



Story Circle Journal

Volume 9 Number 4, December, 2005

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...



Join us in Austin, Texas, February 3–5, 2006 for SCN's third national lifewriting conference.

Stories from the Heart III will bring together women from far and near to celebrate our stories and our lives. Through writing, reading, listening, and sharing, we will discover how personal narrative can be a healing art, how we can gather our memories, and how we can tell our stories.

We welcome women who are readers, writers, and storytellers. There will be opportunities to deepen our writing skills, to laugh, to explore difficult or hidden issues, to expand our relationships with other women, and to discover different modes and media—such as art, dance, and drama—for sharing our stories. See our conference program on p. 4.

Register by **December 15** to receive the special early registration rates. Use the form on the back of this *Journal* issue, or sign up online at:

[www.storycircle.org/
Conference](http://www.storycircle.org/Conference)

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Letter from SCN's President



The past two years have been full of learning and growth for me, and I have had the privilege of working with an outstanding board. Even better, I have had the chance to meet so many of you. I'll still be around as past president on the board, and leading both my Austin Chapter writing circle and my OWL circle. But it is time for another to take my place. Patricia Pando from Bainbridge, Georgia, will be an outstanding president. She brings fresh ideas, fine writing skills and vital energy. SCN can only get better. Come to our conference, Stories from the Heart III, and meet her.

You will still have about two weeks to take advantage of early registration for Writing from Life when you receive this issue of the *Journal*. I've already registered and will facilitate one of the sessions. It will be my first time to be "jest one of the gals." As Conference Chair for the first conference in 2002 and President the second, I was pretty busy. Most women, who have attended before, will tell you high energy and good feelings will "spill all over yourselves." Rosemary Daniell, our Friday evening keynote speaker, who has written *The Woman who Spilled Words All Over Herself*, will be previewing her new book, due out in spring, for us.

I'm pretty excited about our raffle in which each of three winners will make a cameo guest appearance in one of Susan Wittig Albert's three mystery series. Several members of the SCN Board would "kill" to appear in one of Susan's books; however we are not allowed, though we can purchase a ticket in someone else's name or even in our pet's name. The drawing will be the first day of the conference and will be announced when Susan Wittig Albert speaks at our closing lunch. This raffle is open to anyone (even men). And you do not have to be present to win. Raffle tickets would make a great stocking stuffer. Check www.storycircle.org/raffle.shtml or call SCN for information. Do recall that this raffle closes February 3, 2006.

As I write this in early October, the first real relief from a record hot September has rolled into Austin. I have turned off my air conditioner and can breathe real air—even inside. Not only did the South suffer from the heat, but thousands of folks have been left with nothing because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. One of our members volunteered on search and rescue missions in New Orleans. Others volunteered at evacuee shelters and interviewed survivors about their experiences. A board member arranged to distribute copies of our Discoveries journal to evacuees and the Red Cross in Austin. And the SCN Board made a donation of \$100 to FirstBook.org to help restock Gulf Coast school libraries.

Have you written about how these tempests have affected you? If so, please consider going to www.storycircle.org to record your stories in "Catastrophes, Survival, and Recovery: Stories from the Storms." You can also read the poignant stories already posted. And see p. 15 of this issue for more Storm Stories.

Thank you to all of you who have sent in donations for our annual fund drive. As with the great majority of non-profit organizations, SCN's membership dues cover only a portion of expenses, the rest coming from donations and workshop income. If each of you can send even a \$15 donation to SCN, SCN will be in good shape to fund our publications and growing slate of programs for the coming year. (To learn about everything SCN has been doing this year and who we reach, see our new "Annual Report" on page 24.) My thanks to all of you for your story contributions, your loyalty and your energy. You make us truly

Women with Stories to Tell.

Judith Helburn

Judith Helburn
President, Story Circle Network

Story Circle Journal

STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL 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. If you have special mental-health needs, please see a healthcare professional.

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We welcome your letters, stories,
and suggestions.

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\$50 elsewhere

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Back Issues: Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies. 1-9 issues: \$5 each; 10 or more, \$3 each. Add postage as follows: \$1 for 1 issue, \$3.50 for 2-5 issues, \$6 for 6+ issues

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.

Conference News



Pre-conference Workshop: House as Dream, House as Metaphor

Linda Joy Myers is the author of a newly published memoir, Don't Call me Mother (reviewed on p. 6).

When I dream of childhood, I always dream of houses. Sometimes, I'm in the dark, heavy house I grew up in. Other times, that "house" has been healed, and now gleams with gentle light and green plants, telling me the darkness is over.

Another house dream takes place where I spent my childhood summers—my Aunt Edith's two-story house near the Mississippi River. I would visit each summer, and always slept on a featherbed with my great-grandmother Blanche on those balmy nights so long ago. That house has many spaces I still dream of: the kitchen where she taught me how to make lemon meringue pie, and where everything happened, from meals to receiving visitors to chopping vegetables for canning every August. I wish I could return there in real life but, alas, I can visit only in memory, memoir, or dream.

And then there is the house where I spent most of my childhood weekends—Aunt Helen's cozy cottage surrounded by trees and located near a creek. She was not really an aunt, but my grandmother's best friend. The first time I met her she grabbed me and hugged me so hard I couldn't breathe—I was six years old and had come to live with my grandmother when my Mommy left me for a more glamorous life in Chicago. Aunt Helen's first words were, "God love ya darlin'." Can you tell that Aunt Helen was a Texan?

Anyway, her house was scented with sweetness—fresh baked bread and her husband's fresh clipped roses sighing in silver vases on a white tablecloth. Her sheets smelled of the sun, and the lace curtain over the bed would swing in and out, in and out on weekend days I thought would never end. Frequently I return to this house in my memory, a place of safety and beauty, a place of trust.

The houses in our dreams and memories hold clues about who we are—glimmerings of who we might become, poignant memories of times that shaped us into our current selves. How many of us look in the mirror, shocked to see some older person looking back? We wonder: what happened to that girl, or young woman, who still inhabits the dream houses?

My workshop at Story Circle Conference will give us an opportunity to enter the door of the houses of Self. Through story we invite all our identities and dreams to return to us, and we embrace them once again. We will explore what these houses meant to us and how we live in them even now.

Powerful stories can be told through the biography of each house in which you have lived. Even those you have inhabited since childhood have deep and meaningful tales to tell. If the walls could talk, what would they say about your life? At our workshop, be prepared to listen. ❖

Be sure to sign up for Linda Joy Myers' pre-conference workshop when you register!

Conference Hotel

The Red Lion Hotel
6121 North I-35 at Highway 290, Austin, TX 78752
512-323-5466; 800-RED-LION

To receive the *low* conference rate (\$85/night plus tax, double occupancy), call the hotel directly (512-323-5466 or 1-800-RED LION) and make your reservations no later than January 20, 2006.

Looking for a roommate? Go to our website, www.storycircle.org/Conference/roommates.shtml or write to the SCN office and we'll post your information for you.

Sisters Helping Sisters

Our Conference Scholarship Program

Deadline for Applications Extended to Dec. 15

If you are a member of SCN and have an annual family income of \$50,000 or less, you may apply for a conference scholarship. These will be awarded in amounts ranging from \$75 to the full conference cost, depending on need and the availability of funds. Additionally, we may be able to assist with travel/lodging (but we can't confirm the availability of travel/lodging money until January, 2006). To apply, go to www.storycircle.org/Conference/frmregister.shtml or write to us, telling us how much aid you need (for registration, childcare, travel/lodging). Tell us about yourself and your reasons for applying for a scholarship. One of the objectives of Stories from the Heart III is to return to our communities and share our discoveries with others. In approximately 200 words, explain how you will help the Story Circle Network achieve this objective.

Scholarship awards will be based on perceived need, the thoughtfulness of your response, and your interest in sharing what you learn in your community (for example, by starting a writing circle or developing other women's story-sharing activities). We want to encourage the attendance of a diverse group of women who want to share their stories and help other women enjoy the benefits of women's story-telling and story-sharing.

If you request a subsidy, you must pay a \$75 deposit towards your conference fees. If you receive a subsidy, you will then pay the remaining fee (the \$195 full conference fee, minus the subsidy, minus your \$75 deposit). This amount must be paid by **January 1, 2006**. If you do not receive an award your deposit will be returned or applied to your full registration. ❖



Conference

Friday, February 3	Detailed descriptions of conference sessions are on our website: www.storycircle.org/Conference		
Registration Opens	12:00 noon		
Pre-conference Workshop	1:30-3:30 pm	<i>House as Dream, House as Mirror of the Soul</i> , Linda Joy Myers	
Conference Welcome	4:00-5:00 pm	Patricia Pando, president elect of SCN, welcomes attendees	
Dinner break	5:30-7:30 pm	Dutch Treat dinner in Red Lion Restaurant or at nearby eateries	
Keynote Speech and Dessert Reception	7:30 pm	<i>When Strong Women Tell Their Truths</i> , Rosemary Daniell	
Saturday, February 4			
		Track A Circles of Creativity	Track B How Do I Do That?
Session 1	9-10:30 am	Circling Up: Intro to the Story Circle Process <i>Lisa Shirah-Hiers</i>	Blogs & Life-Writing: Finding Our Voices On-line, <i>Susan Albert, Joan Gelfand & Linda J. Myers</i>
Break	10:30-11:00 am		
Session 2	11:00 am-12:30 pm	Luck of the Draw <i>Joyce Boatright</i>	Marketing Your Book: Charting the Promotional Universe <i>Helen Ginger</i>
Lunch Break & Free Time	12:30-3:30 pm	Luncheon Speaker: Susan Lincoln of HildeGirls After lunch visit our vendor area	
Session 3	3:30-5:00 pm	Into the Sunshine <i>Patricia Pando</i>	Framing Your Story: Creative Book Design <i>Jane Ross</i>
Evening activities	6:00-8:00 pm 8:00-10:00 pm	Dutch treat dinner Open Mike, Storytelling from the Heart	
Sunday, February 5			
Session 4	9-10:30 am	Daddy Was a Vampire & Other Family Stories <i>Becky Marshall</i>	Self-Publishing: Can I Really Do It Myself? <i>Linda Joy Myers</i>
Break	10:30-11:00 am		
Session 5	11:00 am-12:30 pm	Who Is That Lady with the Tattoo? <i>Judith Helburn</i>	Playing with Points of View <i>Mary Daniels Brown</i>
Closing Luncheon	12:30 -2:00 pm	<i>Truth and Invention: When Strong Women Tell Tales</i> , Susan Wittig Albert	

Topics and speakers are subject to change.

Program



Rosemary Daniell, Susan Wittig Albert, Linda Joy Myers

About Our Speakers

We are proud to introduce our major speakers—two women with some of the best stories you’ve ever heard! Our Friday night keynoter is Rosemary Daniell—nationally-known writer, writing coach, and founder of La Zona Rosa creative writing workshops—talking about “When Strong Women Tell Their Truths.”

At lunch on Sunday, we will hear from Susan Wittig Albert, founder of SCN and best-selling author of *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul’s Story*, as well as three mystery series. Susan will pick up where Rosemary leaves off with “Truth and Invention: When Strong Women Tell Tales.”

And don’t forget our Pre-Conference Workshop with author, writing teacher, and therapist, Linda Joy Myers, who’ll talk about “The House As Mirror of the Soul.”

Track C Reclaiming Women’s Wisdom	Track D Myriad Methods Of Storytelling	Track E Panel Discussions
Exploring the Seasons of a Woman’s Life <i>Lee Ambrose & Judy Fettman</i>	Metaphor, Paradox & Poetry <i>Lianne Mercer</i>	
Break		
Roots of Our Beliefs <i>Fran Reynolds</i>	Family Ties: Writing Family History <i>Pat Flathouse & Gwen McMath</i>	
Luncheon Speaker: Susan Lincoln of HildeGirls After lunch visit our vendor area		
Writing the Stories That Changed Us <i>Elsa McKeithan</i>	Picture This! <i>Ellen Collins</i>	OWL Circles <i>Anne Beckner (Chair), Pat Flathouse, Penny Appleby</i>
Dutch treat dinner After dinner: Open Mike, Storytelling from the Heart		
Writing to the Center: Spiritual Memoirs <i>Nan Phifer</i>	Moving & Writing: A Dialogue with the Body <i>Barbara Meyer</i>	
Break		
Writing to Heal <i>Sharon Bray</i>	Cooking Up Characters: Making Stories from Recipes <i>Bonnie Watkins</i>	Want to Start a Circle? Reading, Writing, & Internet Circle How-Tos <i>Patricia Pando (Chair), Lee Ambrose, Karen Hett, Evelyn Cook, Lisa Shirah-Hiers, Linda Wisniewski</i>

The full conference registration fee includes all general and breakout sessions, Friday evening reception, conference-sponsored meals, and break refreshments. Dutch-treat dinners are *not* included. The pre-conference workshop is optional and costs an additional \$25. Check the registration form on the back page for other registration options.



The train station is the center of the universe, with tracks going and coming in all directions. People stand shivering in the ever-present plains wind, their hair kicked up violently when a train blows by, especially a freight bound for Chicago where, as I understand it, all sensible trains end up.

—Linda Joy Myers

Her brown eyes under curly eyebrows are fierce as she flails away with the sickle at weeds who have the audacity to grow in her garden and bury the potato patch.

—Linda Joy Myers

Books for the Journey

Don't Call Me Mother: Breaking the Chain of Mother-Daughter Abandonment, by Linda Joy Myers (Two Bridges Press, 2005. ISBN 0972394753). Reviewed by Patricia Nordyke Pando

“I named you Joy, you know because you were my first great-grandchild,” Blanche told Linda Joy Myers when she made an early visit to the family farm in Iowa near the banks of the Mississippi River. A good choice of names, for Myers does bring joy even in the midst of turmoil, treachery, and abandonment. And she brings hope in this powerful book.

“It’s just a word, but words create whole worlds.” Myers does exactly this. She creates the world of a troubled, lonely girl cast off by those who should love and care for her and another world of the grown woman who finds her way beyond that painful world. The word is “mother.”

I read the book twice. Probably, I will read it again. The first time through, I was swept along by the moving story and Myers’ powerful writing. Her descriptions of people—her grandmother wears “good manners like frosting on a cake”—and places are evocative. On the second read-through, I found deeper meanings. As I read her words, I would stop, reflect and find insights into my own, far different, journey to adulthood.

There are many journeys. A mother brings her daughter to her grandmother, but it is not a visit. It is an abandonment, and not the first one. This mother is but repeating her mother’s behavior, and that of her mother’s mother before her. Three generations of mothers in this family sought life without their daughters. Childhood for Myers was filled with uncertainty. Her mother appeared. Her mother disappeared.

“When are you leaving?” I ask.

“You mean how long am I staying?”

Mother and daughter both know that it will not be for long.

Young Linda Joy knows little certainty. She lives in a foster family where she suffers on-going abuse. She is rescued by her grandmother but only to enter a life of turmoil. Gram is a constant, but only as a presence. Her erratic behavior leaves Linda Joy wondering whom she will find when she comes home—the sophisticated Gram with the assumed English accent, the Gram of comfort and cookies, or the rage-filled Gram who refuses to listen.

There are moments of joy and tranquility. Life is never totally bleak. The family, back on the family farm in Iowa, offers a stability and love throughout Linda Joy’s childhood that continues into her adult life. On an early visit, she relishes being a part of the rhythm of their lives and their routines. “I follow them around from room to room, eager to be included in all they do, feeling the comforting mantle of family settle around my shoulders like a shawl.”

Back at the unsettled home in Enid, Oklahoma, there are islands of stability. Gram’s friend “Aunt Helen” and an inspiring music teacher who shows the young girl the beauty and escape of music.

There are dark days ahead as Linda Joy grows up, goes to college, enters and leaves a marriage, and becomes a mother herself. Constantly across the years, she continues to reach out to her mother and to be rejected. There is a final reconciliation before her mother’s death.

Myers, a therapist who offers memoir-as-healing workshops, does more than tell her story. She explains how she saved herself, how she found healing and understanding. There is much to learn from reading and understanding her story, but she goes further in helping readers find self-knowledge. The first appendix lists useful tips for writing your own healing memoir. The second appendix provides an excellent listing of mental health resources. You can learn more about Linda Joy Myers at her website: www.memoriesandmemoirs.com. ❖

Ordering is easy!
Look for **Linda Joy Myers** on the Alphabetic Index on the SCN Book Review website and click on the picture of her book’s cover to order.

Order Linda Joy Myers’ book through SCN’s book review website:
www.storycircle.org/BookReviews
and benefit SCN through your purchase.

Meet other lifewriters and learn from their stories

Susan Wittig Albert: Many Voices, Many Talents

Susan Wittig Albert is best known to many as a successful and well-established mystery writer and to many others as the founder of SCN. As we'll hear more when she speaks on the Bloggers' panel and at the closing luncheon of the Stories from the Heart III conference, Susan is a writer with many strings to her bow and much insight to offer on the writer's voice in both memoir and fiction. The Journal interviewed Susan about her work and about the unusual fundraiser raffle she has set up to benefit SCN.

SCJ. *The meaning of "lifewriting" has changed and expanded enormously since you wrote Writing from Life in the mid '90s. Tell us what you're seeing as you've watched the women's lifewriting movement mature in the last 10 years.*

Susan The most important thing, probably, is the expanded possibility for publication. Several of the big publishing houses have added a half-dozen memoir titles a year to their list, and small presses are publishing quite a few life stories. On-demand and electronic publication has expanded the possibilities. And because self-publishing is easier to do—many local printers offer short runs of author-published books, plus help with editing and book design—we're seeing many more self-published memoirs. A natural result of expanded publication has been an expansion in the range and variety of women's memoirs. We've noticed this as we plan our reading circle books for the year. There are lots more to choose from!

SCJ. *How has this expansion of lifewriting changed the way you write about your own life?*

Susan The big change for me has been in blogging. I began keeping an online journal [usually called a "web log" or "blog"] about five years ago, as an adjunct to my website. When blog technology arrived, I jumped in with both feet. As blog technology has matured, I've matured with it, so that my blog includes photos, reader comments, links to other blogs and to my website. These new techniques encourage me to tell my story in different ways, and with different emphases. When I began, I was thinking that the material would eventually find its way into a book. Now, I think that a book is too limited a venue for the kind of lifewriting I'm doing now. A book is just print, and no more!

SCJ. *How is blogging a different experience for the writer from, say, letter writing or journaling in a notebook?*

Susan It's very different from notebook journaling, which is essentially private. It's closer to letter writing, which is written to an audience. And blog style, with its easy flow, its casual idiom, is like letter style. But with a blog, the audience is much wider and includes people you don't know. As I write, I'm always conscious of the possibility of a great many readers hooking into what I say. They talk back, too. I love the dialogue.

SCJ. *You'll be leading a panel of bloggers at the 2006 SCN conference. Give us a taste of some of the issues that you hope to touch on in the panel discussion.*

Susan We'll be getting into the whys and the wherefores: why a blog might be helpful to you, as a lifewriter; why you might find it interesting to share your life with others; how other people have done this; how you can do it; what you need to know to get started.

SCJ. *What about your fiction—how are you incorporating lifewriting into your stories? Are your characters based on people you know?*

Susan Two of my mystery series (the Edwardian mysteries I write with my husband, as Robin Paige, and my Beatrix Potter mysteries) involve real people, so the mysteries have a great many biographical elements. I work deeply with the facts of these people's real lives, and as I fictionalize them, try to stay as close as possible to their realities. In the China Bayles series, I often model my characters on people I've met in and around the small town where I live. Of course, I change the names and identities so they're not recognizable (I hope). But I believe that writers create out of their experience, and the people who appear in my books are usually based on close encounters of the personal kind.

October 31: The loveliest gift of the cold front is a gaggle of sandhill cranes far overhead, streaming south in a long, ragged V, their high, wild calls falling on me like a blessing.
—Susan Wittig Albert, from her Blog

October 21: I wanted to create a character who would change and grow from book to book—a novel idea in writing mysteries series!—and I fell to it with a will.
—Susan Wittig Albert, from her Blog

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

SCJ. As a fundraiser for SCN for 2006, you've come up with the idea of a raffle in which the winner gets to be a character in one of your novels. Tell us about this "novel" idea.

Susan Actually, it's not such a novel idea (pun intended), since several other authors have done it in the past few years—most recently, Amy Tan, who is auctioning off a "character role" in one of her novels. It's based on the assumption (a true one, I think) that readers imagine themselves in the stories they read: that is, they read themselves into the book, putting themselves into the role of the protagonist or one of the other characters. Wouldn't it be a treat for such a reader to actually find him or herself in the book? And since Story Circle Network is such a worthy cause—well, it seemed like a natural thing to do!

SCJ. What can you tell us about what part the winners' character will play in the story? Can they be the villain; are they central to the plot or more of a cameo?

Susan The guest character probably won't want to be the villain! Whether the person is central to the plot or more of a cameo will depend on who the winner is, and how neatly her/his personality characteristics, interests, and experience fit the time/place/setting/themes of the book. If there's a good fit, chances are that the guest character will play a substantial role. If the fit is tangential, it will be a cameo spot. But it will still be pleasing (I hope) to the guest character.

SCJ. Can the winner request that their pet, child or spouse be the character in the novel?

Susan Sure! In fact, it would be an interesting gift, wouldn't it? (Hint: if you've already bought your limit in raffle tickets, make a cash gift to a friend or family member so s/he can purchase some chances.) A couple of people have already told me that they're buying tickets for their cats!

SCJ. Once a winner is picked, how will you figure out how to fit them into your story and what kind of research will you do? Do you have a clear plot already in mind or will you work the plot of the novel around the character?

Susan I think I'll put together a questionnaire that the winner will fill out, with personal characteristics, work/life experience, interests and so on. Of course, the winner can put in exactly what s/he wants to put in—that is, the winner can fictionalize about her/his life to whatever extent seems appropriate. So perhaps this guest character is more like a self-designed character, rather than like the true-to-life characters I work with in the Robin Paige or Beatrix Potter mysteries.

I'm doing three books next year, so I'm sure that there will be the opportunity for a guest character to be involved in the actual plot. That is, the winner will be identified early enough in the process to be included in the book's planning.

SCJ. What have other writers told you about the possible

pitfalls of the "raffle-winner as character" idea? What are some special challenges and rewards this poses to you as a fiction writer?

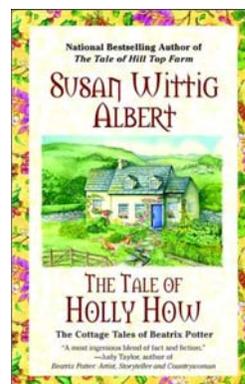
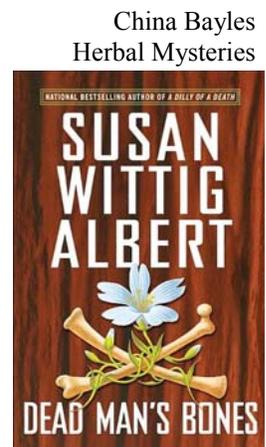
Susan In some ways, I think of myself as an artist who works with "found" material. I love to read small-town Texas newspapers, find little bits of intriguing real life, and work those into the books. For the Robin Paige and Beatrix Potter books, I enjoy reading biographies, histories, and local newspapers, uncovering odd facts and working them into the stories. The same thing will hold true with the "raffle-winner as character" thing, I think. The challenge of doing it right is itself the reward. The pitfall? As always, working with material from real life: you'd better make sure that you have your facts straight. In this case, working with the material provided by the raffle winner as my "factual base," I think both of us (the winner and I) should be pleased by the result.

—Email interview conducted and edited by Jane Ross

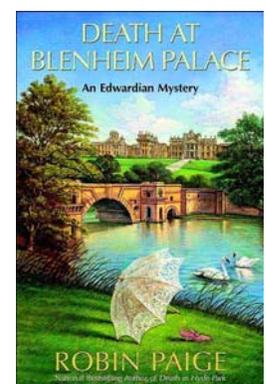
Susan Wittig Albert's three mystery series include these recent titles.

Order any of Susan's novels through our website and benefit SCN with your purchase. Go to:

www.storycircle.org/susansbooks.shtml



The Cottage Tales
of Beatrix Potter



Robin Paige
Victorian Mysteries

Susan's website: www.mysterypartners.com

Have you always longed to see yourself in print? Win a Guest Appearance in a Mystery Novel!

Enter our Story Circle Network benefit drawing, and you could win a cameo guest appearance in one of Susan Wittig Albert's three mystery series: the China Bayles Herbal Mysteries, the Robin Paige Victorian/Edwardian Mysteries, or the Cottage Tales of Beatrix Potter.

Susan (who founded Story Circle Network in 1997) will personally work with the three winners to develop characters who will represent them in three of her upcoming mystery novels. If you win, you'll fill out a questionnaire describing yourself (or the character you'd like to be!), and Susan will use this information to create a character. And don't worry: she won't make you be a villain. You'll be the kind of person you can brag about to your friends! What's more, you'll also receive a specially personalized first edition.

Prizes

First Prize: Winner gets first pick of the series in which s/he wants to appear. Second and third prize winners get second and third pick of the remaining series books. (For information about the series, see Susan's website: www.mysterypartners.com.)

How to enter

Cost: \$5 per ticket, or 6 for \$25; limit 6 tickets per person.

To purchase your tickets: Fill out the form below and mail your payment or register and pay online. If you are mailing

your payment, it must arrive no later than February 2; if you are attending the conference, you can bring your payment on Friday, and give it to us before noon. Payment must be received no later than the close of the raffle: 12 p.m. CST, Friday, February 3, 2006.

Your name will be put on our numbered list when we receive your payment (cash, check, PayPal.com). An email Confirmation of Purchase will be sent to you and you will be asked to print or save this Confirmation of Purchase. The confirmation email will contain the number(s) assigned to you on our list.

The Drawing and Notification

The drawing will be held at the "Stories from the Heart III" Conference in Austin, Texas. Susan will contact the winners, and their names and choice of series appearance will announced on Sunday, February 5, 2006. Winners' names and series choices will be posted on the SCN website, www.storycircle.org.

Rules:

- You must be 18 years or older to win.
 - You need not be present to win.
 - No refunds or exchanges. Void where prohibited by law.
- All proceeds go to support the work of the Story Circle Network, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.



Mystery Novel Raffle Form

My name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Phone numbers _____

Email Address _____

I want to purchase _____ tickets at \$5 apiece (or \$6 for \$25).

Amount due: _____

Copy or clip this form and send with check or money order to:
Story Circle Network,
PO Box 500127, Austin,
TX 78750-0127.

My choice of prizes:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Kitchen table stories

Wild Ones

Bonnie Watkins will be telling and sharing more kitchen table tales at the Stories from the Heart Conference in February where she will lead the session “Cooking up Characters: Making stories from recipes.”

Many of you may never have eaten a persimmon. Even if you have, it was probably the large, pear-sized variety that glistens shiny orange-yellow on some grocery shelves for a few weeks in the fall. Unripe, it is firm to the touch, but, if you are patient, it will ripen to a soft, palpable—indeed, if perfectly ripe, liquid—fruit, best scooped out with a spoon, a powerhouse of Vitamin A. If you have tasted this unusual fruit, you probably don't know that you have sampled what we country folks call a “tame” persimmon.

More common on the farm were wild persimmons, darker burnt orange, almost rust-colored balls that were much smaller, the size of a cherry tomato. Because of the larger size of the tame persimmon, much fruit remains for spoon-eating or baking, using the fruit for moisture as you would a banana in banana bread. The tiny, wild persimmon clusters several seeds in the center, leaving very little for eating or baking.

Yet, the wild persimmon has its wicked uses. In the 1950s in the country, small high schools still practiced hazing as an initiation rite. Green persimmons were highly sought during those times. If eaten green, these small persimmons put the mouth into a half-hour “pucker.” No amount of spitting, drinking water, or swabbing got rid of that strong and distasteful pull.

Somewhere lying in the bottom of a box of photos still lingers the now faded photo of my sister Carolyn in her freshman initiation garb. We cut out holes for her arms from a burlap feed sack, fringed at the bottom. Round her neck stank a necklace of garlic.

As Carolyn climbed up the stairs of the school bus, she handed over the coveted brown bag of green persimmons to a senior waiting to make her day misery. Popping two from the bag, the senior said, “Open wide, Higgins,” threw them in her mouth, and commanded, “Chew, Fish.” Because Carolyn did not respond quickly enough, the senior slave driver reached over and squashed her lower jaw up to smash the puckering fruit between her teeth. Plenty more wild persimmons waited in the bag to be passed around to the rest of the freshmen on the bus.

The larger persimmon, aptly named, appeared tame by comparison. While our wild persimmon tree provided its evil

fruit for nefarious seniors to use to haze freshmen, my Aunt Annie's tame persimmon yielded golden bliss. Her sole tree furnished her family and dozens in our extended family with persimmons for baking, especially her own holiday variation of fruitcake: persimmon cookies. These bumpy little drops of heaven last for weeks and freeze well to pull out if unexpected company arrives or to take to a cookie exchange.

For years, Aunt Anna's daughter, Victoria, provided us with persimmons aplenty. Now she's gone to join her mom in that great cookie-baking heaven in the sky, we no longer have a certain supply. For years when their house sat vacant, I still harvested persimmons from their tree when I visited relatives in Addicks, Texas, outside Houston. Now, with everyone gone, I rely on city folks at markets who don't even know about the evil relative of the tame persimmon, its wild cousin.



Persimmon Holiday Cookies

1/2 cup butter
1 cup sugar
1 egg
2 cups flour
1 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. soda
1/2 tsp. each cinnamon and cloves
1 cup persimmon pulp*
1 cup chopped candied fruit (or raisins only)
1 cup nuts

Cream butter and sugar. Add egg. Beat slightly. Add sifted dry ingredients, alternating with persimmon pulp. Stir in fruit and nuts. Drop by teaspoonfuls on greased cookie sheet. Bake at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes.

* Pulp can be scooped when the fruit is in season in the fall. Pre-measure one cup and place in a zip-lock plastic bag. Freeze to use later in the year.

You have kitchen table stories, too!

We'd love to print them here in the *Journal* (800 words maximum, please, including recipe). Send via email or as a Word attachment to patriciapando@yahoo.com. In the subject line, please type Kitchen Table Stories. If you have no computer, type or write your story legibly and mail to: Patricia Pando, 1600 Lake Douglas Road, Bainbridge, GA 39819.

Besides getting two sons through college, **Bonnie Watkins** has been a teacher all her life, teaching ages 2 to 82 classes in literature, writing, speech or ESL in community college and high school. For several years she wrote a monthly column called “Making Money at Home” for *Welcome Home* magazine.

Take a bow! Spotighting our Story Circle Network volunteers

Patricia Pando: Stirring Up Stories

Story Circle Network's President Elect **Patricia Pando** has been an active member of the Internet Chapter since 2000, leading three OWL circles, taking SCN classes online and participating in Internet reading and poetry circles. Now she's keen to give back in a bigger way by helping our organization grow a truly national presence. Lisa Shirah-Hiers offers this tribute.



A Texas native, Patricia lives in a small Georgia town near Tallahassee, Florida, and has been “trying to get back to Texas ever since.” Living in a small community Patricia knows how SCN and the internet can help end a woman’s isolation. That process is magical, however it happens. Still, many women long for a more direct experience. There is something

special about sharing our stories face-to-face as Patricia discovered when she attended the Stories from the Heart Conference of 2004. “What turned me on at the conference was seeing the dynamism and enthusiasm of the members and being part of it all. I got to see how many different ways you could approach the mission of SCN—not only in a journal but with different ways to tell a story. Meeting all the different women was wonderful.” She left the 2004 conference determined to do more and joined the board shortly after. Now, Patricia says, when she tells other women about SCN she gets “positively missionary.”

Patricia’s parents were both writers. She thinks that’s why she became an economics major—to rebel. When her youngest child entered kindergarten, Patricia went back to school too, earning a B.S., M.A., and Ph.D. She then taught at Houston Baptist University, San Jacinto College, and Albany State College in Georgia and was an administrator at Bainbridge College, Georgia. She has also enjoyed her work as a court-appointed special advocate. Still, she couldn’t escape the writing life altogether. Even when she stayed home with her young children, Patricia wrote letters to her mother twice a week. She says those letters are now a precious record of the years when she was too busy to write in her journal. “The little routine things are fun to remember. You never know when the wonderful moments will be.” When her children grew up, Patricia saw another reason lifewriting is so important. “My father’s memoir, *Nubbin Ridge*, was published by Doubleday. Even though he died before all but my eldest was born, my children feel as though they knew him. It’s a

perfect illustration of why our stories are so important—not just [to record] the times but for our families.”

Patricia now edits two columns—one for her local paper called “Stirring Up Memories,” and another for the *Journal* called “Kitchen Table Tales.” In both, she uses food to help women connect to their memories. Patricia knows that telling life stories is important for our sense of self-worth. Many of the women in her OWL groups and those she has interviewed for her column in Georgia are senior citizens who don’t feel as though they made any lasting contribution to the world. “So many women don’t think their stories are valuable. When others read and relate to your stories you realize how important they really are. Every woman has a story to tell. Every life is fascinating.”

This conviction was reinforced when Patricia and another professor, Florence Gould, co-authored a book about women homesteaders in Texas. The book, called *Claiming Their Land*, was published in 1991 by Texas Western Press. They began research with a call to the land office where they were told by one patronizing official, “Well, you can come down here and look, but you won’t find anything.” They did—and plenty—compiling a list of over 1000 pioneer women who braved the Indians, the weather, hunger and isolation to carve out a place of their own. “Not only was it hard work on the Texas frontier just to make a living, but to be considered a homesteader, a woman had to be single. Many of these women were widows with children. They had so many responsibilities.

In the new social history scholars are beginning to realize that the lives of ordinary people are just as valuable. Now we’re finding wonderful journals of the women who moved west. We’re filling in the holes of the past. Women’s history is part of the fabric of life.”

A dedicated member of SCN’s Internet Chapter, Patricia plans to take an active role getting local story circles started as well. “I hope we grow in a way that will reach people. I hope we get more and more SCN members all over the country, more members who want to form circles of their own. I look forward to getting to know more of our members personally.”

Patricia is also excited that her duties will require a trip back to Texas every quarter for the board meetings. “We’ve lived in Georgia for 18 years now. It’s a wonderful place and we have wonderful friends. But Texas is home.” Now she has yet another good excuse for a visit—the upcoming Stories from the Heart Conference. She has a special reason for her anticipation this time because keynote speaker, Rosemary

Lisa Shirah-Hiers is a freelance writer and piano teacher in Austin, Tex. She has published articles, essays, and book reviews in the *Texas Episcopalian*, the *Hill Country Sun*, *AustinWoman* magazine, *Austin Monthly* and online.

(Continued on page 21)



True Words from Real Women

The theme of this issue's True Words section, edited by **Mary Jo Doig**, is "Gifts." Because of the strong response of SCN members to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, we also invited members to send us stories about "Tempestuous times."

Gifts

Puca Shells

Doris Anne Roop-Benner
Richardson TX

"What is that man doing?"

"I don't know, Hon, but he looks like he's picking up shells, looking them over, and tossing them aside."

My husband and I had seen this man walking the beach every day—just walking, picking, and throwing.

About the third day, we managed to waylay him as he passed the hotel for the fourth time.

"Hi."

"Hello there."

"We've noticed you passing by several times a day. Can we ask what you're doing?"

"Sure. Since I work at night, I like to be outdoors during the day. When I first came to Maui, I noticed these lovely little shells on the sand. Most look alike, but if you look closely you'll see that some are perfectly round with a hole in the middle like a doughnut. So, I started collecting only the perfect ones and making them into necklaces."

"Thanks for telling us. Maybe we'll start looking."

For the next four days, we would walk the beach every morning looking for those shells. We managed to find about five perfect ones.

Sometimes we walked part of the way with Bill. We shared stories about life, family, joys, and sorrows.

He was separated from his family because of a bitter divorce. It seems his wife's mother didn't care much for his devil-may-care way of life—she being very wealthy. She thought Bill was a gold digger and encouraged her daughter and grandchildren to leave him, and they did.

On our last night, we went for dinner at a lovely beachside restaurant. Who should greet us at the door but Bill. His job was the greeter.

"I'm so glad to see you two. You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Yes, unfortunately. But we've certainly enjoyed our time with you."

"Not as much as I have. Thank you so much for listening to me."

"It was our pleasure."

"Well, now. I have a special gift for you."

And he placed a necklace of perfect puca shells around my neck. ❖

A Gift of a Smile

Judy Watkins
Hillsboro OR

I think I have finally done something right! I found a gift that keeps on giving, not only to the person I gave the gift to but one that gives me ongoing pleasure as well.

Last year for Christmas I gave my 47-year-old daughter a year's membership to Curves. She has a muscle disease that has limited the use of her arms and upper body and she is also 40 to 50 pounds overweight, making the muscle problem worse. I asked her before Christmas if this would be something that she would want. She recognized that an exercise club was something that she couldn't afford for herself and she sincerely wanted to make changes in her life, so she approved the gift.

Since Christmas, she has started calling me more often than she did before to tell me that she can now use all the machines at Curves the way they were intended to be used. She can lift her arms over her head to take off her shirt by herself now. She has started walking during her lunch hours, something she didn't have the stamina or desire to do before. She calls to let me know how many miles she walked each week and how many times she made it to class. She lets me know many pounds and inches she lost when she gets weighed and measured each month.

She is so proud and I smile every time she calls to tell me about her accomplishments. Yes, this gift keeps giving to both of us and I am so thankful that it has strengthened our friendship. Sometimes on Saturday morning I drive to her house and go to exercise class with her. I am grateful for the unexpected pleasure of being able to share this gift with my daughter. ❖

Thank You, Dear Husband...

Leni Friedland
Mt. Sinai NY

For the gift of freedom
allowing me to stay home
and raise our children
while you worked to feed
and clothe us.

For the gift of independence
allowing my personal growth
throughout our forty-year marriage.

For your understanding and ability
to change each time I needed
to do my own thing.

For your gift of love and caring
when you help me set up
my outdoor art display
in hot and humid weather,
or under cloudy skies that
threaten rain.

In hard times and better days
you are the anchor that keeps
my wandering spirit in your
gift of safe-haven.

The Gift of Animals

Ekaterina Erev
Danbury CT

I believe that animals are the true gifts to humanity. You may suggest this statement is the motto of all the vegetarian folks. You might be right, but I have not always been one.

In retrospect, I can remember one of the most embarrassing days of my life. It was a day about 15 years ago that gave me a new perspective on the way I was living.

I was raised in the '70s by a very compassionate mother. She would shelter all the neighborhood stray animals, and collect all the rain worms on the sidewalk after the rain had passed. I was my mother's "partner-in-crime," dodging the puzzled stares of the passersby. It was commonplace for me to rescue the bugs and animals from the mean neighborhood kids.

On that fateful day, I was spending my summer vacation at my grandparent's house in the suburbs. There I had witnessed a heartbreaking practice of laying out mouse traps all over the pantry. I knew I could not just let it go. I conspired with two of my friends to get rid of the traps.

Now, there was no better place to eternally seal the fate of the traps than the portable potty. We threw the traps down the collection chute and rejoiced at our victory. That same day, my father came to town. He was not impressed with my "master plan," and demanded to get the traps back. Before I knew it, the new traps were laid out on the table the next day.

Then my father said to me, "You feel sad for the mice but keep on eating meat. It does not make sense to me."

I pledged that night to quit eating animals one day. I knew all along that the fact that someone else did the slaughtering made my consciousness feel like I was committing no crime.

Animals surround us with the unconditional love that hardly any human is capable of. They inspire us to better ourselves and they teach us an invaluable lesson: caring for another being.

I kept my promise. My son is now nine years old, and for the last nine years compassion and humility have been the motto of my family. ❖

Gifts **Tiffany Benton** Wailuku HI

My creative expressions are a gift from my Higher Power. I haven't always known this. I scribbled my first notes in a small, pink, plastic diary secured with a heart-shaped lock. I wrote passionately on the pastel pages about boys, school, clothes, and girlfriends. These pages were the repository of my deepest secrets, and I kept the key hidden in my underwear drawer.

As I grew, I abandoned the childish diary. Yet, whenever troubled, I would pour my frustrations onto paper, hoping a magic healing would occur. By college, I focused on nursing school term papers. I had little time for journaling. But, in 1973 I purchased a small hardbound journal with a shiny bumpy black cover. My first entry said, "I plan this book to be a collection of thoughts to remember, with full realization that one day I may not agree with a thing I've said here. Write on."

This statement of permission freed my mind and soul, and on these pages I wrote my thoughts. At age 51, an astrologer told me that I needed to write my stories. Not just my thoughts, she told me, but the tales I had been telling my family and friends for years.

I spent most of my childhood up in trees, my favorite being the oak with its thick spreading canopy and climbable limbs. I decided to tell my stories with trees as a focus. As my tales found their way onto my laptop, I realized that I wanted a journal I could take with me and use to jot down story ideas. One day looking through a magazine, I found a leather-tooled book cover. A carved oak tree graced the front and back. A leather tie and a silver button engraved with an acorn and an oak leaf secured the cover. I felt blessed, and bought it as a personal present.

Writing is a sacred process from which I learn and grow. I experience a profound sense of release and creativity. It fulfills me. And, like with any gift, I am eternally grateful. ❖

Divided Loyalties **Susan Janes** Glencoe IL

I own two packages of memories, one from my mother and one from my grandmother.

My grandmother taught me to fold the ends of gift wrap in one way, and my mother, her daughter, taught me to fold another way. Until I wrapped away divided loyalties, I used each method half the time. Now I wrap according to the box, but I fill the box with my grandmother's gift-giving spirit.

My grandmother browsed recipients' heads for gifts ideas to surprise and please. At her dining room table she wrapped with playfulness, using her collection of handmade decorations and special finds, papers, and exquisite ribbons.

As a child of the Depression, my mother lived the helplessness and the fear of it, the way a child can. Her

More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 13)

experience distorted the wise frugality she inherited and left a chip in her heart for gift giving. So too did her stroke, at age 42. The personality-altering event affected all of us, but Mother turned her tightfistedness and mean streak toward me.

One day in December, before she died, Mother sat on her couch in St. Louis, with the phone against the wig that disguised the assault of lung cancer, to insist that I accept her used loafers as my Christmas present.

“Susan, they hurt my feet, but I can’t return them.”

“But I have bigger feet than you!”

She called several evenings, persisting in her effort to talk me into the shoes. Behind the phone conversation, I heard the lash of the unsaid, “You are my trashcan. I will dress up as usual on Christmas, wear my gold or maybe my pearls, and nothing is wasted.” Her goal was not to please herself, nor the gift recipient.

This once I declined, the first time in my life. Refusal to accept disappointment freed me to choose my grandmother’s gift-giving ways. ❖

A Stranger Bearing Gifts

Sharon Blumberg

Munster IN

When I was a junior in college I spent one summer on campus for summer school, in Bloomington, Indiana, at Indiana University. This is a place that is embraced by rolling hills and interspersed like lacework, with beautiful southern twangs of speech.

I was 21 years old, and I was finishing up coursework to complete my B.A. I was a little lonely and sad at this point in time, for a number of reasons. First of all, the campus was much more desolate in the summer, although in some ways I enjoyed the solitude. Meanwhile, I managed to cultivate a few friendships of some girls that lived next door to my dorm room.

The main reason I was feeling so lonely was because I had just broken off the engagement of a very controlling boy I had been dating for about a year and a half at college. When I met him, he was a graduate student. So after he had left the campus, we dated via long distance for a year. He wanted me to marry him and to leave college one year early. In this way, I could complete my studies at a regional campus close to where he wanted us to live. When the pressure became too excessive, I gave him back his large diamond ring. This securely severed our ties.

One dusky evening, as I was walking back to my high-rise dorm, it started to drizzle, so I hastened my pace back to my college home. Almost out of thin air appeared a neatly dressed, distinguished-looking man holding up a black umbrella. As he passed by me oncoming, he handed his

umbrella over to me. He requested in a gentle tone that I take it and leave it in the lobby of my dorm.

I took the umbrella and thanked him, in astonishment, as I peered back his way. I proceeded to leave it in the doorway to the lobby, as he had instructed.

How did he know that is where I was heading, and how did he know if he would ever get it back? In addition, I never saw him anywhere ever again on campus. It all seemed so mysterious. I therefore concluded that perhaps the universe has subtle ways of letting us know that we, indeed, are not alone! ❖

Spared Stephanie Barko Austin TX

John was away on a fall hunting trip when my phone rang. “Hello, Stephanie, this is Devin Rayner.” The voice on the other end was familiar, but out of context. *Why would my dentist be calling me after hours?* I asked myself.

Before I could answer, Devin’s chattiness came to a point.

“There’s a party this weekend that I need to attend. Would you like to come with me”?

Stunned and flattered, I said yes and agreed to be ready Saturday night.

John and I didn’t live together, and although we’d been dating for ten months, he never asked me to be exclusive. I rationalized my decision about Devin, knowing that the date would be over by the time John returned.

The party was a fancy dinner dance at a private club. It sparkled with the kind of glamour that a date with John would never possess. Devin’s entire staff was seated at a big round table in the darkened ballroom when we arrived. After the gourmet meal, his receptionist accompanied me to the ladies’ room.

“The office is so glad that he’s dating again,” she said, “and we’re delighted that he’s chosen you.”

A month later, Devin and I were on my driveway mounting his motorcycle when John drove up in his truck. He saw us, backed down the driveway and sped off.

By New Year’s Eve, I had a choice to make. Did I want to be Devin’s second wife or John’s girlfriend? I followed my heart and chose John.

The next year, Devin married a consultant from Arizona who became his office manager. His children gained an experienced mom, and the kids helped Vicki get over her empty nest feelings.

John moved in with me.

Everything seemed in divine order when I learned that Devin had died in a motorcycle collision. Vicki would have to fight Devin’s drug-addicted ex-wife for custody of his children. She would have to turn his practice over to his junior partner. She would have a million dollar lifestyle full of pain, a life that I was spared. ❖

Mean, Lean, Green Machine

Joan Givens
Bellevue NE

Mr. Ludwig's truck,
Stopping outside my house.
Panel doors swing wide,

Revealing forest green fenders,
Silver handlebars,
Coal black pedals.

I'll mount my steed
And be transported
To far off destinations.

I'd never been so excited. I watched eagerly from the front window until Mr. Ludwig's panel truck pulled up at the curb in front of our house. He alit from the truck, moved around to the back, and swung the double doors open wide.

I was bounding down the front porch steps with my sister, Claudia, close at my heels. Peering inside, I caught glimpses of green, silver, white, black. It seemed a lifetime as Mr. Ludwig rolled the bicycles down the ramp and out onto the sidewalk. Yes, bicycles. It was my twelfth birthday, but Claudia was getting a new bike too. I knew there was something inherently unfair in that, but I was just too elated to care.

This was my first bicycle. Mom and Dad looked on, delighted at our excitement. I imagine Mom also had a lump in her throat. My riding a bike down North 29th Street, out of her sight, was probably difficult for her.

But I couldn't have felt freer. A new world was opening for me. I no longer had to stay in the yard, out of the street, or under Mom's purview. I could ride to school or to Nanny's for homemade angel-food cake.

I've been reflecting on that very special toy in my young life and wondering what special possessions the children of the Gulf Coast are missing. Is one of them lamenting the loss of a favorite doll, a Star Wars action figure, a basketball, or perhaps a bike? Or are these children thinking of more substantial losses: a grandma or grandpa, their home and school, life as they've known it?

I wish all of them a "normal" life as soon as possible. And, if for one of them, that would be a bike, I'd love to provide it. It might mean the freedom and carefree adventures I once experienced. ❖

Tempestuous Times

Louisiana—May, 2005

Pat O'Toole
Sun City AZ

You are the ports of welcome on the Mighty Mississippi
adopted by steamships, barges and paddlewheelers
while small pirogues provide transport
through coffee-colored bayous.

You are the architecture enhanced by intertwining oak trees
plantation mansions with Corinthian columns
Victorian homes with dollops of gingerbread
narrow "shotgun" cottages
bonuses of lacy wrought-iron.

You are the Mardi Gras mecca that attracts the world
to dazzling parades, sparkling costumes, wild dancing
millions of beads thrown from brilliant floats
sensual reminders of brief revelry.

You are Cajun and Creole cooking for "hog heaven" psyches
pungent Jambalaya, spicy gumbos—food for the soul
shrimp with red beans and rice
comfort food of crawfish and oysters.

You are the birthplace of Jazz—music with a heartbeat
spiced up by Zydeco and Cajun
cooled down by multiplicity of Blues.

You are a polyglot "gumbo" which welcomes one and all
You give "something extra" and call it "lagniappe"
You are the bountiful State of Louisiana.

Katrina—Rita Epilogue:

Water, water everywhere

devastation—homes and businesses splintered
airlift evacuations, deaths, sorrows, prayers
obsessed observers glued to TVs for weeks.

Kudos to the multitude of heroes—both civilian and military:

General Russel Honore, "that John Wayne Dude"
"Ragin' Cajun" shouting "point weapons downward"
Advised us his men were rescuers—not invaders!
Touched our hearts by "one sick baby airlift"

Were reassured when Coast Guard's Admiral Thad Allen
level-headed, no-nonsense attitude came aboard
and showed pride for all emergency responders
stated he and the General were "joined at the hip."
Now I knew situation was under control.

Ecstasy will come when states start to restore—and
soar to glories—beyond those ever seen before.

(Continued on page 17)

Join us for *Memory to Memoir*,
an online writing class
with Paula Stallings Yost.

Sign up for Paula's class on our website
(look for the **Upcoming Events** links).
Details on p. 26

Tempestuous times

Underwater City: The Big Easy Becomes Difficult

Shawn Alladio's unique skills and experience in swift-water rescue meant she felt called to help rescue people and animals in New Orleans. She made her way to the devastated Ninth Ward in the days after Hurricane Katrina inundated the city in September and bore witness to the chaos and suffering.

*The color of our condition isn't important;
what matters is the color of one's heart.*

I drove the truck for seven hours, gathering gear, making phone calls, heading to the strike zone of unknown collisions between nature and nightmares. Man and the world were showing their worst. Our government seemed frozen; it was a defeat before it was announced, shameful choices, a disgrace the world was watching.

It was eerie driving into New Orleans with no electricity late at night, watching the shadows move like the Night of the Living Dead. I didn't stop and was momentarily lost but not forgotten in my mission. No panic—just trying to set my bearings of north to south and adjust my settling fatigue. I arrived at the safe zone where all the water safety teams were deployed. Outside the boundary, it was a cloak of fear—anything goes—and we were prey when we were trying to save. I was listening to the stories from the Urban Search and Rescue Teams—nothing was as it appeared, safety was temporary, nobody knew what to expect.

I headed over the bridge, looking down upon New Orleans proper. The wasted dome loomed, helicopters checked airspace, emergency vehicles with strobes were everywhere, coming head-on into my lane. It was normal to have no rules, total intensity, lights flashing, chaos, and an eerie feeling of panic and aggressive excitement kicked into full throttle. I drove slower and slower as I gawked at the stripped dome, the military presence of the National Guard, streets turned to sewers, looted debris strewn like dead bodies, and, yes, dead bodies.

Dazed people walked nowhere, one pushing a confused dog in a cart, another scrounging amongst the discarded loot, others shuffling on the interstate, the only dry ground. Abandoned and destroyed cars littered the freeway dry zones but below, in the city, figures waded through mired water. The cars...everywhere were cars and submerged buildings. It collected in my psyche like a calculator. I began to count the acreage, multiply the damage, and assess the scope. I understood what was coming: mold, homes collapsing, more danger later than now, the emotional suicide people were already committing, numb, lost, and separated. Beloved pets watching for hope, people waiting for rescue, some hiding, many betrayed.

Too many weapons. I saw men strapped with so much

firepower, I wondered how much is enough. The transport of holdouts was not dignified. Animals were left behind. People died inside with guilt to leave them, begging their rescuers and getting arrested for trying to feed their pets before they left. I looked at it all and saw the suffering. The rescuers suffered. Some of the support service personnel with weapons gloried in the freedom to exert power. It was just too much for me at times. So I focused on observing, learning, and evaluating, so I could be the voice for those who could not see what was happening all around me, to save myself amongst sadness. I watched dogs eating dogs. I saw starvation, desperation, and longing. I passed animals desperate for love, for rescue, and my heart just collapsed. But I did not cry. I would save that for later when I could be weak.

Mr. Petrie was a "holdout." I think the only reason he left his house on Desire Street was because I did not have a police officer on board with a weapon, and I gave him my word. We took him to his family far away from there, into safety. But he had to leave his dog, Akita. And when we left, I saw into this man's soul, the love that was deeply suffering. I multiplied that by hundreds...by thousands...and I understood.

I went back home to California and then I turned right back around. I was going to get Akita for Mr. Petrie. And I did, with help from my brother, from Menlo Park Task Force 3, from God, and from the mystery of things unanswered. This time, we moved for more and repeated the gift.

There are many angels: the Cookseys of the Friendly Yamaha dealership opened their doors every evening. We reunited families and loved ones there in Baton Rouge. Their Waverunners became our Ark. There was joy on those trips, and the work was good. Nobody will ever know the Cookseys' story but me. I will always remember the kindness, because it is a strong form of uncommon love.

Hurricane Rita just arrived. Three million people are on the move. I feel the pressure of this wall of humanity seeking higher ground. I don't know what to say, as I remember all the eyes, the expressions, and the exact moment of a lifetime frozen in each passing second of working in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans and being a witness for those who would never know the smell of that water, the texture of suffering, and the loss of dignity that passed me painfully in slow motion. ❖

*The wasted dome
loomed, helicopters
checked airspace,
emergency vehicles
with strobes were
everywhere, ...*

More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 15)

Sea Blue
Wendy Hubenthal
 Newton MA

Paint cans and tarpaulin-covered furniture crowd the apartment and a haze of thinner hangs in the air. I crouch in a corner while my father and stepmother paint.

As is always the case, I am invisible to them, extraneous. The only exception is when my stepmother pulls me into staged events to showcase her worth. Her calculated attentions leave my stomach roiling. I learn to move quietly and stay out of sight.

When I say, "I think I'll go to the beach," no one objects, even though I am a thin nine year old. I walk barefoot down three blocks of hot sidewalk to the sand where I pass laughing teenagers with crackling transistor radios, mothers unpacking their coolers, and children screaming after inflated beach balls.

The waves pound large and hard. I am scared, but I push past the surf to the deep water. There I float, wondering if sharks are swimming below me or whether I will be swept out to sea in a riptide.

Finally, thick with goose bumps, I swim towards shore. Suddenly, I am slammed by an unseen wave. Violently tumbled and held down by the churning sea, I wrestle, terrified. The moment before I must breathe, my feet touch sand. Pushing up into foamy surf, I stumble to the shallows where I stand gasping.

Catching my breath, I begin to hear the shrieks of children digging for sand crabs. I see their mothers resting under striped umbrellas. Teenage girls oil each other's backs. I scan their faces wishing someone would wrap me in a towel and stroke my head, but they are all strangers. I move through the hot sand and up the sloping sidewalk, slip into the apartment, and go back to my corner. I am too young to have to save myself, but I do. ❖

Healing After the Storm
Sandra Simon
 Austin TX

Not Katrina or Rita, an earlier hurricane crossed Long Island years ago, south to north, right where we lived. My two girls were small. We opened windows a little at the back and front of our old house to equalize the pressure inside and out as the storm roared through. And roar it did—the trees groaned, debris banged the house, and the wind roared.

Afterwards, it was very quiet. Our house was intact. Trees were down all around us and across the driveway. We had water, but no electricity or phone. In our rural area, we would be without power for eight days.

After a couple of days, the roads were cleared. Behind our house was a field, which had been harvested. I drove my car through our yard, across the field, and down into the next road. I felt calmer then, knowing that we could drive out.

One day I took the girls out to lunch. We waited in line behind a thin old man with slightly bowed legs.

In about twenty years, I thought to myself, my ex-father-in-law Ted will look like this old man.

The man turned slightly and I could see his face. I was shocked—it was Ted.

My personal storm—the ugly, destructive storm of my recent divorce—was still raging. In my anger and hurt, I had forgotten how much time had passed since I had first known Ted and Naomi, and how old and frail he had become. I felt hot, ashamed of my anger toward them. I knew that I missed them and still loved them.

And then we were all hugging one another. The girls, ecstatic, were jumping up and down, shouting "Nanny! Poppy!" We sat and ate together, my daughters side by side between their grandparents. ❖

Looking Ahead

"True Words" is organized around a theme. While we do accept non-thematic writing, we give precedence to stories written on the theme of a particular issue. **Members only, please.** We're looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We're not looking for generalized, abstract truths about life. We want to read your stories, not your essays! Please make sure that your stories are **350 words** or less. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

A Spring to Remember—March 2006 (due January 15, 2006)
The Beach—June 2005 (due April 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 Mary Jo Doig: email maryjo_d@yahoo.com.

If you do submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to: 531 Steeles Fort Road, Raphine, VA 24472.

More True Words . . .

(Continued from page 17)

Muddy Waters

Reda Rackley
Carmel Valley CA

Her belly swollen—levy's breaking down, spilling muddy waters, she'd been walkin' around groanin', way overdue. Weren't no birth cry, only a death cry from so long ago, so long ago.

The saturated walls broken down, broken apart, weren't nothin' goin' to keep those rotten waters from seepin' in, headed straight towards the slave market. The runaways that drown themselves in the black river had grown weary of no one rememberin' to wail and keen for them.

Now the slave master and the slaves bones be roaring side by side each other down the Mississippi, the pretty white man's bone yard swallowed up to join the African soul that nev'r got a proper burial: A race, a race to the end of a war, a Civil War that never really ended.

The old African spirits knew dis day was comin,' knew the white man would have to fall to his knees and wail, "please, please forgive me, forgive my grandpappy, my great-grand pappy, and my great-great-great grandpappy." ❖

Bracing for the Storm

Lela Davidson
Rogers AR

Sunday Mom calls. I'm busy.

"Bracing for the storm?" she asks.

I can't tell you how it irritates me when my mother watches the Weather Channel. From three thousand miles away, she warns: "Big Weather can strike anytime." Doesn't she know I have a weather radio?

I tell her I've got to go, then turn on the TV, just in case. The hurricane is named Katrina.

When I call Mom back, I emphasize the distance between north Arkansas and south Louisiana.

"Hurricanes spin off tornadoes," she counters.

I mm-hmm and okay until she's had her say. I almost think she wants me sucked up into an F-5. Mother loves I-told-you-so.

Over the course of the next week, I take in the dark side of humanity. The media's live images of horror and my nightmares of the things they cannot show leave me preoccupied. Depressed. Only the contrasting deluge of compassion keeps me sane.

I fill up the gas tank.

I study emergency preparedness.

I call everyone.

"Bad things happen in threes," my best friend says. "Get right with whoever it is you get right with." She means God.

At a shelter, a worn-out baby finds his thumb and falls

A warm welcome to our newest
Organizational Members,
Joan and Steve Neubauer of
wordwright.biz

asleep on my shoulder. My arms ache under his weight and I wonder if I'd be strong enough to carry him for hours through waist-high water.

I cry.

A few weeks later: Rita.

A friend in Houston jokes about getting drunk and looting the Pottery Barn.

But this time, I brace for the storm. This time I'm prepared for the surge of confusion, the wave of anxiety, and the flood of sorrow I know is coming.

Sunday, I call Mom. ❖

Katrina

Judy Miller
Austin TX

I can't write about it without becoming emotional. The tragedy of Katrina came out of nowhere. Everyone becomes helpless. Sadness, misery and devastation abound and my throat closes as I look back and try to figure out what to put on paper about it.

I watched the story unravel on the news. Day after day, I woke up early and turned on the television. Maybe if I watched constantly, I would see it end. *The sun would come out tomorrow*, I heard in my head.

I became overwhelmed as the Katrina tragedy spilled forth on my TV screen. Helplessness is a tragedy all by itself and it made me feel fearful and anxious. As a result, other troubles surfaced in me. This time my worries went to the plight of the animals that died or needed rescuing in the floodwaters. I began to dream about the animals. Then I saw images of them struggling in the water, some drowning inside their own houses.

One night I had a nightmare about animals. In the nightmare, I tortured a bird and each time I did something to it, it came closer to me for protection. I was nearly hysterical when I woke up knowing that I could have saved the dying animal.

I can't talk about Katrina in a helpful way or discuss the mission of all the players in this great tragedy yet. I donated a day helping get apartments ready for people to live in and I can't face any more closeness than that. It is too triggering for me.

Katrina will join Camille and the storm of Galveston in our history books someday and I can't wait. The sun will come out because the people of our country are strong just like in the song, *We Shall Overcome*. ❖

Tend and befriend

Journaling and Listening

For SCN, 2005 has been the year of “tending and befriending.” We began the year by publishing Linda Wisniewski’s article about how research proves that friendships among women help us stay healthy. Throughout the year, members like Nathalie Sorrell and Sister Mary Sullivan told us how they put the “tend and befriend” principal to work with women prisoners and at spiritual retreats. And through our lifewriting contest, we heard about some of the important friendships in our members’ lives.

This issue, we hear from a new member, **Ina Albert**, who helps others through her writing workshops. And we read another of the beautiful friendship stories submitted to our writing contest, by **Susan Janes**.

Healing for the Holidays

Ina Albert is the co-author, of *Write Your Self Well... Journal Your Self to Health*, a journal/workbook written for people suffering from illness and stress. It is based on the research demonstrating the health benefits of expressive writing. And when this journaling is done in a group or workshop setting, the stress-relieving benefits are immediately clear.

There is a Jewish holiday that is not practiced very much—especially in the Northwest where the Jewish population is small and dispersed over the mountains and the plains. It is celebrated Saturday night before the High Holy Days begin with the New Year—Rosh Hashanah—the birthday of the world.

It is called Selikot, which means preparation.

On that Saturday night, each person is supposed to prepare for the holidays by looking deeply into our soul, study the ways in which we have measured up or missed the mark during the year, atone for misdeeds, ask forgiveness of those we have wronged and set new goals of behavior for the coming year.

This year, I decided that I would take this holiday seriously and that the proper way to prepare was to hold a Healing for the Holidays workshop at the synagogue at which my rabbi husband was leading services. The synagogue in Bozeman, MT, had never recognized Selichot let alone make a big deal out of getting spiritually and emotionally ready for the holidays other than making sure that the shopping and cooking were done.

The healing I proposed had to do with getting in touch with healthy habits and their impact on our emotional and spiritual well-being. We spent time doing experiential exercises that connected our breath with restoring our energy, centering ourselves, and relieving stress. We experienced drinking water consciously, by tasting small sips. We took time to eat slowly, chewing our food and savoring the flavor. We studied our own flexibility by doing some simple Pilates exercises. We talked about self-critical thought viruses and the damage they do to our self-image. Then we enumerated the qualities we liked about ourselves. And finally, we journaled

about our feelings.

Research confirms that if you write about what you feel, you’ll feel better. To most of us that is self-evident. But science has now demonstrated that writing about our emotions around significant life events can lower blood pressure, relieve stress, strengthen our immune systems, reduce pain and suffering and speed the healing process.

So we journaled—and we cried together. The catalyst was drawing the floor plan of the house in which we grew up. We made note of the objects that took our attention as we mentally toured our homes, and wrote about what we recalled: the dog that was killed by a car, the Raggedy Ann that was clutched during childhood asthma attacks, the treasured bicycle that was stolen—all of it reappeared with the intensity that surrounded the original incidents. Stress released as smiles of relief spread over our faces.

They were ready to be conscious and alive for the holidays. Now we were truly ready to experience Jewish soul food. ❖

Write Your Self Well... Journal Your Self to Health

By Ina Albert and Zoe Keithley
 Publisher: Mountain Greenery Press (May, 2004)
 ISBN: 0975319604 Pb 224 pages
 \$16.95

The toxic memories of stress and trauma that we store in our bodies act as barriers to healing. But, by fully expressing them through daily journal writing, you can find release as the body, mind and soul open to healing. This book takes you on a guided tour inside yourself. It provides a map to lead you into your past so that you can enhance your own healing process.

Order direct from the author at:
www.writeyourself.com/buyBook.html
 or email inaalbert@aol.com.

Tend and befriend: Contest story

Dried Paint

Susan Janes
Glencoe IL

Beth and I grew up in 1950s suburban St. Louis. Our friendship began near the end of freshmen year in high school and would prove impervious to a lifetime of heartbreak.

During our early twenties, Beth's life began to take baffling turns. Not until her death, when we were 58, did the puzzle fit together and reveal a life trapped behind closed doors.

Our friendship began because Beth had a cute older brother. I attended the annual September dance unaware that upperclassmen swamped the first party of the season to look over the entering class of freshmen girls. Beth's brother Tom picked me out, told Beth to clue me in, and we began dating. Before long, because Tom was nice and popular, we started going steady. After the romance ended in May, Tom became irrelevant, and Beth and I grew closer as friends.

A snapshot shows us arm in arm. Tall Beth, short me. She with curly, blonde hair, I with straight, dark blonde hair. Our hair was an attempt to conform to the popular flip hairstyle of the day. By senior year we had tamed our hair into identical pageboys. Thousands of freckles peppered Beth's lanky, athletic body. She was a gentle person with a little girl's voice.

Like hairstyles, smiles were essential social tools. Beth's generous mouth stretched wide across her freckled face. The simultaneous tilt of her head, probably due to her height, brought her subject into the friendly world of her green eyes. In those days it was customary to stroll the halls and put the gesture into practice. Successful smiles won dates and party invitations.

I believed Beth when she said that Venetian blinds and escalators made her "dizzy." Shopping trips to the department stores sent us in search of elevators, and sleepovers landed at Beth's, because Venetian blinds covered the windows at my house. Beth, in fact, was avoiding triggers for epileptic seizures. For her not atypical family, epilepsy was a shameful disorder. Beth and I were unable to acknowledge her epilepsy until after her parents died in the 90s.

Sleeping over involved stretching out, she in one twin bed, I in the other, to philosophize. No one else in our crowd shared our passion for seriousness, as far as we knew. We had more interest in our hopes and dreams than in gossip. Beth wanted to be an artist, like her mother.

Our school fostered high achievement. Within that competitive environment, Beth provided safe, comfortable companionship. She was supportive of my accomplishments. In return, I respected hers. As the less skillful basketball player, I was proud of Beth's varsity stardom. Beth acquired a baby blue Chevy Impala convertible at 16. Naturally, we drove everywhere in Beth's car. We sat in the balcony of our

Presbyterian Church where the boys congregated. Beth had several admirers, but she never experienced capturing a boy who was the object of her crush. Her eye skipped to distant, unobtainable males.

College took Beth away, while I attended Washington University at home. After sophomore year, Beth returned as a freshman at Washington's art school. We scheduled P.E. classes together and met for lunch. Not long after her return, I noticed the narrowing of Beth's range of interests. She became involved in an unconventional religious sect. Our conversations revealed her obsession with a married instructor who was unaware of her interest.

After Beth graduated, she found an apartment and designed ads. I had completed a Masters, become a science teacher, and moved to Chicago with my new husband. We met whenever I was in town visiting family.

Two years after Beth began working, she called me in Chicago, when long distance calls were rare, to tell me that she had fallen on a moving escalator and shredded her face. "Dizzy," she explained, "And I can't drive anymore." I knew I could not ask why the fall resulted in the loss of her driver's

license. More than epilepsy plagued Beth. The next year brought hospitalization for depression and shock treatments and a move into her parental home.

In her parent's backyard on a splendid spring day that year, we spread a blanket on the ground for my new baby. "I want to have a baby someday, a family." Nearby, her mother sighed in frustration. How odd, I thought.

Beth's father shot the last photograph I own of Beth and me. She looks tired, her freckles unappreciated. More than the photograph, my memories of the garden bring focus to the scene. I remember Beth's small voice under a canopy of bold, blossoming trees, her passivity in the midst of inviting pathways, winding into woods and through islands of wildflowers. The garden said the world is a beautiful place; get up, go, be. Yet Beth, her parents as well, were as frozen in place as their garden sculptures. Nothing changed over the decades.

Whenever I was in town, Beth might let me come by or not, depending upon how she felt. Her contacts and interests shrank to the size of her brother's family in California. She stopped painting. My phone grew heavier and more difficult to dial.

When Beth's parents died in the late '90s, she was left to manage in the house alone. When I called, she asked me to take her out for a hamburger. My turn to drive Beth had arrived! Upon seeing her, I knew something was very wrong. She had not bathed in a long time. Over hamburgers, she told me she was out of medication for her epilepsy.

Panic took me to our former church for local intervention. They provided a volunteer, who visited Beth weekly. After locating Tom in California, he arranged the unpleasant task of having police remove her to an assisted living facility. She soon developed uterine cancer, and uncontrollable seizures caused falls that tore her ankles into inoperable pieces.

*A snapshot shows us
arm in arm. Tall
Beth, short me. She
with curly, blonde
hair, I with straight,
dark blonde hair.*

I last saw Beth in September 2001. From her wheelchair she noticed the hamburger I brought as a gift and smiled wide with pleasure. Three months later, in December, Tom informed me of Beth's death. She had refused treatment for the cancer.

"You see, Susan, Beth had schizophrenia. Instead of proper treatment, my parents hid her at home. When she became violent in 1991, they finally obtained a diagnosis and medication. I cannot forgive them for their neglect."

Beth's faraway crushes made sense when Tom explained that his mother told her she could never have children because of the epilepsy.

Decades of confusion fell away. Beth's neglectful family had compounded her misfortunes and planted, as massive as the family garden, a permanent ache in my heart. The tragic sacrifice of Beth's well being for their veneer of normalcy had kept me from understanding Beth and her suffering. All a friend could manage was to spare her from the forgotten and the discarded. I don't regret a baffling moment I spent with Beth for the value of knowing and loving her.

Beth's funeral took place on a December day that was as mild and sweet as spring. Following the service, I was the only person left to accompany Tom to the graveside. ❖

Susan Janes lives in suburban Chicago with her husband in a house on the village historical registry, built in 1877. The house stimulates her interest in memory and history. She graduated from Washington University in St. Louis and taught high-school science and cooking. Her memoir writings have appeared in the Northwestern University *ILR Journal* and in an anthology, *Gifts from Our Grandmothers*.

(Continued from page 11)

Patricia Pando: Stirring up Stories

Danielle, is a dear friend. Says Patricia, "I read Rosemary's book, *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself*, and it broke a dam for me. It's a super book for those who want to start telling their story."

Patricia says another big role model was her history teacher, Mary Elizabeth Davidson at West Texas State College (now Texas A & M.) "She helped me gain confidence. She was independent, self-confident, and also very kind. She seemed to recognize something in me and went to the trouble to let me know it." Now Patricia is doing the same. Her students, her OWL workshop members, reading, and poetry circle members, and the women she's interviewed have all benefited from the same qualities she admired so much in her college teacher, for Patricia too is independent, self-confident, and very kind. She is just the woman to take on the task of spreading the word about SCN, ensuring not only our future as an organization, but the continuation of our mission to give voice to women's stories. We look forward to getting to know her too. ❖

About the *LifeLines Lifewriting Retreat at Wildacres, North Carolina*

By Robin A. Edgar

The further we zigged and zagged up the mountain roads, the more convinced I was that the Wildacres Retreat in Little Switzerland, North Carolina, was going to be a meaningful gathering place for peace and inspiration. Having taught at the John C. Campbell Folk School along the bucolic edge of the Nantahala Forest in western part of the state, I knew just how integral the natural setting was to the success of a writing retreat.

As I pulled up to the office to register and saw the magnificent view and sipped a deep breathe of Blue Ridge Mountain air, I knew the weekend was going to soar! The friendly staff greeted us and made us feel at home. Walking into our rooms at the lodge with their private baths and ample space sealed the deal! We shared a hearty evening meal that accommodated vegans and vegetarians in the communal dining hall, which we shared with the other groups that were at Wildacres that weekend.

Twelve lovely ladies, including me and Pat MacEnulty, my co-instructor, traveled from various parts of North Carolina and even Virginia to attend this first ever SCN Lifewriting Retreat to be held in this part of the country. Pat and I put the group through some ice-breakers to get to know each other. Ranging from young mother to great grandmother and city slicker to born-in-the-hollers, we became writing sisters within moments as we laughed, sighed, and amen'd our way through each other's stories about courageous mothers, dysfunctional fathers, and lost but not forgotten brothers. As the sessions progressed over the weekend, we proved, once again, that women are natural storytellers and that the sharing of their experiences was a powerful act of personal transformation.

One of the participants, Nancy Jones from Charlotte, put it the best when she described the meaningful and productive work done by every member of the group. She said, "It was rewarding, reassuring, and affirming for everyone there. It meant so much to me to see the clouds of distress and despair lift from the faces of those who seem particularly burdened."

Pat and I enjoyed being with this wonderful group of ladies, some of whom we had never met before. She observed that the way everyone was willing to share their stories made it a meaningful weekend. It was hard to leave the sanctity of our treasured writing space and the notion of getting away from it all. But, do not despair—I put my dibs in at Wildacres for September so be sure to watch for notices of our 2006 Wildacres Writing retreat! ❖



Story circles—the heart of SCN

Rounding up New Story Circles

The ever-energetic Lisa Shirah-Hiers chairs the Circles Committee of the SCN Board. This summer she's been busy rounding up a new circle and helping members around the country to form their own.

Finding or Starting a Circle of Your Own

From time to time, members of the Story Circle Network board are asked, “Why are so many of the SCN events in Austin, Texas?” The simple answer is that this is where SCN originated and where we have the largest membership base and women to draw on for the gargantuan task of organizing workshops, conferences, and retreats. But as we approach our tenth anniversary, SCN is entering a new phase of development in which we will seek a more national presence. You, our members in other locales, are crucial to this growth. As of this writing there are 21 SCN “Free-Range” circles meeting in the United States. Only six of these are in Texas. We have a large membership, however—just under 600 members spread out across the country and in a few foreign countries. We are here to help you start a story circle in your area if one does not already exist or is closed to new members.

The Story Circle Network Board defines an SCN Free-Range circle as one that is not affiliated with either the Austin Chapter or the Internet Chapter. (Circles in the Austin area must affiliate with the Austin Chapter.) Our plan is that, as the number of circles increase in a given area, they might affiliate into an official SCN Region that would be able to offer Story Circle Network signature programs like Writing from Life or become locations for a national conference or retreat. But the first order of business is to increase the number of circles, and thereby members, nationwide.

The issue of growth has become especially important to SCN. A major donation that SCN received for several years in our startup phase has expired and we now rely primarily on our membership to cover the organization's running costs. Continued growth is going to be an important element of our drive to mature as a solidly funded and vibrant non-profit. That means we're keen to increase our membership and to expand our workshop offerings throughout the US and overseas.

As an organization, we are fervently dedicated to our mission to help women tell the stories of their lives and to offering ways and means for them to do so with the nurturing support of other women. Women seem to find their voices most easily in such close-knit groups where our experiences are recognized and validated and we find common ground.

A story circle is many things—a source of support, friendship, and nurturance, a gentle encourager to write in spite of myriad responsibilities, a gift we give to ourselves and each other. Facilitating such a group is profoundly rewarding.

To start an SCN Free-Range circle, only the facilitator need be a member of the national organization, though she will be asked periodically to encourage others to join. Any member interested in starting a circle can request a copy of the Facilitator's Guide, free only to our members. The guide offers excellent suggestions for finding members, organizing a time and place, prompts to get you started and advice on making your circle a safe and encouraging place. ❖

New Story Circle Forms in Houston

On October 8th, 2005, SCN President-elect Patricia Pando and Circles Coordinator Lisa Shirah-Hiers met with ten dynamic women in Houston, Tex, to launch a new story circle. The energy in the room was palpable and contagious! The participants are a diverse bunch including a professional storyteller, the executive director of a non-profit organization, a retreat leader, a hospice worker, several educators, a published poet, published novelist, magazine journalist and published memoirist. Many of these women already lead writing groups and classes.

We are wildly enthusiastic about the contributions these women are sure to make to their circle, to SCN and to their

(Continued on page 23)

Be Part of a Writing Circle

Need help starting a story circle in your town? From the SCN home page www.storycircle.org look for the heading “How to Start a Story Circle,” in the left hand navigation bar. Or contact the Circles Coordinator, Lisa Shirah-Hiers at storycircle@storycircle.org. Lisa can also supply you with a copy of our handy Facilitators' Guide.

Want to join an established writing circle? To see the current list of writing circles that meet around the U.S. and the world, visit www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml

If you already lead a writing circle, be sure and let us know, so we can add you to the web page. That way, you and your circle members who are SCN members will be eligible to submit stories to our anthology as well as for other benefits. Email storycircle@storycircle.org

local community. Though most of them are not yet SCN members, we anticipate that many will join. Facilitator Joyce Boatright gave an eloquent introduction to the mission and activities of our organization accompanied by one of the participant's yummy home-made scones. Lunch followed and, by the end of the afternoon, they had set a date and time, exchanged contact info and decided upon a unique format. This circle will base their writing exercises on books in a combination reading/writing circle. This format has worked well for at least one of their members in workshops she has led at the Jung Center. The new circle will serve an area where we did not yet have a free-range circle (that is, a face-to-face circle outside the area served by the Austin Chapter.) With so many leaders involved in this major city, we anticipate that this circle will spin off into others and perhaps lead to the eventual formation of a Houston Story Circle Network Region which could offer SCN programs locally. This is a fervent dream among board members and will be a special focus of Patricia's presidency.

We congratulate them all and look forward to hearing more about their activities! ❖

Member Services Web Pages

Are you a dues-paying member of the Story Circle Network? Would you like to advertise your reading/writing/storytelling-related business on our website?

We have now begun a new "Member Services" web page just for you, at a very reasonable price:

- SCN members only
- \$15 once a year
- must be reading/writing/storytelling related
- give us a blurb about your business, referring folks to your website (or email address, or phone number)
- only factual changes within the year (i.e., this isn't for advertising a specific event/date/workshop)

Interested? Go to our website and send us your info:

www.storycircle.org/frmmemberservices.shtml

A Story Circle News Roundup

Here's what the National SCN Board and two Chapters have been doing since September.

Story Circle Board Report

The SCN Board met at La Madeline Restaurant in Austin, Texas on October 10, 2005. Sixteen members attended the meeting chaired by President Judith Helburn.

The Board

- Accepted the report of the nominating committee. The new officers who will assume office on January 1 are Patricia Pando, president; Leilani Rose, acting vice-president; Penny Appleby, Secretary/Treasurer. Carolyn Blankenship will join the board.
- Reported 621 hours volunteered for SCN activities.
- Learned that Paula Yost will offer an online class beginning in early spring.
- Considered the possible publication of an anthology/cookbook to commemorate the tenth anniversary of SCN in 2007.
- Discussed various ways SCN can be involved in hurricane relief efforts.
- Received a detailed report on the activities of the Stories from the Heart Conference Committee.
- Recognized departing board members and officers.

The next Board meeting will be Monday February 6 in Austin, Texas.

—Report by Patricia Pando

Internet Chapter

It's no secret, the Story of the Month segment of our Internet Chapter e-newsletter has become one of our favorite parts of the newsletter. Recently, we realized that our dedicated e-circle facilitators contribute stories each and every month and have never had their stories chosen as "SOM". So for the next many months, chapter members are in for a real treat! Each month, a circle facilitator's story will be chosen as Story of the Month by those who put together the IC Newsletter. We know chapter members will enjoy reading a few examples of fine writing, nurturing efforts, and storytelling from our circle facilitators.

—Report by Lee Ambrose

Austin Chapter

During 2005, members enjoyed themselves on several Sunday afternoons while attending the Austin Chapter's Be Our Guest series. Starting in springtime, we sang our hearts out along with the very spirited voice of Susan Lincoln of HildeGirls fame. In summer, Susan Bright, poet, and owner of Plainview Press led us in a delightful writing exercise and then presented us with tips for publishing our work. In early autumn, several of our very talented members entertained us by reading at our annual open mike session. We'll close our programs for this year with our Holiday Party in early December with a lunch and live music by members Lisa Shirah-Hiers and Danelle Sasser. Many thanks to Rebecca Roberts for arranging these great programs and to the other ladies of Austin Chapter, who participated in and helped make all this happen.

—Report by Jackie Newman,

SCN: Who we are

An Annual Report of Our Activities

We're pleased to bring you the first SCN annual report to members of our organization's activities for the past year. Find out who we are, where we live, what we do, and whom we reach.

Our Mission

The Story Circle Network is dedicated to helping women share the stories of their lives and to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories. We carry out our mission through publications, a website, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories, and choose to be the authors of their own lives.

How We Began

The Story Circle Network was founded in early 1997 by Dr. Susan Wittig Albert. Susan Albert was already a well-established mystery writer when she wrote *Writing from Life*, her groundbreaking workbook aimed at helping women write their own stories. Susan realized that women longed for sharing communities to support them in their writing efforts. The best way to put into practice the idea of the "story circle" that she talked about in her book was to create an organization to spread the word. With the help of a group of founding board members, Story Circle Network was born in 1997 and received its 501(c)(3) status shortly afterward.

Who We Are Now

SCN is guided by a board of directors and incorporated as a Texas not-for-profit corporation. Our activities are funded through the annual dues of our members, through our educational activities, and by the generous gifts and grants of our supporters. Our national office is located in Austin, Texas. Our membership is made up of 573 women living throughout the United States and a dozen living overseas.

Where We Live

USA (43 states): 554
 Canada: 7
 Middle East: 4
 Australia and New Zealand: 3
 Mexico and Caribbean: 2
 UK and Europe: 2
 India: 1

Our Chapters

Our members share their experiences in story circles, groups of around a dozen women who write and share their stories with each other. Our Internet Chapter allows women in far-flung regions to participate in online story circles. In the Austin area, under the umbrella of the Austin Chapter, many women choose to meet in face-to-face circles, in libraries, churches, senior centers, and women's homes.

In other parts of the country, many "Free-Range" SCN circles have formed, as existing writing groups have affiliated with SCN. (In SCN's Free-Range circles, it is enough if only the facilitator is an SCN member.) In communities where SCN members have made contact with others living nearby, more Free-Range circles are forming and new SCN regional groupings are expected to form soon.

Internet Chapter members: 213

Austin Chapter members: 193

Number of Active Circles

Internet Chapter: 15 writing & 1 reading

Austin Chapter: 11 writing & 1 reading

Free Range Circles: 21 writing circles in 9 states

Our Events in 2005

To fulfill our mission, we offer workshops, retreats, and other book-related events, and we encourage our members to organize similar activities where they live.

February	Writing from Life weekend writing workshop in Austin, Texas
March	Austin Chapter Be Our Guest
April	LifeLines Writing Retreat at Festival Hill, Round Top, Texas Barnes and Noble Book fair fundraiser
May	Austin Chapter's "The Writes of Spring" one-day workshop Schmooze the Muse one-day workshop: Nighttime Illuminations
June	A Texas Tea with Nancy Aronie
July	Austin Chapter Be Our Guest Schmooze the Muse one-day workshop: Moving through Writing
September	LifeLines Writing Retreat, Wildacres, North Carolina
October	Writing from Life one-day writing workshop in Austin, Texas Participation in the Texas Book Festival
November	Benefit book signing with Susan Wittig Albert
December	Austin Chapter Holiday Party

Other SCN National Programs in 2005

The Susan Wittig Albert 2005 Lifewriting Contest was open to all SCN members. Stories were judged by a panel of SCN members who are published authors or previous contest winners and the winning entries were printed in the September '05 issue of the *Story Circle Journal*. The *Journal's* editor nominated the first three prize-winning stories for the prestigious Pushcart Prize.

Older Women's Legacy Circle Project (OWL)

The OWL-Circle Workshop is a unique 5-week introduction to lifewriting that individuals, churches, women's groups, and senior centers can offer to their members. The Workbook and Facilitator's Manual (published together) provide everything needed to teach one of the most effective memoir-writing workshops available.

Workbook/facilitator manual sets sold this year: 15
Total distribution of the OWL program since 2000: 81 sets sold in 15 states plus Canada

Our Print Publications in 2005

SCN offers two print publications, mailed to all SCN members as a benefit of membership.

The *Story Circle Journal* (28 pages, published March, June, September and December), edited by Jane Ross, includes a mix of articles about lifewriting, stories by SCN members, and notices about the organization. The True Words section of the *Journal* (edited by Mary Jo Doig) provides a venue for members to submit their short pieces, and many members have the pleasure of seeing their words in print here for the first time.

True Words from Real Women (published annually in the Spring and edited this year by Carolyn Blankenship) is an anthology of lifewriting by our members. The anthology provides another venue for members to submit their work for print in a responsive and nurturing publication.

Our Online Publications

SCN offers four email newsletters (eLetters) available free of charge to SCN members and the general public, to keep them informed of SCN activities. Our Webmistress Peggy Moody oversees editing and production of all our eLetters with help from these volunteers:

National eLetter: Editorial assistance from Susan Wittig Albert (4079 subscribers)
Austin Chapter eLetter: Editorial assistance from Danelle Sasser (877 subscribers)
Internet Chapter eLetter Editorial assistance from Lee Ambrose (201 subscribers)
National Conference eLetter: edited by Peggy Moody (3679 subscribers)

Our Website

Our website is updated almost daily by SCN's Executive Director and Webmistress Peggy Moody, to bring members the latest about SCN's many programs and events as well as links to other writing resources and opportunities for

publishing. The website consists of more than 1000 web pages. Our website received 106,000 page views this year.

One of the most popular areas of the website is the Internet Chapter area, which is accessible only to those who are paid up Internet Chapter members. There are over 800 pages on the Internet Chapter website. Our website also includes a large Book Review site, coordinated by Paula Stallings Yost, with over 200 books reviewed.

The SCN Board website has over 300 pages of agendas, minutes, reports, and other information accessible only by the SCN Board or other administrators.

Who Keeps SCN Running Smoothly?

Our Board

Executive Committee:

Judith Helburn, M.S., Board President
Patricia Pando, Ph.D., President Elect
Penny Appleby, M.B.A., Secretary/Treasurer
Leilani Rose, M.S., Acting Vice President

Other Board Members

Melanie Alberts
Lee Ambrose, Internet Chapter President
Anne Beckner, Director OWL-Circle Project
Pat Flathouse Ed.D., Outgoing Director of OWL
Linda Jones
Marilyn McConnell
Diana McDaniel
Peggy Moody, ex officio Executive Director; webmistress
Jackie Newman, Austin Chapter President
Donna Remmert
Mary Ann Reynolds M.S.
Rebecca Roberts
Jane Ross, *Story Circle Journal* Editor
Danelle Sasser, Stories from the Heart Conference Chair
Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Austin Chapter Officers/Volunteers:

Carolyn Blankenship, Publicity
Diana McDaniel, Hospitality
Jackie Newman, President
Rebecca Roberts, Programs
Danelle Sasser, Treasurer

Internet Chapter Officers:

Lee Ambrose, President; Member Services
Peggy Moody, Secretary/Treasurer

Our Office

The SCN office in Austin TX is run by Peggy Moody, our Executive Director since 2001. Peggy handles all membership inquiries and mailings. She built and maintains our website. Working a 30-hour week for SCN, she handles every aspect of the day-to-day running of SCN with grace and efficiency.

Volunteer Support

Besides our dedicated Board members, SCN depends on the generous volunteer support of many women from around the country. Thank you to all of you for keeping SCN strong and keeping women writing. ❖

Memory to Memoir *Online Writing Workshop* *with Paula Stallings Yost*

Overwhelmed by the idea of producing a life story? Wondering where to begin? Stop worrying and just do it. Sign up today to discover the rewards and relative ease of creating a memoir. The delights and benefits of reminiscence will be revealed as you write a personal or family history one great story at a time. Learn effective life-writing techniques. Relax and have fun with a variety of writing and memory-jogger exercises.

Each student will compose four to five short stories that will be edited by the instructor and returned with helpful suggestions for improvement or expansion. Students also will work on methods for transitioning and organizing the stories into a creative nonfiction narrative, including a table of contents, dedication, etc. Writing guidelines, story ideas, and a bibliography of suggested reading materials will be provided as well.

When and Where: This is an online class running from February 13-March 27, 2006. You will need an email address and ready access to the internet to participate. An introduction will be emailed to you upon receipt of your enrollment fee. The lesson plan, as well as further instructions, will be emailed to you on the first day of class.

Cost and Registration: \$175 (SCN member) or \$200 (non-member). Class size is limited to 15 (minimum enrollment is 5). Please register early using our online enrollment form. You can pay online or via check. When we receive your payment, we will send you a confirmation (via email, if you include your email address).

Refund/Cancellation Policy: We will refund your registration fee, less a \$10 cancellation charge, if you request it up to 15 days before the workshop begins. After that date, we will refund your fee only if we are able to fill your space from our waiting list. Once the class has begun, no refunds will be given. We reserve the right to cancel the workshop; if so, we will refund your full registration fee.

Instructor: A journalist and personal historian and vice president of the Association of Personal Historians, Paula Stallings Yost believes passionately in the power of story. In 1999, she jettisoned a 25-year public relations/journalism career and life in the suburbs to found LifeSketches—a biography service based in the piney woods of East Texas. Helping others preserve their family histories (the real stories of people from all walks of life told in their own voices) has become the perfect niche for her talents and expertise. For more information, an interview published recently in the *Story Circle Journal* may be found at the following web site: www.storycircle.org/LifeWriting/lifewriter_53.shtml. ❖

*Sign up for Paula's class on our website
(look for the **Upcoming Events** links).*

True Words Anthology *Call for Submissions*

All you reading and writing circle members, pick up your pens (or boot up your computers)! SCN's yearly anthology, *True Words from Real Women*, needs you! Each spring, we publish a special "stories-only" anthology to showcase the wonderful writing done by our members.

Again this year, we will only be accepting submissions from women who are SCN members and are active members of an official SCN circle. If you're in an Austin Chapter or Internet Chapter writing *or* reading circle or you're a member of one of our official "Free-Range" circles, we want to hear from you. (Not sure if your circle is an SCN Free-Range circle? Check our website. Look for the "Story Circles in the US" link on our homepage navigation bar.) Because these official SCN story circles are at the heart of SCN's mission, we want to showcase circle members' work and encourage other members to form or join a writing or reading circle.

There is no theme for the anthology, and we accept prose and poetry, and both short and long pieces, though greater consideration is given to shorter pieces. The word limit for prose is 1000 words and for poetry, 40 lines. We will accept up to three pieces per author for consideration. The deadline for submissions is February 28, 2006.

We will be announcing the name of this year's editor shortly. In the meantime, all submissions can be emailed to anthology@storycircle.org. Please be sure to include your name, city, phone, address, and email address so that we may contact you if we have questions about your submission. Also, please tell us which circle you belong to. If you would like to submit your story as a hard copy, please send your writing to:

Anthology Submissions,
Story Circle Network,
PO Box 500127,
Austin TX 78750-0127.

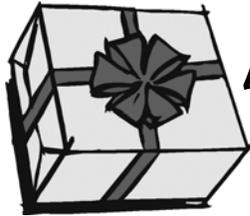
We look forward to having a wide sampling of stories and poems, representative of our increasingly diverse membership, but we can only accomplish that goal with your help. Let us hear from you!

FAQ: I belong to a writing circle in my home town but my circle is not listed on the "Story Circles in the US" web page. How can I get it listed as an official Free-Range circle and be eligible to submit stories to the anthology?

Answer: The facilitator of the circle you belong to must be a current SCN member for the circle to be eligible for listing as an official SCN Free-Range circle. If the facilitator is you, then just contact the Circles Coordinator, Lisa Shirah-Hiers at storycircle@storycircle.org to get your circle listed.

If you are not the facilitator of your circle, why not suggest to your facilitator that she join SCN, too.

Remember, only fully paid-up members of SCN may submit work for the anthology, so once your circle is an official SCN free-Rage circle, encourage your fellow circle members to join and to submit their stories. ❖



Holiday Gifts for Lifewriters

Support SCN as you make your holiday purchases.

Give
the gift that will
last all year—
a gift membership
to SCN

Sign up on our website:

www.storycircle.org

(scroll down to “How to Join...” in the purple navigation bar)

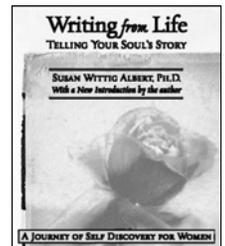
or use the membership form below.

And how about...

 **A new journal** (and perhaps a fancy pen to go with it). How about SCN’s *Discoveries: A Blank Journal Just for Women*, with covers hand-crafted by the women of SCN, foreword by Susan Wittig Albert, quotes by women throughout. Spiral-bound to open flat, 6" x 8", 208 unruled pages.
\$15



 **The book that helped launch SCN** and that’ll guide any woman on her writing journey, *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul’s Story* by Susan Wittig Albert.
Pb \$18



There are many more gift ideas at www.storycircle.org/GiftGuide.html and it’s easy to order online.

 **A book by an SCN author.** There are nearly 100 titles to choose from on our authors’ webpage at www.storycircle.org/authors.shtml.



This membership is a gift.

My name and address:

My phone and e-mail:

Join the Story Circle Network!

____ Annual Membership: USA: \$35 ;
Canada & Mexico: \$45; } International MO
International \$50.
____ Austin Chapter: \$18/yr (in addition to your national dues!)
____ Internet Chapter: \$18/yr (in addition to your national dues!)
____ Sample copy of the *Story Circle Journal*: \$5

Mail your check to
Story Circle Network,
PO Box 500127,
Austin TX 78750-0127

12/05

Name _____

Address _____

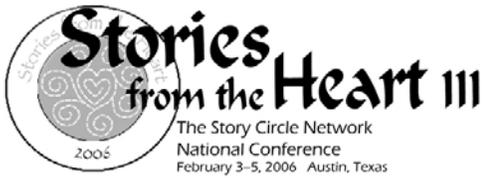
City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Phone _____

Email _____ Amount enclosed _____

Become a supporting member and help Story Circle Network grow. Check here:

\$70 Supporter \$125 Sponsor \$200 Patron \$400 Benefactor



Use this page and send with your check to:
 Conference Registration, Story Circle Network,
 PO Box 500127, Austin TX 78750. To register
 online and use your credit card, go to [www.
 storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.shtml](http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/fmregister.shtml)

Conference Registration Form

Name _____ Phone _____

Street Address _____ Email _____

City, State, Zip _____ Story Circle Member? **yes no**

If attending on Saturday or Sunday, please note your lunch preference: chicken vegetarian

Session/Day	Membership Status	Early Registration (before 12/15/05)	Regular Registration (12/16/05–02/02/06)	Registration at the Door	Amount
Full Session (Fri keynote/Sat/Sun)	Member	\$195	\$220	\$245	
	Non-Member*	\$245	\$270	\$295	
Friday Pre-Conference Workshop	Member & Non-Member/Guest	\$25	\$30	\$35	
Friday only (Keynote Speaker /Reception)	Member & Non-Member/Guest	\$25	\$30	\$35	
Saturday Session Only (Includes lunch)	Member	\$95	\$120	\$145	
	Non-Member/Guest	\$120	\$145	\$170	
Saturday Lunch Only (Register by 2/2/06)	Member Non-Member/Guest	\$30	\$40	Not available	
Sunday Session Only (Includes lunch)	Member	\$75	\$100	\$125	
	Non-Member/Guest	\$100	\$125	\$150	
Sunday Lunch Only (Register by 2/2/06)	Member	\$30	\$40	Not available	
	Non-Member/Guest	\$30	\$40	Not available	
				Total Enclosed	

- *Non-Members who choose to join prior to the end of the conference on Sunday, February 5, 2006, will have a portion of their registration fee applied to their dues.
- Cancellations are accepted until January 10, 2006, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50 for a full conference registration or \$10 for a one-day registration. There is no refund for Friday's lecture/reception.
- Scholarships will be offered through **December 15** through our Sisters Helping Sisters program. (See page 3 for details.)

Story Circle Network
PO Box 500127
Austin TX 78750-0127

**Early registration rates end December 15.
 Mail your registration form or register
 online today.**