



Matilda Butler

A Conversation With Matilda & Kendra

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett are the coordinating team behind SCN's new Editorial Service. (You'll be hearing much more about that in our September Journal.) Here, these two fascinating and talented women talk (via email) with Lisa Shirah-Hiers about their work.



Kendra Bonnett

Matilda Butler graduated *magna cum laude* from Boston University. She earned an M.A. in communications from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in social psychology from Northwestern University. Listed in the Who's Who of American Women since 1975, she has taught and conducted research at Stanford, created the nationwide Women's Educational Equity Communications Network, and co-founded Knowledge Access International, a software company specializing in CD-ROM information products. Together with Kendra Bonnett, she co-authored *Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells its Story* which won the 2008 IPPY National Book Award's Bronze Medal. She and Kendra Bonnett now help women tell their life stories in their women's memoir writing classes on line and in person and through a new 5 DVD set, *The [Essential] Women's Memoir Writing Workshop: 21 steps from Planning to Publication*.

An award-winning author with seven books and over 300 magazine articles to her credit, Kendra Bonnett graduated *cum laude* from Arizona State University with degrees in history and anthropology. She completed a Master's in history from the College of William and Mary and further graduate studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She was editor of the Women's Educational Equity Communication Network, designed computer curriculum for secondary school students and co-founded *Digit*, one of the first computer magazines for children. She later founded *Profit: Information Technology for Entrepreneurs and Beyond Computing*, a joint magazine publishing venture between IBM and The New York Times and was *Profit's* first Editor in Chief.

SCJ: How did the two of you meet?

KB: Matilda was my first boss. I was just out of graduate school at UC Santa Barbara and wanted a job in San Francisco. ... I had been a temp [at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research] for a few months and was getting a good reputation for my editing and writing skills when the position of Editor opened with the Women's Educational Equity Communication Network. Along with about 25 others, I interviewed with the associate director. She told Matilda, who was the director, that I was her top choice. Matilda looked at my resume and was hesitant to even interview me. She said, "She doesn't have the right experiences and hasn't written about women's issues." But she agreed to interview me. I knew I was a quick study and persuaded her to give me a try. What a great learning experience! I was responsible for dozens of publications each year.

That was 1979. Thirty years later, we continue to be friends and are now co-authors, colleagues and business partners.

SCJ: Where did the idea for the book come from?

MB: *Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story* is a collective memoir of women born during WW II and shaped by the '60s, who didn't take "no" for an answer. The idea for the book began to come together in my mind when I

attended the fortieth reunion of my class at National Cathedral School for Girls, a private high school in Washington, D.C. In one joint session, we were seated around tables in the cavernous room where four decades earlier I had studied English Lit, American History, French, and Algebra every afternoon and evening. Representatives of each quinquennial class reunion spoke about their experiences, telling stories that were alternatively humorous and serious because of the momentous times in which we all have lived. I was struck by how the stories of my class differed from those of women who graduated even five years earlier or later.

Once back in my California home, my thoughts returned many times to that session. For the most part, and despite good educations, women who graduated earlier than my class did not seek careers but found fulfillment as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Women who graduated only a few years after my class took their careers and the juggling act of work and family for granted.

My class had a much more complicated and even confused story to tell. When we were in high school, we expected to spend our lives in traditional roles. Some time after that—in fact, at different times for different reasons—unprecedented numbers of us switched tracks and pursued careers. None of us remember thinking, "Well, of course that's what I'll do." Instead, we opened doors and moved in what seemed to be the right direction until

the next doors appeared, then repeated the process. By trial and error, we became proficient in careers that we never imaged when we were in high school. Many of us held jobs in which we were the first woman to ever have that position (hence the phrase “first woman to”). Combining careers and children presented novel challenges, but we were young and energetic.

As a psychologist, my curiosity led me to a formal study of a group I came to call Rosie’s Daughters. I interviewed more than 100 women across the United States and found, in what became a collective memoir of a generation of women on the cusp of change, that my first inkling of a unique group of women was a national phenomenon with stories across this land of common experiences in an uncommon time.

SCJ: What was it like collaborating on Rosie’s Daughters? What did the creative process look like?

KB: As Matilda said, *Rosie’s Daughters* was her idea. She had already done the interviews and had multiple chapters written when she handed me a big pile of papers and said, “Tell me what you think.” The stories told by Rosie’s Daughters really grabbed me, [but] I had lots of questions. Finally, Matilda said, “Will you join me on this book? I think we’re on to something important and we can do more when there are two of us.”

The creative process was definitely messy. We wanted to honor the individual stories, and just using a snippet here and a snippet there didn’t fulfill that need. We wanted to remind readers about the historical context of the last four decades of the 20th century—the adult years of these women’s lives. How could we do that? What about all the quotes Matilda found in the more than 125 memoirs she read that had been written by Rosie’s Daughters—women born between 1940 and 1945?

After months of creative conversations and weeks of research, we came up with an idea we thought would work. We put together a mock-up chapter, which we copied and showed off to friends and family. Nobody liked it, and each person had a different reason. Back to the drawing board. By the third try, we knew we had it right—individual stories at the top of each double-facing page, iconic photos and quotes as sidebars, a 65-year timeline (1941-2005) running across the bottom of pages from the first chapter through the last, and the narrative

occupying the middle of the page. As reviewer author Edith Grotberg said, “[Rosie’s Daughters puts] you...in the middle of this multi-source of information and stimulation. You are part of the action.” That’s just what we wanted.

SCJ: Do you have advice for others seeking a writing partnership?

MB: Kendra and I work well together because each of us has our strengths and we are comfortable with our own strengths and the strengths of the other. We’re open-minded, and I know that if Kendra brings up a point there’s a good reason. We may not always agree but we always work out a solution that is acceptable to both of us.

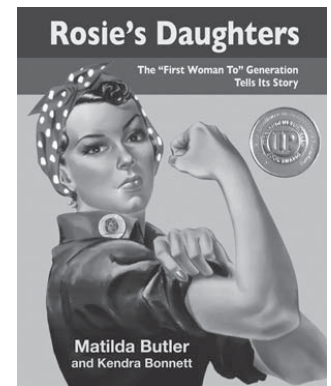
Others seeking a writing partnership need to be clear at the start about how issues will be resolved, who is taking responsibility for which parts of the book or elements of the research, writing, editing process, and how royalties will be divided. A writing relationship is like a business partnership. Everything should be discussed, including how to conclude the relationship if it doesn’t work out.

KB: And 30 years doesn’t hurt. I’m only partly joking. The fact is that good partnerships are few and far between, which is why all of Matilda’s points are critical. You could lose a friendship over a partnership. It requires a level of connection that many marriages never attain, so you have to expect that it might end. Be prepared for that at the outset.

SCJ: What was it like interviewing so many women? What common threads did you find in their stories?

MB: Interviewing more than 100 women for *Rosie’s Daughters* was a life-altering experience. We laughed together; we cried together. Their stories touched my life. In the middle of this process, I found that I dreamed about these women almost nightly. The interviews were long and intense, often lasting three to four hours. Some told me parts of their lives they had never shared with anyone else. I knew I had to find a way to honor those important life stories.

As a researcher, I kept looking for what I thought of as patterns. I never intended to in-



“Gender conservatives who want to dial the clock back say that ‘a woman’s place is in the home.’ That choice is up to each woman, we say. In a free country, no one else has the right to tell me where my ‘place’ is. A second line of resistance is voiced by people who think they are being fair-minded: ‘Women think they can have it all, but no one can have it all.’ That’s certainly true, and we’ll settle for the same amount of ‘all’ that men have always enjoyed—an unchallenged right to work as well as a life partner and a family if desired.”

*~Rosie’s Daughters:
The “First Woman To”
Generation Tells Its Story*

For information on Matilda and Kendra’s memoir classes, books and other products please visit their website: www.WomensMemoirs.com And be sure to watch your September Journal for information about SCN’s new editorial service, which Matilda and Kendra are developing. It’s a story you won’t want to miss.

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interview so many women; I just kept interviewing thinking that I would eventually find the patterns. Finally, I realized what should have been obvious at the start: every life is unique. To force patterns would trivialize their individual experiences.

Therefore, I organized the chapters by the life stages that almost all women share: education, marriage, children, careers, divorce, and spiritual lives. Then I did a content analysis of the information in the interviews about each of these topics to find the major themes. The chapters flowed from the insights found within the themes.

SCJ: Tell me about your writing workshops.

MB: I'm glad you asked about the writing workshops. I started teaching women's memoir writing in 2006 through local colleges and privately. Not long after that, Kendra began coaching one-on-one. There were women who needed help telling their story and who also wanted help on developing a marketing strategy for their book.

Then in 2008, we began teaching through SCN's wonderful online course program. That took us a step in the direction that we knew we needed to go. Although Kendra teaches on the East coast and I teach in Northern California, there were many women who found us through our website, but who couldn't take our locally offered classes. Fortunately, through SCN, we have the opportunity to work with women no matter where they live.

Now, we've gone one step farther. We have just released a 5-disc DVD set that is based on our all-day classes we teach locally. We call it *The [Essential] Women's Memoir Writing Workshop: 21 Steps from Planning to Publication*. When we decided to develop a DVD of our workshop, we realized we had to create separate lessons and couldn't count on the flow from topic to topic that works in a group setting. The development of the 21 lessons caused us to create more writing exercises as well. The final product includes almost 8 hours of video lessons, 40 writ-

ing exercises, and the electronic version of our 57-page workbook. [We're offering it to SCN members at a discount. In addition, because Alzheimer's is a disease that robs women (and men) of their stories, we are honoring SCN's mission to "help women tell their stories" by donating \$10 for each DVD set sold to the Alzheimer's Association, the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research.]

SCJ: What do you find most rewarding about working with the women in your classes?

MB: Kendra and I always mention the satisfaction in seeing writers move to a new level in their writing. No matter their proficiency at the point of entry, we love seeing them grow in their writing skills and, of course, in their own satisfaction with stories better told.

SCJ: Why do you think writing our stories is transformative?

KB: Just living life is a full-time proposition. Some years it seems like life is giving us a one-two punch and getting back on our feet is about all we can manage. In those times, we can't imagine we have the energy, resources or strength to write our stories. Besides, who would even care?

Yet telling or writing our stories provides us with the opportunity to lay out the turning points and circumstances, to reflect on our part in the drama, to evaluate the current impact, and, in the best of situations, to dream of the future we want. We never do this without a deliberate effort at life writing, or life talking. During the process, there is time for insights, time to listen to the inner voice that can guide us if only we can ever be quiet enough. Storytelling changes us.

And when we are really lucky, writing our stories can change the lives of our readers... [After reading *Rosie's Daughters*] one woman told us, "I'll never be the same." Reading our book caused

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...Because Your Story Deserves to be Told

What we may perceive as our ordinary lives can have extraordinary impact on others...this is the power of our legacies.

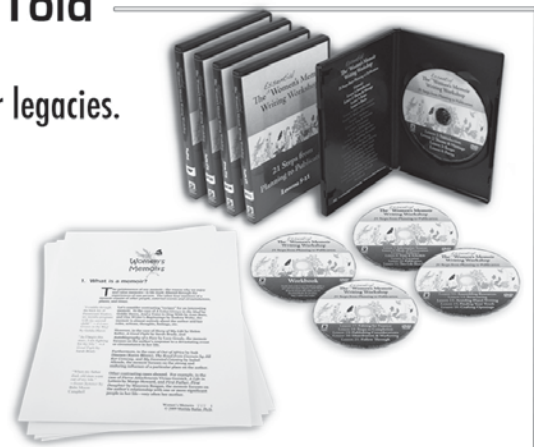
What's keeping you from writing your story?

Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett have created the 5-DVD set

The [Essential] Women's Memoir Writing Workshop: 21 Steps from Planning to Publication to help you answer that question and say, "Nothing, Absolutely Nothing."

We're offering this DVD-based course through SCN at a special **DISCOUNT** for you--just \$99, 25% off the regular price. In addition, we're giving \$10 of your order to the Alzheimer's Association, chosen because this disease is robbing too many women (and men) of their stories, their legacies.

For much more information: www.tinyurl.com/scn-dvd



Your DVD course inspired me to start writing the story of my life. -Marilyn D.
I love this DVD because the presenter is experienced and beginner friendly. -Crystal K.
Your Women's Memoir Workshop is very motivating and exceeded my expectations. -Joan E.
Your clearly defined planning and execution steps will guide me in the coming months. -Jackie F.

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her to look at her life, the good and especially the bad, which she had stuffed down deep. She said it wasn't easy but she was transformed by the process.

SCJ: What do you think is the greatest legacy of Rosies and Rosie's daughters?

KB: I like answering this question because I'm not part of the Rosie's Daughters generation. I'm a Baby Boomer. And the truth is we get so much of the credit for the change, for the expansion of opportunities and willingness to do it all. The fact is, just like all successive generations of women, we too are the benefactors of what the "First Woman To" Generation (the FW2s we call them) has done. They broke down the doors and smashed the glass ceilings. Of course, we're close enough on their heels that the oldest Boomers had to navigate the splinters and broken glass left behind. We just didn't get as many bruised shoulders.

Rosies gave their daughters a legacy of what was possible. They proved that women could do it all. All those Rosie the Riveters didn't brag about their accomplishments. They just did what was necessary, and when the war was over they went home. But there was a powerful message in their accomplishments, and when their daughters needed to find the strength to take charge of their lives, they could draw on their mothers' experiences.

Successive generations—the granddaughters and beyond of Rosie the Riveter—have to keep vigilant. They must not lose this most precious legacy that has been given to them—We Can Do It! It's one of the most valuable gifts each of us will ever receive.

We learn best to listen to our own voices if we are listening at the same time to other women-whose stories, for all our differences, turn out, if we listen well, to be our stories also.

—Barbara Deming

Online Learning Helping Women Write Their Lives: One Story at a Time

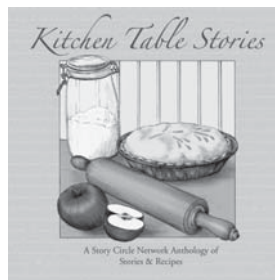
Visit the Online Learning website at www.storycircleonlineclasses.org for the latest class schedule. Our next session runs July 15—September 8, 2009.



The Story Circle Network has offered classes, workshops, conferences, writing and reading circles, and online programs—all designed for women—since 1997.

Our central program focus is writing about our lives—about women's lives. We teach general writing skills, organization, and critical editing, as well as technical skills in book design and development, online marketing, blogging, and other Internet-related activities.

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Join nationally known author and writing workshop facilitator, Robin Edgar, for a weekend life-writing retreat open to any woman who is interested in life-writing, regardless of skill level or experience. Held at Wildacres atop a Pompey's Knob mountain in Little Switzerland, North Carolina, it is a true retreat, undisturbed by through traffic or noises of the city. The 1,600 acres are adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway and thousands of acres of the Pisgah National Forest. The buildings are modern yet rustic and provide a very comfortable setting.

Guests stay in lodges with rooms that have a private bathroom and accommodate up to two guests. There are no televisions or telephones in the rooms. Go to their website at wildacres.org for more information.

Registration is limited to 12 participants. Fees for this weekend retreat of \$225 for SCN members, \$250 for non-members, include a double-occupancy room for two nights and five meals.

To register, please contact Robin Edgar at robinedgar@earthlink.net or visit www.robinedgar.com.

