor's Note: please send your news to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org) by August 10 for the next edition of Creative Wisconsin*

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Meet the dynamo behind the WWA Events Committee, **Christy Wopat**, who's also a pretty good writer, and the smile behind "Um, You Guys? Author Christy Wopat" page on Facebook.

### **Christy, how long have you been a member of WWA?**

A little over three years. I joined at the start of the pandemic when everyone was at home. I answered a call for volunteers, and very quickly found myself as the chair of the events committee, which was not at all something I planned!

### **What do you most appreciate about Wisconsin Writers Association?**

It is full of the most kind, motivated, and helpful writers. Instead of it being a competition, it is a way to lift all writers and give them opportunities to learn and grow. I've made many new friends since I joined, thanks to that supportive environment.

### **What do you write?**

Okay, so, I have three published books that are all about the same topic—infant loss. The first is a memoir about when my twins died, and the stories of how I navigated that horrible time. The second is a picture book for families who have experienced infant loss. It's so beautiful (am I allowed to say that?) because it gives families permission to grieve and honor the memory of their baby. And then I have a short, mini-memoir about pregnancy after loss.

But, I also love to write personal essays. I've been published in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, for example, but also in several online journals and anthologies. I

love to make fun of myself and find the humor in life, which is what I usually write about.

Oh. And then I have a middle grade book on submission—I teach elementary school and have a deep love for children, especially my fourth graders. I wrote a book that I adore. It hasn't sold yet, and I'm terrified it won't, but my agent still has hope, so ... I'm hanging in. Speaking of teaching, I have half a memoir on my twenty years (so far) as an educator.

So, maybe you should have asked what don't I write? :)

### **Share a little about your writing process. How have you benefitted from WWA?**

I am all over the place. It's strange because I'm pretty organized and have a good work ethic about most things, but writing comes very sporadically for me. After teaching all day, and then coming home to a twelve- and a ten-year old, there usually isn't a lot of me left. But every once in a while, I'll get inspired.

I plan a lot. I'm definitely not a pantser. I like to take walks and just think about things, what's something that is troubling me, or brought me joy. And then ask myself questions about why that is.

WWA has completely kept me motivated to write. Those monthly events are full of wonderful information and writers who have so much to share. I also feel like I don't want to let anyone down, so I keep going.

### **What would you like to see WWA do more or less of going forward?**

Oh, this is a tough question because I do NOT want to give myself more work. Ha! Seriously, though, I'd love for us to have more in-person events by region, even if it is just networking. Writing can be so isolating. I do think WWA is doing so many amazing things that I'm happy with everything they do. It's all volunteers! Can you believe that?

### **What advice do you have for aspiring and seasoned writers?**

Aspiring: If you're reading this, you're doing something right already by becoming a member of WWA and reading *Creative Wisconsin*. Even when you

don't feel like it, you ARE a writer, and try to at least fake that confidence. You'll make connections that will pay off.

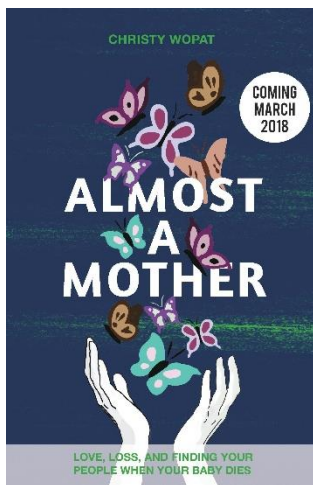
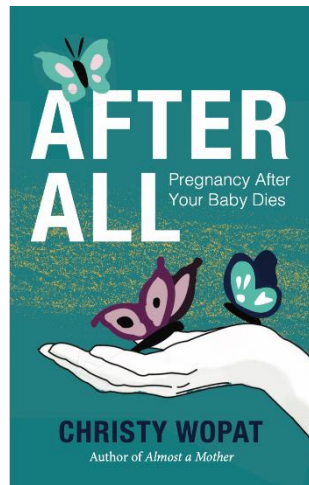
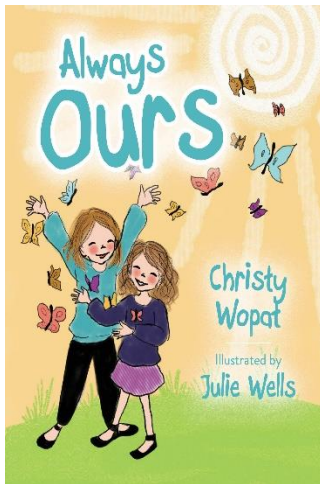
Seasoned: Give back to the writing community if you can. Remember all the amazing and kind things people have done for you and try to pay that forward. It can be so rewarding!

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Christy Wopat is the author of three books: the award-winning memoir, *Almost a Mother*, a picture book titled *Always Ours*, and *After All: Pregnancy After Loss*. Her personal essays have been featured in *Still Standing Magazine* and *The Educator's Room*, among others.

Christy is a fourth-grade teacher and lives with her husband and children in Holmen, Wisconsin. She heads up the WWA events committee, where she gets to meet amazing writers.

You can find Christy at [www.christywopat.com](http://www.christywopat.com)



## In Honor of Memorial Day

### Senryu for Vets

Nick Chiarkas, Madison

*For my fellow veterans and present brothers and sisters in uniform.*

death brushes past me  
dragging away frightened friends  
Māra why not me

recurring nightmares  
midnight mourning of dismay  
retain terror's taste

died in that jungle  
returned home to no parade  
can you still feel me

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*Note: With respect to "haiku" vs. "senryu" vs. "hybrids." English-language haiku according to George Swede (co-founded of Haiku Canada) consist of three content categories: Nature haiku, Human haiku (senryu), and Human plus nature haiku (hybrids). The "hybrids" are the most frequently published kind of haiku—around 60 percent."*

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Nick Chiarkas is a Blackbird Writer, a Wisconsin Writers Association Board Member, and the author of nine books: two award-winning novels *Weepers* and *Nunzio's Way*, and seven nonfiction books. After his mother was told that Nick was hopeless, he became a U.S. Army Paratrooper; a New York City Police Officer; the Deputy Chief Counsel for the President's Commission on Organized Crime; and the Director of the Wisconsin State Public Defender Agency. Nick has a Doctorate from Columbia University, a Law Degree from Temple University, and was a Pickett Fellow at Harvard.



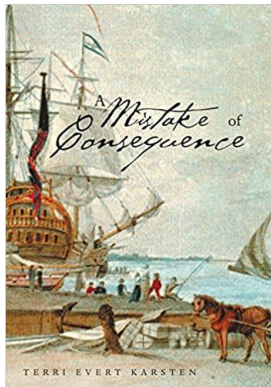


## Book Shelf Reviews

A benefit of belonging to WWA is that members can request to have their books reviewed by a volunteer reviewer. If you have a book you wish to promote, please email Kathleen (K.M.) Waldvogel at [waldvogelkm@gmail.com](mailto:waldvogelkm@gmail.com) with your request. Although the request is not a guarantee of review, our volunteers try their best to accommodate.

Here is a sample of what some talented WWA members have published.

Reviews can be found: <https://wiwrite.org/book-reviews/>



If you enjoy historical fiction, consider *A Mistake of Consequence* by Terri Karsten. The story is set in 1754 and follows the protagonist, Callie Beaton, on her involuntary journey from Scotland to America. A little bit of mystery, a little bit of romance, and a lot of plot twists and turns!

*The author presents our hero's compatriots and potential romantic interests as complex people wrestling with the world around them. The story is a fast-paced and intriguing tale that makes the reader want to unravel plot twists and turns.*

The entire review can be read [here](#).

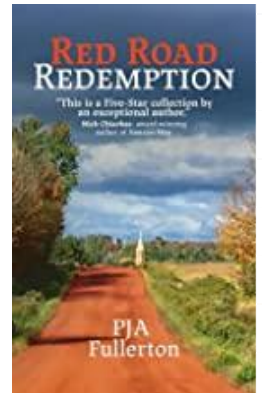


Maybe middle-grade fantasy is more to your liking. *The Dream Walker: Land of Mystica Series* by Michelle Murray includes wizards, dragons, and even ogres as the protagonist finds herself in a dreamworld attempting to stop a dark wizard.

*Every page is action-packed and suitable for middle-grade and adult readers alike. I recommend this book for anyone looking for a lively trip into a dreamworld that might set your own minds wandering at night.*

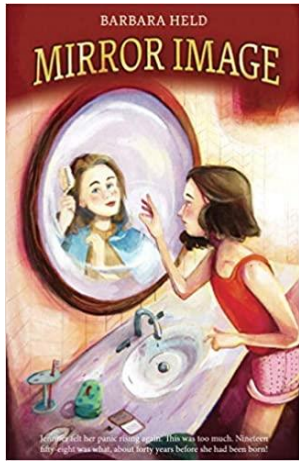
Read more about this book [here](#).

If you love to read collections of short stories, check out *Red Road Redemption: Country Tales from the Heart of Wisconsin* by Pamela Fullerton. Sit back with a cup of tea or a glass of lemonade and savor the stories of country life and characters.



*Many of her stories, set in rural Wisconsin, read as reminiscences with a narrator looking back upon an important moment in a character's life. "A Walk in the Snow" is one of those stories where an outwardly normal event shifts into an ordeal that has a life changing implication for the character.*

Read the entire review [here](#).

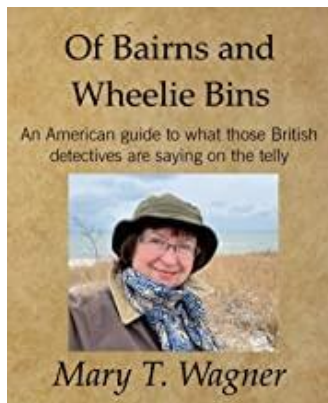


Are you looking for a middle-grade historical fiction book to enjoy on your own or give to a younger reader? If so, *Mirror Image* by Barbara Held may be the perfect fit. The author has cleverly mixed time travel and historical fiction to make you experience the protagonist's life in an interesting way.

*In Mirror Image, readers will glimpse two settings in history, both well-researched, where the character, like Marty in Back to the Future, finds out their actions in the past will influence them in the future.*

You can read the entire review [here](#).

Fans of British detective shows may appreciate the efforts of Mary T. Wagner in her 26-page book, *Of Bairns and Wheelie Bins*. Wagner has attempted to create a useful guide of what British characters are actually saying, but she does so in a manner that will surely make you smile.

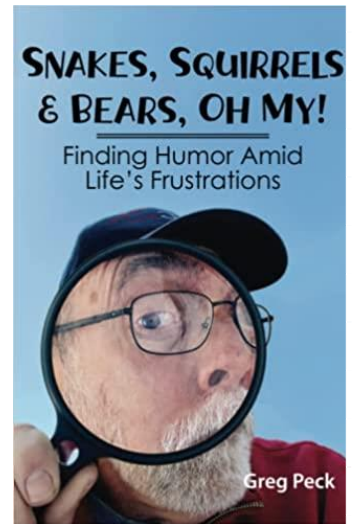


**Toffee nosed** – ordinarily *I'm all for toffee (particularly when covered with chocolate!), but this means stuck-up, snobbish, pretentious, posh, supercilious.*

*Helpful information with a touch of wit to lighten the mood. These easy-to-read explanations are especially useful if you are a novice to British shows.*

Read more [here](#).

Perhaps you want to immerse yourself in humorous daily events. If so, check out the humorous memoir, *Snakes, Squirrels, and Bears, Oh My!* by Greg Peck. It's sure to brighten your day as you read about the author's efforts to traverse modern life.



*Like a brandy old-fashioned or a stroll, Snakes, Squirrels & Bears, Oh My! offers a relaxing chuckle at day's end and a sure cure for many irritations of daily life. This is particularly true if the reader has ever lived in Wisconsin.*

Find out more about the book [here](#).

## Writing an Effective Book Review

What makes you want to buy a book and read it? Perhaps you heard about it from someone, or read about it, or saw an ad, or browsed at some type of venue—store, fair, library. No matter why, you might have been less inclined to buy a book that someone said was not worth it...unless you are good at reading “between the lines.” An effective book review is less about you and more about the book. A good review runs maybe 200-350 words, and like any story has a beginning, middle, and an end. Start with a good hook about the book: what is your overall impression? Write a few sentences about what happens in the story without giving anything away or repeating back cover copy. Go ahead and interpret the theme or action. Write a couple of sentences about the effectiveness of the story, and if you are experienced, talk about the style of writing, comparing it to another work. End by adding a little about the author, and your own takeaway. If you don't like something, be specific...but remember, although these reviews are an advertising tool, they reflect on you more than the product. Be kind, be vague if have to, but avoid letting the public know you can't judge a book by its cover.

## CRAFT TIPS

*New column alert! Thanks for the marvelously talented and ever-resourceful Kim Suhr who'll be bringing us timely tips and practical advice.*

**Writers:** Try the prompts at the end of the column and send me the results for potential publication in a future edition of *Creative Wisconsin Magazine*.



### Boundary Hopping

Kim Suhr, Red Oak Writing

The other day, I was looking through old notebooks and came across a page that said, “Germs’ John Dufresne” on the top and the opening line: “Most things will never happen; this one will.” What followed was the beginning of a pretty fascinating story I had written in the second-person point-of-view (something I seldom use) and in the future tense (which I never do). But I guess I can’t say “never” because here was a draft of something I had apparently scribbled in nearly ten years ago in 2014.

The voice was so different from mine, the premise so unusual: a nefarious scientist with serious mom issues smuggling a vial containing a virus to start an epidemic, not to kill people but so he can be the hero by “developing” the vaccine at warp speed. I hadn’t written this. Had I?

Turns out I had. All except the first line, which John Dufresne had borrowed from Philip Larkin and used in a writing prompt called “Germs” and reprinted in the book titled, *Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer* (Random House, 2008). Apparently during my writing warm up in 2014, I wrote to the prompt, created a most-unusual-for-me draft of a story, and completely forgot about it.

Obviously, I never went on to do anything with the draft, and, with the advent of the covid pandemic would need to turn it into a very different story if I wanted to revise it now. But I think the more valuable use of these previously-forgotten pages is to show the

power of stepping outside our usual forms and genres to keep our writing lively and fresh.

What boundaries have you put up around your writing? What is the last form that you would ever write? An abecedarian sonnet? Try it. A story in the voice of a ghost? Why not? A memoir in the form of dictionary entries? Yes, please.

I’m no brain scientist, but it seems to me that while our linear, problem-solving brain is occupied with the unusual approach to writing (What “c” word can start the next line?), the creative part gets a chance to run wild and try out new, fresh stuff we might not ordinarily (cumulus, of course!). Or maybe something else is going on.

What I do know is that giving ourselves permission to expand and even breach our own writing boundaries, we’ll have more fun, write more freely, and discover things we never knew were there.

**Writing Prompt: Either use the line, “Most things will never happen; this one will.” Or grab a book from your shelf and copy its first or last sentence. Use this as a jumping off point: as the first sentence of a new piece of writing or to connect somehow to your work-in-progress. Set your timer (How much time do you have now? Yes, I mean right NOW! Even 5 minutes is enough. Come on. It’ll be fun.) Go!**

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Kim Suhr is author of *Nothing to Lose* (Cornerstone Press, 2018) and Director of Red Oak Writing, an organization supporting writers at all places on their writing journeys. She teaches Time to Write! a weekly online class, which provides an opportunity to spark creativity and write in community with others near and far. Her next collection of short stories, *Close Call*, is forthcoming in March 2024, also from Cornerstone Press.





## Writing in Credible Characters: A Therapist's Perspective

S.W. Strackbein, Jackson

The creation of character within the literary arts is as close to godliness as any human will ever achieve. Unless you're a mom, I'm guessing that may be relatively close. As writers, realistic characters are seconded only to plot in their importance to story. We give them names, describe their hair and eye color, height, and girth. Hopefully, we've granted them feelings, some thoughts, and navigated them through choices we, as their all-powerful puppet masters, have presented. And yet for all our giving sometimes our offspring come off like cardboard cutouts, flat and lifeless with blond hair and a tan.

I've been a mental health therapist for half my life and a writer for a good third. As a therapist, I've spent years observing human behavior, the interactions between thought, belief, and past influences. I'm asked to interpret, and at times unravel the interconnected facets of what makes up a person. These years of observation have had a tremendous influence on my writing. The insight into what's actually involved in human development has led to more humanlike characters. Truth is, it's difficult for humans to fully know themselves let alone someone else.

Each character needs to embody a real person because, to the reader, they are real people with the same complexities as any other human. The more depth and substance a character possesses the easier it is for the reader to get lost in the story. Successfully recreating these complexities within a fictitious world allows the reader a greater sense of emotional connection with the characters thus adding to the intrinsic entertainment value, leading to a greater understanding of the choices made throughout the story. The good news however is, as writers, we don't need to start with all that mess, like muddy footprints on a white carpet, we create it as we go.

### Observational Study

People are complex, it's what makes us so undeniably fascinating. Full of opinions, experiences,

biases, traumas, belief systems, customs, and a plethora of other minutiae that are sometimes difficult to sort out. When I first started writing I'd sit in various coffee shops and observe people. I'd pay close attention to the way they interacted with each other, their mannerisms, and body language. I'd imagine what their morning must have been like to cause their current behavior pattern and use these observations as writing prompts.

In the same way, observe people's use of language. As someone who talks to others for a living, this has come relatively easy for me, but recreating speech patterns and spoken mannerisms within effective dialogue takes practice. The way characters speak can reveal a ton about their personality, background, and motivations. Writing natural and realistic-sounding dialog takes a firm grasp on how people speak, either regionally or otherwise. As my wayfaring mom says when someone comments on her Midwest accent. "Listen to your local news broadcaster, they talk like me, don't-cha-know."

### The How and the Why

Character sheets, interviews, or sketches are a great way to build a skeletal frame and I've occasionally used these along with other techniques, for roughing out a newly born character. I've generally gained some insight into what the character's favorite color is or what coffee they like (triple venti, half sweet, nonfat, caramel macchiato) or how noninfluential their siblings are to their story; the basics of who they are. These sketches remained plastic as the story unfolded. However, they never encompassed the full complexities of a well-rounded character and never breached the surface of the truly realistic character I strive for in my writing.

As a therapist, there is an interpretive nature ingrained in the job, there very often isn't a straightforward path to why troubling behaviors occur and some problems are tougher to untangle than others. When it comes to writing deep and meaningful characters, lives don't need to be so tangled as to boggle the reader, there does however need to be a rational cause and effect for each character's behavior. *How* this character acts, thinks,

or responds the way they do should be supported by the *why*.

### **It's All Prologue**

Whether you're a pantsers, plotter, or some freaky hybrid of both, you likely have some idea of your character's backstory. Part of therapy is a collaborative discovery of the causes, the whys, of troubling behaviors. Most often this involves a deep dive into a person's childhood, maybe early adulthood, or at least a recounting of some past occurrence that led to their current situation. As a writer, you get to decide what the important whys are.

In therapy, counselors tend to work backward. Observing the behavior, thought, or complex emotion (affect) and reasoning out the influences (causes) which led to who they are and why they behave the way they do. As writers, we can do the same. You wouldn't burden a character with agoraphobia without a logical basis for the condition, typically a traumatic early childhood experience, such as the death of a parent. And you don't necessarily need to know the cause before you write the scene. If the character needs to have agoraphobia write them with agoraphobia. Afterward, you can research a logical reason for them to be that way.

Ultimately you don't need to know your characters fully to create the realism you're looking for. Characters oftentimes act and react in ways that are perfectly reasonable for the scene, surprising even the writer as the behavior occurs. Let's say our character, Jeff, is an investigative reporter and has suffered from agoraphobia since he landed his first job. As the writer we may need Jeff to be terrified of going outside and agoraphobia engrosses the lives of those who suffer from it. There is a myriad of intrinsic conflicts embedded in this scenario. How is Jeff going to investigate when he fears leaving his house? How is he going to react to his boss when he's forced to be out in the field or come into the office? Why did he choose a career where he'd have to be outside? How did he get this job in the first place? How does he see his psychiatrist or pick up his medication, or his groceries? Any of these conflicts can be used within Jeff's story and because agoraphobia is an anxiety-

producing affliction, most of Jeff's interactions (affect) will be influenced by his anxiety (cause).

As a therapist, this cause-and-effect relationship between personality and behavior comes with training and eventually has embodied the way I think and view the world. Others undoubtedly think in different ways. However, as writers, we already understand the cause-and-effect nature of story, specifically in plot development. It isn't such a shift to realize that if Jeff doesn't do what his boss asks of him, he'll get fired (cause and effect within plot) when he inevitably goes into the office, rushes past the cubicles without making eye contact, slams his boss's door, and yells about the way he's been mistreated (caused by his agoraphobic anxiety, effecting his mood as evidenced by angrily yelling at his boss).

The result is a much rounder character who appears outwardly aggressive, rude, and perhaps entitled, but who, in his complexities, is an adult man continuing to struggle with connection in his world while trapped in his fears. This cause-and-effect behavior may play out within the story, teaching Jeff that he can have relationships beyond the safety of his home or if Jeff was a minor character as a base for the writer to understand why Jeff is the way he is.

### **Character Flaws: The Mustard on the Hotdog of Life**

No one is perfect, and our characters shouldn't be either. Mannerisms along with flaws and weaknesses, both large and small, make characters relatable and ultimately more human. This may include personality flaws such as Jeff's rudeness, physical flaws, or emotional vulnerabilities. These character flaws should not be mistaken for a character's tragic flaw, a trait that ultimately leads or contributes to a character's tragic downfall. Tragic flaws are most often viewed negatively, character flaws may be negative but oftentimes have the prospect of turning into a strength.

I use a fair amount of trauma-based mental illness in my novels. I won't go into all the psychological root causes of such illnesses nor should I. Nobody wants that kind of dissertation bogging down the plot. Characters' personalities don't need to be clinically

diagnosable, but understand that the majority of people have some pain, and it's that pain that is relatable to our readers.

In my soon-to-be-released novel *The Change Paradox* one of my central characters, Alastair Cole, is a physicist and engineer who constructs a time machine. On the surface, he's a fun-loving playboy who enjoys the nightlife, intellectual conversation, and his vodka martinis with no olive. But the why, the reason behind inventing his time machine, and his motivations for traveling in time come from a lack of connection to his emotionally distant father and the physical absence of his institutionalized mother.

All of Cole's decisions revolve around his need for connection. Cole's Playboy lifestyle and most likely his drinking problem are direct causes of his feelings of abandonment from both his parents. This unconscious longing also has the effect of using others, mainly those closest to him, to achieve his goals no matter the consequences.

### Final Considerations

Within the skeletal character sheets, you've probably considered factors such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or religion. People are influenced by the cultural and social context in which they live. Cole lives in Chicago and was raised in a wealthy, Caucasian family. This privileged lifestyle influences how he sees and interacts with the world. Our investigative reporter, Jeff, sees the world as a dangerous and scary place. He may also live in Chicago, perhaps in a gated community (an *effect* of his fearfulness) or in a gang-riddled part of town (a *cause* of his fearfulness). Most of these aspects are static within your character, but they play a large part in a diverse, nuanced, and realistic character.

Characters that move readers, that relate, and bring about genuine emotion, are the ones that stick with our readers far after the book is closed. Atticus Finch, Jane Eyre, Jaime Lannister, and Bilbo Baggins, these characters hold a mirror up to our own lives and have been given life beyond the page. Their motivations, flaws, likes, dislikes, backstories, the how and why, have all been considered, sometimes down to the finest detail.

There are a multitude of techniques that will help flush out the humanness in any character. Use one or use them all it's ultimately up to the writer to decide. I've found the most helpful technique is observation. Watching people be people, listening to how speech is used to portray so much more than what is said, and filling in what's unseen from a logical standpoint. We writers strive to mimic human behavior inside our made-up worlds. It stands to reason that observing human behavior might be the best research writers could do. Research from afar, observe your family's interactions, be your best friend's therapist, and write incredible characters.

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Steven W. Strackbein is an avid reader and writer of speculative fiction in the science fiction and fantasy genres. He's been a mental health therapist for almost 25 years, serving both adults and children across several counties in Wisconsin.

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### Why Write a Sequel?

Mary Behan, Mazomanie

I didn't set out to write a sequel. By the time I had finished writing my first novel, *A Measured Thread*, I had exhausted the protagonist's story. She was close to the end of her life, and at peace with the choices she made in her past. Everything neatly wrapped up, I focused on the next writing project. Then something strange happened. I began to feel a sense of responsibility for the characters in *A Measured Thread*, now they had left the safety of my mind and were out in the world.

I had ended the novel on a bit of a cliff hanger and my readers began to ask, what happened next? Was there going to be a sequel? I demurred, having no intention of putting myself through the agony and ecstasy of writing another novel. Instead, I began to write short stories, enjoying the enforced limits of that genre. But in the back of my mind there was always the question of what happened next.

I found myself thinking more and more about one character in *A Measured Thread*, Isobel. She had so



much promise, yet she was haunted by an unanswered question: why had she been given up for adoption? That question became the theme of the sequel, *Finding Isobel*.

I began to write *Finding Isobel* on April Fool's Day, 2021! I picked the date deliberately to remind me of how foolish an undertaking this was. I didn't yet know where the story was going, but I knew I had a great opening chapter—one that I had considered for a short story. Those first pages were relatively easy to write, but somewhere in the middle of May I came to a crashing halt. Looking back now, I understand why. A story outline was taking shape in my mind, but it was going to take me to some emotionally disturbing places, and I wasn't ready for that. Besides, I was distracted by publishing my first collection of short stories, "Kernels."

In the end, it was NaNoWriMo that rescued me. For those of you who don't know about National Novel Writing Month, it's a challenge to write a 50,000-word novel in the month of November. Now, I'm one of those people who happen to love deadlines. I had been feeling guilty about making absolutely no progress on *Finding Isobel* for almost two years, so this presented a lifeline.

I immediately looked for partners amongst my writer friends. Valerie Biel of Lostlake Press agreed to join me, and she recruited Silvia Acevedo. These two amazing women, both successfully published and prize-winning authors, were two of the best companions one could ever have in NaNoWriMo. Val set up a shared calendar where we logged our word count every day. She organized a Zoom call each week, and we had a Facebook Messenger spot for those outbursts of frustration or satisfaction that came at random moments throughout the month.

You might ask, why did NaNoWriMo work? First, I am retired and have (almost) complete control over my time. I refused invitations and offered none. I made sure all the outdoor projects were finished, and put aside books I was reading. Next, I stopped reading or watching or listening to news. My habit each morning over breakfast is to check four or five news websites from around the world. It's amazing how that alters your day. It's a distraction—one that you cannot shake

easily during the day's writing. And it's an addiction. Often during that month, I found my fingers drifting to those apps on my iPad and had to chastise myself before a relapse. I missed nothing. The world continued to spin.

Another reason NaNoWriMo worked, at least for me, was a piece of advice I read. Do not edit. Most of us are inclined to re-read the previous day's work to get back into the groove. Unfortunately, we tend to get bogged down in editing which is much easier than creating.

In case you are wondering if I outline stories or just go by the seat of my pants, it's a bit of both. I had written the beginning of the story, knew where it should go in the middle (albeit with minimal detail), and I was certain how I wanted it to end. Along the way, I took a couple of detours, and met a few wonderful characters that literally waltzed onto the page, leaving me excited in anticipation of what they might do the following day. That's the fun part of writing a novel. When you get in a zone and things just flow and you are genuinely having fun. But have no illusions; there were many days when it felt like digging a trench in muddy clay. I call those my "digging potatoes" days. You get something out of the effort, for sure, but it's only later you realize you were making progress.

Having a story bouncing around in your head for thirty days and nights is something of an obsession, but fortunately friends and family were very understanding. The last few days of writing were truly wonderful because I could see the finishing line. All along I had wanted my characters to be happy, and finally they were going to achieve that. It's amazing to hold people's fate in your hands like that. Power, control, kindness, sympathy. And that's just the writer!

Expect to see *Finding Isobel* later this year.

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Mary Behan is a retired professor of neuroscience. She devotes her time to writing fiction, memoir, and short stories. Her first novel, *A Measured Thread* (2020) was a finalist in the Page Turner Awards, and an eLit medal winner. *Kernels*, a collection of short stories, was published in 2021. <http://www.mvbehan.com/>

# THE STUDENT WRITING CONTEST

As part of Wisconsin Writers Association mission to encourage writing of all forms for all ages, we sponsor an annual student writing contest with monetary awards for first through third place. Winners also will get a free one-year membership to the WWA and winning submissions will be published in our Wisconsin Writers Association Anthology. A copy will be sent to the student and the school they attend.

All categories have a maximum of 1500 words and must be the original work of the student. The contest is open each year from the end of January to the end of March, and submissions must be made online through [www.wiwrite.org](http://www.wiwrite.org)

This year's place winners have gone international. We're pleased to announce the following results of WWA's annual Student Writing Competition. Congratulations, all.

## Non fiction

First – Iago Macknik-Conde, “Keep on Rolling”

Second – Anna Davis, “Pretty Girl”

Third – James Lindmark, “The Name James”

## Poetry

First - Saarah Hussain, “Vellichor”

Second - Sydney London, “You Are Missing From Me”

Third - Joshua Lewis, “Enough”

## Fiction

First – Asenath Wetzal, “The Waiting Room”

Second – Savanna Ellenbecker, “My New Purpose”

Third – Ava Strancke, “I Take a Surprise Vacation to the Underworld”

## Nonfiction

### Keep on Rolling

Iago Macknik-Conde, Brooklyn, New York  
Homeschool

My feet are planted on the pads of my Segway and my hands are glued to its rubbery handles, but I am soaring along the street. Passersby snap photos of me, and excited children gasp in Polish as I speed past, feeling the wind on my face. The smell of nicotine from the pedestrians' cigarettes fills my nose, but it lasts only for a second as it dissipates into the crisp afternoon air. Our Segway tour of Warsaw is drawing to a close, and our guide has allowed us to roll around Pilsudski Square to make the most of our last few minutes on wheels.

“How about one more lap?” my mother asks, rolling past me.

I smile and follow her, my wheels grating like grindstones over the concrete tiles. *It's rare that it's just the two of us*, I think. My mom invited me to join her on her work trip as a sort of graduation present before the start of middle school, so we are each other's travel companions for the week.

The Pilsudski Square is a mostly empty, gray-tiled space, sprinkled with a few large monuments. Stately cream-colored government buildings surround the enclosure, standing tall over the pedestrians as if aware of their own importance. My mother and I transverse the plaza and swerve towards an ebony black staircase leading to the sky. Neither of us can make anything of it, so she looks it up on her phone. “It commemorates a plane crash that killed many Polish people. The sculpture represents the collapsible staircase that people use to board a plane,” she says. I notice the fresh flowers spread around the base of the monument, and my stomach knots as I imagine the lives that were lost. It hits me that things can change so suddenly, and wish I could stop the clock, feeling overwhelmed at the fragility of it all.

“Let's check the other end of the plaza,” says my mother, knocking me out of my spell, and I am quick to agree, inhaling for what feels like the first time since we got to the monument. We roll to the next memorial, a bit

faster than necessary, and I think back to the time when I was little and my mom pushed my kiddie car while I pretended to drive it.

We lived in Arizona then. I remember the towering saguaros and the vast blue sky turning to red at sunset. My mom would push my car around the neighborhood at the edge of the desert, always careful to give the jumping cholla cactuses a wide berth, and pointing to the jackrabbits we scared as we passed. I feel a hole open up inside me, knowing that I will never experience those kiddie car rides again.

Once more, my mom's voice brings me back to the present. "Would you stand next to those mannequins while I take your picture?" she asks, heading to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I follow her gaze and see two life-size model soldiers in combat gear flanking a marble coffin. I approach them, still on my Segway, and almost fall off when I see one of the dolls blink. They are actual people!

"Mamá, mira, they're real!" I say. My mom laughs when she realizes her mistake, but the soldiers remain perfectly stone-faced. She takes my picture quickly while the troopers stare ahead with cold, harsh glares.

Having my mother to myself for what seems like the first time in years feels momentous. I can finally get a word in edgewise without being interrupted by my brother or my sister. I want to savor every moment, not just because our trip is ending soon, but also because I know that this stage of my life will conclude shortly, too. Sometimes I can't wait for what comes next, other times I dread the change. My childhood is slipping from my fingers, but my future is too far to touch. Can't we just take a breath and cruise along?

We circle around the plaza a few more times, rolling side by side and admiring the sculptures and buildings that contain us as if inside a snow globe. I try to etch in my mind every image, smell, and sound, forming a time capsule to go back and visit, even many years from now. For the briefest instant, I manage to stop time.

Then I zoom ahead on my own for one last loop, taking it all in. Our guide calls us back to the center of the square and retrieves our Segways. The tour is over now, and climbing down from my machine after rolling for three hours feels like learning to walk again. We start the trek back to our hotel room, completely exhausted but happy about our adventure together.

Things will continue to change as I get older, but I know that my mom and I will keep on rolling.

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## Pretty Girl

Anna Davis, Hartland, Wisconsin  
Arrowhead Union High School

I have always been a pretty face. Since I was a little girl, strangers in stores would tell my mother to "keep an eye on that one" as if I was a dog that could quickly run away. I knew it was a compliment. That they were saying I was too pretty for my own good and that boys would start flocking to me like crazy. I knew there wasn't anything wrong with their intentions, but it had always rubbed me the wrong way.

They were right; when I got to middle school it was evident I was the pretty girl. Not a day went by where someone didn't mention how pretty I was, how all the boys were into me, how my friends hated how oblivious I seemed to be. The pretty picture-perfect girl. How could I not know everyone had eyes on me?

"Song of the Prettybird" first caught my attention when I was in high school. Through the internet, specifically, TikTok, a woman with the username MadelineaFord read the poem by Shay Alexi Stewart. Ford, through the way she delivered the poem and the words in the poem itself, touched millions of people—including myself.

Never was I praised for being smart, for being talented, for being kind, but only for how my hair was so unique, how my face shape was that of a model, and how my figure was something to be gawked at. I only ever saw myself as pretty. "How does one achieve complexity when all she was ever taught to be was basic," Stewart questioned and so have I. How could I be anything more than a pretty girl? How could I be anything more than what people



see? How could I be more?

Although Stewart asked the same question I did, she answered it; through literature. Prettiness couldn't show up on paper. If someone read something of mine they would have no choice but to focus on the word on the paper, not the look on my face. They would have no choice but to listen to what I was saying, the content of my pieces rather than the texture of my clothes. I finally felt empowered to be more than pretty, that I could throw behind titles I was given and take control over how I wanted people to see me. Being pretty and intelligent could coincide, no more would I be only pretty, no more would I be a half.

I re-found my love for writing in high school. I wrote poems and narratives and essays. I took every literature class in my realm, read every book I was given with the utmost focus, and took notes on every stylistic device I was taught. By now, literature and I have almost become one. If I didn't have literature I wouldn't be the person I am today, and if I didn't have that poem I would have never found literature.



## The Name James

James Lindmark, Hartland, Wisconsin  
Arrowhead Union High School

In Hebrew, my name means “the one who takes by the heel.” My name means the follower. A name of peasants—and of rulers. A name passed through the ages. A popular name, and a simple name. James.

Before I was born, my name was Grace. I came out a boy and my mom was speechless. After two days with their nameless child, my parents read the book of James in the Bible and knew it would be just right for their new boy. The book of character. An example of wisdom for me. A follower of Jesus. Simple and meaningful.

When I hear my name, I hear a whistle. Not a loud obnoxious whistle, but a soft, quiet one. Noticeable but not blaring. It does its job. Catches my attention. The single syllable with sharp sounding letters makes it unignorable to me. A friend in the hall could speak it, and I would know. My dad calling “James” from the stands turns my head.

I see motion in my name on paper. I can see it shake. My eye is like a lion's, scanning the horizon until it catches a glimpse of movement. My name is a lively zebra on the savannah.

My name is just like me. I blend in, but I'm still special. I don't try to catch the attention of strangers, but to a close friend, I am a light. I can spend time by myself, then a minute later I can listen to a friend about their problems. To me, my name represents that I can be unique, but still relate to people.

A close look at my name reveals who I am. A funny story, a simple life, and a good spirit. James.

## Poetry

### Vellichor\*

Saarah Hussain, Al Khor, Qatar  
Al Khor International School

Crooked from the merciless winds of time  
Each frosted in creams of grime,  
Those smooth bars of mahogany colonize her  
layers of faded carpet from floor to ceiling. They  
wind,  
arch, twist, and bend, creating a lingering aura of  
hostility.

Yet her intricacies are what enthrall me. Those  
rigid, brown barriers  
are simply shields guarding unfound gems of  
literature. I delve  
deeper, uncovering threads of literary genius  
stitched tight by beautiful  
phrases. I sail with pirates, debate with  
politicians, and battle with beasts.  
I fly with pilots, explore volition, and devour  
Arabic feasts.

All while accompanied by a persistent waft of  
biblichor. That  
archaic aroma, embedded in the covers, infused  
within the words.  
The stench uplifts any story's vivacity,  
For with age comes wisdom, concepts, ideas,  
vellichor,  
Undying and original.

But they say, "she is a liability, staining our  
modernized streets!  
What with her Stygian darkness engulfing our  
artificial lighting and

her wooden skeleton usurping the aesthetics of  
our buildings  
sleek metallic flesh! Even worse are her internal  
organs; those  
water-stained stacks of stories tangled with vines  
of letters. They lasso  
our intricate technology, squeezing out the  
modernism!  
Frankly, she is outdated, a relic amidst our avant-  
garde architecture.  
In our advanced times, she serves no purpose.  
Why have a physical, time-beaten archive  
burdening our man-made  
living space? What use are millions of untouched  
stories, as fantastical or as  
factual as they may be!"

Saddening to me is their absolute ignorance,  
Those big-mouthed ignoramuses and their  
disregard for her beauty- time's merciless winds  
may have snatched her sleek exterior, her polish  
and her  
glamour, but her interior remains. Those weaved  
words,  
of knowledge so powerful it pummels their  
'modernism',  
that essence of vellichor overwhelming their  
complex machinery.  
As aged as she may seem, her nostalgic glow  
shines bright,  
An immortal, aged, powerful light.

*\*Vellichor - the wistfulness associated with old  
bookstores.*

## You Are Missing From Me

Sydney London, Harrogate, Tennessee  
Lincoln Memorial University

I could say I miss you  
As the river across the bridge  
Where we once shared all our secrets  
In the swing overlooking the sunset  
Divides our futures  
Weeded out by the swaying seagrass  
Though "I miss you" doesn't seem to convey  
The part of me you inhabited  
The space between my breaths  
That seems to be lacking  
So I shall say "Tu me manques"



## Enough

Joshua Lewis, Hartland, Wisconsin  
Arrowhead Union High School

You tried to be different didn't you?  
soften your features  
but sharpen your smile  
improve  
to be less and not more  
to listen instead of being listened to  
but you feel the loneliness creep around you  
consume you  
fueled by insecurities  
what if's filling your head  
feeling the guilt of never being  
*enough*  
but what if you're never enough?  
you can't fill a void that is endless  
you can't find love where there is none  
you can't take something that isn't yours  
you are perfectly imperfect  
a force of beauty  
you need to open your eyes to your own beauty.



## Fiction

### The Waiting Room

Asenath Wetzel, Olympia, Washington  
Olympia High School

He tapped his finger bones against the desk, one after the other, relishing the sound. It was so exact, so precise—like the ticking of a clock. He hadn't heard that sound in... how long?

Clocks didn't exist in the Waiting Room. Just that red light over the door at the end of the hall that dinged green whenever someone entered. Sometimes it glared red for what felt like weeks, and sometimes it kept dingding—ding ding ding ding ding—letting souls flood in. They were always so confused—first at their surroundings, then at the ticket they found clutched in their fist.

*Where am I?*

*What's this?*

*What's going on?*

*What? What? What?*

But right now, for the moment, it was calm. He tapped his bones on the desk and eyed the souls sitting in the hallway. They all sat the same way—slumped over in their delicate bodies, staring at their precious little tickets.

His finger bones itched at the thought, and he tapped more ferociously. Such small tickets, in such soft hands. Surely it wouldn't be difficult to seize one...

A hiss erupted from the right side of the Waiting Room, where a single elevator was set in the wall, the doors sliding open. The souls lifted their heads at the sound. The moment the hissing stopped, they stood up in unison.

They moved eagerly toward the doors, and his hand froze. His gaze followed a small soul, clinging to the side of a taller one. A ticket poked out from its curled fist—glossy, with a sun-shaped hole punched in the corner. The soul approached the elevator, nearing his desk, and his jaw tensed.

He remembered taking that very ticket, running his bones over the embossed sun, punching the matching shape in the corner. And then letting it go, to

a weak soul who didn't even deserve it.

It had been right in his hands. His ticket to heaven. He got up from his seat carefully...

But everything always worked against him. The Others, the ones who placed him here in the Waiting Room, had promised him a ticket of his own. He had believed, at first. He had been patient, diligent. But he hadn't heard from them in... how long?

He stretched out his hand, reaching, reaching...

It was a trick, of course. He knew that now. Just one of their nasty tricks.

It was up to him to obtain a ticket, in secret, at the perfect moment, or he'd be trapped here forever in an endless ding ding ding ding ding—

The soul shrieked, and he snapped back as if stung.

He had almost snatched the ticket before the stupid thing cried out.

"Mommy," it whimpered, clutching the wispy hand of the taller soul, "the skeleton is staring at me again."

He straightened and towered over them, in his body of strong, hard bones. The small soul and its—mother?—froze in place as the other souls rushed past.

This was his chance. Take the ticket and run, into the elevator, into freedom.

"I just want to check your ticket," he said. He used his smooth voice, his velvet voice. "I may have made a mistake."

They huddled together. There was some deep instinct the Others gave all souls—the instinct that told them to keep their tickets close, to enter the elevator as soon as it opened. To find their place, and take it, before it could be stolen.

Well, he had that instinct, too.

"There's no mistake," the tall soul said firmly. "We have suns on our tickets, and suns in the corners. It matches."

The doors were going to close any second, and then he'd have to wait again—for another perfect, impossible moment. He could be trapped in the Waiting Room for... how long?

"Then let me see it," he hissed gently. He extended his hand—gleaming white, and so, so strong. But not

strong enough, not here where the Others ruled.

The small soul hesitated, its vague, milky face contorted with indecision.

Ding!

The light at the end of the hall flashed green, and his head snapped up, mind clouded with horror. The elevator doors never stayed open when souls entered the Waiting Room—they always slid shut, waiting to re-open until the next lull.

Ding ding ding ding ding—

“Give it to me now!” he snarled, turning back to—  
No.

They were gone, slipping through the doors as they shut.

And new souls were clambering behind him, babbling in confusion. He whirled to face them, a shudder rattling his bones.

How close had he been that time? How close?

He started tapping his fingers on the wood, in perfect rhythm, as he eased back into his seat.

So close...

The green light kept dinging, on and on and on, and the number of souls grew, spreading through the hall, leaking around the desk, huddling against the walls. They approached him, confused and cautious, and he let his mind go numb.

Ticket after ticket passed through his hands. His motions became automatic—reach, grab, glance, punch, extend. Until he reached out, and his fingers closed around—

Nothing.

What?

He lifted his head. The souls were crowding the room, and staring. Staring at the elevator doors, which were slowly opening, even as the green light kept dinging faintly.

Something was wrong.

He felt a flash of cold, as if ice was trickling down his spine, and he slid from his seat, sinking into the crowd. A horrible humming began that sent his bones spasming, and he fought the urge to curl up and scream.

He knew this feeling, didn't he?

An Other stepped into the Waiting Room. It had a body of bones, like his, but the Other's body was

unnaturally tall and strong, stretching up to the ceiling. And it had terrible eyes—burning white eyes—that it used to scour the room.

He ducked down to avoid its gaze, bones aching.

It was here for him. That was the only explanation—the Others had discovered his attempts to reach heaven, and they had come to punish him, to send him back to—

No! He wouldn't let them. He had agreed to work in the Waiting Room in exchange for his freedom, and he would not leave without it.

The souls surrounding him stood frozen until the Other moved away from the elevator, and their instincts took over. The souls who already had their tickets punched surged forward to the elevator, and the ones who didn't clamored to reach the hole-punchers abandoned on the desk.

He lurched along with the current of souls, struggling to stay low, hidden from the Other. There was no precision, no plan, not this time. There was only pain and fear and desperation and chaos. He was pressed up against sickeningly soft souls, and the horrid humming was growing louder, and the door at the end of the hall was still dinging, and it felt like his bones were about to shatter. And then, when the elevator was finally right there—

The humming twisted itself into a voice.

“THERE YOU ARE.”

Eyes of blazing white turned on him, and the Other approached, something pale and shimmering in its hand.

He had mere seconds. There was no fear of being caught, now—no fear of being seen. The Others knew what he had done. They'd pursue him relentlessly. But there was a chance, the slightest chance, that they'd remember their promise, that they'd let him stay in heaven once they caught him. It was the only chance he had.

His bones knew what to do.

The soul screamed when its hand was crushed. The crumpled ticket came away easily, and he gripped it with an iron fist as he set his jaw and *leapt*.

He landed in the elevator with a thud. A hysterical laugh escaped his teeth, and he let it grow louder as he straightened. He had been waiting for this moment

for... how long?

A soul brushed past him, and he watched as it lifted its ticket, the sun-shaped hole in the corner expanding and filling with light until it enveloped the soul completely and shot upward.

He, too, lifted his ticket, smoothing it out.

His laugh cut off like a gunshot.

A crescent moon was punched in the corner.

Terror seized him, and he stood paralyzed as the hole swelled with darkness, and came crashing over him like a mouth snapping shut.

The wrong ticket...

The darkness was cold and complete. A familiar sound rose up from the depths—clicking, like the ticking of a clock, or clacking of teeth.

That was his job, before. He had been so perfect. So precise...

He was still unbreakable, wasn't he? He had his strong body, his body of bones...

He put his hand to his face and choked back a scream. Soft all over, and so, so fragile.

The clicking grew louder, shadows closing in.

His scream ripped free.

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## My New Purpose

Savanna Ellenbecker, Hartland, Wisconsin  
Arrowhead Union High School

I am a plastic bag, blowing in the wind like a fragile leaf. My life has not always been like this, you know. In the beginning, I remember being made in a factory with more bags just like me. We were shipped all over the world to different stores. I sat in a cardboard box until it was my time to shine. I was put by the cash registers where I watched anxiously as my turn to be used got closer and closer. *This is my purpose*, I thought as I was taken home by a little old woman, filled to the brim with groceries. I was placed into the back of her car, then taken into her kitchen. She unloaded the groceries from me, but then she was done with me. She put me into the trash!

How could this happen! My entire life led up to this moment and now I serve no purpose. But my life is not over. I will spend thousands of years traveling to the landfill, then blowing into the environment, then back to the landfill again.

Just as I was thinking about this, something amazing happened. I thought I was being brought back to the landfill again after blowing out into a tree. But this time was different. I was placed into a blue bin instead of a gray one. *This is not a garbage bin, this is a recycling bin! I have been saved!* I was taken to a new place: a recycling plant. I was taken through a conveyor belt where I was separated from the rest of the recyclables. Then, my new plastic friends and I were squished into a big plastic cube where we went on another adventure. We traveled to a place especially for plastics like me. A place where each of us got a new life; a new purpose. I was melted down and reshaped into a new, cool shape: a water bottle! *This is my new beginning.* In the same cycle as when I was a bag, me and more water bottles alike were shipped to stores all around the world. But this time, I was put on a shelf! People were looking to buy me! I was taken home by a teenage girl who was in awe of my colors. *Nobody had ever wanted just me! This is amazing!* I was used time and time again, bringing hydration and happiness to this girl.

We plastics are not inherently bad, but the way people use us is. If I were not recycled, I would have lived the rest of my life in a useless cycle. But now, I can serve a purpose and do good in this world. It is important to recycle me and my plastic friends when we are no longer usable in our current state, so it does not build up in landfills or get stuck in the environment. If I, a simple plastic, can work to help the world, you as a consumer can help too. I can only be useful if I am actually being used—given a new purpose—and the answer is recycling.



## I Take a Surprise Visit to the Underworld

Ava Strancke, Hartland, Wisconsin  
Arrowhead Union High School

My name is Orpheus. Just a few hours ago, I was an average sophomore in high school. Now, I am standing on the banks of the river Styx with my (evil) English teacher Mr. Brown and best friend, Theo, on a quest to save the world as we know it. You're probably wondering how I got here, so I will tell you how my grand adventure began.

The end of the world began as I was sitting through a dull class period of afternoon English on the Friday before spring break. Mr. Brown was droning on about the difference between an adjective and an adverb. His class was about as lively as the people found in a morgue. Just as I was about to fall asleep, my friend Theo passed me a crumpled sheet of paper from behind. I uncrumpled the paper to see it read, "Twenty bucks if you can hit Mackenzie in the back of the head with this."

Money *and* a chance to pay Mackenzie back for the Cheeto she threw at my head during lunch? Yes. I might be lucky enough to get kicked out of class for being disruptive.

Mr. Brown turned his back to us to write something on the board. Now was my chance! I glanced over my shoulder with a rueful grin to ensure Theo was watching.

I chucked the ball of paper as hard as I could. Then, something changed when the ball was about to hit its target with a satisfying smack.

All of the colors left the room, and static surrounded us. A suffocating silence blanketed everything. The students seemed to lack substance as if made of morning fog over marshes. The paper sailed through Mackenzie's head and bounced along the floor. Then, she was gone, along with everyone else that had filled the class just seconds ago.

My entire class had just *evaporated*, but Mr. Brown continued to write on the board.

"Am I the only one seeing this, Orpheus?" Theo leaned forward and whispered.

"No... Something is wrong."

Mr. Brown's head snapped over in our direction. The English teacher did not appear to be entirely human any longer. His face looked like a rubber Halloween mask of a middle-aged man; suffice to say, *wrong*.

Oh no. I stood from my desk, and Theo did the same. My movement felt restricted as if I were trying to swim against the current in fast-flowing water. I couldn't lift my feet off the ground, and judging by the panicked look on Theo's face, he couldn't move either.

"Maybe Mr. Brown *is* a force of evil who feeds off of our anguish," I stated, making light of the terrifying situation. Theo snickered. He sounded far away and muffled, even though he stood right behind me in the aisle between desks.

Without even appearing to move, Mr. Brown was suddenly a few feet in front of us. We had to get away. We had to do something. Think. Think. Think. He took a few steps toward us and stopped.

"Mr. Brown, if I am going to die, I would rather not die in your miserable class," Theo confessed.

I couldn't help the hysterical laughter that followed that, which enraged Mr. Brown.

"Neither of you should be able to resist the magic in this place," Mr. Brown said in a voice layered with something that sounded older than time itself.

"Please let us leave, and we'll stay out of your... whatever this is," I squeaked out as I gestured to the empty classroom.

Mr. Brown glared at us as if trying to control us with willpower alone. Theo started to look dazed and, seconds later, fell to the floor unconscious.

I couldn't tell if Theo was still breathing, and it was obvious that Mr. Brown's magic had been the cause of his sudden collapse. My heart pounded as I started to panic, and a peculiar heat spread to every part of my body.

Still glaring at me, Mr. Brown took a step toward me. Then another. His hands morphed into razor-sharp claws. He raised his hand to slash me to ribbons. I couldn't believe that I would meet my end at the age of fifteen. The heat inside of me became a burning inferno.

"Halt, foul demon. Release the hold of your spell, and follow me," a voice I didn't recognize spoke out of

my mouth just as Mr. Brown's claws were about to rip through me. Theo bolted upright with a panicked gasp and looked around from his place on the floor.

As I was helping Theo up, Mr. Brown said, "Very interesting. I was not expecting to find a child of the underworld in such a place."

"Wha—What is that?" I asked.

"You are descended from a person much like me but of far greater power. Thus, I must, unfortunately, follow your commands, child."

"HMMMMM... creepy," Theo murmured.

"If you are from the Underworld, then why are you here? What do you want from us?" I asked.

"The powers of Olympus have grown weak enough to allow our people to reclaim the lands stolen from us at the beginning of time," Mr. Brown responded, "I am merely here to do the dirty work."

"And what if we ask you nicely to go away?" Theo proposed with a fake smile.

"The Lord of the Underworld made a command, and I must follow it. You would have to plead your case with him."

"We might have to do that if your people took more than just our school. I can live without this place," I said.

"Lovely time to stand around talking about the occult, but how about we get out of here now?" Theo interjected, giving me a look that meant we should go *now*.

"Follow us, Mr. Brown," I commanded, feeling like I would need his assistance soon. Mr. Brown gave a curt nod, and I led the way out of the school.

I do not know what I expected to see when I led my small group outside the school, but it was *not* this. Everything was a shade of grey, and a heavy gloom hung over a sky that should have been bright with the afternoon sun. This morning, trees were in bloom, and the smell of fragrant flowers filled the air. Now, brittle grass crunched underfoot and the oak outside of the school looked like it had been dead longer than I had been alive.

"Everything... is gone," I said, words failing to describe the gravity of the desolation. Theo stared blankly ahead, not responding.

Mr. Brown appeared unfazed. "What did you

expect, child? When I said the Underworld reclaimed its territory, I was not referring to a school, but an entire *continent*."

"What happened to the people who lived here?" I asked.

"The Lord of the Underworld claimed their souls, along with the territory."

Theo sat down on the lawn, tears streaming down his face. "Why are we the only ones left? I would've rather gone with them than be stuck *here*."

I couldn't offer any comfort because I felt the same, but I could provide the beginnings of the dumbest idea I had ever thought of.

"We are going to get our parents—no—*everyone* back. And I have an idea of how to do it," I sounded more confident than I felt.

"Oh?" Theo sniffled.

"We'll have Mr. Brown lead us to the mysterious lord he mentioned. Then, we will uh... convince him to give us back the land and people he took."

"That sounds better than sitting here. Maybe we can persuade the Lord of the Underworld by threatening to burn his palace down," Theo said with a smile.

I looked at Mr. Brown and prayed that my power would work.

"You will take us to your lord *immediately*."

The command worked terrifyingly well. Mr. Brown's eyes glazed over, and he said in a monotone, "Yes, sir. Follow me."

Mr. Brown parted the open air like a curtain, revealing a gloomy riverside, not unlike our current surroundings. I looked at Theo and gave him a thumbs up. Then, we walked together through the portal, ready to do anything, even arson, to save our world.

## WWA EVENTS

Some people spend their lives avoiding the spotlight, not wanting or needing any acknowledgment at all.

I am not those people. Once I decided that my random scriblings might actually make a memoir, the first thing I did was ponder what I'd wear to be interviewed on Good Morning America.

I'm also, however, somebody who puts in the hard work. Thus, in December of 2015, I spent hours googling, "How to become a writer," and "How to Write a Book the Right Way." I stumbled upon a website for the Wisconsin Writers Institute. I sent an email to someone named Laurie Scheer and asked, "Can anyone, even a beginner, attend this conference?"

Clearly I had no idea who Laurie Scheer was at the time, but it took me about ten minutes after arriving at the Institute to figure out that she was essentially a writing hero. Before I had a book, before I had a writers group, before I had a book deal, before I even had a rough draft, I thought of how amazing it would be to be like Laurie. I had goals. Writer goals.

Spoiler: I am nowhere near as cool as Laurie. But, this week she sent me a selfie wearing a T-shirt I bought for her, and I feel like my goals have been achieved. And I would never, ever know her on this level were it not for my volunteer role with the Wisconsin Writers Association.

I teach elementary school, and when Covid shut down the world, WWA had a Zoom open mic. I showed up, only listened and didn't read, but decided to join the organization. I was reaching the end of a stint on the board of my local writers group, and felt ready for something new. So, I sent an email to someone named Barry and threw my name in the proverbial hat.

Three years later, I have met so many incredible writers and so many incredible humans. There was a day when I had three emails waiting for me from Hank Philippi Ryan, Christine DeSmet, and Lisa Lickel. I have a literary agent, thanks to attending a WWA online conference where participants were allowed to query her otherwise closed list. I have made so many connections across the state and been inspired over and over again by writers. It is literally what keeps my butt in the chair to keep writing.

When Barry "hired" me (let me be clear, my pay is \$0), he said, "Here's what I need. We do one, maybe two events a year. We want more." Since that day, WWA has given a spotlight to more than FIFTY Wisconsin-based talented writers, the majority of those workshops that are completely free to members. Also, we pay our speakers, which is something we're incredibly proud of.

I know some of you don't love Zoom, that you're not all interested in every genre, that we have busy, wild lives—but our events are worth it. And our big, main, can't-miss-it event is the upcoming 75th Anniversary conference, which will take place on October 6 & 7 in Waukesha and Brookfield. You might want to sit down before you see the line-up, which is a knock-your-socks off one full of inspiration and talent.

### **SAVE THAT DATE!**

Additionally, we have some Zoom events approaching:

- Summer: Date TBD: 2nd Wisconsin Writers Association Social
- Summer: Date TBD: Open Mic

I'll see you at our next event—or maybe you'll volunteer to be on a committee and I'll see you there. Either way, stick around.

*Christy Wopat, Events Committee Chair*





wisconsin  
**writers**  
association

**75 Years of Success Stories:  
Celebrating Your Voice, Your Writing**

**Oct. 6 & 7, 2023**

Keynotes:

**Hank Philippi Ryan  
and**

**Christine DeSmet**

**Friday 10/6:** Downtown Waukesha

**Saturday 10/7:** Brookfield Conference Center

- Industry Professionals
- Agent Pitches
- Master Class with Hank Philippi Ryan
- Craft and Business Workshops
- Networking

**Save  
the  
Date!**



wisconsin  
**writers**  
association

[wiwrite.org](http://wiwrite.org)

## Recent WWA Events

Wisconsin Writers Association members took part in several state events in May. If you were involved in an event for your writing, please send a picture!

### Ridges & Rivers Book Festival, Viroqua

April 27-28



*Christy Wopat and Tom King*



*Debbi King and Barry Wightman*

### Lakefly Writers Conference, Oshkosh

May 5-6



*Debbi King and Pamela Fullerton*



*Greg Peck*





## Honest critique, fun and love of writing keep group going

Dave Thome, Shorewood

When the Milwaukee Veggie Chips Writers formed in 2013, we wanted a group that would endure. I don't think anyone thought about a 10th anniversary. 2023 was a long way off.

But, we made it—by Zoom during covid—in the process writing 19 novels and novellas, three screenplays, 30 vignettes for a website and dozens of short stories both fictional and true. One member has written innumerable opening scenes, but they're always a highlight, and the rest of us now accept his character, Zeke, as family.

Half of the six original members are still active. One passed away a few years ago. That was Larry Kresse, whom I'd met at a writer's group. One day he said to me, "If you ever want to start a group, call me first."

So I did.

The original six Veggies set a few basic rules: Bimonthly meetings; everyone can read up to 10 pages; everyone gets to comment; everyone must attend every meeting even if they have no material to share.

By the end of 2013, we'd picked a name—inspired by Larry's insistence on hosting and providing snacks, which were invariably tube-shaped vegetable chips—and added three members to the roster, including two who still participate.

One reason the group has endured is that we have fun together. Our calendars all list "Veggie nights" in ink. We give each other solid feedback. We've become friends. The participants include men, women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. Members range their early 30s into their 70s and include teachers, journalists, community activists, an insurance

saleswoman, computer programmers and a police officer.

But, why do people stay? Here's what the members say:

Susan Maciolek (joined 2013): You could ask a friend or a fellow writer to read your work. But it would be an imposition to keep asking, and if the person is not a writer, you might get flattery but not meaningful feedback. Our group waxes and wanes in size, but a core group keeps showing up and at every meeting you can count on meaningful feedback. The members have different strengths, too. One might suggest adding sensory detail, while another points out passive voice and others raise questions about character and plot development. We've also been through a range of life experiences, and being together so long makes our exchanges more meaningful.

Ken Walker (founding member): I published the novel I wrote with the encouragement, support and constructive criticism of my writing partners in Veggies. I don't know if the book would have been successful otherwise. The people in the group have become my social outlet as well.

Frank Rewolinski (2017): Growing up feral, the middle child of a large family, I drifted aimless for a long time, unable to connect with the world and people around me. Eventually, I found a bridge in the written word. In Veggies I have a supportive group of mentors willing to foster that writing.

Mike McCrossin (2020): When I retired, a friend gave me a journal and a fancy pen and said I should write something. I started filling the journal with childhood stories and joined a writer's group that met at a college, but wasn't satisfied. I've known Dave for a long time, and when I heard his group had room for another person, I joined Veggies. I felt like a rookie baseball player hanging out with Robin Yount and



Paul Molitor, so at first I was shy about critiquing their work beyond pointing out a misplaced comma. But they listened to what I said, and that made me more confident. I keep going because I like being introduced to different writing styles—and because of the encouragement I get to keep writing.

Jonnie Guernsey (2013): A long term-group brings a strong sense of community and shared experiences and allows people to develop trust in the critiques of all members, celebrate successes and encourages people at all stages of writing. At Veggies, we ask members to commit to attending regularly and be serious about writing. We have discussions, but don't rebut criticism, and write notes directly on everyone's pages so they can reflect later.

Sheila Julson (founding member): Writing is a lonely craft, and critique groups are a great opportunity to get neutral, unbiased feedback from other writers on what does—and doesn't—work with my writing. I've stuck with Veggies because I trust their suggestions. We've become friends and support each other's journeys and triumphs, but we're also honest and offer thoughtful, fair critique.

Stephen Jansen (2021): The group is a safe environment where we see reactions to our work in real time. This is crucial as I revise my manuscript prior to submitting it to literary agents. Each writer in the group is vastly different—novelists, short story writers, script writers, comedy writers, thriller writers—each with an important perspective to share. What brings us together is a love and passion for the written word!

Dave Thome (founding member): Sometimes I can write every day for three months; other times I wouldn't write anything if I didn't have to think of arriving to Veggies without something new. I've been a professional writer for 44 years,

and even taught writing at the college level, but there's nothing more instructive than reading and analyzing other people's work, and being able to see my work through their eyes.

Dave would be happy to talk to you if you're thinking about starting a writing critique group. Reach him at [t2winc@sbcglobal.net](mailto:t2winc@sbcglobal.net).

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Dave has been a reporter for three Wisconsin newspapers, has authored several self-published novels and has written many screenplays, some of which won awards, earned him some money, or were rejected by famous people. He lives with his wife, editor and freelance-writing business partner Mary Jo in Shorewood, has been a member of WWA for several years, and once had a short story finish second in the Jade Ring Contest.

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## The Safety of Rain

Leoma Retan

Rain nourishes earth. Grass rustles with  
movement of bunnies.

Hawk perches on lofty pine, grumbles that  
droplets blur his keen sight.

Mist hides small creatures, protects bunnies  
from hawk's searching eyes.

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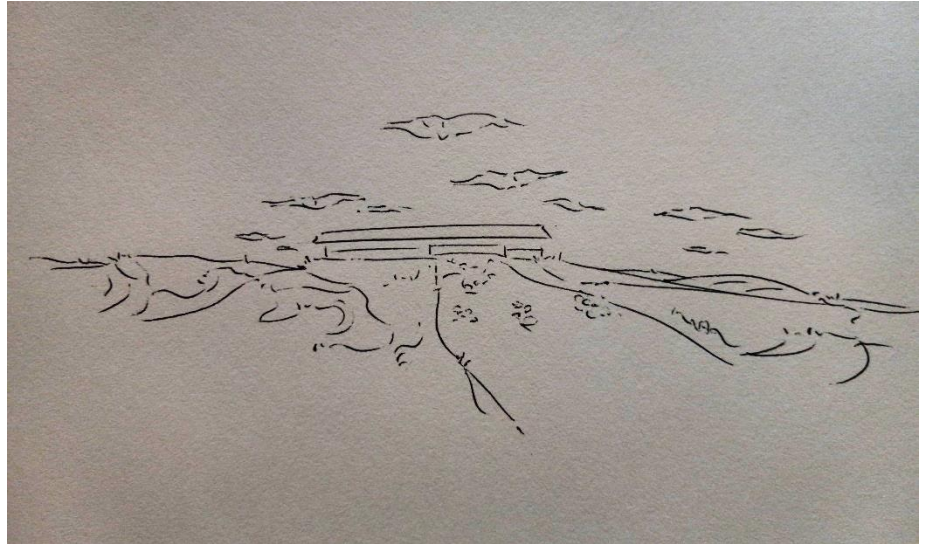
## Language goes beyond words...

*Writer Challenge: write a story in verse or prose, 250-400 words max, about one of these pictures and send to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org).*

### Visual Story

Marcus Tauch, Madison

Founded in 1985, ARTS for ALL Wisconsin is a statewide nonprofit organization guided by the belief that the arts are a universal and essential language that challenge people to respond to the world, look beyond themselves, and celebrate diversity...we are determined to ensure that the power of the arts are accessible to people seeking equality, respect, and justice. [Artsforallwi.org](http://Artsforallwi.org)



*Country barn in pen*



*Countryside cabin/landscaping in pen.*

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Marcus Tauch is an avid artist who excels in pen and marker drawings in the agricultural/landscaping and facial features. The drawings submitted are his main stay and he has been working with Arts For All in Madison.

## POETRY

## It Begins with a Kiss

### Sijo Poem

Trudy Bosman, Gresham

I look at the sky, the sun slowly setting in the west  
I linger, awed by the beauty, though I should be  
going home  
The sun slips below the horizon, I hurry on my  
way

*Trudy says, "Thanks for introducing this new style of poetry to me. Here is my attempt at a Soji poem."*

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Trudy Bosman worked for the Shawano School District for 29 years before retiring. She is a member of the Shawano Area Writers group.

### Three Poems

Jim Landwehr, Waukesha

#### Death at Sea

Being a displaced Minnesotan  
he wanted a Viking funeral  
with modern modifications  
not a boat but rather a kayak  
not of plastic but rather wood  
he requested a fishing rod  
be placed in his cold hands  
a surface lure at the end  
in case the bass are biting  
cover him in newspaper  
a liberal-leaning fish wrap  
push him into the bay  
then charge mourners a dollar  
per flaming arrow with  
proceeds going to plant trees

---

Jim has four published memoirs, *At the Lake, Cretin Boy, Dirty Shirt*, and *The Portland House*. He also has five poetry collections, *Thoughts from a Line at the DMV, Genetically Speaking, Written Life, Reciting From Memory* and *On a Road*.

She held her hand out seeking a kiss  
a kiss is a kiss until it is not  
it is not what it appears to be  
it appears to be too late to tell  
if I tell you I love you will you hate me?  
hate is a strong word  
in the beginning was the word and the word was  
good  
what's good for you is not for me  
for me this poem seems to be a little different  
there is little difference between this and that  
that is my point  
my point is, and I do have one, but have forgotten  
it  
to be forgotten is a negative way of being  
validated  
being validated is all about approval  
if approval is what you're seeking you're doing it  
wrong  
your wrong is my right  
you're right it is.

### The Report

It was all in the police report  
all the kicking and punching  
shouting and name calling  
the blood and the hatred  
it was all there.  
It came with the names of the men  
who killed my father  
but walked free because of technicalities.  
Guilty by any other name  
is still guilty.  
What retribution do I have?  
What recourse?  
I can only rest in knowing  
that each man,  
each of the five assailants  
has to wake every morning  
knowing they had a hand  
in taking the life of a man  
and changing the trajectory  
of a mother and six kids forever.  
Knowing they wake with this guilt  
gives me some satisfaction  
but maybe they don't  
maybe they've reasoned their way  
out of it.  
They're still guilty.



## SHORT FICTION

### Italy on \$1,000 a Day

Beth Washow, Milwaukee

Here we are. Italy. What a glorious way to spend two weeks in June. As the plane touches down in Rome, our tour group's excitement rises. Gianni, the guide from the tour company, greets us at the airport and accompanies us to our first hotel just outside of Vatican City. Barely have we checked into the hotel when my friend, Karen, a veteran teacher of thirty years, wants to explore the nearby shops. She is an over-the-top amateur actress who never does anything in a small way. This is her first trip to Europe, and she is anxious to live it up, no matter the expense.

Some members of our group take advantage of the free afternoon to tour Vatican City, which is literally across the street from our hotel. Others follow Gianni on a short walking tour of Rome. Karen opts for the Vatican, so I agree to accompany her. Sporting sunflower gold flip-flops, she almost falls off the hotel stoop in her haste to begin our exploration. "I'm so excited," she bubbles. "I'm really in Italy."

Outside St. Peter's Square we see street vendors selling cheap scarves by the armload. Every time the police appear, the women scatter. Karen is an easy mark. Once she buys a scarf from one woman, three more descend upon her. Oh, what the heck! Karen decides to buy some more. I buy a few myself. These would be fashionable and inexpensive souvenirs for friends and family and can be easily packed. As we walk the streets, Karen feels compelled to check out every shop we pass. Her pile of bags is quite impressive, and I offer to help her carry them back to the hotel.

The next day finds us on an organized tour of Rome. Karen buys a sun hat and sunglasses from a street vendor. At the Coliseum, she buys a book and a small model of the monument before we even enter it. When Evangelina, our guide for the city of Rome, calls "Family," the group assembles and waits for Karen to pay for her purchases. Carefully navigating the ancient

structure in her flip-flops, Karen stops to take a photo and asks someone to hold her bags. She doesn't notice until back at the hotel that the obliging stranger had lifted the sunglasses out of one of them. She just shrugs it off and says, "Oh well, they were cheap. I'll just buy another pair."

That evening, our group has dinner at a special restaurant in Rome, *Papa Rex*. Between each course, four opera singers treat us to Italian arias and duets. Three songs precede each course. Soon, however, we grow impatient, as the enthusiastic performers take too long to complete their sets. What a surprise at the end of the performance when they offer the diners a unique opportunity to purchase their CDs for a mere fifteen euros (\$20)! As expected, Karen purchases three of them. Nobody else in our group buys any, but the Japanese tourists at the neighboring tables buy plenty.

Back at our hotel room that night, Karen uses her international cell phone to call several friends back home in Wisconsin to say, "Guess where I am. I'm in Rome!" After her phone calls, she spends an hour trying to squeeze her purchases into an already bulging suitcase. I fear she will ask me to sit on it to help her close it.

Early the next morning, the group boards the tour bus and heads north.

On the way, we stop at a cameo factory and store. Gianni warns us, "You have to be careful of people who sell fake cameos that are machine-made. This is a legitimate hand-carved cameo store." The prices are not cheap, but I treat myself to a pair of carved earrings and a pendant for a total of \$75. I'm not sure what all Karen buys, but I see the clerk wrapping two large objects that look like a lamp or vase. I hear her bill is about 800 euros (\$1,000). *OMG! She already has her customs limit.*

We travel on to Tuscany through fields of saffron yellow sunflowers and rolling hills with tall thin Cypress trees. When the bus makes a rest stop, Karen returns with a bag of food, postcards, and a neon green T-shirt sporting the statue of David.

Finally, we arrive in Florence, the capital of Tuscany. I'm enthralled with the history and the art. Karen is enthralled with the shops and the markets,

where she buys leather goods and gold jewelry. At the market, I buy some cheap glass pendants for \$6 apiece, thinking I got a real bargain on Murano glass. Back at the hotel, Gianni bursts my balloon when he says, "Those are cheap knockoffs from China." *How was I to know?* I am, however, legitimately proud of the gold sun pendant that I bought at one of the thousand jewelry stores in the city. It may not have been a bargain at \$50, but it is a good remembrance of the Tuscan Sun.

The group finally arrives at our first real small Tuscan town as we check into the spa in Montepulciano. After dinner, we join the natives for a late-night stroll and gelato. For once Karen gets off cheaply, only because there is nothing to buy.

The next few days are packed with visits to several small hill towns and hikes through the countryside. Following one of the hikes, we tour a vineyard where the merchants offer weary travelers a sampling of wine and bruschetta in a rustic outdoor setting. The shop features their wines and olive oils at reasonable prices. Karen walks out with two clinking bottles of wine and another two of olive oil.

The group next ventures on to Siena. We stop for lunch at Cortona, the location of the famous book and movie, *Under the Tuscan Sun*. In the center of the town, we find a linen store and several pottery shops. After a quick lunch, Karen leads the attack on the area boutiques. "Forward, charge it," she yells.

In one pottery shop, Karen finds a gorgeous black vase with sunflowers painted on it, a matching spoon rest and plate, and a pitcher painted with a scene of a Tuscan town at night. She does not need them, nor does she know where she will put them, but this is the chance of a lifetime to buy them. The shopkeeper packages the purchases well for travel. At the linen shop next door, Karen finds sunflower-decorated towels and tablecloth.

Once in Siena, we sit in the grand piazza and eat gelato. We imagine what it was like to watch the horses racing around the outer ring of the piazza, or the flag twirlers, accompanied by drummers, throwing their flags in the air. As we walk back to the hotel, Karen suddenly disappears, annoying our friends, who wonder where she has gone this time. Five

minutes later, she reappears with a very large new soft side suitcase, finally realizing that her multitude of purchases dictates an upgrade in her luggage. "She's a world class shopper, for sure," someone mutters.

At our last stop, Milan, we visit the cathedral and then have some free time. Karen feels the need to purchase something from the fashion capital of Italy, so off she dashes. The stylish ladies here would laugh at the cheap scarves she bought, and her flip-flops are *démodé*. In the brief time she has before our farewell dinner, she buys herself a blue pashmina, some fashionable yellow stiletto heels, and a multi-colored Murano glass necklace with matching earrings.

It's time to say good-bye to Italy and return home. Karen packs her precious souvenirs into the new suitcase, the wine and olive oil wrapped in the scarves. The airline charges her \$50 for the extra suitcase, and then Karen panics on the flight when she sees the attendants passing out customs forms.

"Why didn't you tell me there was a limit of \$800?"

"You didn't ask," I reply, as I help her fill out the form. "Would it have limited your shopping?"

"Probably not. Shopping was so much fun."

Back in Chicago, Karen retrieves her luggage and notices a stain on the new suitcase as it slides down the conveyor belt. Hastily grabbing the case, she notes a curious odor emanating from it and a liquid substance dripping from the zipper closure. Panicking, she opens the bag to discover that the wine bottles have broken and saturated her purchases.

I don't know how she manages to get through customs without contributing to the United States Treasury. Maybe the agent is distracted by the smelly, stained luggage and just wants to be rid of it and her.

"How stupid have I been?" she laments. "I spent so much time buying souvenirs that I didn't enjoy the other parts of the trip, like the scenery, the history, the people, and the food. Now what do I have to show for my time?"

"The wine may be gone, but most of the other things can be cleaned up and salvaged. You'll remember much of what you saw, and you have the pictures you took," I reply. "This was your first trip abroad. You'll hopefully have many more. I'm sure

Italy hasn't seen the last of you."

"Yeah, you're right. I tend to go overboard. This was a great trip that I will always have. Memories are more important than 'stuff.' I guess I learned that lesson the hard way. Watch out, Italy. I'll be back."

And I'm sure I'll be back to Italy myself one day, only not with Karen. However, I must admit that compared to other tours I have taken, Karen did give me a unique perspective and memories of this trip, not to mention the aroma of all that spilled wine. Going forward, I may be more cognizant of how I spend my money, but I will also be more flexible in my openness to others' expectations, priorities, and reactions. My travel experiences don't have to be mirrored by those of everyone else around me. After all, isn't flexibility a necessity for travel?

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Beth Waschow is a retired high school teacher who is a member of the Writing Special Interest Group at Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and past member of Milwaukee Writer's Circle. She has self-published a book, *Demo Diva*, a humorous look at her experiences as a supermarket food demonstrator.

## Find Me

Leoma Retan, Pardeeville

The November wind's sharp bite cut through Hector's smoke-gray winter jacket as he trudged along the forest path, which was rendered nearly invisible by decaying red maple leaves. The trees had been green and sheltering when she brought him here two summers ago.

Amara.

They'd camped beside the hidden lake and imagined their future together. She told him stories about the spirits that protected old forests like this one. Amara's dusky face glowed in the moonlight as they lay together that evening, beneath the fronds of a towering willow tree. "If you ever wake and find me gone, come to this place," she'd murmured. "I'll be waiting for you."

He'd laughed. "Are you already planning to leave me?"

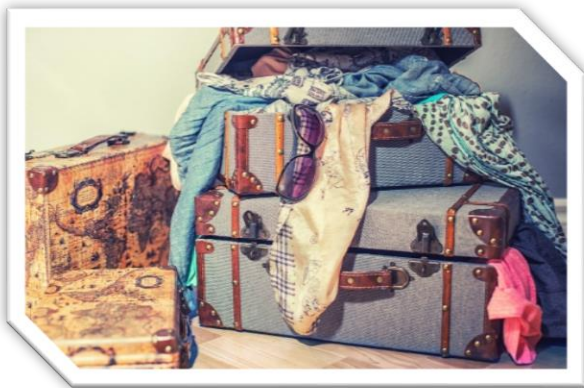
She'd smiled, though her soft brown eyes took on a serious look. "Not planning. But..."

That night, as they slept in the open, beneath the softly rustling trees, Hector dreamed that she could talk to birds. In the morning, he woke to see her standing barefoot in the grass, her arms outstretched as though she was beckoning the first golden sparks of dawn. When a small, brown sparrow settled on her fingertips, she brought her hand closer to her lips, her eyes focused on the tiny creature. A moment later, it flew away.

This morning, when he woke in their small apartment, she wasn't there. He'd relaxed when he remembered that she had an early meeting. Then the police came. Serious. Sympathetic. They'd asked Hector to come with them.

The body they'd pulled out of the wreck was barely recognizable as human but it wore the tree-of-life necklace that he'd given her for her last birthday. He wanted to scream, to rage, but no sound came out of him. She couldn't be dead. This had to be a mistake.

Hector was frozen for...he didn't know how long. Then he turned and left. He went home only long





enough to don his heavy clothes and his hiking boots. Then he got in the car and drove. The sun was setting by the time he reached the forest.

"I'll be waiting for you," he heard Amara's voice in his mind. "I'm coming," he whispered to the cloud-filled sky.

Hector leaned against a towering oak to catch his breath. He'd been walking for hours. Or was it days? He wasn't sure. The winding paths confused him; wild tangles of thorn trees blocked the direction he thought he needed to go. He sipped the last of the water from his thermos as he looked at the sky. A storm was brewing; it would break soon.

A branch snapped in an icy blast and a leaf lost its fragile connection with its tree. Hector watched it float to the ground. Within the keening wind, he could almost hear Amara's warm, lilting voice telling him about guardian spirits in this ancient forest. He'd teased her when she cautioned that any tree might house a spirit and any bird or animal might be one. Now he prayed that the spirits would help him find her.

The rustle of small animals and the hoots of owls surrounded him. A twig broke to the right of the path. He turned toward the sound, but saw only dark shadows. He punched the nearest tree trunk. "Where are you, Amara?" A thunder clap was his only answer.

Hector meandered through the forest through the beneath angry, roiling clouds, in search of the stand of birches that she'd told him marked the path to the lake. His feet felt heavier with each step. Flashes of light from the center of the angry, roiling clouds above brightened the sky every few minutes. His calls grew sporadic.

A root buried in the leaves brought him to his knees. For the first time in hours, no tree stood close enough to catch him. When he pushed himself up with his last bit of strength, he realized he'd found the birches. His landmark. Not far now.

He forced himself to stand, to put one foot in front of the other until he reached the willow tree standing alone next to the lake. The tree where they'd sat and shared their dreams—Amara's favorite spot. He crawled under its drooping boughs.

As the snow began its dance from sky to ground,

Hector dozed. He dreamed of Amara's gracefully swaying body and her feather light step as they waltzed around the forest glade to the music of golden bells hung from the holly branches. Her dark hair flowed behind her as they glided and spun. A thousand fireflies lit the edge of the forest around them.

A twittering next to his ear interrupted the sweet music. He frantically scanned the lake side for Amara but she was gone. He collapsed back against the tree and closed his eyes, willing the dream to return. The flutter of wings around his head forced him to look up. A small, brown sparrow that settled on his knee cocked its head as though it was studying him.

"Who were you looking for, just now?"

Hector glanced to both sides and peered up into the tree but he couldn't find the source of the high-pitched trill.

The sparrow ruffled its feathers. "I'm here in front of you."

Hector stroked the bird's head. "You can talk?"

"Yes. When I have something to say."

"But... Are you a guardian spirit? Amara told me about them."

The bird seemed to nod. "I am Kamali. Who is Amara?"

"She is... She was...my beloved."

"Was?"

"They showed me a burned, broken body. I didn't want to believe it was her. I couldn't. But she once told me that if I ever lost her, I should come here. That she'd be waiting." Hector's voice became a raspy whisper. "I've looked through the forest. I've grown hoarse calling her name." He did nothing to stop his freely falling tears. "I can't feel her anymore."

Kamali hopped onto Hector's hand and looked directly in his eyes. "Time is different after death. You should wait. It may take a while for her to find her way back to you."

Hector didn't notice when his body stopped breathing and his spirit silently seeped into the willow tree. He lost count of the number of times the sunny warmth of spring returned to the earth and the bitter winter winds froze it again. Ordinary birds came. They built nests and raised families. Occasionally Kamali visited. She always counseled him to be patient.

Sometimes he felt the presence of other guardian spirits but they never spoke to him.

Early crocuses had given way to wild violets when he felt the first tendril of climbing hydrangea at the base of his trunk, among his weathered bones. It felt softer than the grass. Its touch was lighter than the clover and the Queen Anne's lace raising their faces to the sun. He knew that caress. Amara! Hector's spirit expanded to the farthest tips of root and branch.

The normally slow-growing hydrangea reached upward an inch in that moment. "You didn't forget me. I'm sorry it took me so long to reach you."

The willow sprouted a leafy branch near its base. "I would wait forever for you."

Three hydrangea tendrils twined themselves around the willow's new growth and sprouted pure white blossoms.

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Leoma Retan, member of the Wisconsin Writers Association, is an engineer by day and a writer by night. In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, long walks, and her two dogs.



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association

## **LOOKING for WWA EVENTS or to add your EVENT to the WWA Calendar?**

A link to a Google Docs submission form to enable your event to appear on the calendar is found on this page. <https://wiwrite.org/WWA-calendar>

## **LOOKING for WWA GROUPS?**

A list of Groups, Guilds, and Clubs is found on this page. <https://wiwrite.org/regions>



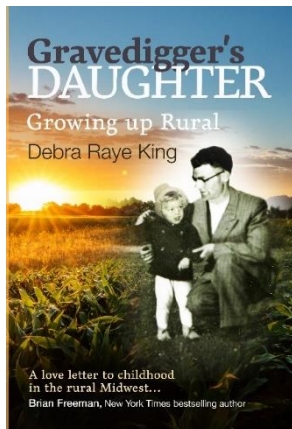
*Cedar Waxwing, Mary's tree*

Greg Peck, longtime WWA member and former board member, shot this photo of a cedar waxwing from his back deck. The bird was among a flock that descended on a serviceberry tree behind his garage in mid-June 2020. In the past four and one-half years, Greg has amassed photos of 85 different species within the city of Janesville, demonstrating that you don't have to venture far to find birds. It does help, he notes, that the Rock River meanders through Janesville.

Greg uses a compact Sony DSC-HX80, small enough to fit in a belt pouch whenever he's hiking, biking, or walking his cairn terrier, Molly.

## WWA Press

[www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press](http://www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press)



### **Gravedigger's Daughter - Growing up Rural**

Debra Raye King  
Memoir  
November 1, 2022  
WWA Press

Available in hardcover,  
paperback & ebook

**Gravedigger's Daughter - Growing up Rural** is a collection of short stories and essays based on actual events in the 1950-1970s in northern west-central Wisconsin. Little Elk Creek is a tightly knit community of Norwegian immigrant farm families who assist one another at harvest time and share their skills so all could succeed.

**Debra Raye King** shares her remembrances from an era when her father was the local gravedigger at the local church cemetery and it wasn't unusual for a daughter to help shovel. Moms were mostly homemakers, dads wage earners, and the children attended Farmers Union Camp, 4H, and the Luther League when not in school or helping with chores.

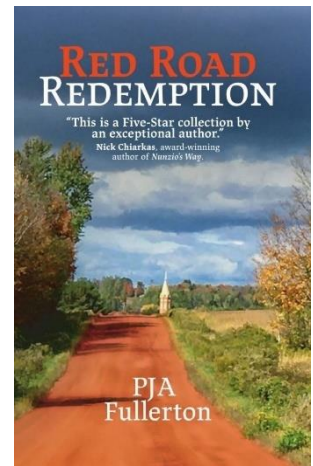
Experience the grit, heartache, joy, and innocence of growing up rural with these tales of one family farm in Wisconsin.

**We need you!** Reviewers, word of mouth shoutouts, book clubs... ask for electronic copies in exchange for a review. Contact Lisa, press manager, at [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

### **Red Road Redemption Country Tales from the Heart of Wisconsin**

PJA Fullerton  
Short story collection  
April 25, 2023  
WWA Press

Available in hardcover,  
paperback & ebook



The iconic red gravel roads of Marathon County lead past idyllic farms and fields, across tall rolling hills and through forests of majestic white pines and ancient maples.

These stories are about the lives lived beside those roads; roads that may guide you to an Amish harness maker's shop, a local tavern, or a country church and its quiet cemetery. Roads which often lead to unexpected adventures for man and beast; that connect, but can also divide neighbors, and for some, can become rare paths leading to the redemption of dignity and spirit.

**Red Road Redemption** is more than just a captivating collection of short stories. They are tied together with love, humor, and heartbreaking moments that pull the reader in and circles back with a powerful "aha" ending that ties the entire collection together. Throughout, you are in the hands of an extraordinary storyteller. -Nick Chiarkas, award-winning author of *Weepers* and *Nunzio's Way*

**Pamela Fullerton** presents stories set in the heart of rural Wisconsin. These are the tales shared over the paddock fence by older, and much wiser, neighbors. They are funny or tragic stories that both fascinate and precisely capture a way of life that was becoming extinct, even as it was being lived.





## **Wisconsin Writers Association Press** **In pursuit of the noble literary art**

The Wisconsin Writers Association Press aids WWA member authors in following through with our organization goals to help writers learn, grow, and publish in the literary field. The Wisconsin Writers Association Press exists specifically for Wisconsin Writers who tell Wisconsin-themed stories and provides a publishing platform currently unavailable to Wisconsin writers.

### **What We Publish**

WWA Press welcomes original material of good quality that celebrates and explores all walks of life and for all ages, be it historical, fictional, nonfiction, lyrical, or speculative. Family friendly, please.

### **Submissions**

In 2023 we are open to non-WWA members. Authors should submit samples of new, original work in English that is complete. The work should be tied to Wisconsin in some way.

*Material published by the WWA Press will not be eligible for the Jade Ring or any other WWA contests.*

### **Fiction**

The Press will consider most genres or literary works. The best lengths for works in fiction is 60,000 - 100,000 words. If you have specific questions about your genre, please ask before submitting. Questions to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

### **Nonfiction**

The Press will consider work in all areas that focus on promoting Wisconsin life, culture, history, biography, poetry, essays, or combinations thereof. Full-length work of 40,000 - 80,000 words is preferred. Collections of poetry and essays or children's books will be considered on a case basis.

### **How to Submit**

Authors should submit a one-page cover letter which includes the following information and attach the first 50 pages of your manuscript.

- Author name/pen name
- 200-word author bio (third person)
- How are you involved with WWA?
- Title
- Word count
- Genre
- Audience
- 10 keywords
- 50 word summary
- 450 word sample back cover blurb
- 1000 word complete synopsis
- Sales contacts and promotional ideas (Minimum of 10)
- Endorsers or writers of foreword/afterword ideas and contact information *if applicable*
- Know that you can provide the names and contact information of at least 5 reviewers who can review your book at the time of publication or soon after.
- Previous publications (if any).

Full Guidelines: <http://www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press>

Ready to submit? Email: [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

# NONFICTION

## The Bicentennial Horse

June Groshek Czarnecki, South Milwaukee

"I'm the back end of what?" I repeated as Mrs. Judson, the stage director, checked a list on her clipboard.

"I'm sorry, the horse is the only part left if you and Renee want to be in the play."

I groaned and nodded. Renee hurled a smug smile. Mrs. Judson suggested that we wear the two-person costume of Paul's Revere's horse. At least Renee was the front end of the horse. I was the back end!! How did I get myself into this mess?

It was 1976, and I was in the seventh grade at Burdick Elementary in Milwaukee. It was the Bicentennial year, 200 years of Independence for America. The anticipation and media frenzy was tremendous.

Schools, businesses, church groups across the country were preparing for the holiday in bigger and more spectacular ways. There were numerous television shows highlighting the event. One network aired a daily "Bicentennial minute" showcasing important events in the war of Independence.

Burdick was no exception from the hype. Like so many other schools, Mrs. Judson, the history teacher, was preparing a special bicentennial play. It would be performed on our school stage sometime during the last week of school before summer vacation.

Mrs. Judson selected a series of vignettes celebrating important American events. One vignette would show Betsy Ross sewing the flag, another George Washington crossing the Delaware, and another the midnight ride of Paul Revere.

A flurry of students volunteered to create the sets and sew the costumes. I didn't want a behind the scenes role. I aspired to the prima Betsy Ross part eagerly.

Of course, Renee Vernon\* was coveting the same role. I should have known my nemesis would be. Without ever saying it aloud, we competed with each other constantly whether it was in the spelling bee, vying for safety cadet or trying out for chorus. I always felt slightly intimidated by her. Being an only child, Renee had the nicest clothes of any seventh grader in the school. She often paraded her luxurious threads in front of class, especially the silky snow-white pantsuit. She strode up to the chalkboard during class with an obvious sway and Cheshire cat smile as she looked down upon her frumpy classmates.

But alas neither of us was chosen as Betsy Ross. When the dusty horse costume was pulled out of storage, Renee and I stared and sniffed it. It was dark brown with matted faux fur that had seen better days. There was a front end and a back end with an overlapping middle. There was no zipper. The head itself was made of paper mâché with flecks of paint missing from the snout and ears.

"Gimme that head," Renee demanded, relinquishing me to the less flattering equine rear end. When we tried on the costume, I heard snickering classmates. I was mortified. It was hot and sweaty and I didn't appreciate the view of Renee's butt, as I hunched over into my "role."

But things got worse. Mrs. Judson opened the seam that separated us.

"Here's the board."

The board? Yes, not only would be the horse, but we would actually have Paul Revere sitting on top of us on a board!

As Mrs. Judson realized, this would be quite the acrobatic feat for us to balance a board above us and carry someone. Luckily, she chose Tim

Jasper, with the diminutive stature of a jockey, to play Paul Revere.

As the days grew closer to the performance, Renee and I actually balanced the board fairly well with Tim perched on top.

This thing smells like moth balls." Tim complained.

"How would you like to trade places with me?" I retorted sarcastically.

The night performance finally arrived. We grew jittery watching parents and friends filter into the auditorium. Parents took pride in their offspring's respective roles. Some brought flowers to present their little darlings after the performance. Renee's parents carried in a huge bouquet of red roses.

"Maybe your parents should have brought you oats," I said to her wryly.

"Shut up, backside." she bellowed.

Flashes from cameras were everywhere. I was glad I was hidden from view. I assumed the proliferation of cameras was the reason Renee donned her beautiful silky white pantsuit instead of something practical like jeans and a sweatshirt.

Finally our cue arrived. "Hear ye...hear ye!" Tim shouted through the costume, ringing a bell. Hanging on to the board, we strolled gingerly across the stage. But something happened. The board shifted. I felt Tim pitch to the left. The audience heaved a muffled hush. Renee remained standing as Tim and I hit the floor.

Mercifully, I remained buried under the excess horse flap on the floor. Plastered to the stage, I peeked through the split in the costume and witnessed Renee drop the paper mâché horse head. It skittered a few feet in front of her. Having lost her horse head, Renee was totally exposed. I saw a flash of light from the camera of the photographer for the school newspaper. The headless horse (which was really Renee's head)

was going to be front page news in the Burdick Buzz.

The audience roared with laughter for what seemed an eternity. I will never forget Renee standing in half of the horse costume, her head sticking out where the horse head should have been, her prim white pantsuit smudged and dirty.

After that humiliating day on stage, Renee's bravado diminished. Playing the back end of a horse was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, but I took great satisfaction in knowing Renee Vernon would always be remembered as Burdick's Bicentennial horse.

\*(Names have been changed to protect the innocent)

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June Groshek Czarnezki lives in South Milwaukee, is married, retired and mom to two adult sons. A member of Wisconsin Writers Association and SCBWI-Wisconsin, her articles have appeared in magazines such as *Highlights*, *Reminisce*, *ReMind*, *Reunions*, *Country*, *Good Old Days* and *Our Wisconsin*.







## Kernels and Mirrors

Bert Kreitlow, Waukesha

Once the drums stopped, I heard his prayer. The old holy man dressed in white cotton and circled by dancers kneeled in the dust and dead grass. Behind him the Cholula pyramid rose like a mountain. Just beyond his brown knees were woven baskets and clay pots. His prayers were directed toward the baskets and pots in order to bless the corn seeds they held.

This revived indigenous ritual was staged in May of 1998, a year that I spent in Mexico doing historical research. My research centered on corn in Mexico, and so when I saw a flyer advertising this event, I took a break from the archive for a day. What I saw at Cholula was its own lesson.

I was aware corn is important to Mexico. I knew it started as a domesticated crop here and I had even visited the Tehuacan Valley where some archeologists locate the plant's origins 10,000 years ago. There I stopped at an empty, neglected museum displaying remains of tiny cobs and murals of the first farmers. But for reasons beyond its native status, corn works differently in Mexico than what I had seen in the U.S.

I thought I had known the stuff pretty well. I had grown up in Iowa, worked as a detasseler and spent blissful weeks of the hot, humid summer staying at the original family farm, then run by Aunt Louella and Uncle Lauren. Later, I was the farm reporter for the Cedar Rapids newspaper. But in all that time, I had never seen elderly men in white loincloths bless

baskets of corn kernels nor museums devoted to its history.

Mexican scholar Gustavo Estela wrote, "We invented corn, and at the same time, corn invented us." Estela is not referring just to the genius of the Tehuacan farmers/geneticists who invented the staple crop, but also to the Maya origin myth that says the gods created humans by fashioning their form from corn dough that they'd moistened with their own divine blood. Estela, who died in 2022, saw corn as the essence of a struggle for Mexico's future and a place for its indigenous and mixed-race farmers in it. The corn blessing ceremony I witnessed shared the same goals.

Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* shows us that plants—how we use them and how we tell stories about them—serve as a mirror that we hold up to reveal our own identity. The different way that corn exists in Mexico reflects its profound differences from my home first in Iowa and now for the past decades in Wisconsin. For all the differences, though, I sometimes see fragments of the stories told about corn in Mexico blended into my own family's history. Thinking about corn allows me to link my life rooted in the Midwest with the differences I've researched and experienced in Mexico.

My favorite story is about my father as a baby of only nine or ten months and already out in the fields with his family during harvest. This was before machinery, so his parents Frank and Bert and their three other older sons picked the corn by hand and threw the ears over their back into a wagon pulled by horses. Dad as a baby was there in the field with them, but tucked away among blankets and jostling inside a wooden drawer fastened to the underside of the wagon.

The baby among corn reminds me of a farmer I rented a room from named Carlos Díaz in the northern mountains of Puebla state. Like other subsistence farmers, Don Carlos' family stored the ears of corn they'd harvested inside the house. A share of those ears would provide the seed for planting when the next rainy season arrived. This store of corn is precious to a subsistence farmer, even sacred. Some Mexicans place crosses on the top of the pile. Carlos

told me that his wife Neti gave birth to their children in the room that houses their family's corn.

With the ancient stories about the origin of humans are the myths that tell how corn was introduced to the universe. An Aztec version of corn's origins gives part of the credit to ants. In a time before the world knew light or wisdom, it is the god Quetzalcoatl who is aroused by a delicious smell. Set on a search for the aroma's origin, the serpent-like god finds that a procession of ants are carrying kernels of corn in all its shapes and colors. The ants refuse to tell the god where to find the kernels, so Quetzalcoatl assumes the shape of an ant and joins their procession undetected. The source is found through a tunnel within a hill, and the god introduces corn to humans in order to nourish and delight them and at the same time introduces light and wisdom to the universe.

My dad did not follow his older brothers Wally and Lauren in farming and instead became an electrician. When I was a little boy between potty training and kindergarten, my dad took me with him. One time his work took him to the very top of the massive white grain elevator at our town's farmer co-op. This was in Hancock County, Iowa, which is drained marshland that is table flat where the corn fields surrounded by gravel roads extend forever in a uniform grid. All the little towns spread along rail lines sprout one of these elevators, bone-white clusters of towering cylinders that are the only interruption in the straight horizon. The co-op manager, Dad and I rode to the top in a rickety wood platform without solid walls that lifted us rattling inside a shaft through the dusty air and black darkness. When we finally reached the top and walked out on the roof, I was stunned by a view so high in the air. Dad took me to approach the fence at the edge. I remember that, when I looked straight down, the men who worked among the railroad car and snoots of augers were so small they looked like ants.

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Bert Kreitlow of Waukesha writes short fiction and is revising his first novel. He is active in RedOak Writing and a member of Wisconsin Writers Association.

## Sunny Dandelions on a Spring Day

Victoria Lynn Smith, northern Wisconsin

In March 1971, I turned twelve. That spring and summer I spent a lot of time singing the Coca-Cola jingle, "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing," a song about love and harmony. And in May of that same year, while I sat in a chorus of dandelions on a sunny day, I was in harmony with hundreds of them growing on the hillside in front of our weathered barn. Warmed by sunshine, surrounded by velvety yellow, and sitting with my best friend, I was in love with the world.

As a child, dandelions were my favorite flower. But I didn't know their name was derived from the French phrase *dent de lion* meaning tooth of the lion, most likely because their serrated leaves look like teeth. I thought dandelions were named after lions because their round, shaggy, golden flowers resembled a lion's head with a fluffy mane.

On that May afternoon, with my strawberry blonde hair topped by a crown of braided dandelions and a face freckled by the kisses of sunbeams, I watched butterflies and bees flit from golden bloom to golden bloom. I was fairy princess meets flower child. But I didn't know that dandelions were flowers—like asters, daisies, and sunflowers, all belonging to the same family, *Asteraceae*. That by the 1800s people could buy different varieties of dandelion seeds from catalogs to plant in their gardens. That Emily Dickenson wrote a poem about them and made mention of them in three other poems. I'd been told they were weeds.

My friend, wearing her own crown of dandelions, had brown hair, hazel eyes, and just a sprinkle of freckles across her nose. We plucked the flowers from the ground, choosing tall ones, and braided their thick, flexible stems, making necklaces to match our crowns. She, too, was fairy princess meets flower child. But I didn't know that a dandelion's thick, hollow, supple stem had evolved to withstand strong winds. That our plucking the tall flowers would cause the next dandelions to grow shorter, hoping to avoid being picked. That when a lawn mower lopped off their

flowers before they could seed, dandelions countered by sending new blooms to squat closer to the ground, hoping to keep their heads below a mower's blades. I didn't know dandelions had the survival skills of a toothy lion on an African plain.

As I plaited dandelion stems, a white, milky sap stained my fingers, making them sticky. I knew it wasn't poisonous, and that it would wash away with soap and water. But I didn't know the substance was latex, a bitter tasting compound that protects dandelion roots from insects. I didn't know dandelions were edible. That their leaves could be eaten in a salad and had more nutrients and vitamins than the spinach that gave Popeye the strength to defeat Brutus. That their roots could be dried, roasted, and made into a coffee-like drink. That their flowers could be made into tea or wine. That dandelions had been used for medicine, alleviating diseases caused by deficiencies in calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C.

I'm not sure what my friend and I chatted about that day. I was crazy about the boy next door, and she was crazy about a boy she would eventually marry. We probably gossiped about those boys, our friends, and summer plans. And talked about the latest fashions and hairstyles because each of us wanted to fit in at the middle school. But I didn't know dandelions were considered a blight upon lawns because my parents never treated our yard with herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizers. I didn't know that in the 1800s wealthy Americans would admire the expansive green manicured lawns of wealthy Europeans and would copy their style. That with the invention of the first mowers in the 1830s, middle-class Americans would covet green manicured lawns, a nod to status and belonging. The dandelion slid from grace and became a weed.

My friend and I rubbed dandelions under each other's chins to see who liked butter, a childish game for a pair of twelve-year-old girls who talked of boys and love. But I didn't know twelve was the cusp between youth and young adulthood. That the buttery-colored powder was pollen, a delicacy for bees, butterflies, and insects. That dandelion blooms were masses of tubular florets, an early spring smorgasbord for hungry pollinators while they waited

for other flowers to open for business.

Dandelions didn't grow in our next-door neighbor's yard. They treated their lawn every year with a powdered chemical. If someone had asked my twelve-year-old self to explain why my parents didn't do the same, I would've chalked it up to money and time. The neighbors had more income, so they could afford weed killer. They had less than an acre of land, and my parents had two point two acres. It would've taken more money and time to kill the dandelions in our yard.

But I didn't know my parents weren't conforming to a neighborhood standard of weed-free lawns. That the neighbors had to keep treating their lawn every year. That dead shriveled leaves of poisoned dandelions left small barren spaces where new dandelion seeds, blowing in on a wind like Mary Poppins, could settle and thrive. That dandelions could regenerate from parts of their surviving roots. That if the neighbors stopped treating their yard, dandelions would once again, and quickly, crowd their lawn.

On the day I sat in the dandelions, I knew my great-grandfather had immigrated to America from Sweden in 1869. That other relatives had emigrated from Ireland, England, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and Hungary. But I didn't know that dandelions were immigrants too. That the first wave of dandelion ancestors came over the Bering land bridge and settled as far east as the Great Plains. That the second wave arrived in the 1600s, carried across the Atlantic by European settlers as an herb used for medicine and food.

Later in the spring the dandelions would go to seed, and I would fill my lungs with air, hold the seed head in front of my mouth, and blow as hard as I could. If I dispersed every seed, I would earn a wish, and I always wished the boy next door would be my beau. But I didn't know the feathery seeds I blew into the air in the service of love would fall to earth at an angle, and the barbs along their edges would hook into the soil. The seeds, like me, would wait to see if their wishes would come true.

My friend and I watched my orange-and-white cat, Napoleon, hopelessly swat at butterflies as he



lazed nearby in a layer of golden dandelions. At best he was an indifferent hunter, preferring to take his meals from a can and to leave nature's creatures unharmed. But I didn't know that Napoleon had the good fortune to lie on an untreated lawn. That people, pets, birds, and insects could be harmed by chemicals. That a woman named Rachel Carson had written a book called *Silent Spring*. That as an adult I would be pressured into treating my lawn. That I would use my children and pets as excuses to avoid using herbicides and pesticides. That I would dig hundreds of dandelions by hand to avoid chemical treatments. That after decades, I would learn that dandelions are early pollinators and that I would stop digging them.

The sea of dandelions that flooded the sunniest part of our lawn every spring, made my young heart zing. From that sea I picked buckets of bouquets, braided countless crowns and necklaces, buttered scads of chins with pollen, and blew thousands of fuzzy seeds into the air. But I remember best that day in May 1971 when I was twelve, and my friend and I sat among the waves of gold and talked of love while plaiting crowns and necklaces. While the butterflies and bees gathered pollen in harmony, and I wanted to teach the world to sing.

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Victoria Lynn Smith, a fiction and nonfiction writer, lives in northern Wisconsin. She is a member of Wisconsin Writers Association, Write On Door County, and Lake Superior Writers.



## He Typed His Way to the Top

Greg Peck, Janesville

I looked forward to typing class during my sophomore year in the early 1970s at Marshall High School. After all, I figured, typing a letter or most anything would be faster than cursive writing. Besides, even back then, my handwriting was far from stellar.

Typing, however, turned out trickier than I imagined.

Thane Klug's classroom offered a mix of older Royal and Underwood manual typewriters and newer IBM Selectrics. I don't remember how we chose seats, but I was fortunate to get one of the green electric models.

Mr. Klug was a stocky and stubby instructor who had been around so long that he also taught my mother to type. His fingers were so short I wondered how he maneuvered around a keyboard himself. Besides typing, he also taught shorthand and other business-related classes. This stern taskmaster put up with no nonsense, and because he also served as our school's athletic director and I played basketball, I knew better than to fool around.

It was only a coincidence that Mr. Klug and his wife lived across the street from our Park Drive home, though the Klug home fronted Main Street. As a kid, I watched their teenage son Jeff, a sizeable redhead and the youngest of the four Klug boys, whack baseballs around the open back lots of the homes fronting Main Street.

Not that being almost neighbors provided me any special connection to Mr. Klug. I barely knew the man.

Mr. Klug demanded that we pay attention and sit up straight with both feet flat on the floor. Chewing gum was a no-no. My classmate and neighbor Barry Johnson also played basketball, but one day he thought he would try to get away with chewing gum during class. Mr. Klug came up behind Barry, grabbed the scruff of his neck with one stubby little paw and howled, "What's that in your mouth?"

An eerie silence suddenly replaced the clattering sound of typewriters as Barry's gum went in the wastebasket.

Typing was tougher than I expected. We learned

about the “home keys”—the fingers of the left hand, starting with the pinkie, resting on a-s-d-f and those of the right, starting with the index finger, hovering over j-k-l-;

I struggled to reach such distant keys as the numbers and punctuation marks on the top row. Curling the pinkies down to hit the z button on the left and the slash and question-mark button with the right also proved problematic. Despite feeling coordinated on the basketball court, I felt clumsy on the keyboard.

My mom worked as a secretary for Attorney Solon Pierce in Deerfield. Sometimes I rode with her when she went to work on Saturday mornings. She typed client letters as Mr. Pierce filled the office air with pipe tobacco smoke. If Mom could type and type well, why couldn't I?

Worse, one day I arrived for class only to find that my IBM typewriter had been sent out for service. That meant I had to use a manual until it returned. Only then did I realize how lucky I had been to be assigned an electric. My fingers struggled to push the keys down on the manual far enough to make inky impressions on the typing paper.

Another aspect of this class proved fortunate. It came right after our lunch period. That meant I could cut lunch and socializing short—a difficult choice for a teenager—and spend a few extra minutes practicing before typing class started. Doing this regularly, I got the hang of it. Also, by focusing, I was able to minimize errant keystrokes. This was crucial because whenever Mr. Klug gave us a five-minute timed “writing,” he docked us five words per minute for each typo.

When you consider it, losing five words per minute for a single mistake made sense. Back then, you had to use a tiny brush in a bottle of liquid “white out” to cover your mistake, then blow on it long enough to dry so you could type the correct character on that spot. That laborious process gobbled the better part of a minute.

One more thing helped me improve. I developed a habit of “shadow typing.” As words and whole sentences flowed through my mind during the day, my fingers moved to “type” the words—even though I wasn't sitting at a typewriter.

Slowly but surely, through practice before class

time and this practice of “shadow typing,” I got better and better. It helped, too, that the repairs to my IBM Selectric only lasted a day or two.

Our final test was another five-minute timed writing. Again, Mr. Klug would dock us five words for every typing mistake. I went into this exam confident and with a focus I only wished I could carry over to the free throw line in basketball.

“You can begin,” Mr. Klug ordered with a glance at the wall clock, and the clacking and clattering of various machines, followed by the jarring clunks of carriage returns, filled the room. Seconds, then minutes, passed, and I could sense that I had yet to make a mistake as my fingers moved at a steady, consistent pace. As the minutes clicked off, I began to wonder: Could I somehow go the whole five minutes without a single typo?

“Time's up,” Mr. Klug called, and a collective sigh of relief, interspersed with mumbles, filled the air.

Now the counting began. I'd done it! I avoided any mistakes and typed 59 words per minute. That was not only impressive, it topped our class.

Later I learned that I tied classmate Cathy Parpart, who led the other of the two typing classes we sophomores filled.

Once during class, Cathy earned Mr. Klug's wrath for passing notes. “Cathy Parputt,” he called, mispronouncing her last name, then asking her a multiple-choice question. After that embarrassment, party-girl Cathy didn't dare cross him again. Her typing prowess and avoiding further trouble served Cathy well because when Larson Manufacturing came to Marshall, the company contacted Mr. Klug about whether some student might help in its office after school. That became Cathy's first job.

My typing talents likewise served me well as a journalist—a career that spanned parts of five decades. It helped me turn out stories on deadline while I watched other journalists—who didn't enjoy the tutoring of a Thane Klug—use the slower hunt-and-peck typing method. This skill continues to benefit me as a writer and author in my retirement years.

While my mother took several of Mr. Klug's classes, surviving one under this disciplinarian was

enough for me. However, when interviewing sources as a reporter, I wished I had taken shorthand. My cobbled chicken-scratch version of shorthand left my handwriting so sloppy that my elementary teachers are probably rolling in their graves. I struggle to decipher my scribbles if I wait too long to retype the notes.

I never again matched the pace nor precision of that final typing test. Of course, modern computers make fixing errors easy. Even today, however, during quiet moments away from a keyboard, I find myself subconsciously practicing that habit of “shadow typing” that bolstered my talents in Thane Klug’s classroom.

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Greg Peck is a longtime member and former board member of the WWA. He is author of three nonfiction books: *Death Beyond the Willows*, *How a Wedding Day Turned Tragic in America's Heartland*; *Memories of Marshall, Ups and Downs of Growing Up in a Small Town*; and the newly released *Snakes, Squirrels & Bears, Oh My! Finding Humor Amid Life's Frustrations*.

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### ***In case you were wondering...***

World Typing Day is celebrated on January 8 of each year, established, according to [Nationaltoday.com](http://Nationaltoday.com), in 2011 in Malaysia when the first Malaysian Speed Typing Test was introduced.

Of course we all know that we have Milwaukeean Christopher L Sholes, journalist and inventor, to thank for his development of the QWERTY keyboard system and first functional typewriter.



*Editor's note: I may regret opening this can of worms, but I think it's something we need to consider. As an editor and contest judge, I constantly check for plagiarism and correct use of quoted material out of habit. But how do we check for the human origin? And should we? I know I'm not the only one who's read books like Ishiguro's Clara and the Sun, just to name one of oodles dating back at least a generation...or a century. Are you concerned? Why or why not? Send me some letters and I'll print them in the next magazine.*

## **Ethical Considerations of AI in Writing**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized many aspects of modern life, from healthcare and transportation to finance and entertainment. One area that has been particularly impacted by AI is writing. With the development of AI writing tools, writers can now generate text faster and more efficiently than ever before. However, with this newfound power comes a host of ethical considerations that must be taken into account. In this article, we will explore the moral and ethical implications of using AI for writers.

### **The Advantages of AI for Writers**

Before we delve into the ethics of AI writing, it is important to understand why it has become so popular in recent years. AI writing tools offer a range of benefits to writers, including increased speed, accuracy, and efficiency. These tools can help writers generate high-quality content quickly and easily, saving them time and allowing them to focus on other aspects of their work.

AI writing tools can also help writers to overcome writer's block and other creative challenges. By suggesting ideas and generating content based on specific prompts, these tools can help writers to break through mental barriers and explore new ideas.

In addition, AI writing tools can be particularly useful for writers who struggle with grammar, syntax, or spelling. These tools can automatically detect and correct errors, ensuring that the final product is error-free and easy to read.



## The Ethical Implications of AI Writing

While there is no doubt that AI writing tools can be incredibly helpful to writers, there are also several ethical implications that must be considered. One of the biggest concerns is the potential for AI to replace human writers altogether.

As AI technology continues to improve, it is conceivable that machines will eventually be able to generate content that is indistinguishable from that created by human writers. This could have serious implications for the writing industry, as it could lead to widespread job losses and a decrease in the quality of writing.

Another concern is the potential for AI writing tools to be used to generate fake news or propaganda. With the ability to generate convincing content quickly and easily, there is a risk that AI tools could be used to manipulate public opinion or spread false information.

In addition, there is the question of ownership and control over the content generated by AI writing tools. If a machine generates a piece of content, who owns the rights to it? Should the machine be credited as the author, or should credit go to the person who programmed it?

These are complex ethical questions that will need to be addressed as AI writing technology continues to advance.

## The Role of Human Writers

Despite these concerns, it is important to remember that AI writing tools are not intended to replace human writers. Rather, they are designed to assist and support writers in their work.

Human writers still play a critical role in the writing process, bringing creativity, empathy, and a unique perspective to their work that machines simply cannot replicate. While AI tools can help with the more mechanical aspects of writing, such as grammar and syntax, they cannot replace the creative and emotional aspects that make writing so powerful.

In addition, human writers can provide a level of nuance and subtlety that is difficult for machines to replicate. They can use their personal experiences and insights to craft stories and messages that resonate with readers on a deeper level.

## The Future of AI Writing

As AI writing technology continues to evolve, we will likely see new and more sophisticated tools emerge. These tools will offer even greater speed, accuracy, and efficiency, allowing writers to generate high-quality content more quickly and easily than ever before.

However, we must approach the use of AI writing tools with caution and consideration. We must be mindful of the potential ethical implications and work to mitigate any negative effects that may arise.

In addition, we must continue to value and support human writers, recognizing the unique contributions that they bring to the writing process.

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The above article was written entirely by ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence chatbot developed by OpenAI and released in November 2022. It's free, open-source, and can be found at <http://openai.com>. The only input given to produce the article was, "Create an article on the morals and ethics of using AI for writers."

The output as you can read is quite unseasoned. But, in industries where precise technical language is favored, like law firms, cyber, privacy and data security, or even mass media it can become if not already becoming a real problem. There exist even more robust versions of AI that are pay-to-use and it has yet to be determined if these other versions would give a comparable sort of vanilla result.

Will AI be the death of writers? At this moment, definitely not. As the AI said, "Human writers provide a level of nuance and subtlety that is difficult for machines to replicate." They bring in human experiences and emotions, subjectivity, and most importantly adaptivity. AI may gather material from the endless slush piles of digital information but it's human writers that add the context, the conscious decision-making; the seasoning to engageable writing. Would it help in the tedious research of that unfinished nonfiction manuscript or creating a catchy title for your next book? Maybe, but then you didn't write the title; the AI did.

What are the current and future moral and ethical considerations of AI-assisted writing? That question has yet to be answered. Is it any different from your agent telling you to change your latest book's title to something you hate? Probably not. At least there's no animosity and all the punctuation will be correct.

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Steven W. Strackbein is an avid reader and writer of speculative fiction in the science fiction and fantasy genres. He's been a mental health therapist for almost 25 years, serving both adults and children across several counties in Wisconsin.