

Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 6 Number 4, December 2002

SCN Stages First Theatrical Benefit

On November 7, Story Circle staged its first theatrical benefit, a play called *Waiting for MacArthur*, written and directed by SCN member Paullette McDougal and performed by the Paradox Players of Austin TX. In addition to the play, the sell-out audience enjoyed a champagne and chocolate reception and a “talk-back live” exchange with the playwright and the players following the performance.

Paullette’s moving and poignant play features four women actors: Annie Lou Holsom, a young U.S. Army nurse on Corregidor during the fall of that island fort in 1942; her mother, a German immigrant who is married to a Greek; her stay-at-home high school friend Rosalie, and Margaret, her high school English teacher.

As the play continues, Annie Lou’s letters home move the play forward, and her relationship to each of her three correspondents becomes at once clearer and more complex. Her mother is struggling with her own impossible need to protect her daughter, caught in a brutal war on the other side of the world, while at the same time trying to deal with another impossible situation: the horrible fact that soldiers from her country are occupying her husband’s native land. Her friend Rosalie cannot understand how the brutality of war has changed Annie Lou, who must nurse the wounded under fire in an ill-equipped underground hospital with war waging over her head. But it is her correspondence with her former teacher Margaret that allows Annie Lou to share her soul, and which helps Margaret herself grow from an isolated, cautious school teacher into an active war worker and courageous adventurer who is finally able to reveal to Annie Lou her own dark, long-hidden secret: her out-of-wedlock child.

Paullette, an award-winning filmmaker, author, and playwright, earned her M.F.A. from Columbia. Her numerous plays have been performed widely through the United States, as well as in Canada and the United Kingdom. *Waiting for MacArthur* is based on Paullette’s extensive interviews with women who lived through World War II and her review of memoirs and letters of the period. One of Paullette’s other plays, *Back Talk*, is based on a memoir by Joan Weimer that the Austin SCN Reading Circle read in 2001.

During the talk-back session after the play, members of the audience shared some of their own experiences of World War II, reminding us that our individual stories have many common themes and that one woman’s story, in many ways, is the story of us all. The audience agreed that the play, although it was set in the 1940s, was especially appropriate to our own immediate experience after 9/11, and allowed us to see and feel the common experiences of women through the ages in times of war, on the front and back home.

The play was staged by the Paradox Players, a non-profit community theater. The company stages two full productions annually and offers play readings throughout the year. The company has mentored a teen theater group that produced its first show earlier this year.

Special thanks for creating, planning, and carrying out Story Circle’s first theatrical event go to Paullette MacDougal and the Paradox Players for producing the benefit performance and to Donna Remmert, for suggesting the event and organizing the Champagne & Chocolates reception. Donna was assisted by SCN members Carolyn Blankenship (publicity), Pat Eick (photography), Peggy Moody (website), Leilani Rose (registration and website), PJ Pierce (MC, talk-back live), Susan Albert (books and sale items), and Linda Jones, Beth Kennedy, Rebecca Roberts, Catherine Cogburn, and Carolyn Scheider (champagne and chocolates). Their efforts and teamwork made this theatrical event an occasion to remember!—*Susan Albert*

*Writing bridges the inner and
outer worlds and connects
the paths of action and
reflection...*

*Writing is sorting. Writing
down the stream of
consciousness gives us a way
to respect the mind, to choose
among and harness thoughts,
to interact with and change
the contents of
who we are.*

—Christina Baldwin

*One cannot make up stories;
one can only retell in new
ways the stories
one has already heard.*

—Carolyn Heilbrun



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How SCN Can Help You Tell Your Story

If you want to dig deeper, look farther, write more often and more expressively, or discover other ways to tell and share your experiences, we're here to help. But SCN is like anything else—the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. Here are some ways you can get more out of what we offer.

1. Journal every day. You'll find journaling tips and guides in each issue of our *Story Circle Journal*. If you're a member of the Internet Chapter, you'll also receive weekly writing prompts by email—perfect for keeping your journal on-track.
2. Join a Story Circle in your community. Can't find one? Then start one! Our Facilitator's Guide will show you how easy it is to do this. For a free copy, go to www.storycircle.org/facguide.shtml.
3. Join the Internet Chapter and connect with a Story Circle on-line. See www.storycircle.org/ecircles.shtml.
4. Contribute your writing to our *Story Circle Journal*. And read the *Journal* from cover to cover—it's full of great ideas for writing your life story.
5. Take an on-line writing workshop offered by the Internet Chapter. For information, go here: www.storycircle.org/ICworkshops.shtml.
6. Read, read, read! Women's memoirs are "hot" in today's publishing world, and we try to keep abreast of the best. Here's a list of the books our reading circles have read over the past several years: www.storycircle.org/BookReviews/readingcircle.html. We've also reviewed a great many other books about women's lives—visit our book review site: www.storycircle.org/BookReviews for a look. Want to write reviews of women's memoirs and related books? Read our Reviewers' Guidelines: www.storycircle.org/ReviewersGuidelines.shtml.
7. Join our on-line Internet Chapter Reading Circle, or our Austin TX Reading Circle, or start a Reading Circle of your own. You can choose books from the SCN reading list and print out our on-line reading guides.
8. Attend our events. We offer Writing From Life weekends in Austin twice a year, a LifeLines writing retreat (see p. 18) and a national conference every two years. Our Austin TX chapter offers five or six Be Our Guest programs each year. Want to attend events but can't join us in Austin? Start a Story Circle Chapter in your own community and create your own calendar of women's events! Here's how to get started: www.storycircle.org/ChapterGuidelines.html.
9. If you're sixty-plus, you may be interested in our Older Women's Legacy Circle project. To see what's going on, go here: www.owlcircle.com. And be sure to subscribe to our OWL-Circle eletter, while you're visiting that site.
10. If you offer writing-related classes, workshops, or programs, you are eligible to post information about yourself and your work on our Speakers Bureau pages. Posting on our site does **not** obligate you to any payment to Story Circle. You will have your own individual URL and will be able to put it on your brochures, handouts, and business cards. For an example, go to the Speakers Bureau (www.storycircle.org/SpeakersBureau), then choose a name from our list of speakers.
11. If you're ready to tell your story to a wider audience, check out our Market Watch (p. 23), where we list current current publishing opportunities, contests, and writers conferences. You can also find the information on our web site.
12. Share the story of your writing achievements with us. To see what other lifewriters have been doing, take a look at our Members in Print and in the News page: www.storycircle.org/MembersInPrint.shtml, or see p. 23 in the *Journal*.
13. Give a gift membership to a friend or favorite relative. You'll find a form on p. 9. Let them know that you value their stories and hope that they'll write them down!
14. Stay informed. We're continually offering new programs and services. To stay up-to-date on what we're doing, subscribe to our monthly National and Austin eletters: www.storycircle.org/eletters.shtml.

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Story Circle Journal

STORY CIRCLE is a quarterly newsletter, published in March, June, September, and December. 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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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!

Scrapbooking Your Story

The Book of Me

With this article, SCN is delighted to introduce the work of award-winning scrapbook artist, author, and teacher Angie Pedersen. Angie will offer a series of four articles designed to show you how to use a scrapbook to tell your story. Angie is the editor and designer of the website magazine, www.OneScrappySite.com. She currently teaches The Book of Me classes online and in stores throughout the country. Angie lives with her husband and two children in the Kansas City MO area.

In the introduction to her book, *The Book of Me*, Angie Pedersen writes the following paragraphs.

"I was in the middle of a personal crisis. It was June 2000 and I had been a stay-at-home mom for several years. I was raising two beautiful children and running a modestly popular website. To most of my friends, I had it all together. But I lacked direction and a sense of identity.

"I wondered what was special or distinct about me. I believed that anyone could do what I did and that I made no contribution of significance. Faced with this rather unflattering portrait, I set out to prove myself *wrong*.

"I began working on a scrapbook about myself.

"I wanted to show myself the gifts I had to offer and decided to showcase my life from the perspective of the different hats I wear in a day. I explored all the pieces that make up my life—the sum of the parts that equal the whole person. I saw all that I accomplished and all that I am grateful for. This special scrapbooking project allowed me to appreciate Me—the person I have struggled to become."

With all of this in her mind, Angie went on to create a book—*The Book of Me*—that is designed to help you tell your personal story in scrapbook form. Over the next three *Journal* issues, we'll be featuring parts of Angie's book, as well as ideas and suggestions that she shares on her web site.

Creating Your Book of Me

If you are new to scrapbooking, Angie has some words of advice. "Scrapbooks aren't just photo albums," she says. "What makes a scrapbook a complete memory is the journaling of the story and the inclusion of memorabilia. These memories are preserved further by placing all elements in an environment that is photo-safe, acid-free, and archival-quality. This means using scrapbooks, pens, paper, adhesives, and other supplies that are manufactured to be the safest possible for making memories last."

Your *Book of Me* is different from other scrapbook projects, Angie tells us, "because it is about your personal memories, values, and priorities. It takes a big-picture perspective rather than working on the crisis of the moment, and it incorporates mixed media—photos, memorabilia, and quotations."

There are several ways, according to Angie, to create your own *Book of Me*.

- **Make one big book** in which the spotlight is on *you*. Include items from your childhood, school and college years, career, family, friendships.
- **Design and create a theme book.** Angie offers these examples: "Angie's Closest Friends," "Angie, Wife of David" and "25 Things to Do in My Lifetime." You might consider theme books based on important family celebrations (such as a family reunion, a wedding), a challenging experience (an illness, an unanticipated move, a job loss), a life-changing event (a pregnancy, a love affair).
- **Put yourself into family albums.** If you've been keeping a family scrapbook, make sure that you're there, too! Don't just picture the kids and grandparents, include yourself in the action.
- **Design a remembrance album.** One valuable way to honor someone we love is to remember her or his life in a scrapbook. Include as much material as you can assemble from the person's childhood, school years, work life, and service to community and country.

Journaling in Your Scrapbook

One of the things that makes a *Book of Me* different from other scrapbooks is the lifewriting that's included. For instance, instead of just putting in a picture of you and your favorite teddy bear, you will also include a bit of writing. Who gave you that bear? What did you love about it? What finally happened to it? Do you remember any special times with that bear?

Throughout Angie's *Book of Me*, as well as on her website (www.scrappyourstories.com), she includes writing prompts to help you explore your life's story. These prompts, and her many other suggestions, can help you to find out more about the Very Important Person you truly are.

The Book of Me: ***A Guide to Scrapbooking About Yourself***

by Angie Pedersen

Available in bookstores

To purchase online through SCN, go to
[www.storycircle.org/BookReviews/reviews/
bookofme.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/BookReviews/reviews/bookofme.shtml)

for a signed copy, go to www.scrappyourstories.com

There is only one person who can write the story of your life, with all its foibles, follies, treasures and tears. That person is you.
—Kathleen Adams

Today you are you. That is truer than true! There is no one alive who is you-er than you!
—Dr. Suess

I finally figured out that the only reason to be alive is to enjoy it.
—Rita Mae Brown

I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.
—Gilda Radner

Writing and Healing

Gifts of the Journey

"Writing is one of the healing arts," Mary Ann Moore says on her website, at www.retreatsonline.net/flyingmermaids. "Your creativity will admit you to a sacred space." So we asked this writer, poet, and Story Circle member from Guelph, Ontario, to help us understand how we can use writing to heal ourselves. In this essay, she suggests that we pay special attention to our longings, in order to know where we need to be healed.

Music invites longing. I hear music from Canada's east coast—Rita MacNeil or the Rankin Family—and I am nostalgic, longing for home. But I'm not from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, or Newfoundland. In the music is the remembering, of a land, of people who have passed on, of a way of life that is no more. The fact that many of the singers and musicians of these songs are young people suggests that they long to recreate that life, and to repair some of its loss. They're learning Gaelic, learning to play the fiddle and to dance the jig. In their nostalgia may be the missing of what was, as well as, what could have been.

As I listen and sing along to "Fare thee well love," I remember my grandparents who died when I was ten. The Ottawa Valley in Ontario where I grew up. And although the music I learned as a child was from the piano where Grandma played hymns like "The Old Rugged Cross," the fiddle music of the East Coast is very much a part of the Ottawa Valley where Irish settlers made their home. My great-grandfather Thomas Benjamin Lett came from the County of Tyrone, Ireland. In those strains of song and fiddle are memories of the land we came from. Even if I haven't been there before, I "remember" Ireland, the thatch-roofed cottages, the selkie stories, the peat fires. The memories are in my very being and I long for the simplicity of that life. For the storytelling, the rituals, the honoring of rites of passage. For the circle of loved ones around the fire.

What are the objects, pastimes, and pieces of music that invite longing for you? You will probably find evidence of those longings on your book shelf or in your CD collection, on your shelf of collectibles or on your altar. In the objects you collect, the trips you take and plan for and on your lifetime "to do" list. What can you do with this longing? How can you use it to heal?

My friend Ulli gathers stems in her garden, bundles them together with wool, and offers them for burning. She collects bones, stones and sticks to create nature collages. Although she takes the Toronto subway to her job every day, her spirit is collecting and offering the fruits of her gatherings to the people she counsels in a city housing co-op, just as if she were in a village in Germany or at her cabin in Manitoba. She attempts to remember and recreate a life in the wilds. In so doing, she honors her longings.

I honored my longings by writing a novel about a

playwright called Zoe, a word that means "life" in Greek. (Two excerpts from the novel, which is called *Ordinary Life*, have appeared in *Prairie Fire*, a Winnipeg literary journal.) My character, Zoe, lived in a literary part of Toronto called "the Annex" and earned her living by writing plays and doing temporary work on the side. As she researched the lives of two sculptors, Florence Wyle and Frances Loring (who were born in the U.S and moved to Toronto around 1913), she uncovered her own story. And guess whose story that was? Mine! In Zoe's story, I honored my story.

My own family history floated up through layers of old photos that Zoe was looking at. When we're writing about our ancestors, we sometimes catch glimpses of behavior we would rather forget. I delved into the story of my great-uncle Adam Lett, who was an Anglican minister and ran a residential school for First Nations children in Lytton, British Columbia. As I honored my longing, that story of ministers and teachers who "meant well" was revealed to me and released to the world.

What about longings you just can't satisfy? I can't change what was done to suppress the spirits of First Nations people who were forced to attend residential schools, but I can make a difference in my actions every day. My life can declare that I will not deny or forget, but will remember and offer what I can. I will honor my longings so that I give from a place of love rather than impose myself on others.

How can you use writing to help you deal with the longings you just can't satisfy? Writing can allow you to express your sadness over unrealized dreams. When you do that writing in a circle, you have companions near by. You find out you're not alone with your longing. When you read your longing to the circle, you give longing a voice. The sorrow becomes lighter, an easier burden to carry. In that self-expression and release is the healing.

Honoring your longing isn't meant to leave you sad. I think of David Whyte's poem "The House of Belonging" in which he describes home as a place "where I want to love all the things it has taken me so long to learn to love." I take that to include longing, along with other emotions we have been afraid to invite: the love of our talents, our gifts, our selves. Our songs of longing become songs of belonging when we embrace and express all of who we are.

A Reader Tells Her Story**The Diamond**

Mary Jo Doig began writing her memoirs after attending a Writing From Life Workshop and joining Story Circle Network's e-circle # 2 in 2000. Her children grown, her professional career no longer fulfilling, Mary Jo moved from New York's Catskill Mts. to a tiny wooded cabin in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, where she uncovered gifts leading to inner peace and spirituality. She has also written a novel for young adults.

It is a stunning Marquise diamond, nearly a carat, set in sterling silver. Joe gives it first to Corinne, then breaks that engagement to give it to my mother, Audrey, in 1940. They both work at 20th Century Fox and have known each other about four years.

Audrey is a beautiful brunette with a lovely smile. Joe asks her for dates when they first meet, but Audrey is waiting for her love, Shep, to graduate from law school. Time and distance cause the relationship to fade, which Audrey sadly accepts. Yet, she wants to marry and have a family, so in time, when Joe again seeks a date, she accepts. I can see his response—the charming man, attentive, affectionate, his smile warm. Joe and Audrey are married on August 10, 1940, their future holding as much promise as the radiant diamond on her left hand.

I am their first child, born shortly after Pearl Harbor. Two years later Audrey is pregnant again. She also knows Joe is seeing another woman. When she tells him about the new baby, he tells her to get an abortion. She refuses. When my tiny five-pound sister, Jacqueline, is born on March 4, 1945, the baby cries constantly. I remember only chaos from that time forward, with the exception of my sister, Bonnie's birth in 1950.

The lovely diamond becomes enveloped in the darkness of Audrey's jewelry box for decades. She divorces Joe when I leave for college.

Now it is May, 2002. Joe died years ago—alcohol and cigarettes the thieves of years of his life. Audrey is 86. She would be healthy except for the 45 years she smoked. Thus she has emphysema, uses oxygen, and her heart is compromised by the strain her lungs create.

My sister Bonnie calls me to say Mom has bronchitis. Can I come help? Of course, I say without hesitation. As I drive the five hundred miles from Virginia to Long Island, I have lots of time to reflect. I know there are few trips like this remaining and it's possible this may be my last. I feel sad, drifting into and then away from depressed feelings.

I ponder that, although my mother and I always say "I love you" at the end of each phone conversation, in truth these are often words I say rather than feelings I feel. There is a wall between us and I know it's my wall, not hers. Then I slip a condensed version of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* into the tape deck. I am crossing onto the Long Island Expressway when the story concludes. I never dreamt that incest would be part of that story but it is. I can usually pick up on family incest as instantly as my mother's cat leaps at the sound of a pop-off lid. Did the mother in Smiley's novel know what her husband was doing to two of her three daughters, I wonder? And then for the thousandth time comes the next question, why didn't my mother know what my father did to two of her three daughters?

Audrey was well into her seventies and frail when my memories returned. Nevertheless I asked her my haunting question: did she know? She looked at me straight and steady and said, "I didn't know, but I can believe he did that. If I'd known, I would have killed him."

At the time, I felt relief and validation by her response, for many who ask that question are met with anger, denial and rejection. Yet, in time, another haunting question surfaced: Mom, when he came home drunk and wanting sex and you were hiding, didn't you ever wonder where he went? Didn't you ever hear anything? My room was next to yours.... It's a catch-22 for me, because at her delicate age, I will talk no further with her about it. What would her answer be? I will never know. So, it's up to me to tear down the wall.

Soon I pull into the so-familiar sandy driveway. Inside, she lies upright on her bed, her dark eyes dull, her salt-and-pepper hair flat on one side and at varied angles on the other side.

She grimaces. "Hello, Mary Jo. I'm having a terrible night." I can easily see her anxiety, hear the rattled cough and difficult breathing. A few days later, she is diagnosed with bilateral pneumonia. After two days of massive antibiotic doses, she is not responding. There is a Do Not Resuscitate order.

Mom knows her condition is grave and says, when we visit her that Sunday night, "I know this will be hard on you girls.... It would have been nice to have had the summer in my little house."

I cannot speak. Later, I go to Mom's silent home. In her room I sit in the easy chair where she spends most of each day. I sit there for two hours, wrenched inside. I don't want to lose her. Not yet. It is only when I decide I must tear down the wall between us that I begin to feel some peace and calm inside. The bricks seem so trite when compared to the fact that she may be dying.

I pray that she can have her wish—one more summer in the home she has created over the past thirty years—acutely aware that I am also asking for a little more time to be a better daughter, for time without the wall. Then I let it all go.

The next morning Bonnie and I drive to the hospital, somber, but planning to make this, if it is going to be one of our last times with Mom, as cheerful for her as we can make it. Bonnie tells me she has prayed all night for Mom to have just one more summer. I stare at her in amazement. "Bonnie, I prayed for the same thing," I blurt.

At the hospital Mom's x-ray shows her lungs are improving. We are stunned by this turnaround. It is unbelievable that she was so close to death last night and just a few dark hours later, is recuperating. But the next hours and days reveal that she has, indeed, once more regained her health. She will come home and be able to live in her home again with some supports.

In my heart, I believe she's been given the summer she

Meet Other LifeWriters and Learn from Their Stories...

Jan Seale: A Writer at Work

Jan Seale is an award-winning author whose poetry, fiction, and non-fiction prose has appeared in Yale Review, Chicago Tribune, Nimrod, Texas Monthly, and Writers' Digest. In addition to her work as a writer, she has served as a high school and college English teacher, workshop facilitator, memoir teacher, editor, and consultant. She is the author of three volumes of poetry, a short story collection, a book of essays, a how-to book, and eight children's books. She has also edited three wildlife books. She received a National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowship in 1982, has won seven PEN/Syndicated awards for her fiction, and holds a place on the Texas Council of the Humanities Speakers Bureau. Jan lives with her husband Carl, a composer, in McAllen TX. She has three grown sons and two grandsons.

*What do we bring,
helpless, at birth?
What are we worth?
We come with family,
a history, a past,
stories that last.*

*What do we leave,
going our way,
at end of day?
The stories we lived,
when young, when old,
the stories we told.*

Jan Epton Seale

*[Your life story] is
stored in your head.
You've told parts of it to
others... You've spent
countless hours in reverie.
But your life story
won't be recorded until
you write it. Sounds self-
evident, doesn't it? But
it's the biggest truth you
have to deal with if you
want to succeed in making
a permanent record
of your life.*

A Nuts-&-Bolts Guide
J.E.S.

*It doesn't matter whether
you set your goal as
two hours or two pages.
What matters is that you
have a regular schedule
and follow through with
it.*

A Nuts-&-Bolts Guide
J.E.S.

SCN. You're a much-published author, Jan, and it's clear that you take your writing work seriously. When did you start to write? What, for you, is the relationship between writing and publishing your work?

Jan. Someone said that you don't have to have an unhappy childhood in order to be a writer but it helps. I began writing as soon as I could read and write, probably because I had tuberculosis as a child. Just as all my friends were going to school and exploring the world, I was sitting in bed from age five to seven, entertaining myself. I still have a few of the books I read at that time. One was a sort of coffee table book with pictures of birds and poems about them. To this day, I can turn the pages of that book, glance at the bird, and recite the poem that accompanies it. As I memorized those poems, I remember thinking: I can write something like this. And I did.

I look back on that time as a marvelous period in a child's life where words—reading, and saying, and writing them—actually saved her, kept her sane. And yet she didn't know any of this. She was only following an instinct toward something she would do and love her whole life.

Later, as a teen writing poems, I had a couple of friends who wrote poems too, so we had this pleasurable thing among us. My teachers responded appreciatively when I showed them a poem but there was no organized writing club in my school. In my love of words, I knew I was different from my classmates—but no one ever said, "Jan, I think you're going to be a writer."

I won a couple of campus writing contests in college. I was in seminars in creative writing at the University of Louisville and after I graduated with a B.A. in English, I began publishing poems. But perhaps surprisingly, I was also publishing articles on childcare. My first son was born seven months after I got my degree. and with him came articles on diapering, bedtime, telephoning the doctor. I found that absolutely ordinary ideas about mothering, common sense stuff could be sold for good money. I teamed up with an OB-Gyn who wanted the byline but not the money; we wrote a number

of articles on patient-doctor relations. After a few years, I went back to school for an M.A. Mine was the first creative writing thesis in poetry at North Texas State Univ. Then I taught a year at North Texas and began to see the possibilities of publishing poems and critical articles in academic journals.

I look on writing as a calling. Some people are put on earth to pray, others to be surgeons, or caregivers, or teachers. Writers are here to write. If one writes, knowing that she is doing what she is supposed to be doing, that is the important thing about the act: then publication becomes the fine by-product that it should be. I enjoy being published because it's a way of connecting with others, but I believe I will always write, regardless of publication. I write to set my thinking in order, to figure out puzzles, to entertain myself. Sometimes writing is solace, sometimes an alleluia for the pleasure of simply existing

SCN. In addition to working as a writer, you have taught autobiography and memoir writing. Tell us about this part of your life.

Jan. Teaching autobiographical writing came after I left the University of Texas-Pan American, where I had taught English for 12 years. When I quit, I thought I would probably focus on writing, but I found that I missed teaching. Also, I needed more income, so I developed a little "cottage industry" based on a perceived need in the place where I live.

Every year thousands of retired people winter in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. With discretionary time, they seek out activities, among them, naturally, is telling the story of their lives for their families. So I developed a month-long, weekly series called "Writing Your Life Story." I taught it mainly at the Hidalgo County Historical Museum, which welcomed the traffic as well as the subject. I also taught classes in RV parks and retirement centers.

Now I've expanded my yearly Winter Texan offerings to two workshop series, Part One and Part Two. Generally, people take Part One in

January and Part Two in February. Sometimes I teach multiple classes.

I also teach one- and two-week workshops in autobiography at other sites, such as Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, West Texas A&M at Canyon in the Summer Writing Program, and at Mo Ranch near Kerrville TX. Often I give one-day workshops, and hour-long presentations to groups like genealogical or old-timers clubs.

I also teach creative writing, both locally and elsewhere. And lately I've been giving a workshop on women's wisdom called "Celebrating Women's Gifts." I've just come back from Maryland, where I presented this topic in a weekend workshop at a retreat center.

SCN. What are some of the satisfactions you gain from teaching memoir writing? Have you experienced many frustrations?

Jan. Adults, particularly older people, are ready to learn; they receive information eagerly. They may have the gifts of wisdom, compassion and patience, enabling them to hear their classmates' stories and respond helpfully. They also know how to take what they hear from others and apply it to their own stories. And they often hear *themselves* telling their *own* stories for the first time to others and may make a wonderful discovery in the process. I love to feel that I have helped bring people together to let this magic happen.

But there are frustrations. The hours together are far too brief, and time limitations in class inhibit people's freedom to tell and hear stories. How to share 70 or 80 years of one's life? Another frustration: Here in the Valley my students are not permanent residents, and when I teach away from home, I am the itinerant one. I may never know whether our time together has helped people to complete their stories.

My teaching relieves the loneliness and constant self-starting of writing. I can rise from my desk, take my lesson plans, and move out to a definite time and place. The teaching also takes me into interesting environments and allows me to study human nature.

But while my students' life stories contain fascinating facts and turns of event and often inspire and amaze me, I've not been much tempted to appropriate them in my writing. They have *their* stories and I have mine. I don't claim any virtue about this, but when I reflect on it I think it's probably best that it's turned out this way. I don't mean to imply that there's a strict line between my teaching and writing. But the way the teaching influences the writing is more a general thing for me. My time with students shapes me as a person in subtle ways that will allow me to write with more feeling, from a broader experi-

ence, and with that kind of awe for the human condition that a writer needs.

SCN. You've written a handbook for memoir writers. How did that come about? You've also self-published it—could you share your thoughts on that process?

Jan. I laughingly say I wrote *The Nuts-and-Bolts Guide to Writing Your Life Story* when the handouts for my classes became too bulky. After years of teaching memoir writing, composition, and creative writing, I realized I'd acquired more than a few tricks in my bag. I wanted to write a book that students could use when they left the class, or as a substitute for taking the class. The other self-imposed requirements were that the examples would be drawn from older adult experiences and that this how-to book would actually be fun to read and use.

After it was published, I learned that students in freshman composition were using the technical chapters on spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Now, on the advice of a book consultant in New York, I'm in the process of splitting it into two books. One will be called *An Armchair Guide to Writing Your Life Story* and the other will be *Glamorous Grammar*. I hope to get outside publishers for these.

As for the self-publishing, that was not my first choice. (An agent shopped it for eighteen months and got two offers, but we decided against both). The self-publishing has proved satisfactory in that I keep much more of the profit from the sales than I would if I'd gone through a commercial publisher, and I control the distribution. I always have books on hand and can do anything I want to with them, including revisions. We're in the sixth printing now—I print 100 at a time with a local printer. The book goes with me to all my seminars and classes. Depending on the arrangements with the sponsors of the event, it can be a required text or a supplement.

Self-publishing has polished its halo lately, and I think it's one of the healthier trends in publishing today, especially because it's an answer to the mega-publishing houses which call books "products" and pay the writer poorly. (Distributors irritate me, because they gobble up another 15%, after the 40% wholesale discount, off the retail price of a book.) Self-publishing allows the writer to get on with disseminating her work, but she must have the means and the energy to promote and distribute it. That's the trade-off: you get more of the profit, but you have to work harder *after* publication. I dislike this aspect of self-publishing, but, I was willing to do it because I believed in the book and I

One of the greatest delights I have as a teacher of autobiographical writing is to see people literally access their long-term memories as they listen to others' stories in class. Lights dawn in tired eyes; "Ah-hah" and "Oh, yes!" are audible. Pencils scribble notes and the fleshed-out memories come back on the page next class session. "It's a miracle, they say. "I got started and I remembered a lot more than I thought I could. One thing made me remember something else."

Nuts-&-Bolts
J.E.S

The six senses are the biggest storehouse of specifics... Specifics have the greater appeal to our gossipy inquisitive wondering human natures... Write a bushel of details for every dash of generalities. If you've done a good job of selecting your details, your reader will fill in the blanks, and with pleasure.

Nuts-&-Bolts
J.E.S.

Ernest Hemingway advised writing until you come to a place 'where you still have your juice and know what will happen next and you stop and try to live through until the next day when you hit it again.' Still good advice after nearly 40 years.

Nuts-&-Bolts
J.E.S.

needed it desperately to teach from.

SCN. *Some of us are poets, others essayists, others write fiction. You seem comfortable in a variety of literary forms. Tell us about this, please.*

Jan. Poetry. Whatever I write, I always return to poetry. It's the most satisfying way for me to write. I think of poetry as my mother tongue, my basic artistic language.

Short Fiction. I began to write short fiction while I was teaching at Pan Am because I was teaching creative writing and the curriculum required students to write a short story. I thought I should be writing my own, along with them, to experience what I was putting them through.

And then a beautiful thing happened: I found out early on that certain stories in my heart and mind could be told much better in prose than in poetry. So the same thing happened when I was 35 as happened when I was five, alone in bed all day with a book of poems. I read and read and then put the book down and said, "I can write one of those."

I had beginner's luck with the second short story I wrote, called "Jack of Hearts." (It's in my collection, *Airlift*.) The story was chosen by the PEN/Syndicated Fiction Project and published in seven major newspapers, including *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Kansas City Star*. In the decade following, seven of my stories were chosen for this project. Two were read on National Public Radio, and another is read by Ellen Burstyn on a tape from Papier-Mache Press. These are traditional stories that appeal to general readers.

I have a new manuscript of short stories that I've begun submitting. It may be hard to get them published as a collection because many of the university presses (which are able to print collections) want experimental stories for academic readers. I had to smile the other day when I received a kind rejection from a university press editor in which she declined my stories because they were "plot-driven."

By the way, I'm probably one of a very few fiction writers

who is not too eager to write a novel. I have written a formula romance novel (unpublished—I wrote it on a dare), and I have the beginning of another mainstream novel that I might get around to finishing some day.

Essays. This is one genre which literally sneaked up on me! I have written columns for newspapers—*Living and Other Complications* for a local paper; another for the *Corpus Christi Caller*—and for a time I wrote an annual Fourth of July piece for the *McAllen Monitor*. One day I looked at my clips from these and other sources and realized that I had a book, which became *Homeland*.

As I get older, I seem to write more essays. For one thing, by now, I've witnessed hundreds of folk writing their memoirs, and have been privileged to read some gorgeous accounts of personal experience by my students.

It stands to reason that essay and personal experience writers just get better as they age. As our memories and mental facilities change (notice that I say "change", not "decline") with age, we learn to draw on our vast experience and to feel confident in speaking the truth of our lives through essays. As I get older, I think my will to invent—to use ideation in really fantastical ways—has waned. I'm looking on this as an opportunity to explore other ways of thinking and writing.

I'm very interested in fluid and crystal memory research, particularly as it reflects the mature mind and memory.

I'm also interested in the newly-identified "creative non-fiction" (now about ten years old). It's fascinating how much artistry can go into this kind of writing, and a growing attention is being given to the form and shape of it.

Much of my published writing, maybe 80 percent, is shaped from my life experiences. Sometimes the fun is in trying to be as honest as possible (in essays or poetry) and sometimes the pleasure is in seeking to alter it—disguise, re-do, add to, take from, mix and match—for a more satisfying experience for the reader (in fiction or poetry). Of course, everything anyone has told me, and everything and everyone I observe, are also "my"

continued on Page 18



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Books for the Journey

In each issue, we review books that teach us something important about women's stories. If you have a favorite book you'd like to share, send for our Reviewers Guide or go to <http://www.storycircle.org/ReviewersGuidelines.shtml>. We welcome your reviews!

Airlift: Short Stories, by Jan Epton Seale. Texas Christian University Press, 1992, Fort Worth TX. Reviewed by Melanie Alberts.

Airlift, Jan Epton Seale's collection of short stories is a book populated by farmers, laborers, teachers, retirees, mothers and children whose lives are presented with humor and grace. Ms. Seale concentrates her attention on the common folk of rural Texas and the Midwest. She names them Earl, Edgar, Mattie and Hattie Mae and treats their passions with sympathy. In one of my favorite stories, "Going to Terrell," Lucille mourns the death of her only son while her husband Clovis denies his grief. He sends her off to a sanitarium where Lucille learns she is not the crazy one. In a letter to her "Sistoo" Lucille writes: "Sistoo, can you still love me—even though I am supposed to be having a nervous breakdown? I know I shouldn't ask, but I hope somebody does."

Lucille's need to feel loved is echoed in varying ways throughout *Airlift*. In "Jack of Hearts" a single mother helps her "special" young son make homemade valentines. Although Seale never spells it out, the mother worries about her son's obsession with making the right valentine for each child. Her catharsis is triggered by a simple thank you note from a classmate. In a particularly moving piece, "What Flesh is Heir To," an elderly lady named Dosha recalls her long-standing resentment for having to hand her sickly infant over to an uncouth sister-in-law living on the frontier:

"[W]ho can say what is important sorrow and what it not? Who? There are things in a woman's life that hurt her deep, and yet they don't mean a thing to other people. In the end, she swallows them back until she knows them only at night, coming over her as she wakes, weeping and ashamed."

The eighteen stories in *Airlift* will alternately lift your spirits and make you tearful. These stories celebrate the lives of ordinary people who delight in the appearance of birds in a martin house and find strength in holding a child's hand. Ms. Seale reveals the importance of trampolines and sewing machines and custom-designed tombstones, in a voice that is never condescending and always a pleasure to read.

Homeland: Essays Beside and Beyond the Rio Grande, by Jan Epton Seale. New Santander Press, Edinburg, TX. Reviewed by Judith Helburn

Take fine writing, humor, wonderment and family. Gently stir with some interesting facts, and you have *Homeland*. With this recipe, Jan Epton Seale demonstrates how to look at our ordinary lives and activities and see the extraordinary, as she does.

For instance, the story "One Day in the Life of a South Texas Juror" covers an experience that many of us have had. "Near the back," she says, "I pick my way over several people, a man immobilized by new high-topped boots, a woman reeking of Estée Lauder, a teenager temporarily prevented from rising when the handle of his hip pocket comb catches on the seat..." Familiar, yes?

Seale also writes of a possum posing on the back fence for the perfect "photo op" and of her dubious skills in Spanish and the trouble language can cause. She writes of a South Texas Independence Day celebration and "A Nineties Kind of Wedding." She asks,

Is a wedding an anachronism in the nineties? After all, they've been living together eight months... "Get over it, WASP Mother. We have had a first for everything," the groom says to me later in a conversation about love customs. "The firsts just came in a different order from yours and Dad's."

Jan Epton Seale delightfully, gently gives us a taste of plain, ordinary, delicious, extraordinary life.



She would like to know in what office in Washington, on what polished desk, was born the idea that a child is an adult on an eighteenth birthday... This was a hard thing, converting to the past tense of mom.
—Homeland, "The Past Tense of Mom"

Is it too late to honor the spirit of the generous and magical plant world? Will we be happy only when the last office building supplants the last fig tree? Don't we see the connection between a tree and joy?
—Homeland, "How Soon is a Fig Tree Withered Away?"

When I loved you into being, I took the chance of loss. In every shiny bicycle of life there lies a chance of wiping out. Crying and daring are risky business, but they are about all we can know of that precious beauty we call living.
—Homeland, "Letter to a Long-ago Boy"



True Words from Real Women

In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish members' 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!

Songs to Sing

I just gave away my ukulele. Beginning in 1947, my intended, three-month-visit to the Territory of Hawaii with a Hawaiian-born college roommate while her parents visited stateside stretched to three years, the longest a "coast haole" could live at Fernhurst, the Honolulu YWCA residence. Parties with local Hawaiians enticed me to learn to hula and to play the ukulele, which filled an unsuspected vacuum somewhere viscerally deep. How I longed to be a real Hawaiian! Memorizing the native songs, listening to slack-key guitar and learning to play the ukulele brought me as close as reality permitted.

Eventually the time came when I must return to the Mainland, taking my ukulele as my emblem of Hawaii. Recently, upon discovering it gathering dust in the closet, I was poignantly reminded of the dreams and hopes contained in swim-suited bodies nuzzled by trade winds and entranced by the beach fire that flickered on singing faces and nimble fingers. The mended crack in my uke recalled the young man who had slapped it too hard against his thigh, splitting the wood. I envisioned again the hibiscus blooms daily threaded on split-bamboo strips embedded in the huge, sand-filled pot in the lobby of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. I could again taste the popovers of Sunday brunch at the Halekulani Hotel. Double carnation, pikake, lehua and white ginger leis once more moistly tickled my neck. The view from the Pali road past the spot, so the song told us, where King Kamehameha's enemies died reappeared as unspoiled as when first seen.

Now, 50 years later, I have forgotten the fingering for the ukulele chords, my vocal chords are rusty, no one on the Mainland wanted to hear the songs, and the young man and many of the swimmers are dead. The Royal Hawaiian has lost its green lawn that harbored the hibiscus bushes; the Halekulani is no more; the road no longer goes over the Pali, and the leis are fresh only in memory.

So, I gave away my ukulele, but discovered that it is not so easy to dispose of the residue of the unfulfilled dreams and hopes that it embodied.

Mary Louise Lyman
Ashland OR

Not only is your story worth telling, but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song.—*Gloria Hunt Naylor*

Writing

Words: my lifeline
to myself, to others,
I yearn to share them
as they make their way
unbidden
to the surface

where they are welcomed
with the joy of discovery
as though, like Columbus,
America is discovered;
I celebrate,
my goal achieved.

Duffie Bart
Monterey CA

No Regrets

I like to reminisce about growing up in the late forties and early fifties. During my childhood, every evening after supper I could be found in the kitchen perched on top of a three-foot tall, wobbly red wooden stool, drying dishes and singing songs with my Mom. Sometimes when she sang "Big Rock Candy Mountain" I'd keep time to her singing by wobbling the stool to and fro, making Mom laugh until tears streamed down her face. I liked to make her laugh. She said singing was good for the digestion.

As I grew older, drying dishes was a special time to share secrets, to learn about growing up and becoming a young woman. I can still remember one hot evening in August 1949, when Mom told me about the hardships of her childhood. Her mother died when she was 10, the same age as me. Her story made me cry. To comfort me, she gave me a big hug and sang "You Are My Sunshine." She could always make me smile. As I wiped away my tears with the end of the dishtowel, I watched her wash two tablespoons in the dishpan of hot soapy water, then dry them on her apron. She stopped singing and grinned at me, then placed the bottoms of the spoons back to back and began slapping the spoons against her leg and the palm of her hand. Giggling, I watched her play the spoons, and accompanied her by deliberately making the stool wobble back and forth to the beat of the spoons. I watched in awe, knowing I wanted to be like Mom when I grew up.

Looking back, I realize Mom was unable to fulfill all of her dreams, but she had no regrets. She had songs to sing. I'm glad she sang them for me.

Music, Maestro, Please—Just Give Me a Latin Beat

In the mid 1940's my life pivoted around the song "Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing In a Hurry." It was due to a shared two-for-one dance course with my friend Lois, whose husband had been called into the Army. We already danced fox trot, waltz, and swing at U.S.O. dances, but admitted to sketchy knowledge of the rumba, tango and samba. Xavier Cugat was recording exciting music from Cuba. Fidel Castro was an unfamiliar name—and Americans spent romantic weekends in Havana, dancing to scintillating renditions of "Amour," "Perhaps" and "Adios."

At the studio we reveled in the wicked feeling of swaying our hips to sensuous beats of "Jungle Drums" and "The Peanut Vendor." The weekly Hit Parade invited the world to sway to "Beguine The Beguine," "Siboney," and newcomer Desi Arnaz' "Babalu."

Lois followed her husband to a different city when the war ended—and I embarked on my new career as an enthusiastic Murray instructor. Favorite Latin teaching records were "Jalousie," "Brazil," and "Tangerine." Nostalgically I remember the many diverse personalities into whose lives we helped put a little fun.

A vacation trip to New York, plus a visit to the Havana-Madrid dance contest, presented even more tantalizing levels of Latin dancing. We were amazed at the dexterity of footwork and wild, sexy, uninhibited possibilities demonstrated by sleek, polished Latin dancers from the big city. We two teachers from the hinterlands watched enthralled and goggle-eyed at the exciting decadence!

I later married a fellow instructor following an "Orchids In The Moonlight" courtship—usually with maracas, claves and bongos playing in the background. Our favorite vacations were cruises for practically round-the-clock dancing. My nimble-footed husband's philosophy was: fly-up, dance-back, let's live! Happy memories of the first cruise included the Eastern Star widows who insisted we dance close to them because they "loved that wiggly dancing."

My voice was apparently never meant for singing—but I joyfully express music through feet and body motions as often as possible. Thank you, Maestro. Keep up the Latin beat!

Pat O'Toole
Sun City AZ

Remembering a Moon Boat Lullaby

Consolation calls my mind to leap,
To times when comfort came in moon boat song,
When Mother sang her little girl to sleep,
With silver notes to sail the heart along.
No matter why the tears or hurt to tell,
Or even if there was no pain to weep,
Her sweet soprano served a solace well.

As I grew up the tune lay stilled in time,
When claimed, assurance came in other ways.
But the melody kept silent in my mind,
To soar again, a gift for other days.

More years rolled by across the sea of living,
Until life's boat held babies of my own.
Resumed, the song came richer for the giving,
Formed loving hearts from reverent passion sewn;
They learned the words and reveled in the singing.
Again, song ceased while children bloomed,
Until recalled to send one heaven-winging.

As, slowly, life renews, the song in memory rests,
Till from love's thread babes weave through other lives,
New hearts to snuggle on a Mother's breast,
And dream a silver moon boat through sleep's skies.

Sunnye Tiedemann
Murray NE

Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is loosely organized around a particular theme. While we do accept non-thematic writing, we give precedence to stories written on the theme of a particular issue. **Members only, please.** Please make sure that your stories are **350 words** or less. We receive so many contributions that we must reject longer stories. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

Tracks and Trails—March 2003 (due January 15)

Buds and Blossoms—June 2003 (due April 15)

Saving Time—September 2003 (due July 15)

If you can send your writing via email or as a Word attachment, the editors will love you. If you type your story on an Internet computer, all you need to do is **highlight** the text, **copy** it, and **paste** it directly into an email message. (This will eliminate lots of extra typing!) Send your work to Marie Buckley, marie@aracnet.com. If you submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to Marie Buckley, 1070 N.E. Sturgess St., Hillsboro, OR 97124-3330

More True Words

Stop—in the Name of Love

When did I stop singing, I wonder? I always loved to sing as a child. The fact that I had a lousy voice never stopped me. I'd spend hours in the bedroom that I shared with two sisters, singing to albums on the portable record player covered with imitation crocodile skin. I didn't have any of my own albums, but was allowed to listen to those my mother bought before she had five kids to raise. Show tunes, that's what I listened to: *Oklahoma*, *Sound of Music*, *West Side Story*. I dreamed of being Maria, and sang, "I Feel Pretty." I was Maria, waiting for my Tony.

As I grew older, I gradually stopped singing, without even realizing it. I tried to resume the habit when my oldest son was born. One night, while I crooned his favorite, Van Morrison's "Tupelo Honey," he covered my mouth and said, "No sing, Mommy." It was one his first sentences.

One evening not long ago, my sons, overtired and irritable, started snapping at each other, arguing about who is going to sit in which chair. I've been feeling overtired and irritable myself lately, and without even realizing it, I fling out my hand, and yell "Stop!" The boys, startled out of their argument, stop and stare at me. I have one hand on my hip and the other flung out like an overzealous traffic cop. An unexpected memory hits me. "—in the name of love, before you break my heart," I sing.

My three-year old thinks that I've just generated a brilliant joke and starts to imitate me. We both laugh and begin to vamp around the kitchen.

"Great, Owen, now look at what you've started," my seven-year-old says with a heavy sigh. He rolls his eyes at us, and strolls from the kitchen. Owen and I shrug at each other as we sing our way to bed.

Erin Boyle
Pittsburgh PA

Making Music

Determined, at eight years old, to play hymns, I methodically plunked out the four parts to "My Jesus I Love Thee" on the family piano. I can only imagine what it sounded like when I put all four parts together for the first time. But the family didn't complain about the repetition and mistakes so I kept it up. Then, by ear, I started playing "Blue Moon" and other songs of the day.

My older sister had given me a couple of lessons before she left home. After my first lesson, Dad told me if I practiced I might be better than her someday. I knew that would take a lot since she even played for the college choir. But that motivation and my determination spurred me on to teach myself how to play.

Having shown talent and interest, the folks had me start formal piano lessons with Mrs. Harriet. Practicing scales and songs like "Bill Grogan's Goat" bored me, but I stuck with it.

Mrs. Harriet eventually sent me to Mrs. Agatha who taught higher level students. Sensing my continued lack of enthusiasm, Mrs. Agatha challenged me by switching me to organ lessons.

The complexities of the instrument, and the coordination required, both challenged and intrigued me. The pedal work especially appealed to me. Our community frowned on dancing but, subconsciously, I learned to dance on those pedals. I became a pretty good church organist because I knew how to lead the congregation while dancing!

Regrettably, I haven't always embraced my musical skills. Sometimes I had no song in my heart, and no passion for playing. But now I'm back. Lately I've learned to dance, and not just on the pedals. I get on Western wear and dance to boot scootin' music like "Two Dollars in the Juke Box." I call it enjoying the classics—country classic, that is.

I'm back partly because my name, Carolyn Joy, implies music and joy. I'm choosing to bring back the songs, and to play until I can't. Plus, without inhibitions and guilt, I'll keep on dancin', and not just on the pedals.

Carolyn Joy Scheider
Austin TX

Stopping by St. Cyril's

Dimly lit
By the flickering votive lights,
The Church smells
Of incense and candle wax.
I sit under the choir loft,
Savoring my surroundings.
Huddled near the altar,
Dressed all in black,
The usual group of older ladies,
Is reciting the rosary.
I listen to them,
As I have done hundreds of times.
The rhythm of their Slavic words,
Music to my ears.
Above me, suddenly,
The organ sounds for choir practice.
The members hum softly
To find their key.
I recognize the song's prelude.
And my heart quickens.
The director's deep bass voice
Vibrates within me.
As he begins the words to Ave Maria,
A great peace comes over me.
I want it to last and last.
It is so beautiful.

Jackie Newman
Austin TX



Lang Syne
for Robbie

I have been lost
in the *lang syne*
of when it was true
between you and me.

I have followed the meander
into memory and stumbled
into dark and doleful
mists of melancholia.

I *kenna* what summoned
me into reverie's river
but I kilted up my skirts
and waded knee-deep
in nostalgic reminiscences.
Remembering your kisses.

Recalling when we walked
hand in hand in the gloaming,
alert to a full moon on the rising.

We were also full —
replete with anticipation
hearts swelling in fond affection.

Now you're *gane*;
the *bairns*, all grown
I *ken* your *luve* no *mair*.

Perhaps you say I've
been a *tawpie*,
vera, vera witless to
let my mind go so far astray.

But I'll take a
cup o' kindness yet
and pray for more love
like yesterday's.

Alyce Guynn
Austin TX

When I Was Six

I pushed back reality by filling my days with lots of ritualized, carefully controlled, meaningless actions. Even though my bed was accessible from both sides I never, ever got out of bed on the right hand side always the left. Left house shoe, then right one. Counting carefully the steps to the bathroom. I would not walk without counting and if I reached my goal at an odd number I had to add one more tiny little step. I always put my clothes on in the same order, left sock, then right, etc. My fork was always placed on a napkin to the right of my plate, never the left. I could only go up the

steps right foot first, being ever so careful not to step on any cracks in the sidewalk. My school papers were written and rewritten. I did not allow myself to erase. With so many self-imposed rules, who had time to dwell on unpleasant thoughts? My thinking seemed to be that if I did things the same exact way each time I could control events in my life. As an adult I have learned this is called "magical thinking" and that my actions were not all that unusual for a child under stress. I find myself occasionally reverting to these childhood rituals when life seems out of control. Even though logically I know it makes no difference which side of the sink my toothbrush rests on, I find myself returning to the bathroom to make sure it is on the "right" side.

Laylee Muslovski
Belton TX

Kitchen Table Debut

Twenty years ago, our family of five was seated around the dinner table when our eight-year-old daughter, Alison, announced to us that she had a song to sing. She believed that performing this song would gain her the position of soloist within the so-called "Peppermint Factory," a local singing group of children aged ten and under.

Alison had been in the group for about a month when her "music box within" evidently signaled to her that it was time that she revealed her talent to her director, Mrs. Clavelle. She figured she could do the job as well as the current soloist who was two years older.

Naturally, we were all interested in hearing her perform. After much coaxing, she shyly agreed to audition for us then and there, but not without first crawling under the dinner table to avoid embarrassment. After finally quieting the giggles of her two sisters, we signaled her to "hit it!" To our delight, the sweetest, purest, most angelic rendition of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" wafted up to our ears from below. Amidst much clapping and cheering, Alison crawled out and took her bow. This was all the encouragement she needed.

A week later, I received a call from Mrs. Clavelle, who couldn't contain her excitement over my daughter's confidence and ability. From that point on, Alison sang solos for three years with the group, performing at malls, nursing homes, and many other community events. Music became her passion as well as her major in college, with voice being her primary instrument.

Three years ago, the phone rang one Saturday morning. Alison was calling from the rehearsal stage of the Johannesburg Symphonic Choir in South Africa. She had been singing with the Symphony for two years and they were in the middle of a rehearsal with the Three Tenors. They would perform for an audience of forty thousand people with Nelson Mandela as the guest of honor—and to think that it all began under the kitchen table!

Judith Flournoy
Austin TX

And More True Words

Red Top Pot

Back in the fifties, the popular Red Top Band toured the Mississippi delta every summer. The band's soloist, Willie Lee, had a fine tenor voice. He ended every dance performance by singing "Danny Boy." His claim to fame was his ability to hold the high note of this song sixty seconds. The Red Top Pot encouraged him to perform this traditional feat. Each dancer put a dollar in the pot, guessed how long he'd hold the high note. The winner and Willie Lee split the pot.

One night I decided to risk a dollar. I guessed seventy seconds, a new record. As Willie Lee stepped up to the microphone, all were silent. The old song floated across the room like the sweet scent of summer magnolias, until the final crescendo. Then the crowd shouted, "Sing it Willie—one thousand, two thousand, three thousand..." Everybody clapped counting, "Fifty-eight thousand, fifty-nine thousand, sixty thousand..."

He was still holding on!

"...Sixty-eight thousand, sixty-nine thousand, seventy thousand!"

He'd done it. He'd set a new record. The pot held one hundred twenty dollars—sixty for Willie Lee and sixty for me.

When Daddy learned I'd won, he said, "Sue, gamblin's devil's play. You must make amends by placin' your winnings' in the foreign mission collection plate on Sunday."

As the congregation sang "Bringing in the Sheaves," I reluctantly released my winnings. Mama said, "Doesn't it make you feel good to know you helped feed starvin' children in Africa?" I guess my contribution made up for all the mealtimes I had not eaten all the food on my plate.

Suzanne Vance Zoch
Ruidoso NM

A Mother, an Author and Songs to Sing

When I began to write my first book I realized how similar giving birth to a book is to giving birth to a child. During the first trimester I pondered how a baby would affect my career. The questioning continued even as I poured over baby books. As an author I wondered how a new writing project with immeasurable hours of research would fit into my hectic schedule. The questioning continued all the while I was working to develop a theme and title.

During the second trimester the full-length mirror wasn't kind, it showed bulges—nothing fit anymore and I couldn't see my feet. At night my sleep was constantly disturbed by urgent calls to the bathroom. During the third to sixth month of writing I'd dash off to the computer immediately following breakfast and skip lunch and dinner. The full-length mirror was not kind to this hit-and-miss eating schedule. At night new ideas and wonderful inspirations would jar me out of a sound sleep.

Our house took on a new level of clutter during the last trimester. Furniture was rearranged and a nursery rose out of the clutter. I packed my suitcase for the hospital. By the sixth to ninth month my chapters were falling into place. My office was messy and piles of notes covered the top of my desk. The least movement sent stacked reference books crashing to the floor. Finally I packed off my manuscript to the publishers.

Near my due date I was rushed to the hospital wondering, "Is it supposed to hurt this much?" After hours of pushing and groaning I was handed a beautiful baby girl, all pink and cuddly. Tears rolled down my face as I whispered a soft lullaby to my precious bundle. It was my song to sing.

As an author I wondered, "Why is the mail so slow?" Finally Federal Express delivered a box—my manuscript had turned into a beautiful book. Tears rolled down my face as I shouted joyfully, "I did it." It was my song to sing.

Trudie M. Eklund
Austin TX

No Songs to Sing

I don't have any songs to sing, so others must sing for me. I love songs but I cannot carry a tune in a bucket. This is due to a lack of natural talent and also to the fact that music was not a major part of my upbringing. Also, when I was in elementary school we had a choir director who was such a perfectionist that she threw books at those who were less than perfect. When asked to sing solo, I was so scared that all I could do was croak and then I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me. I quickly learned to merely open my mouth and move my lips but no sound came out for years.

Later I developed a great love for the songs we sang at church...songs of great inspiration and devotion that filled my heart and carried me away on their melodies. In church I began to sing because I figured those around me would drown out my croaking. Now I enjoy singing in a crowd, but I have never been able to sing out loud by myself.

When I began teaching the deaf, the job was perfect for me because no one required me to sing. However, when I taught hearing children in first grade, I quickly learned that records made good sing-along companions and the children were quick to join in. However, I did envy the teachers who could break into song to catch the attention of their students, those who built entire lessons around songs, and those who entertained with their songs.

I really regret that I had no songs to sing for my own children, but, luckily, I married a man who sang to the children as he played his guitar. We encouraged our boys to join the school band and two have continued playing musical instruments since high school. Fortunately my boys have married musical girls and I am thankful that their children are growing up with songs to sing.

Pat Flathouse
Austin TX

Picking and Grinning

A few months ago I sat on my deck, watching the sky turn beautiful shades of morning delight and thought of the dreams I had when I was one and twenty. Full of energy, with places to go, people to see, and things to do, I wanted it all. "Is this where I belong?" I cried that morning. "Have all of my travels and experiences led me to this place?" The birds at my feeder turned to look at me, and a mockingbird finished her breakfast and broke out into song. I sighed with sadness. Frankly, I had envisioned a life that would build and build to one great crescendo. Now my life seemed so ordinary it was downright anti-climatic. For the umpteenth time, I cried out, "I don't want to do this alone, Lord. Please, not alone." But I had lived alone long enough to know I could. I could make my life extraordinary. It could be a beautiful and productive adventure. And it could still be fun.

And then one day a distinguished looking man introduced himself to me at church. We immediately found that we had a great deal in common, and our friendship grew every minute we talked. I went around singing all week. His passion is writing, singing, and playing country/bluegrass gospel. Music had almost disappeared from my life the last couple of years, but when he brought his guitar over, I was so enchanted I had to concentrate on keeping my mouth closed. He reminded me of one of my all time favorites, John Denver.

He asked my permission to court me, and I just about "swooned" in old Southern belle fashion. I have been pursued by a fair number of men, but none of them ever asked my permission. I didn't know exactly what this Southern gentleman had in mind, but I surely did want to find out. Back in my college days, we would have said, "He's so s-m-o-o-t-h, he reminds me of blue velvet. Why he could eat crackers in my bed any night!"

Meanwhile, he's picking and I'm grinning.

Jackie Woolley
Hutto TX

Song of Me

I am a palm tree in the golden
glowing wind,
strong and flexible

With quiet resolve I
bend and sway
in the ocean's pounding surf

Time will bring stillness
but for now . . .
I am the eye of the hurricane
spiraling toward
ten thousand flaming stars.

Charlotte Hamrick
New Orleans LA

Song to Myself

She who knew from the very beginning
That she was destined – destined, mind you –
For greatness
Never suspected that perhaps her knowing
might be nothing more than the soul's delusion
Holding imprints of hopeful mystery.
This knowing comes now to bother her
In the hubble and clutter of kids-cats-anniversaries
To a dissatisfaction
An impatience
With the humble goodness of her ordinary life
She who longed both for this
And for a roaming otherness
Now remembers old lovers
And the taste of their tongues
As she fights the shame
Of a temper at small infractions by her
Children-thank-god-for them
Never knew such temper simmered
Aching to be lost.
She sinks into memories and dreams
Folding corners of herself down
Like a neat napkin
Hiding the stains, the dirt
Of her most wondrous gypsy self
So that this life – this perfectly happy life –
Might proceed without incident
Medication
Tragedy.
She who writes this song to herself
Sings now for the selves
That have no place to be sung.

Joanne Fedler
Sydney AU

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Two More of the Best: Stories from the 2003 LifeWriting Contest

We had many wonderful contest entries this year. On these two pages, we print two more of the best. We know you'll enjoy them!

Lost: In Vicinity of Post Office by Jane Ross, Austin TX

Soon after my arrival in Rio de Janeiro, Felipe returned to his work and I found myself alone in the tenth floor apartment. We had set up an office in the second bedroom where I would work on the book I had told family and friends in London I planned to write. My desk stood close to a window that looked across the twenty-foot space to the neighboring apartment building. Street noise echoed between the buildings' hard walls. The wood floors and bare walls of the apartment amplified the noise and bounced it back from unexpected directions. The sound of dogs barking in the street seemed to come from the empty spare room. The honk of a car's horn came from the tiled kitchen.

Sitting down to work, I twisted back and forth in the swivel office chair, stared out the window, fumbled with my pens, and felt anxiety rising in my throat. I had come to Rio intending to write a South American novel. The minutes ticked by, while cars on the nearby main road revved and honked. Porters called across the spaces to each other, exchanges that I could not understand. I pushed away the notebook and took a sheet of typing paper to write to my sister Fiona. Grand statements about the Brazilian psyche eluded me. I wrote about the tropical smell in the air, a sweetly acrid mix of mildew and fumes from cars that ran on ethanol. My loneliness was a sideline: "Missing you very much."

I folded the letter. Tugging open the desk drawer, I pulled out an airmail envelope edged in green and yellow and addressed it to England, relieved at last to have found a purpose. I would begin my own tentative experience of Rio by going to the post office.

It was hot that morning and I had dressed in pink shorts and a tank top. Now I donned high-heeled sandals and sunglasses with shiny reflective lenses. I took up my purse, slung it from one shoulder to the opposite hip, holding it close, nervously recalling stories I had heard of frequent muggings in Rio. Locking the door of the apartment, I descended in the elevator, exited the building with a shy smile to the porter, and walked purposefully through the concrete spaces lined with tall buildings, past borders of exuberant tropical plants.

The sidewalk of Leblon's main shopping street was crowded. Housewives and maids pulled trolleys full of groceries. Porters in their uniforms lounged in doorways. Street vendors hawked their wares on the corners: nail files, hair ties, and cheap toys. Middle-aged men with paunches leaned against parked cars and held animated conversations with their colleagues, gesticulating as they talked. My neck muscles were tense as I felt eyes follow me. My shorts were too short, my legs too bare and too white, my sunglasses too shiny, my sandals too high. I looked for other women like me, for a familiar face, for a glance I could return. But there were no young women in shorts and heels, walking self-consciously and hiding apprehension in their eyes. I walked on, less sure of myself.

Inside the post office, the air was stagnant and oppressive.

Clerks moved about their tasks slowly and with utter boredom. I joined a line of housewives, retirees, and office boys. The ennui blanketed all and I shifted from foot to foot, weighed down by the heavy, hot, damp air of bureaucracy and resignation.

"*Proximo.*" I had a new word to add to my vocabulary: *Next*, pronounced over and over in loud but desultory tones as the line crept forward. I approached the counter and handed over my letter. The clerk's eyes remained sullenly averted as she took the letter and put it on the scale.

"*Quinhentos.*" Her boredom was palpable.

I fished in my purse for the bundle of limp notes Felipe had given me. Five hundred *cruzeiros*: proud that I had understood, I handed a grubby bill across the counter.

"*Esse nao vale mais.*" She pushed the bill towards me. I didn't understand. Her annoyance mounted. She rose from her seat and, taking all the bills from my hand, sorted them and pulled out a different one marked 500.

"*Quin-hen-tos cru-zei-ros!*" She spoke loudly, her enunciation exaggerated as if I were deaf, and plunked my other notes down on the counter. The other customers craned to see what fool didn't know about the new 500 *cruzeiro* bill. I smiled sheepishly at the clerk, who gave an irritated snort and secreted the bill in the drawer beneath the counter. She passed the letter through the metering machine, stamped it loudly, and threw it into a crate where it lay among letters addressed in uneven hands to towns in the interior of Brazil.

"*Proximo.*" I was dismissed. Stares followed me as I left the post office and turned toward the apartment building. With each step, my isolation grew. The woman who, just weeks earlier, had walked confidently to her job at a London publishing company had given way to a some other person I didn't know--a woman gripped by fear, retarded perhaps, or deaf, outlandishly dressed, knowing nothing and no one.

The heat pounded in my head as I paused while the porter unlocked the entrance gate of the apartment complex. Within the wrought-iron enclosure, the grind of air-conditioning units in dozens of windows seemed louder than ever. Condensation dripped from the highest metal A/C units onto those below in a clanking cascade down the side of the building. I hurried around the side of the building to the lobby and the elevators.

Letting myself into the apartment, I threw my purse on a chair and slumped onto the sofa. The apartment was empty, hollow, echoing. Across the empty space between the buildings a maid called to another. They shared a joke and loud laughter--a joke I could not understand. An oppressive drowsiness overtook me. I stood and dragged myself to the bedroom, where I lay down on the hard mattress in the bare echoing room and soon fell into a heavy, troubled sleep.

I awoke with a start. Sounds came from the living room--people noisily moving furniture, turning over our rooms, it seemed, in search of valuables. Steps sounded along the corridor. I lay frozen in absolute fear, unable to breathe. My heart was stopped in my chest.

Then a key turned in the front door lock and Felipe stepped

into the living room from the lobby with a cheery, "*Sou eu*. It's me."

The footsteps vanished, thieves disappeared, and my heart resumed beating. Felipe came into the bedroom where I lay, still paralyzed with fear. Waves of relief, anger, and loneliness overcame me. I shook with sobs as he sat on the edge of the bed and held me and begged to know what had happened to leave me in such despair. What could I tell him? All I knew was that, somewhere between our apartment and the post office, I had lost two things whose value I had never realized until that mo-

Objects in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear

by Linda Wisniewski, Doylestown PA

Every time I pass a mirror, I give it a glance to see if she is still there, that older woman. She looks like my father's mother; she does not smile. But her eyes are my own mother's, hunted and looking for a place to hide. She is always on the alert, waiting for someone to lower the boom.

In my mind's eye, I am blond, about thirty, and very pretty with soft, smooth skin. I attract the second glances of men, and heads turn to follow me wherever I go. When I look into a mirror, it's just a quick check to see if a hair may be out of place, straying across my forehead in the wrong direction. But when I take a closer look, I see her, that older woman, and she needs moisturizer, something age-defying with antioxidants. She needs it fast. Her cheeks have lines all through them. Not just the parenthetical laugh lines around her mouth, or the tiny ones radiating from the outer corners of her eyes. Those marks of distinction appeared in her forties, when she said she didn't mind them at all. They added a certain look of maturity and experience. They hinted at a story, a life well-lived. She didn't count on the lines that have appeared more recently, the ones that pull down the corners of her mouth, or the short ones between her eyebrows that don't go away when she has stopped frowning. She is me, and she looks like Grandma.

I hardly knew my father's mother, and now I think of her every day. I noticed that I was starting to look like her when I stopped wearing contact lenses. My eyes were too dry for them to be comfortable for more than a few hours. Squinting eye-drops into them several times a day became a chore I didn't want. Now that I wear small wire-rimmed glasses all the time, I see Grandma Nelly's face looking back at me in the mirror, and I remember that I don't know much about her. Was she kind? Was she the loving mother my father cried for when she died? Or was she the cold matriarch I remember, a tall, silent woman whose house was filled with crocheted doilies on all the dressers and end tables, and on the backs and arms of upholstered sofas and chairs? I know that her alcoholic husband left her a widow with four children, long before I was born. But when I think of her, I only remember those doilies. In my mirror, am I becoming her?

Or am I transforming into Lucille, my own mother, who lives out her days in a nursing home, in the confused world of dementia? I don't want to be like her, not even as a young woman. She married Nelly's son, an insecure man who often humiliated her. She worked long hours in factories, raised two daugh-

ters, and tried very hard to behave in the appropriate way. She taught me accommodation and apprehension in the face of my father's rages. I could not predict his anger, but I could avoid it by making myself invisible. In our tiny house, that wasn't easy. I often hid my face behind the wing of a living room chair. This disappearing act was so successful, at least to me, that when I pass a mirror now, so many years later, I am surprised to see myself, a real woman taking up space.

Looking into my reflection, I see my mother's eyes, fearful and wide. I want to look away. But I make myself look for Linda in those eyes, and in that lined and sagging face. I tell myself to remember who I am and what I have done. I've been motivated to seek the things my mother and grandmother were denied. Because they were so limited by the times in which they lived, I am an ardent feminist. The cycle of child abuse has stopped with me. At ball games, in elections, in competitions of all kinds, I always, always root for the underdog. I've traveled to most of the places I've dreamed of. I became what Lucille and Nelly would have called "a career woman." Both of them endured what life had given them, while I started my life over several times. Beginning when I changed my college major from chemistry to sociology, I've changed jobs, homes, partners, religions... In fact, I'm still remaking myself. Not because I don't like who I am, but because I'm still discovering new ways of being.

And in these ways, too, we are different. I see myself as a seeker, looking for new paths. I've been a caseworker, vocational counselor and librarian. Helping people find what they need has been my vocation. I've lived in New York State and Pennsylvania, and feel at home in both places. I've been a Roman Catholic, an agnostic and a Unitarian Universalist. My mind is open to the Goddess, angels, spiritual healing—anything that strikes a chord in my heart. Nothing in my life has been wasted, including the things I've left behind. All I have been and all I have done is part of the package that is me.

Not long ago, at the suggestion of a friend, I started attending Al-Anon meetings. Each week, in the company of women like myself, I'm learning to accept the things I cannot change. Things like my childhood, my parents, and the fact that I'm no longer young. And I'm learning to accept my imperfections, instead of trying, unsuccessfully, to hide them.

More and more often these days, I think of Nelly and Lucille when I gaze into my mirror. Now that I'm in my fifties, that retrospective decade when many women take stock of their lives, I find myself wanting to know the women behind the face in my mirror. I've come to see that they are both part of who I am today. It's not only because their bodies gave me life. It's not just the fact that I have Mom's eyes and Grandma's cheekbones. I am in awe of their endurance, though I struggle to understand it. I believe that if I can understand them, I will forgive them for putting up with so much disrespect from their men. And when I finally understand, I know I will be able to forgive myself for the times when I didn't have the courage to stand up for me.

The fresh-faced young woman in my mirror has gone, replaced by someone with a lot more wisdom, experience and compassion. I think I like her, this older woman I've become.

Nelly and Lucille? They're closer than ever. I'm getting used to seeing us.

LifeLines: A Writing Retreat

LifeLines, our first Story Circle Writing Retreat, will be held March 28-30, 2003, at Mo-Ranch, near Hunt TX. The weekend program will be offered by Christina Baldwin, the author of two landmark journaling books, *One to One: Self-Understanding through Journal Writing* and *Life's Companion: Journal Writing as a Spiritual Quest*.

A year ago, SCN interviewed Christina and asked her to say why it's important for women, especially, to write and journal about their lives. Here's how she responded:

Writing gives us a voice. . . Having the ability to write one's own life story is incredibly empowering and liberating. We can speak our reality in our own words! We can practice how we see our lives and life around us. And for many women, before we can say, "here's what I think about that..." or "here's the impact that has on me..." we have first to write it down and finish these sentences for ourselves. Privately, quietly, tucking our truths away until we are ready to stand by our stories.

Christina Baldwin is an eloquent and thoughtful teacher who integrates the spiritual journey and the practical path and whose life exemplifies her philosophy. Stories are central to her teaching. "What if we really talked with each other . . . and listened to each other . . . and held each others' stories as sacred information that could co-inform our lives?" she asks. Her seminar, "The Self as the Source of the Story" has helped many women put their experience into story. You'll find her not just inspiring but full of practical ideas about ways to tell your story.

And you'll also find that Mo-Ranch will be part of the wonderful magic of our women-only weekend. Located in the beautiful Texas Hill Country, 90 miles west of San Antonio, this 475-acre ranch is a serene retreat from the hustle of the city, with breathtaking views, secluded trails, spring wildflowers, and plenty of peace and quiet. We can't promise you bluebonnets (they usually appear about the second week in April) but we can promise double-occupancy hotel-style accommodations with two queen-size beds in each room and American-plan food service. (Included are Saturday breakfast, lunch, and dinner and Sunday breakfast. Friday dinner and Sunday lunch may be purchased.) The cost for the weekend is only \$275 for Story Circle members, and \$300 for non-members. This includes tuition, room, and four meals. You can pay in installments, and a tuition subsidy is available. (For details, write to the address below, or go to the website, www.storycircle.org/LifeLines)

Because we wanted an intimate retreat, where we can really talk and listen and hold each other's stories as sacred, we are able to accept only fifty participants. We expect these places to fill quickly, so please register as soon as you can. You can mail a check for your registration to Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750-0127, or go to the website to register and pay via credit card: www.storycircle.org/LifeLines.

Jan Seale: A Writer at Work

continued from Page 8

life experience. That's a pretty big reservoir for all of us to draw on when we write out of "our personal experience."

Outside of poetry, I think non-fiction is the easiest to break into print with. I am constantly urging my students to send this or that account to this or that publication. When they take me up on it, they are often happily surprised at its acceptance. My students' writing has been accepted in large-circulation magazines and anthologies. This is rewarding to them, and me.

The biggest problem for students is deciding that they can take rejection if it comes. I try to model that hurdle, telling them about the poem that was rejected 21 times before it was taken, and about the short story that came back with a big "Just a memoir" scrawled by a peptic-challenged editor across the first page—only to have it later accepted by *The Yale Review* as the fiction it was intended to be.

SCN. Your work was honored with an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. How did that feel?

Jan. My fellowship from the NEA was awarded in 1982, for poetry. I took that year off from teaching and just wrote. I finished a book of poems (*Sharing the House*, RiverSedge press), and started several other things. The fellowship was a huge affirmation of my writing and I am forever grateful to have had it. That year made me realize that I was not going to get as much writing done if I continued to teach fulltime, so I'd better begin to think how to get more writing time. Yes, it was a watershed experience.

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by Jan Epton Seale



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Creating A Family History**Your Family History & the Holidays**

This is the fourth of our articles on family history. If you have a special interest in genealogy and/or family history and would like to contribute to this section, we would very much like to hear from you. Please email us at storycircle@storycircle.org, or write to SCN Journal, PO Box 1616, Bertram TX 78605.

Families and Holiday Celebrations

Whatever religious traditions we celebrate, the Yuletide holiday season is one of the most important times of the year. For most people, family and friends are the heart of the holiday celebration, beginning with Thanksgiving and continuing through New Year's Day. It just wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't hang the quilted stockings Aunt Rachel made, and listen to her retelling of the stories of each patch of fabric. Hanukkah wouldn't be Hanukkah without Uncle Joseph's handcarved menorah, and his tales of the family's survival during World War II. And then there's Grandma, whose favorite glass Christmas tree ornaments were handed down to her from her Czech mother, along with her recipe for turkey stuffing. And don't forget New Year's Day dinner, which absolutely has to include a dish of Cousin Belle's black-eyed peas.

Yes, it's true. Every aspect of the holiday season, from the beliefs that undergird the celebrations, to the decorations, the music, the food, the drink, and even the gifts and the way we give them—they're all part of our family's history. Wouldn't it be fun to spend some time this holiday season collecting some of this history, including the family stories that go along with the Yuletide celebrations?

Where Did Your Family Come From?

A family's holiday traditions are often rooted in the culture from which it came. Germans gave us the Christmas tree, while the Yule log came from English traditions. A Scottish celebration might include a Christmas Day breakfast of *new sowens*, a dish of hot oatmeal. A Greek family might decorate a wooden boat, instead of a tree, and exchange their gifts on New Year's or St. Basil's Day.

To start your holiday family history, write a page of two describing where your family originally came from. If you're unsure of this, ask older family members. If your family includes any special cultural rituals in the holiday celebration, describe them here.

How Does Your Family Celebrate the Season?

While religious practices differ, we all celebrate with special foods, special music, and special decorations. In your family, what are these like?

- Foods. Make a list of the dishes that appear on the table at Thanksgiving, at Hanukkah or Christmas, and on the New Year. If you can, collect the recipes. Where do these come from? Perhaps the cranberry sauce is Aunt Susie's specialty, while your mother-in-law always makes the most heavenly divinity fudge. Collect the recipes if you can, and include a paragraph about the person who always provides (or provided) this special dish.
- Does your family enjoy traditional Christmas carols? Does someone play the piano, or do you go caroling in the neighborhood, or do you gather at a place of worship to join with others in song? Are there any family stories that center around holiday music?
- Decorations. This is a special season, and decorations are sometimes handed down within the family. Who has Great-grandma's chipped ceramic turkey that always sat on the table at Thanksgiving? How old were the children when they made those snowflake ornaments? Where does your family get its Christmas tree? When do you decorate it—on Christmas Eve, or earlier? When do you take it down? Why?

As you make notes about these special holiday objects and activities, lots of stories will emerge. Write them down, giving each one its special place in your holiday history. If you have pictures, include these as well. How about making a holiday scrapbook? It might become a family heirloom, to be opened and enjoyed each holiday season!

Each Family Member Can Contribute

Creating a family holiday history isn't a job for just one person. The children will love to take part, and may surprise you with what they remember of their Christmases past. Be sure to ask the older members of the family how they spent Christmas when they were children, and what they remember about their family's celebrations. You might want to include a page from everyone, perhaps recalling a special gift or a particularly memorable year. However you organize your family holiday history, make sure that it's expandable! Once you start collecting stories, you'll discover more and more, and you'll want to add them to your holiday collection.

Take a Bow! Spotighting Our Story Circle Volunteers

Telling & Sharing: The Story of a Life

We are continuing the stories of some of the special women who have made the Story Circle Network such a stunning success. In this article, we feature Pat Riggs Flathouse, Director of the Austin OWL-Circle project, SCN board member; writing circle facilitator; and teacher. Story Circle is very grateful to Pat for nurturing and guiding our Austin OWL-Circle groups and helping us build the national OWL-Circle program. She is another one of the wonderful women who help to keep the Story Circle dream alive and grow-

Pat Riggs was born and raised in the Texas Panhandle, the oldest child in a family of three children. After high school, she went to the University of Texas at Austin, where she earned a degree in elementary education and then accepted a fellowship to do a year's graduate work in deaf education. While in that program, she met and married her husband, Virgil Flathouse. They both began their teaching careers at the Texas School for the Deaf, but then left for California, where Virgil earned his Master's Degree. Their next two homes were in Illinois, where Pat became a stay-at-home mom to two of the couple's four boys. These first two sons were born while their dad earned his Ph.D. Another move brought the family to Austin, where two more sons were born.

Pat reports that she enjoyed staying at home when her children were small. "Once they went to school," she says, "I was hired to develop a religious education program for a new parish in our community. During that time, I enrolled in and completed a Masters Degree program in Religious Studies at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio." She continued in that job for several years until the family moved to Lubbock, TX, where Pat began teaching first grade after 25 years of being out of the classroom.

But Pat isn't the kind of person who does just one thing at a time. While still teaching first grade, she began working toward her doctorate in counseling at Texas Tech University. "That was a life-changing program for me," she says. It helped me examine who I really was, gave me a great deal of confidence, and taught me that I could fight for what I believed in, and win. And I had to fight several battles in that five-year process, including one with the dean!" Her doctoral studies com-

pleted, she worked as a school counselor, taught at Texas Tech, and presented wellness and stress management workshops for school administrators in the Lubbock area.

The children grown, Pat and her husband returned to Austin. She now had the time to pursue some of her neglected hobbies and interests: quilting, stained glass, china painting, wood carving and genealogy. But family matters remained high on her priority list. "I enjoyed being a grandmother," she says, "and helping my mother care for my aging dad. During his three remaining years of life we developed a wonderful notebook on his family history and I gained a wealth of genealogical information."

Through Pat's interest in writing down the stories of her family, she came into contact with the Story Circle Network and attended a Writing from Life Workshop. "After that two-day workshop," she says, "I had enough tools and ideas to begin creating wonderful books for all of my family." She began writing stories and adding to them the recipes and pictures that she had been collecting and archiving in notebooks for several years. "I am so excited about my newfound way of sharing these wonderful stories with my family and with others," she says.

Pat opened yet another chapter in her story-telling and story-sharing life when the Story Circle Board of Directors named her director of the Austin Older Women's Legacy Circle project in late 2000. Since that time, she has worked with passionate enthusiasm to improve and expand the program, develop new circles, and discover more ways to share her love of women's stories. Thanks, Pat, for all you do to support Story Circle's mission!

Does Your Friend Have a Story?

Of course she does!

And so does your mother, your sister, your cousin, your aunt, your grandmother, your neighbor....

Help them believe that their stories are important by giving them a year's membership to the Story Circle Network.

They'll receive our quarterly *Journal*, full of wonderful suggestions for documenting their lives.

Use the membership form on p. 8
or go on-line at
www.storycircle.org

LifeWriting Tips....

Faith, Hope, Joy, Peace

However you celebrate the holiday season, your celebration is probably associated with four words: faith, hope, joy, and peace. Take some time in the next few weeks to reflect on these words. How were these concepts incorporated into your childhood holidays? How do you, or could you, incorporate them now? Ask yourself these questions: What does each of these words mean to you? How does it fit into the story of your life? How might you use it to change the future story of your life?

—Margaret Knorr lives in Charleston, WV. Her website is devoted to journaling. www.geocities.com/mairearad. She also teaches journaling workshops at Inspired2Write.com.

A Story Circle News Roundup

If you'd like to share your writing-related news, or if you're facilitating or participating in a Story Circle, tell us about it! Write to Story Circle Roundup, PO Box 1616, Bertram TX, or email Susan Albert at china@star.net

SCN Board Approves 2004 Conference Site

The SCN board met at the Red Lion Hotel in Austin on October 14, to approve the Red Lion as the site for the 2004 National Conference. The board approved the minutes of the last meeting and the treasurer's report; reviewed plans for the Life-Lines Writing Retreat in March; approved credit for referring new members (see p. 24); elected Jazz Jaeschke to the board for a three-year term; and thanked retiring board members Lisa Belli and Vera Preston-Jaeger. Leilani Rose reported that there is a 14% increase over last year's membership (with a renewal rate of 69%), and a 30% increase in e-letter subscribers since July. Paula Yost reported on increased traffic at the Book Review site. The next meeting will be held on January 12.

For 2002 to date, Board members have contributed nearly 2200 hours to help SCN achieve its mission and its goals. A big round of applause for each one of them!

Conference Planning Gets Underway

With the approval of the conference hotel—the Red Lion, in Austin TX—the planning for *Stories from the Heart 2004* is now officially underway. Peggy Moody and Susan Albert are serving as conference coordinators. The conference planning team includes these SCN members: Carolyn Blankenship, Melanie Alberts, Donna Remmert, Leilani Rose, Catherine Cogburn, Carolyn Scheider, Judith Helburn, Jazz Jaeschke, Paula Yost, Danelle Sasser, Linda Jones, Penny Appleby, PJ Pierce, Rebecca Roberts. The conference website will be launched in February, 2003, when the call for Program Presenters will be available. The conference is scheduled for February 6-8, 2004. If you haven't already marked your calendars, please do so right this minute. We're going to spend a wonderful three days together!

News from our Chapters

The Austin Chapter's August Be Our Guest program was a standing-room-only smash hit. PJ Pierce presented her just-published book, *Texas WiseWomen Speak*, and talked about women's wisdom with Liz Carpenter, former press secretary to Lady Bird Johnson. Liz's sharp, dry wit and PJ's thoughtful remarks gave everyone something to remember. It's a program that the chapter will be talking about for a long time to come! Be sure and calendar the chapter's Holiday Party, on December 8, 1:30-4 p.m., at Jackie Newman's home, 9220 Evening Primrose Path, Austin. For information, call 512-454-9833, or go to www.storycircle.org and click on "Holiday Party" on the tool bar.

The Internet Chapter continues to grow, with 196 members currently enrolled. The chapter offers 12 writing circles and a reading circle. Lee Ambrose will be facilitating the IC Reading Circle in 2003. For information, see the chapter's web site, at www.storycircle.org/InetChapter/.

OWL-Circle Project Inaugurates E-Letter

The OWL-Circle Project is in the news! In September, we published the very first edition of this email newsletter, to keep interested people up to date on what's going on in the program. Pat Flathouse and Peggy Moody are the co-editors. The e-letter will be published quarterly for the first year.

The inaugural issue featured stories about the national OWL-Circle project, news about the three October OWL-Austin workshops, and a facilitators' meeting, hosted by Pat. Another feature linked to the recent article about the OWL-Circle program in the Seton Good Health Magazine.

One of the resources we are working to develop is a bibliography of older women's memoirs. Currently, our list contains books by Carolyn Heilbrun, Doris Grumbach, May Sarton, and Helen Nearing. If you have items to suggest, send them to Susan Albert, PO Box 1616, Bertram TX 78605, or email to china@tstar.net. The current list is posted at www.storycircle.org/owlcircle/memoirs.html.

To sign up for the e-letter, go to www.storycircle.org/owlcircle/Newsletters/.

Tyler, Texas, Circle Opens

Pat Turner (captain2@yahoo.com) will be facilitating a circle in Tyler TX on the second Wednesday of each month, from 2-4 p.m., in her home. "This is a new circle with eight enthusiastic members eager to tell our stories," Pat reports. "At our organizational meeting, we concluded everyone has an abundance of stories. Since we are all new to the concept, we are choosing to close our membership for now. We plan to go through the suggested meetings over the next few months [the suggestions in the SC Facilitator's Guide] and remain open to the guidance of the Muse."

Florida OWL Circle Leaves Tracks

Sue Wagstaff (sue_wag@msn.com) is facilitating a new Story Circle at the Gulf Breeze United Methodist Church. It meets at 6:30 on Thursday nights. "This is a new OWL Circle named the Footprints Story Group," Sue says. "We chose the name as we are located on the Gulf of Mexico, so we felt that Footprints was a good way to describe an OWL-Circle. We will be putting our 'footprints' on paper, instead of the white sand of the Gulf."

There's no Story Circle meeting in your town?

That's an easy problem to fix!

Start your own Circle!

for information, call 512-454-9833 or
download and print our Story Circle Facilitator's Guide
from www.storycircle.org

Writing the Truth & Other Fictions

In our September issue, Judy Fettman wrote about what can happen when various understandings of the truth collide. Her story illustrates a problem we often ponder at Story Circle: to what extent do our stories belong to us, and when do they become somebody else's story? What happens when other people don't remember the story the way we do? Linda Wisniewski replied to Judy's concern this way.

Dear Judy,

I read with great interest your story in the September *Story Circle Journal*. You have done a wonderful job of capturing the feeling of being in this predicament. Here are some of my experiences along the same line:

My memoir in the anthology, *The Circle Continues*, was about a favorite teacher. A couple lines in it mentioned my parents' abusive relationship. To my relatives, it's "that story about your parents."

A memoir I wrote about my deceased uncle contains one sentence I once heard my aunt say about her own son: "He has no girlfriends..." Her husband was very upset with me and insisted at a large family gathering that his son always had lots of girlfriends. The son, my cousin, loves the story, by the way (and now has a girlfriend of his very own --tee hee.)

In researching the above memoir, I asked family members for some details, and several of them said, "I don't remember, Linda, make something up. Just spell my name right."

In my essay which appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, I said my husband was not a camper, was watching the Yankees on TV and that my son was ten when the incident I was reporting took place. When the story came out, here's what I heard: "Nice, but I did camp a lot in Utah before I met you, in the 1970s. And I don't think I was watching the Yankees that night." My son was miffed because the story actually happened when he was eleven, and I made him look like a little kid.

Finally, I once heard a story about Frank McCourt, who wrote *Angela's Ashes*. He says his brother, Malachy, complained endlessly that the way Frank portrayed incidents in their childhood was not the way he remembered them. Frank, in frustration, said, "Write your own damn book!" And he did: *A Monk Swimming*, by Malachy McCourt.

So, keep writing and if someone doesn't like it, they should write their own darn story!

Warm regards (and hugs too),
Linda Wisniewski

Giving a Gift to Help SCN Grow

It's the time of year when we start making our gift lists and checking each of the names twice—and all because we want to give our friends and family exactly the right gift.

As you make those gift lists this year, consider giving a gift that will please your recipient all year long: a year's membership in the Story Circle Network.

Every woman has a story to tell. Often she only needs a little encouragement and a few words of how-to, and she's off and running. Your gift can help her to recognize the value and importance of her story, and show her ways in which she can record and honor her life's experience.

But there's more to it than that. Your gift will also strengthen the Story Circle Network and help ensure that we can go on extending our programs to women everywhere. And your gift will bring you the pleasure of knowing how much you are helping—as well as credit toward a Story Circle Share & Multiply Award. (See page 24 for details.) Who could ask for more from an investment of only a few dollars? We've made it easy for you, too. All you have to do is go to page 8, fill in the form (you can write the names of the extra gift recipients on an extra piece of paper), and mail a check.

Visit Our Gift Shop!

There are other ways you can help SCN while you do your Christmas shopping (other than giving gift memberships, that is). You can visit our new on-line SCN Gift Shop and take a look at the neat stuff we've lined up, with a special appeal for memoirists, journal-writers, and story-tellers—and all designed especially for women.

We've created a selection of the nicest items: blank journals, writers' tools, notecards, calendars, and (of course!) our very own SCN tee shirts. Here's just a sampling of what's in our gift shop:

A Woman's Book of Changes: A Notebook Journal, by Ilene Segalove. This lovely book is a gentle reminder to stay connected to our inner wisdom, creativity and purpose, especially during times of change

A Good Book is the Best of Friends: A Reader's Journal, by Robin Doak. A beautiful write-in journal for avid readers who want to savor and remember the books that touched their lives

Celebrations Keepsake Book, by Susan Branch. A great deal of the joy brought about by any event or celebration is in the remembering. With that in mind, Susan created this keepsake book as a place where family and friends can share impressions, expressions of love, words of wisdom and friendly advice.

To purchase from the SCN gift shop, go online at www.storycircle.org and click on "Neat Stuff" on the tool bar. You'll be shopping through Amazon.com, and a percentage of your purchases will be credited to SCN.

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Story Circle Members in Print, On the Web, & in the News

Send news of your publications and writing-related activities to Nancy Rigg, njrigg@mediaone.net. You may also send your news item to news@storycircle.org for posting on our website.

EJ Phillips' new book, *WOMAN: What She Has Done With Where She Has Been*, is now available on www.publishamerica.com or www.ejphillips.com. *WOMAN* is an anthology of stories about women who have overcome adversity to rebuild their lives.

Mary Faloon self-published her first book, *The Fullness of Love*, at age 78 in 2001. Mary writes, "It has been nothing but a positive experience for me, and I recovered the cost of publishing in about four months. I have a web page at www.GoldenRPress.com."

Linda Wisniewski's memoir, "Whispers," was published in September in the inaugural issue of *Retrozine* at www.retrozine.com. Another memoir appeared in the September issue of *The Green Tricycle* at www.greentricycle.com. Linda's flash story, "Jungle Dreams," will be published in the November issue of *Cenotaph Pocket Edition 500*, at www.cenotaph.net/pe. Another memoir piece, "Little Black Cat," will be published in the November issue of *Mocha Memoirs*, www.mochamemoirs.com.

Linda has been facilitating the OWL workshop at Bucks County Community College, in Newtown, PA. Her first group of writers was a varied and fascinating group of women. She also presented a "Writing From Life" workshop at the 20th Day for All Women in Bucks County, PA

Renee Howard Cassese, Seaford, NY, had a poem published in her local paper, an essay in *Personal Journaling* magazine, and an essay about running a writers group in an anthology of essays on the subject. One of her personal essays has been accepted for future publication in *Bereavement* magazine.

Patricia Pando's story, "Salvation Summer," (which she began writing in an SCN Internet Chapter's online writing workshop) placed second in the *Seven Hills Fiction Review* contest and will be published in the *Review*. She has also been invited to read a short section of her story at the October Tallahassee Writers' Association meeting later this month.

Susie Kelly Flatau was recently honored at a black-tie gala as recipients of the Hall of Fame Alumni recognition award for Clear Creek Schools (TX). In November, Susie will speak to the Baylor University Women's Alumni Association at a scholarship fundraiser and present a workshop at the Sam Houston State University Children's Book Festival/Young Adult Conference. Her workshop is titled: "Honoring Women's Voices, Celebrating Women's Stories." Rounding out the month, Susie will conduct a talk on "Imagination and Spirituality: A Blurring at the Edges" at The Seton Cove in Austin, Texas.

Mary Jo Doig's essay "Anna" has been published on the "Baby Think It Over" website, here: www.btio.com/cms.asp?SID=68. Mary Jo works as a Health Educator for Partners in Prevention in Lexington, VA.

Maggie Knorr I teaching an online journaling workshop entitled "Journal Voices." For more information and to sign up visit: www.inspired2write.com/workshop/prejour2.html.

Regan Brown wrote about 9/11 for Internet Chapter writing e-circle #9. She has sold the piece, entitled "Requiem For All That Is No Longer Forever: Mourning Lost Diamonds, Safe Skies and Everyone Who Died Wearing Pantyhose," to a website called AustinMama.com: www.austinmama.com/

LifeWriters' Market Watch: Opportunities for Publishing

ANTHOLOGY seeks personal essays, journal entries, or poetry describing how involvement in crafts (woodworking, quilting, basketry, jewelry making, painting) sustained you through a difficult circumstance in life. Creatively and insightfully explore how hands help heart. SASE. Harley Refsal, Art Dept. Luther College, Decorah, IA 52101. Deadline: 12/31/2002

ESSAYS wanted for *You Don't Look Old Enough to be a Mother: Teen Moms on Love, Learning, and Success*. How did becoming a parent while still a teenager have a positive impact in your life? www.teenmombook.com. Deadline: 02/01/2003

FULL CIRCLE, A Journal of Poetry and Prose, is now accepting submissions for its premier issue. Poetry, essay, memoir, fiction of all types and lengths, book reviews (query). Work of the highest caliber, only: www.fullcirclejrnl.com.

ISSUE 3 of the all-women's journal, *PMS poemmemoirstory*, will be accepting submissions of poetry, fiction, and memoir from September through November. Send up to 5 poems or 15 pages of prose with SASE to PMS, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Dept. of English, 900 S. 13th St., Birmingham, AL 35294-1260. Deadline: 11/30/2002

LIFEBOAT: a journal of Memoir. New print publication, second issue, Spring 2003. Seeking literary autobiographical writing: prose and poetry. Also, book reviews (please query), oral biographies (please query), and b&w photography. Theme: Seduction. www.lifeboatjournal.com. Deadline: 02j/01/2003

SOUL-MAKING Literary Prize, Tenth Annual, Open Competition. Cash prizes. Poetry, short story, essay/creative nonfiction, novel excerpt, short-short story, prose poem and young adult poetry and fiction categories. Sponsored by Pen Women. SASE to Webhallow, 1544 Sweetwood Dr., Colma, CA 94015 or visit www.welcome.to/SoulMakingContest. Deadline: 11/30/2002

Reading Circles Announce Book Picks for 2003

The Austin Chapter and Internet Chapter Reading Circles have announced their twelve picks for 2003. Both circles are reading women's memoirs; for the Austin Circle, 2003 will mark its fifth year. The Austin Chapter meets the second Monday of the month; for information, contact Peggy Moody at 454-9833 or go to www.storycircle.org/schedule.shtml. For information about the Internet Chapter Reading Circle, go to www.storycircle.org/ecircles.shtml. If you want to read along with us, you'll find Reading Guides for each book on our website.

Books for 2003

January (ACRC only). *Tangled Lives: Daughters, Mothers & the Crucible of Aging*, by Lillian Rubin
 January (ICRC only). *Shadow Mountain: A Memoir of Wolves, a Woman, and the Wild*, by Renee Askins
 February. *With a Woman's Voice: A Writer's Struggle for Emotional Freedom*, by Lucy Daniels
 March. *The Invisible Garden*, by Dorothy Sucher
 April. *Change Me Into Zeus's Daughter*, by Barbara R. Moss
 May. *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*, by Mary Morris
 June. *Rowing to Latitude: Journeys Along the Arctic's Edge*, by Jill Fredston
 July. *Seeing Through Places: Reflection on Geography & Identity*, by Mary Gordon
 August. *Blackbird*, by Jennifer Lauck
 September. *Composing a Life*, by Mary Catherine Bateson
 October. *A Single Square Picture*, by Katy Robinson
 November. *Speaking Truth to Power*, by Anita Hill

SCN Announces Share & Multiply Incentive Program

Beginning January 1, SCN members who refer their friends and family to SCN will be awarded credit for their new-member referral.

The program was designed, according to Board member Leilani Rose, to say thank you to members who help spread the word about SCN and contribute to the growth of the national program.

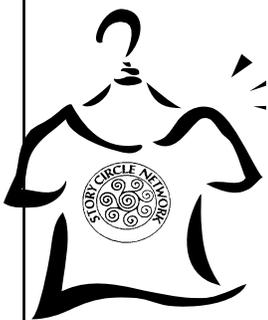
Share & Multiply works like this. Each new National member will be asked to provide the name of the SCN member who referred or recruited her. The referring member will receive one credit for each name. Only one SCN member will be awarded the credit for a new member. SCN members who give SCN gift memberships will receive a one-time credit for each recipient. Incentives will be awarded once a year, based on the number of credits that have accumulated during the previous year. Here is the Share & Multiply credit plan:

- two credits: choice of 6 SCN notecards or \$6 credit toward National event fee
- four credits: choice of 1 dozen SCN notecards or \$12 credit toward National event fee
- six credits: choice of an SCN tee shirt or \$18 credit toward National event fee
- eight credits: choice of one paid membership (personal or gift) or \$24 credit toward National event fee

A special surprise award will be given each year to the member who recruits the most new members (with a minimum of 10). In case of tie, the award will be given to the first person to earn the highest number of credits, above the minimum.

Strut Our Stuff!

Share Story Circle's message with the world!
 Our T-shirts make great gifts your friends,
 your circle, and for yourself!



Story Circle T-Shirts
 100% Heavy Cotton
 Ivory with attractive
 purple printing

Front: "...for women with stories to tell"
 Back: "What would happen if one woman
 told the truth about her life? The world
 would split open." —Muriel Rukeyser

Sizes medium, large, X-large, 2X, 3X, only \$16 (shipping/handling and tax included). Order from our web site at www.storycircle.org, or mail your check to T-Shirts, Story Circle Network, PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750-0127

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