

Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 4 Number 1, February 2000

Our Internet Chapter Opens for Business

The theme of the last Journal was "New Beginnings," and it seems only fitting, in this first year of the new century and millennium, that we announce our new addition: the Story Circle Internet Chapter! We officially opened for business at the beginning of February, announcing our Grand Opening on our web site and in our new National e-Letter. We have several features already available for members, and more in the works, to be available in the coming months. All are aimed at helping women around the world write their life stories and share their experiences with other women—so easy to do when we tap into the vast and exciting resources of the Internet! Here's what's available to members of the Internet Chapter:

- You can join other members in our chat room or on our bulletin board—sharing your thoughts and ideas and getting to know other women through their stories.
- You can read the profiles of life-writers, to help inspire and encourage you in your own life-writing endeavors.
- You can enroll in Susan Albert's first on-line writing workshop, "Writing from Life", to help you start recording your life story. This workshop is a six-week session in which Susan and the students exchange assignments, comments, and critiques via email. Other workshops will be available in the coming months. (If you have an interest in teaching an on-line workshop, let us know. You can email Susan at china@tstar.net or Peggy at mmoody1@austin.rr.com.
- Each week, you can receive "Women's Wise Words & A Week's Worth of Writing Prompts," to help provide focus for your daily journaling.
- You can submit your writing to "True Words from Real Women," a monthly on-line feature. This will give you a place to publish your work and allow other women to read your story.

Sound interesting? Want to connect with women around the world as we explore our stories? We'd love to have you join us! Go to www.storycircle.org and click on "Internet Chapter". Fill out the on-line form, mail us your membership dues (\$12/year), and start a new chapter in your life!—*Peggy Moody*

Peggy Moody serves as the Network's webmistress and secretary of the Board of Directors, as well as coordinator of our member services. The mother of three young children (13, 5, 4), she also works part-time to develop web tools and web pages for IBM--all from her home, thanks to the marvels of the Internet!

We are, each of us, our own prisoner. We are locked up in our own story.
—*Maxine Kumin*

Our stories can set us free.
—*Mary Pipher*

There is nothing more comforting or more freeing for a woman than the rich intimate territory of women's talk. A woman friend will say, "You are not alone. I have felt that way, too. This is what happened to me." Home, in other words.
—*Elsa Walsh*

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Story Circle Network's First National Conference February, 2002 Austin TX

We've started to plan our first national Story Circle conference!

In future newsletters, we'll tell you about the program, which will feature a nationally-known speaker, plus workshops, panels, opportunities to share your story, exhibitors, entertainment...lots of exciting stuff!

Please plan to join us for this unique event.



Story Circle

STORY CIRCLE is a quarterly newsletter, published in February, May, August, and November. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. This newsletter is provided for information and is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance.

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The Story Circle Network

The Story Circle Network—What is it and who are the members?

The Story Circle Network is made up of women who want to explore their lives by exploring their stories.

What can I gain from the Network?

You will receive the following publications, information, and opportunities. These things won't be available all at once—we're just getting started! But as our membership grows, our activities will expand. You'll get:

- ◇ **four issues** of the 16- to 22-page newsletter, *Story Circle Journal*, with ideas for writing additional chapters of your life story, plus poetry and brief personal essays from subscribers
- ◇ **the opportunity to submit your writing** to the newsletter and other Network publications
- ◇ **a network guide** that will allow you to directly contact members with interests and experiences similar to yours (forthcoming, as the Network grows and members send us their information)
- ◇ **a report on the activities of Story Circles** across the country, in each issue of the newsletter
- ◇ **book reviews and a resource guide** listing groups, teachers, and publications that are committed to helping women tell their stories (in each newsletter)

What can I contribute to the Network?

The Story Circle Network is built out

of our shared experiences. To it, we hope you will bring yourself and your willingness to share your life and what you have learned from it. If you wish, you may contribute some of your writing (poetry, prose, book reviews—ask for a copy of our writer's guidelines). If you are a teacher or group leader, you are invited to calendar your related events.

We also hope that many of you will decide to participate by leading a Story Circle in your community. It isn't hard, and it's enormously rewarding. Won't you give it a try?

How do I become a member?

That's the easiest part! You automatically become a member of the Network when you subscribe to *Story Circle Journal*. Annual memberships are \$20 in the United States, \$26 in Canada and Mexico, and \$30 elsewhere. You will find a membership form at the back of this newsletter. Please join us and share your story.

You're on the Net?

So are we!

Visit us at

www.storycircle.org

www.owlcircle.org

Subscription/Membership Rates

*Four Issues \$20 US
\$26 Canada & Mexico, \$30 elsewhere*

Foreign subscriptions: International
Postal Money Order *only*, please



Back Issues: Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies, for \$5.00 each (includes first class postage). Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere: \$8 each.

Missed Issues: We try to ensure that *Story Circle Journal* arrives in your mailbox four times a year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

Change of address: If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your newsletter!

*LifeStory Briefs: Practical How-to for Memoir Writers***Details, Details, Details!**

Whether you're writing your memoir for yourself, for your family, or for publication, the most important thing you can include are the little things. Yes, that's right—the details!

The Difference is in the Details

If you doubt that details make a difference, compare these two passages:

Our family always enjoyed going to the beach. We started early in the morning and came back late at night.

Mom, Dad, John, and I loved riding our old bikes along the gravel road to the lake-shore dunes. We would start just at dawn, fueled with hot oatmeal and orange juice, and we never rode home until the summer sun had set behind the pine trees and the twilight breeze gave us the shivers.

Did you notice that each of these paragraphs is just two sentences long? But the second paragraph is made up of a dozen details, lovingly remembered. The second paragraph tells us who, when, where, and how, and almost every word offers some sort of sensual experience. For the reader, the details help to bring the story to life, make the scene vivid and visual, and create the sense of "being there." For the writer, one remembered detail often evokes another, and then another, until the memory yields up an entire scene. Without these concrete details—these clear, sharp images and impressions—both writer and reader are left with only a vague and general idea about what happened. It's the difference between a hazy photograph that offers only an indistinct, out-of-focus outline, and a photograph that is clear and sharp, down to the details.

Capturing Details

Once you get used to it, capturing the details isn't hard at all—but it does require you to slow down and pay attention when you're writing. It also requires you to examine what you write to make sure that it is as specific and as detailed as you can make it. Try one or two of these short

writing exercises:

—Write a detailed description of somebody who is "old." Who is this person? How old? What does this person look like (skin, hair, hands, body, clothing)? How does s/he move? talk? sit? stand?

—Write a detailed scene about a birthday party you remember from your childhood, when you were the Birthday Girl. Who was there? Where was the party held? What games did you play? What did you eat, drink? What did your cake look like? What did you wear? What was your favorite present? Who gave it to you?

—Start with this general sentence: "I love to read (or cook or garden or swim or whatever)." Now, bring in the details: what, where, when, how, how often, why, who else, and so on. See how the writing moves from the general to the specific as you capture the details? Look at this example to see how it can be done:

I love to read—especially stories about women's lives. For tonight, I've saved the last few chapters of *Paula*, by Isabelle Allende. I'll put on some Bach, curl up in my old chair by the fire with a cup of hot tea and a plate of cookies, and lose myself in the memoir that Allende wrote for her dying daughter.

Can you see how each sentence adds a few more sharp details to an increasingly sharp picture? You can do this, just by adding details.

Got the General Idea?

Once you've mastered the trick of pinning down the details, your writing will be sharper, clearer, more focused—and more memorable. When you write detailed descriptions and detailed scenes, your memoir will come to life, both for you and for your reader!

**DETAILS
TRUE OR
FALSE?**

In many published memoirs, you'll find scenes that are full of lively details, down to the food on the table and what people were wearing, as well as what Uncle Carl and Aunt Margaret said to each other—all this in a scene that took place forty years ago!

But is it really likely that the writer remembers exactly what happened and what was said, especially if she was only six years old at the time?

To tell the truth, probably not. But it probably doesn't matter, as long as the food and the clothes and even the words *might* have been true. For the memoirist's task is to evoke the past as if it were the present, to make it real and alive and sharp and vivid.

And that's what details help you to do, whether they are absolutely factual or maybe slightly fictional.

So stop worrying about whether the dress you wore on the first day of school was blue or green, and whether you wore loafers or saddle shoes or sneakers, or if your lunch bag held peanut butter or cheese sandwiches. Imagine the scene as richly as you can, inventing any details that you can't quite remember. Stay true to what *might* have happened and stop worrying about the rest.

Your story will be richer and more fully textured, and your readers will have the sense that they—like you—have been there!

The Journaling Page . . .

Discipline & The Practice of Journaling

by Susan Wittig Albert

We are seeking contributors to The Journaling Page. If you have something to share—an idea, some suggestions, some journaling topics, or some journaling experiences—please send them to us. We'd love to feature them here!

For ten years or so, I taught journaling classes at the Jung Society in Austin TX. Fifteen or twenty of us would meet once a week for six weeks to learn about journaling, share our journaling experiences, and (sometimes) read pieces from our journals. But the classes were more about *how* we had written than *what* we had written. I believe in the old adage, "Give a woman a fish and she'll be hungry tomorrow; teach a woman to fish and she'll never be hungry." Or something like that. So we were learning that the only way to journal is to journal. Each day. Every day.

The most important *first* thing about journaling, I would tell my students, is to accept the discipline of journaling. I asked them to choose a period of time to write every day (it could 15 minutes or an hour, morning, noon, or night—the only rule was that it had to be the *same* time every day), a place to write (yes, the *same* place every day), and a means of writing (a notebook, pen, computer, whatever—the *same* means every day). That was it. That was our discipline. That was our practice. (What went in that journal was entirely up to the writer of course.)

In the first few weeks of the class, whenever I used the word "discipline," everybody would groan. "Discipline! Yuch! Aargh! Eeek! Discipline is miserable! Why can't we have fun? Why can't we just write whenever we feel like it? Whatever happened to spontaneity? What about creativity?" Or words to that effect.

Now, I grant you, discipline is a very hard word, even an unpleasant one. It conjures up images of three dozen Jumping Jacks at Girl Scout camp. It brings up memories of bright summer afternoons lost forever while we played scales on the piano. It reminds us of English teachers with red pens correcting the grammar of our adolescent essays. Yes, I agree. On the basis of our childhood experiences we have made discipline into an unhappy word.

But it doesn't have to be that way, as Jungian analyst Marion Woodman reminds us. In an article published in *New Age* magazine, Woodman says:

Discipline is a bad word in our culture. People associate it with having to do what they're told. But discipline is quite a lovely word. It comes from the same root as disciple, and it means seeing yourself through the eyes of the teacher who loves you. We

have that teacher within ourselves; we also have the wild animal that needs to be disciplined with love.

I think Woodman is right. It's the "wild animal" within us that is spontaneous and creative and full of energy. It's the loving teacher within us who has the wisdom, the courage, and *yes!* the discipline to help us manifest that creativity.

Let me put it this way. Peggy Fleming would never have become a world-champion skater without discipline. Marianne Anderson would never have stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial to sing "God Bless America" without discipline. And you and I will never achieve very many important things in our lives without accepting the discipline of learning (in the "school of small steps," as Hillary Rodham Clinton put it) and daily practice. As my meditation teacher said once, with a sly smile on her face: "Tushie to cushie, every day. That is the secret path to enlightenment."

I like that idea. It's important for me to know that I don't have to worry about being enlightened *today*, but that my daily commitment to my spiritual practice takes me that much closer. I don't have to finish my book *today*, but every sentence, every paragraph I write moves me a little closer to my goal. And I don't have to fill that journal notebook *today*, but when I meet my daily writing commitment, my writing practice becomes that much more solid and my journaling habit becomes that much more reliable. I can count on my inner teacher to be there when I need her—even when I'm hurting, or tired, or angry, or completely discouraged. *Especially when* I'm completely discouraged. And I like *that* idea very much.

There's more to be said, though, about the value of making a time and a place to write and showing up every day. For the truth is (as Peggy Fleming would no doubt tell us about her ice-skating career) that the more often we do something, the easier it becomes. And the easier it becomes, the more likely we are to do it often. This has happened in my own writing work, and now I can look back on an entire shelf of books, each of them a testament to the important idea that daily practice can help us create far more than we ever imagined might be possible.

I think this will become true and real for you, if you'll give yourself a chance!

Susan Wittig Albert is the author of Writing From Life: Telling Your Soul's Story, and a best-selling mystery series. With her husband, Bill Albert, she also co-authors a series of Victorian mysteries. But she still devotes time to the practice of daily journaling.

Between Generations: Women & Girls Sharing Our Life Stories

by Carolyn J. Scheider

When our middle school administrators requested sponsors for our newly formed Girls' Clubs, I initially dismissed the idea. After all, wouldn't the girls prefer a younger and more hip sponsor to me, a teacher of retirement age? Along with other signs of aging, I wear prescription support hose, peer over the top of my reading glasses to see at a distance, and have a wrinkled neck. How could the girls relate to me? Now, I view my age as an advantage because we crossed generational lines as we shared our stories.

Prior to forming the Girls' Clubs, our faculty read *Reviving Ophelia* (Putnam, 1994), in which author Mary Pipher addresses the oppression that adolescent girls face today (Pipher, page 12). Over the years, I had become interested in telling and writing my life's story. I attended workshops led by Susan Wittig Albert, author of *Writing from Life* (Putnam, 1996). I found that both Pipher and Albert say that most of history is His Story, and not Her Story (Pipher 41, Albert 1-3). Albert emphasizes the importance of changing this situation by having women write their stories, thus making them Her Stories (Albert, 9). I wanted these girls to begin writing their stories, and I believed I could help them.

With *Writing from Life* as a guidebook, I decided to have the girls begin their first chapter by investigating the day of their birth. For the first meeting, I asked the girls to bring baby pictures. After sharing their pictures with the group, they made a list of words or phrases people used to describe them on the day of their birth and for the first few months of their lives. I wanted these words and/or phrases, which are generally positive, foremost in their minds as they began their stories. I felt confident that these kinds of thoughts would strengthen their self-esteem and empower them.

The girls worked on the first chapter in the next three meetings. In the first of these meetings, they worked on a concept map about the day of their birth. As the girls searched for facts, doors of communication opened with parents and other family members, who provided details about their birth day including who was with Mom during labor, the birthplace and the weather. In the second meeting, the girls wrote about the birth day, and we shared our narratives in the third meeting. Previously, I had written about my birth day, and I shared it with them at this meeting. The girls listened intently as I recounted my birth day sixty years earlier in an Iowa farmhouse during the

threshing season. My age no longer concerned me because I knew that, by successfully sharing our stories, we had created a bond between generations.

After writing about their beginnings, the girls began creating a scrapbook which added another dimension to their stories. Their scrapbook's first chapter included their birth stories, photos, and other memorabilia.

Our groups didn't start until February and, now that the school year was ending, we found ourselves running out of time to complete other chapters. But *Writing From Life's* second chapter, "Glories, Gifts, and Graces" seemed like an appropriate end to our meetings. After all, it is by our glories—our achievements and successes—that we develop a sense of pride and personal empowerment (Albert, 44). Before our meeting on "glories," I asked the girls to think of honors, big and/or small, that they could share with the group. We began that meeting with a timed writing in which they listed as many glories as they could. Then they shared their number one glory from their list.

I knew, by the girls' reactions, that we had ended the year's meetings on the right note. I believe that writing their stories helped the girls realize their own sense of self-worth. I left the project open-ended by explaining how they could add to their stories, and I hope they will continue building their own chapters.

The way in which I helped the girls develop their "Her Story" narratives is not a recipe. I want more adults, especially seniors, to consider helping our adolescent girls by encouraging them to write their stories in a comfortable style. While belonging to a club can motivate girls to write, I think sharing one-on-one can be equally effective.

Now I am a retired teacher and I look at Girls' Club sponsoring as a highlight of my teaching career. The idea of sharing with the younger generation gives me a new sense of purpose in writing. I plan on being an active retiree, and I want my activities to include opportunities where I can help girls write their stories. I know that by taking an active stance, I am less frustrated about the issues adolescent girls face today. —Carolyn Scheider

Adolescence is when girls experience social pressure to put aside their authentic selves and to display only a small portion of their gifts.—Mary Pipher

Social pressure disorients and depresses most girls. They sense the pressure to be someone they are not. They fight back, but they are fighting a "problem with no name."—MP

Adolescent girls experience a conflict between their autonomous selves and their need to be feminine, between their status as human beings and their vocation as females.—MP

Adolescence has always been hard, but it's harder now because of cultural changes in the last decade. The protected place in space and time that we once called childhood has grown shorter. There is an African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Most girls no longer have a village.—MP

Carolyn Joy Scheider recently retired from her Round Rock TX middle school teaching position. Her retirement activities include working with girls' clubs, taking classes offered to seniors, exploring ways to use herbs, and traveling with her husband, Max.

Writing and Healing

Listening to Our Stories

by Catherine Cogburn, M.A., L.P.C.

In this regular column, we explore the expanding body of knowledge about life writing as a way of improving our psychological and physical health. We're looking for contributors. If you have an interest in the topic of life writing and wellness and would like to be a columnist, please write to Editor, Story Circle Journal, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605, or email china@tstar.net

Therapeutic Writing

Here are some writing prompts to help you listen to your self:

Who Are You?

—Set a timer for 1-5 minutes and as quickly as possible write a list of as many descriptors as you can think of. Don't hesitate, just keep writing words and phrases that describe who you are, roles you play or have played, characteristics, traits, talents, both positive and negative. Keep asking yourself, "Who *else* am I?"

Affirmations

—Make a list of the most negative things you think of about yourself, like "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable" or "I'm not successful." Pick one. Draw a line down the middle of your paper, to make two columns. Now translate that negative thought into its opposite, e.g., "I am good enough." Write this in the left column, and immediately listen for a negative response—this will usually be in the form of some hard, solid evidence you have to the contrary of the positive statement "I'm never on time," "I'm messy.") Now write down that negative response in the right column. Keep writing in both columns, using the same positive statement, until the negative responses stop. Now write this sentence (fill in the blanks with your own responses) and see what happens: I am (negative response) BECAUSE I BELIEVE that I am not good enough (or lovable, or whatever your negative thought was). We think we're not (whatever) because we have learned to supply the evidence to support this belief, not because it is true.

Limitations

—Again, make 2 columns. On the right, quickly write down 10 things you can't do, in this format: "I can't ____." Now, write the sentences again on the left, only this time substitute the word *won't* for *can't*, and see what happens.

I have the privilege of being able to earn my living as a psychotherapist. Often people ask me how I can stand to hear all those horrible stories, as if I were required to put on those stories like a too-heavy coat and carry them around all day, weighing me down with unsolvable problems. The question always takes me by surprise. I know the questioners are projecting onto me the helplessness they must sometimes feel with their own and others' stories. The truth is that the process of engaging in a therapeutic conversation is one of the most joyful activities I know. I get to participate in a process in which clients connect with a deeper part of themselves than they ever suspected was there. The goal is to introduce the client to herself and her own story, through therapeutic conversation during the sessions, and through therapeutic writing exercises both during the sessions and in between.

My job as a therapist is to listen to people's stories. In listening, I ask myself "Who is this person? Who else is she?" as a way of focusing my perceptions on the whole person, not the problem. My job is not to sympathize or agree with the client's positions, but to listen more deeply to what the "positions" are saying about her and her world—to listen to her story. It is a way of honoring another that teaches the other how to honor herself. We don't listen to ourselves very well. Learning to write therapeutically teaches us to listen to ourselves more carefully, more tenderly, more lovingly.

When I ask a woman to list in one minute as many words as she can to describe herself (one of my favorite writing prompts) I look up to see a woman's face shining in victory through her tears, because she realizes that for the first time in the two years of grieving her husband's death, she did not think of herself primarily as a "Widow." In fact, the word didn't make it to the list. She realizes in that instant that she is healing, she is living her life without the constant pain of and identification with loss. She has a new story. She has come through, and she really *is* all right. She will always be a widow, but now she knows she is far more than that.

And I watch as a young woman coming to see me for anxiety and depression begins to write her list of who she is with increasing speed and energy, breaking through the confining identification of "Depressed" into the rest of her Self—loving, a student, a friend, a daughter, kind, sensitive, angry, hard to get along with, etc., etc. She now has access to all the rest of who she is *in addition to* the depression. She can now hear her much broader story: she is a problem-solver, smart, dumb, sweet, mean, a singer, a musician...and when that list is exhausted, she moves into a very special place of realizing that she is, finally, indefinable. She simply is. She has listened to her self in a new way. And she can begin to access those parts of herself that can make the changes being called for by her depression.

When we truly listen to our stories, they have the power to transform us, heal us, enlarge us, and help us grow beyond the narrow limits we impose upon ourselves.

—Catherine Cogburn

Catherine Cogburn, M.A., L.P.C., has a private practice in Austin TX. She is the director of the Older Women's Legacy Circle project and will soon start a new life-writing project for women with breast cancer and breast cancer survivors. She serves on the Story Circle board of directors.

Meet Other Life-Writers

“Like Alice down the rabbit hole...”

With this issue, we are beginning a series of interviews with women who are engaged in telling the stories of their lives through a variety of media: through words, music, art, textiles—in all the myriad ways women find to express their experiences. Some of these women are also teachers, encouraging other women to find a way to share their personal histories. If you have a suggestion for an interesting interview subject, please let us know!

For the past six issues, *lisa shumicky* has written a journaling column for the Story Circle Journal. She has also edited her own three newsletters: “*lisa’sjournalnotes*,” a collection of excerpts and prompts, as well as news about new journaling books; the “National Journal Network Newsletter,” a clearinghouse where journalers could share their work; and her current newsletter, called “a capacious hold-all” that includes all sorts of interesting bits about journaling. Story Circle interviewed *lisa* by e-mail, using an open format that allowed her to answer our nosy questions and us to respond to her fascinating answers.

SC: *lisa*, please introduce yourself to us.

lisa: My name is *lisa shumicky*. I’m a librarian by profession and a diarist by passion. I’ve been working in the same public library on Long Island for 15 years. Before that, I worked part-time in several libraries at once, waiting for a full-time position to open up. I started working in a library when I was in high school and have never worked any place other than a library in all those years! I have a Masters in Library Science. My undergraduate work was in English lit.

SC: Why do you use lower case letters in your name?

lisa: Probably because of bell hooks and e.e. cummings but mostly because I think it “looks” better that way. It’s related to the same thing that makes me like to play with fonts and lettersize & rubber stamps—the placement of the text on the page, the way it looks.

SC: And on the personal side—what’s your life like?

lisa: I’m married to Bill, with no children (by choice). And one cat—Munchkin. We live in a cute little green & yellow house with an ivy-covered garage and I have a “room of my own,” aka my writing room, in the front of the house.

SC: You’ve been at this life-writing thing for a long time. When did you start keeping a diary?

lisa: I’ve been keeping a diary since I was in 5th grade, though there are some gaps in the keeping. I date my “real” starting date when I was in junior high in 1973. I’ve been keeping it religiously, voluminously, and just about daily since (approximately) 1978.

SC: Why is it important for you to journal?

lisa: Because putting things down helps me figure things out, because it clears my head, it’s relaxing, it’s therapeutic, it’s play, art, translation, it’s a constant, a given, like breathing. I don’t know how people survive without keeping a diary. I honestly don’t! It’s a major part of my life—I eat, breathe, and sleep diary.

SC: What does your physical journal look like?

lisa: The journal itself—currently called “still life,” previously called “naturellement” and “*lisa’s* journal”—is written in inexpensive spiral notebooks, wide ruled, about 70 pages per notebook. I buy them in bulk when back-to-school supplies are on sale, usually 3 or 4 books for \$1. I fill about 15 or 16 of these spirals a year, completing one in 3-5 weeks. I make a collage on the cover of each volume—clipping illustrations from magazines and such, gluing them to the cover, then covering it with thick clear library tape. Then I write “still life” and the beginning date on the first page (in green). I number each one (I think I’m on #165 of the “At #32” volume right now—our house is #32 Fischer Avenue, that’s why I call them “At #32”). On the last page, I write the titles of the books I’ve read during the time of each volume and when I finish the volume I rip that last page out and keep them all in one place to compile the annual “books read” list at the end of the year. I also keep a small spiral in the car for diaristic emergencies—and what I call my “ArtVolume” in a separate note-

*I hope I may Live to
Spend my time better And
have Beter Employment
for my Pen . . . Some-
times after our people is
gone to Bed I get my Pen
for I Dont know how to
Content myself without
writeing
Something.
—Jemima Condict, 1774*

*For me, writing some-
thing down is the only
road out.—Anne Tyler*

*We write to taste life
twice, in the moment,
and in retrospection...
We write to be able to
transcend our life, to
reach beyond it. We
write to teach ourselves
to speak with others, to
record the journey into
the labyrinth.
—Anais Nin*

Writers live twice. They go along with their regular life, are as fast as anyone in the grocery store, crossing the street, getting dressed for work in the morning. But there's another part of them...that lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and the details.
—Natalie Goldberg

After a certain number of years, our faces become our biographies.
—Cynthia Ozick

I often think of the room I write in as a book itself, illustrated with my pictures and favorite things, furnished with ideas and joys and disappointments, and always open to new dreams that fly in like fresh breezes through the window.
—Susan Wittig Albert

I am the only one who can tell the story of my life and say what it means.
—Dorothy Allison

book. This is a thick appointment book (also spiral—spirals are *de rigueur*) that I work in from time to time, clipping pictures from magazines or iDeas from different places and then annotating them with thoughts or comments.

SC: *You have a writing room in your house, lucky you! Tell us about it. (Lisa was painting it the week we interviewed her.)*

lisa: There's a desk, right in front of the window that looks out (only) at the neighbor's front yard, but it's grassy and there are trees and sky. I have two bookcases, a tall cabinet that Bill made that is filled with rubber stamps. I have shadowboxes around the walls also filled with rubber stamps and two other floor-standing shelves also filled with rubber stamps. There's a loveseat in there too. Oh, and a computer. But my husband uses that, at home, more than I do—he is welcome in my writing room. The books in the bookcases (that my grandfather built) are books about writing (of course!) and also published diaries....

SC: *I wonder, do you think of your writing room as an extension of your journal?*

lisa: I never thought of this, but I suppose the whole house, as decorated personally, can be considered as an extension of the pages of a journal. Or a self. On one wall of the room I intend to hang prints (when I find them!) of women writing. I also have a card that says “Dwell in Possibility,” an Emily Dickenson quote.

SC: *You have a great many journals! Where do they live? Do you ever go back and reread them?*

lisa: I always thought that when I got old and gray, I'd sit in a long, flowered Laura Ashley dress in a yellow rocking chair on a porch in the sun and reread all my journals & relive my life. So I kept all my books in bags and boxes in the bottom of my closet. Then somewhere along the way, when the volume of volumes was getting voluminous, I realized that I'd much rather be writing something new than reading something old. Plus I realized that I really DON'T want to read all that old stuff (reading it is sometimes embarrassing and makes me feel uncomfortable) and I CERTAINLY don't want anyone else to read them. I have no children to leave them to but even if I die, I really wouldn't want them to read them. All along in my mind I had envisioned my journals in sort of chapters... This made it easy to discard the early ones—well, I call it “releasing” because that sounds gentler. And a few years ago, I did release all the volumes that predated our moving into this house 10 years ago.

And I bought three big plastic storage boxes and started keeping the “at #32” volumes in them. When all three big boxes filled up recently, I released the contents of the earliest box...And I'll probably continue to do that, release the earliest and keep a constant three-box worth in those boxes in the basement.

SC: *When people start to keep a journal, they often worry about issues of privacy and security. Are you concerned about this?*

lisa: I don't have to worry about privacy, or I don't, anyway. It's just Bill and me in the house and I know he wouldn't go into them. Even if he did, my handwriting would probably confuse him! Even when I do reread, I find that my writing is at best cryptic. Sometimes I don't even remember or realize what I was writing about! It's process, not product, so that really doesn't matter. However it comes out is good, as long as I get it out and down on the page.

SC: *Sometimes a partner feels left out when a woman is involved in something intensely. How does your husband relate to your journaling?*

lisa: My husband understands completely. He too needs a certain amount of space around him. He “gives” me an hour (at least) to myself first thing when we get home every evening. I go into my writing room and fall into my notebook. Sometimes he comes in and surfs around on the Internet. And sometimes we'll say a few words back and forth, then it's quiet again. That doesn't interrupt me.

SC: *In the Journaling Pages you have written for the Story Circle Journal, you have a definite personal style. You run words together, use different cases, different fonts. What's behind this individualistic style?*

lisa: Yes, I do run words together etc etc. Sometimes I think that runningthemtogether makes a STRONGER word. It makes a new word, and it often makes the word that “is” the thing more than the individual words would be. It's really all in play (a lot of my diary writing is about play, playing with words, relaxing, playing with my mind, playing like a kid, delighting myself). When I was a kid in elementary school I would often get in trouble for putting my words too close together. For awhile, I had to write a word and then put my thumb down and then write the next word next to my thumb—the teacher's way of getting me to understand how much space should be around each word in a sentence. (Which makes me think of

space around things. I do like space around things too, like Japanese art. And that's part of the play with font and spacing.) Part of the reason is that it's artistic and poetic. It feels like poetry in words. (I am a fan of haiku too)

SC: You've obviously given a great deal of thought to the journaling process. Can you say something about your special interests?

lisa: Lately I am interested in the act of diary writing itself. I spend a lot of time thinking and writing about writing. I've long been a student of the diary—reading other diaries, studying them, thinking about them—and lately I've been turning that "eye" onto myself and trying to figure out this writing and what exactly it is I do when I write.

SC: I've asked my students to think about that, and some of them say it makes them so self-conscious they find it hard to write. Are you self-conscious when you journal?

lisa: Actually, writing about writing makes me feel LESS self-conscious than getting lost in the writing. I don't feel self-conscious when I write. I don't sense a "self" when I write. I am other, gone. I think it's Mary Englebreit who illustrated this quote, and may even have originated the quote: "Books fall open, I fall in." I feel the same way when I open my notebook to write. I fall in, like Alice down the rabbit hole, and I am just gone. It's a comfortable world.

SC: You seem to have a passion for books. Can you say something about the role books and writers play in your life? (Apart from your work as a librarian!)

lisa: I've always been a reader, love to read, love

getting lost in story. Last year (for example) I read 95 books (I keep an on-going list at the back of my diary and at the end of each year, I type it up). When I looked at it closely, I discovered that about a third of the books were novels and the other two-thirds books about writing or autobiography/biography/ memoir. I like reading about people living creative lives.

SC: Do you think of maybe writing a book?

lisa: (Shh) yes. I'm sometimes afraid to say it, admit it—and for a long time I had no desire at all to write a book—but lately I feel I want to, though I have been unable to get a foot into it (this has been inside me for about a year now). And I do feel it will be more about the process than a how-to (more along the lines of Holzer's A Walk Between Heaven and Earth, which is one of my absolute favorites.) I just haven't figured out the way in yet. AND I do feel that this would take time away from my writing. I don't feel like I have enough time to write as it is, how am I going to have time to write a book (for heaven's sake) & all the other things that go along with that!

One can't be an expert in process. By its very nature process can't be mastered. Because it's not finished. And who knows what will happen next?
—Nancy Mairs

Reading was my first solitary vice (and led to all the others). I read while I ate, I read in the loo, I read in the bath. When I was supposed to be sleeping, I was reading.
—Germaine Greer

If you would like to receive lisa's current journaling newsletter, "a capacious hold-all," send four dollars and your name and complete mailing address to lisa shumicky, 32 Fischer Avenue, Islip Terrace, NY 11752

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True Words from Real Women

In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish your contributions of poetry and prose. Write for our Writers' Guidelines, limber up your ballpoint pen (or your typewriter or computer) and send in your contributions. We want to hear your stories!

Winter-Tide

Sitting by my window, I watch the snow enfolding everything outside in its wintry embrace. As long as one doesn't have to suffer the travails of being out in this kind of weather, it is wonderful to watch the wind whipping snow into fanciful peaks and mounds.

The radio reports that the bitter cold and wind is creating a wind-chill of minus forty. It is no wonder that tenants of the "apartment house" in the 30-foot blue spruce out in the yard have gone south for the winter. Well—not quite all of them. A few hearty sparrows flutter out occasionally to get food, then quickly dart back to their nest in the tree.

Just before the snow fell, I filled a bird-feeder and hung it in a nearby tree for them, then threw more seed on the ground for any larger birds. It didn't take long before three gray squirrels, in their heavy winter coats, came over to take advantage of the free hand-out. After eating their fill they flew off across the yard, their feet barely touching the cold ground. They are probably watching this marshmallow world from their warm nest now, for there are no prints around the feeder today.

Being an optimist, I predict that the brash blue-jays, bold robins, and majestic cardinals will be returning to their "apartments" within six weeks or so. They will probably return to strut their plump, colorful bodies while arrogantly chirping for all to hear, "We had a great time. You should have gone south with us. Too bad!"

Hmmm—I think I'll go out to the kitchen and stuff a pinecone with peanut butter and bird seed as a treat for those plucky sparrow who, like me, did not go south this winter. While I am at it, I just might fix some hot chocolate and cookies for myself, too.

Phyllis Gobreski
Lafayette IN

The Return of my Fifteenth Summer

I had plans for this second maternity leave. I was definitely going to take the full 12 weeks. I wasn't going to short-change myself as I did the last time. And this time I had goals, big goals. As long as Brendon would also be home, he would learn to totally dress himself, to recognize the upper and lower case letters, and to love milk. I was going to clean out all the closets, sew Brendan the summer wardrobe he didn't get last year, write every day, and pump every time I breastfed Owen so I'd have a good reserve of milk when I went back to work.

But as the weeks started flying by, I began to feel frustrated; I wasn't meeting my goals! Then I received an e-mail from my little sister. She described her summer reading list and reminded me of the reading clubs we joined every year at the library. "Must be nice," I thought to myself. And then it dawned on me. "Hey, what's stopping me?" This is the first summer I haven't had classes or work since I was 16, and that was 21 years ago! Haven't I been upset that I've been putting Brendon "through his paces" since he was eight weeks old? He's been up at 6:00 a.m., dropped off at daycare by 6:30, picked up by 6:00 p.m. and hopefully in bed by 8:00 so we could do it all again the next day.

With that thought I began my real leave, the return of my fifteenth summer. I stopped worrying about the alarm clock. I let the birds wake me in the morning, and lay back to listen and enjoy them instead of madly dashing from bed, worrying that I was already late. I read piles of books, starting another as one was finished. I sat on the back porch in the morning, feeling the sun warm on my back, and moved to the front porch in the afternoons to catch a breeze. I finished some cross stitch projects and started others. I held Owen for hours at a time, took little naps with him, and sang to him during bath times. I played in the sandbox—me making sand castles while "Godzilla" knocked them all down. I watched Brendan draw on the sidewalk with fat pieces of colored chalk, and left the pictures there until the next rain washed them away. I eased up on the no-long-videos-during-the-week rule and let Brendon watch the *Star Wars Trilogy* repeatedly. I thought about Mom taking us to see Episode Four and remembered getting a big crush on Mark Hamill. I played with my kids, took them out too much, spent too much money, and enjoyed the heck out of it.

Okay, so I didn't meet my original goals. Brendan didn't learn all his letters, although he does do pretty well with X, O, and B. And he did learn to say "Obi Wan Kenobi" perfectly. He still doesn't dress himself all by himself or love milk, but he did learn to open both the front and back doors and that tricky tube of Tinkertoys all by himself. I don't have much of a reserve of breast milk, but Owen and I did get to enjoy snuggling with every feeding. My house is trashed and I still have plenty of weight to lose, but maybe I accomplished something more important. I know I had more fun.

Erin Boyle
Pittsburgh PA

Just Getting By

I think that my life has revolved around words, mostly written. From the time that I first started to make intelligent sentences, I was hooked. I told ghost stories to the neighborhood kids. I don't know how brilliant they were, but sometimes I had to walk the kids home because they were so scared.

I advanced to writing short plays to be acted out by those same kids and attended by mothers who lived in the neighborhood. I finally tired of that, and went on to other interests and my career as a playwright came to a screeching halt.

In English class, we had to write themes and other stories. I was often called upon to read mine aloud and managed to get "A" for my efforts. This soon brought me to the lucrative business of writing stories for some of my classmates and also drawing maps for a certain fee. I loved art so this was great for me. I finally quit that—it was pure luck that I managed to escape detection.

Soon World War II began and my four brothers went to serve their country. I did my best to write to them, but there wasn't much excitement in my life or in the small town we lived in. However, they were hungry for any crumbs of information from home.

For about 10 years, I have been keeping a daily journal and writing many letters.

Betty Smith
West Columbia TX

Old Buttermilk

Vacation that summer was a trip to a dude ranch. I agreed to that because there was a pool, meals would be served family style, it was something new to do, and Patti and her father could ride horses. I guess most kids want a pony when they are nine. Patti did. I didn't. I'm afraid of horses.

We arrived at the ranch in central Texas, settled in, and had supper. Tired from the trip, we went to bed early. We wanted to be rested for the Trail Ride Breakfast the next morning.

Morning came. We put on our jeans and went to the corral where the cowboys saddled our horses for the ride to the breakfast. Jack knew I was apprehensive about riding a horse. He told the cowboys I needed a gentle horse and lots of attention. He reassured me about how gentle Old Buttermilk was and helped me get aboard and settled for the ride. We started out near the front of the line of riders going on the ride to the breakfast.

Old Buttermilk walked along the path as if she had been on it many times before. Just a gentle walk, nothing to scare me or cause me distress. We went quite a long way, Old Buttermilk following along behind the horse in front of us in a steady fashion. Tree branches hung over the riding path; I ducked or put my arm up to keep them from hitting me in the face. Without warning, Old Buttermilk stopped to eat the leaves off one tree she found especially enticing. I was wondering how long it would take her to eat her fill when one of the cowboys rode up beside

us. He had a big stick in his hand. Without warning, he swung the stick and hit Old Buttermilk on the rump. She kicked her back feet and then lurched ahead in her usual unhurried fashion. The cowboy fell back to his place in the line.

We rode along for another ten minutes before Old Buttermilk found another delectable tree and stopped to eat again. Again the cowboy rode up, whapped her, and started her up again. She stopped to eat the third tree; the cowboy rode up again. I turned, looked him in the eye and said, "Don't hit the horse." He said, "But lady, that's why we bring the stick. It's the only way we can make her stop eating and start walking again." I said, "Don't hit the horse." He said, "You won't get there in time for the Trail Ride Breakfast if we don't get started." I said, "I don't care if we don't get to the Trail Ride Breakfast in time for supper, *don't hit the horse!*" By this time, Jack was riding beside us. The cowboy looked at him. Jack shrugged his shoulders. The cowboy rode away.

Old Buttermilk and I were the last to get to the hitching post. Jack and the cowboy were waiting to help me dismount. Jack knew better than to comment.

As I got both feet on the ground, a long white Cadillac convertible pulled up with two trays of steaming hot biscuits for the breakfast. I looked at Jack. He said, "You wouldn't dare!" I strolled up to the cowboy driving the Cadillac. "Are you going back to the ranch?" "Yes, Ma'am." "You have a passenger," I said. I walked around the front of the Cadillac, took a biscuit from the tray in the back seat, opened the front passenger door and slid in on the red leather seat. Much more comfortable than in Old Buttermilk's saddle, I breathed a sigh of satisfaction, leaned back, munched on my biscuit and enjoyed the ride back to the ranch.

When Jack and Patti returned from the breakfast, I was reading by the pool, sipping a frosty drink. They came over and told me that on the way back, the cowboy led Old Buttermilk home. The other riders would ask, "What happened to the lady riding Old Buttermilk?" My family acted as if they wondered too. What *had* happened to the lady riding Old Buttermilk? They were both giggling.

Peggy Park Talley
Gonzales TX 78629

More stories
on page 12!

Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is loosely organized around a particular theme. We urge you to submit your stories on these topics:

May, 2000—Grandmothers (deadline 4/15/00)

August, 2000—Teachers & Wise Women (deadline 7/15/00)

November, 2000—Abundant Gifts (deadline 10/15/00)

More True Words

Continuity

January 2000—the year of the dragon, the infant year of the new millennium (some say), but best of all, the year that my lineage has been directly passed on. As I am my mother's daughter, and she, her mother's daughter, my daughter continues the line by birthing Grace Amelia yesterday in California.

I'm off—yes, I'm off to see the brand new wizard—daughter of my daughter, star child, aquarian child. Who knows what dreams she has already stored in her memory, hidden in her unconscious by the touch of an angel on her upper lip* as she slid out into the light of this world.

Joy of joys! I pray that I help her to be the best that she can be. I know that Robin will be a wonderful, creative, and loving mom.

* There is an old folk tale that says when a child is born, an angel creates the dent between the lip and the nose so that the child forgets all the wisdom and knowledge that she knew before, and enters this life ready to learn even more.

Judith Helburn
Austin TX

Golden Earrings

Golden earrings. Remember that song? It's an old one, recorded by Vaughn Monroe, I think. Remember when we wore big hoop earrings? I did, years ago, so long ago that gold was still \$35 an ounce. . . . Around that time, we spent a summer in Venezuela and I bought a pair of large hollow 18-carat hoops. I wore them happily for years, and not just for special occasions. And one day, one was gone. It had been a busy spring day and I had gone many places, worked in the garden, picked up the kids at school—the usual things that young moms do. I had no idea where that other earring went. I put the surviving earring away—after all, it was gold—and forgot about it.

And the pages of the calendar turned: one month, six months, a new calendar, and yet a newer calendar. Spring again, and my husband had been coerced into turning over the soil in what was to be, again, my vegetable garden. He came into the house with a grin and his hand behind his back. "What are you looking so silly about?" I asked. He flourished his dirty hand in front of my face clutching ...a gold hoop earring, still shiny. Off to my jewelry box I went and dug up the mate.

Did I wear them again? Probably not, but I do have two. Perhaps I'll think of something creative to do with them when I have the time. Any ideas?

Judith Helburn
Austin TX

Story Circle's New & Renewing Members

*We extend a very special welcome to the women who have joined our Network or renewed their membership since June, 1999.
We're glad to be a part of your story—and hope that you'll become an active part of ours!*

Alabama

Dianne Lodge-Peters, Evergreen

Arkansas

Lucy Abraham, Little Rock

California

Bobbie Mahoney, Tustin

Indiana

Jean McGroarty

Georgia

Patricia Pando, Bainbridge

New York

Pam Priest

Maryland

Elizabeth Lawrence
Tamara Zacharkiw

Massachusetts

Gail Godio, Sandisfield

New Jersey

Shirley Norton

Oregon

Marie Buckley
Lina Tanner, Florence
S.M. Crothers, Reedsport

Pennsylvania

Anne Waldron, West Chester

Texas

Mary M. Elizabeth, Austin
Monica Solomon, Austin
Jane Lewis, Austin
Claire Saxton, Austin
Natalie Thomas, Austin
Gwen King, Austin
Mary Kamm, Austin
Margaret Baacke, Austin
Robin Barrat, Austin
Jennifer Reardon, Austin
Mary Jane Marks, Austin
Janet N. Smith, Austin
Carolyn Cowan, Austin
Ann Swain, Freeport

Peggy Talley, Gonzales

Susan Uecker, Houston
Kay Axtmann, Richland Hills
Mary Lee Harris, Round Rock
Sandra Young, San Antonio
Patti Bliss, San Antonio
Helen Jacobs, San Antonio
Leanne Nichols, Spring
Janet Weidemann, Vernon

Utah

Nickieann Fleener, Park City

Virginia

Jeanne Lupton, Arlington

Washington

Jeannine Potter, Vancouver

Wisconsin

Lorraine Beck, Waukesha
Diane Harris, Glenwood City

The Carol W. Landherr Life-Writing Competition

The Story Circle Network is proud to announce its first Life-Writing Competition, dedicated to the memory of Carol W. Landherr. Carol was an enthusiastic and committed life-writer who inspired others to write and share their stories. She died on October 10, 1999, after a valiant fight with breast cancer, but the memory of her life remains bright and fresh in the hearts of all who knew her. In Carol's last few weeks, she assembled a group of friends at her home to write and share stories from their lives. The group itself was her special gift to each participant, for Carol believed whole-heartedly in the transforming magic of story and in the importance of exploring our joys and griefs together. A short time ago, a group of her friends gathered in her garden for a "dig and divide" party, each woman taking a piece of a plant that Carol had planted and nurtured and loved. Here at Story Circle, we think this is a lovely metaphor for our first life-writing competition, which we dedicate gratefully and lovingly to Carol. So please join us as we dig deep into our lives and our memories and share what we have planted and nurtured and learned.

Topic: *A Relationship That Taught Me Something Important.* This might be a joyful relationship, or painful, or challenging. It might have ended many years ago or still be on-going. Tell us about the experience and what you learned from it.

Awards: One prize of \$50, two prizes of \$25 each. Winning stories will be published in a special section of the May *Story Circle Journal* and on the SC's web site. (Copyright will remain with the author.) Upon the judges' recommendation, other entries may be published in later issues of the *Journal*.

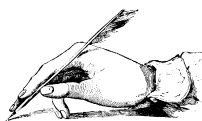
Rules: You must be a member of Story Circle Network to enter. Entries must be typed, double-spaced, on 8.5 x 11" paper. Each entry must be no more than 1200 words, and must include a title. To be eligible, the entry must be previously unpublished. To identify your submission, place your name, complete address, phone number, and email address, and date of birth on a 3x5 card and *paper clip* it to your entry (do not staple). Do *not* put your name on your submission. Instead, place your birth date in the upper left hand corner of each page of your entry as an identifying code (like this: 01/02/1940). Please include a 100-word bio or statement about the creation of your story, to be published with it if you win. Winners' stories must be available for publication; however, if you wish your story to be published anonymously, please let us know this. Be sure and keep a copy of your entry.

Criteria: The judges will be looking for stories that are fresh and original, are written in a clear and authentic voice, and are responsive to the topic. Final "polish" is a fourth criterion.

Entry fee and deadline: Entry fee \$3. Deadline: May 1, 2000.

Winners' Notification: Winners will be notified by mail no later than May 30, 2000.

Send your entry to: Life-Writing Competition, Story Circle Network, 1501 W 5th #107, Austin TX 78703



Dear Pen Partner...

Stories mean a great deal more when they're shared with a pen partner—someone (or two or three) with whom you can trade letters and/or emails. If you'd like to be a pen partner, send us your name and address and we'll print it here. The rest is up to you!

Judith (Judie) Ross-Bales, 19303 Lazy Valley Dr, Katy TX 77449, judie-ross-bales@iadc.org

Peggy Talley, Rt 2 Box 266B, Gonzales TX 78629, phillbigg@the-cia.net

Marie Buckley, 1070 NE Sturgess, Hillsboro OR 97124, marie@aracnet.com

Jean McGroarty, PO Box 44, Battleground IN 47920, smlsn@dcwi.com

A Story Circle News Round-up

Good stories have the power to save us.... We can all make a difference by simply sharing our stories with real people in real times and places.—Mary Pipher

Reading Circles

Here in the Austin TX area, our Reading Circles are among our favorite Story Circle activities. Writing our lives is important—but reading about other women’s lives is just as important. The shelves of a woman’s personal library are a revealing and important part of her personal history, as significant as the pages of her journal. We grow through our reading, and we learn to read more deeply and inclusively as we talk about our reading with other women. Here is how we’ve organized our reading.

How We Do It

At the present time, we have two circles, both meeting on the first Wednesday of each month: our Noon Circle and our Evening Circle. Each circle has 12-14 members—large enough to be interesting, but small enough to be intimate. We are currently meeting in a conference room in one of the branch libraries. We have only one “rule”: that as women join the group, they agree to stay with it for at least six months. That allows each member to establish continuity with the books with the discussions, and with the other members of the group. We do allow people to visit for a session or two before they decide to join, to see whether they enjoy the kind of books we are reading and the discussions we have. Susan Albert serves as the coordinator of both groups, and facilitates the discussion in the Evening Circle. Peggy Moody puts the necessary information on the web site and handles the email mailings.

The Noon Circle is now in its third year, and about half of the members have been with the group since the beginning—it’s an “experienced” group. In November and December, the members submit the titles of books they think would be appropriate for the circle. Susan chooses 12 and arranges them in a suitable order—alternating them by topic, by reading difficulty, and by tone (“dark” and “light”). Members of the group volunteer to facilitate the discussion on a particular book. Peggy puts this information up on the web site. (To see this, go to www.storycircle.org and click on “Austin events.” Follow the links to the Reading Circles.) The week before the discussion, the facilitator prepares 7-10 discussion questions. These are emailed or mailed to the members, and Peggy posts them on the web site as well.

The Evening Circle is in its first year, and is using the same books (with one or two exceptions) as those chosen for the Noon Circle. This year, Susan is preparing the discussion questions and facilitating the discussions. Next year, the group members will take over.

The Books We Choose

We try to follow some general guidelines in choosing books. Since we’re interested in women’s stories, we have so far elected to read women’s memoirs but may later include women’s fiction. We’ve stayed away from “celebrity” memoirs

and from most best-sellers, concentrating on books that reveal different life-styles, cultures, issues, concerns. We try to choose books that offer psychological depth and complexity and give us a glimpse at the inner life of the writer—not always the same life she wants to present to us! We choose books that are in print and in paperback. Those of us who are on the Internet can buy our books through Story Circle’s link to Amazon.com, and Story Circle earns something from each purchase. Here are the 12 books we discussed in 1999:

The Last Gift of Time, by Carolyn Heilbrun

West With the Night, by Beryl Markham

Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, by Kathleen Norris

Deep Water Passage: A Spiritual Journey at Midlife,
by Ann Linnea

Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter, by Adeline Yen Mah

Zami, A New Spelling of My Name, by Audre Lorde

An American Childhood, by Annie Dillard

Extra Innings: A Memoir, by Doris Grumbach

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, by Terry
Tempest Williams

Drinking the Rain, by Alix Kates Shulman

Woodswoman, by Anne LaBastille

Are You Somebody, by Nuala O’Faolain

The Discussions

Our discussions are usually free and far-ranging, and while we have all thought about the discussion questions, the facilitator doesn’t hold us to them. Rather, she encourages us to think *beyond* the questions. Most of us have had the experience of coming into the discussion with one view of the book and leaving with a very different perspective: as we hear other people’s reaction to a book, our perceptions of it can be radically changed. We value this, because it helps us to expand what we read beyond the limits of our own narrow realities and learn from the wisdom and experience of other readers.

We also refuse to limit our discussion to the book itself. Nothing is “off-topic” for us, because we know that as we read another woman’s story, we are also reading our own stories as well. Too often, our high school and college teachers have taught us to read as *observers*, standing outside of the experience of the book, as if it were separate from us. In our circles, we read *ourselves* as well as the book, and try to see how our stories are reflected in the author’s story—which means that no response is irrelevant, as long as it comes from the heart of our experiences.—Susan Albert

*Life Writing for Publication***Writing the Book Proposal**

by Dayna Finet

Tough and unrelenting in its methods of commerce and competition, the publishing world can easily intimidate the novice life writer.

But it offers a nice chunk of relief, I think, known as the “book proposal.” Unlike our less lucky fiction-writing friends, we life writers (who belong to the nonfiction genres of memoir, biography/autobiography, and creative nonfiction) typically get book contracts, and advance money, before we finish writing the books themselves.

That doesn’t necessarily make it easy. Somewhere between 90 and 95 percent of book proposals get turned down by agents. The other 5 or 10 percent that clear that hurdle must go on to impress publishers with their potential for literary merit and market appeal. An effective book proposal requires a serious investment of effort and commitment.

Although you’ll want to inquire about the specific preferences of individual agents, most book proposals include a standard group of basic components. (Recall that you submit your proposal to agents, and the agents forward proposals to publishers. Also remember that in almost all cases, you will not send a full proposal to an agent unless she/he has asked for it in response to a query letter from you.) Your proposal should include these sections:

- **overview**, which summarizes information from the whole proposal in a couple of pages;
- **competition**, which explains why your book is either the first or best of its kind;
- **marketing and promotion**, which describes the people likely to buy your book and your ideas (and resources, if you have them, for reaching the book’s intended audience);
- **biographical**, which gives your credentials, qualifications for writing the book, and writing experience;
- **chapter outline**, which provides titles and abstracts for each chapter in the book;
- **sample chapter** (s), to show how you write; and
- **supplementary materials**, including your resume or

vita, clippings, and recommendation letters.

If you’re serious about creating a book proposal for your life writing, I recommend that you purchase one of several good book-proposal writing guides. My favorite is the concise and helpfully-organized *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anyone Can Write*, by Elizabeth Lyon. Although less good as a general guide, Jeff Herman’s and Deborah Adams’ *Write the Perfect Book Proposal* provides 10 full length (successful) book proposals that you can use as models.

Over the past year-and-a-half, I’ve tried to cover the fundamental, need-to-know topics for life writers aspiring to publish—working with agents, writing query letters and book proposals, life writing online. If you want to publish your life writing, you might explore other helpful topics. Seriously think about self-publication (once thought of as amateurish, now quite legitimate). I’d also encourage you to investigate writers’ organizations. From critique groups to professional associations, they can help you ground your publishing aspirations in reality, both gritty (hard work and the marketplace) and bounteous (the support of likeminded friends).

Someone else will be writing on those topics here, however, because this is my last column for *Story Circle Journal*. Like many of you, I face the demands of competing priorities. I need to return to some interrupted work dear to my heart. I leave you with this wish—the most meaningful exploration of your own life story, as you come to discovery for yourself, and as you choose to share with the world. A lotus to you.

Dayna Finet is a writer, mother of a wonderfully mischievous seven-year-old son, and caretaker of loyal pets Miles the Dog, Chloe the Cat, and Andrews the Hamster.

Breast Cancer Survivor?

If you are a breast cancer survivor and would like to participate in a writing project designed to help breast cancer survivors write about their experience, we would like to hear from you! The Story Circle Network is planning to create a life-writing workbook and workshop specifically for breast cancer survivors, and we would very much like to have your input. If you’re interested, write to Catherine Cogburn, Story Circle Network, 1501 W. Fifth Street #107, Austin TX 78703, or email her at ccogburn@io.com.

Our Readers Share Their Sto- ries....

Jane Purtle, of Bullard TX was “born a Baptist in East Texas in the middle of the Depression. When I studied world literatures in college, I learned what those facts meant. When I was fifty, I returned to East Texas to discover the rest of the story.” She suggests a book to readers: *Spiritual Autographs: Southern Women Tell Their Stories* (available through Spiritual Autobiography Association, 703 South Main, Jacksonville TX 75766, fax 903 586-2412.)

Jean McGroarty of Battleground IN, writes “I am a mother, a wife, an educator. I am a cancer survivor and a survivor of my own youthful stupidity. I am an actress, a writer, and an off-key singer.” *Jean (like several other Story Circle members) has asked for information about how to start a Story Circle reading group. We hope to have a booklet ready for you soon, Jean—in the meantime, take a look at the article on page 14. That might be enough information to get you started.*

Judith (Judie) Ross-Bales of Katy, TX, tells this story: “Born and raised in Kansas, graduated from KSU, lived in England for three years as a young bride back when all able men had to go into the military after graduation, moved back to states and divorced after 13 years and three children (two are twins). Raised the children, spent 10 years as a care-giver to my parents and am trying

now to find a life for myself. The story of my life in three sentences sounds cold, hard and terribly dull, but I have had a *mostly* good life with a lot of joys and the prerequisite amount of sorrow; now it is time for my “rebirth” and the achievement of some of the goals I have dreamed of, or maybe just to find out who I am.” *Judie asks us to explain what a Pen Partner is—Judie, take a look at the expanded introduction on page 13.*

Mary Lee Harris of Round Rock TX says that she is “writing short-short stories (about three pages). My husband is encouraging and helpful, like typing and editing my stories. The editing I could do without! I’m going to clone him any day now.”

Marie Buckley of Hillsboro OR says: “My childhood was spent magically poor; adolescence was like nine miles of bad road. I’ve been married to a good human being for 32 years and driven by creativity and countless interests. I can’t function in the 8-5 work world which has caused me to be seen as wasting my potential; at the same time, I’ve developed a deep love for all species and give my heart and soul to any animal I can help.” *Marie’s writing is regularly published in Women’s Journal, a Portland OR monthly periodical.*

Peggy Talley, of Gonzales TX writes that she is a “retired registered nurse now living a rather socially isolated life. My husband and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary this year. I am an artist, using oil paints, and a life-long reader and writer.” Two of Peggy’s stories were featured in the Arts and Letters section of the *women2women.com* website. She is working on a book about herself: “the life of a woman that started during the Depression and has extended into the age of the Internet.”

Regular contributor **Duffie Bart**, of Monterey CA, reports that she recently participated in a workshop led by Brugh Joy—“a wonderful experience that helped many of us learn more about ourselves.” She adds that she recommends a book to SC members: *A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman*, by Joan Anderson.

Oops! **Charlotte Hamrick** of New Orleans writes to correct our error in the last *Journal*. We omitted an important word from the title of *Cultivating Sacred Space*, by Elizabeth Murray. “I would hate for anyone looking for this wonderful book to miss out,” Charlotte says.

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