

STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 15 No. 4, December 2011

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

First Annual May Sarton Memoir Award Last Chance to Shine

by Paula Yost



Only two weeks left until the December 15 entry deadline, and the close of our first year's competition. If you have published a memoir in 2011, or would like to nominate someone else who has, don't miss this opportunity. Clear and simple guidelines for the process are easily accessible at <http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/guidelines.php>.

The Sarton Memoir Award will be presented annually to the author of the best woman's memoir published in the United States and Canada, chosen from works submitted. Professional librarians not affiliated with SCN will select the winner.

This award is named in honor of May Sarton (1912-1995), distinguished American poet, novelist, and author of twelve memoirs and journals. Readers have found Sarton's work to be inspiring, moving, and thought provoking. While widely acclaimed for her fiction and poetry, Sarton's best and most enduring work may lie in her journals. In these honest, probing accounts of her solitary life, she deals with such issues as aging, isolation, solitude, friendship, sexuality, self-doubt, success and failure, envy, love of nature, gratitude for life's simple pleasures, and the daily challenge of leading of a creative life.

Our first-round jurors already are reading entries carefully, searching for some of those same wonderful attributes found in the writings of May Sarton. And we're lining up a fine bunch of second-round jurors. If you know a librarian who is not a member of SCN who might be interested in participating, please email susan@susanalbert.com and pass along her name and contact information. We're very excited to have a terrific evaluation rubric as a basis for the judging. Some of our jurors like it so much that they plan to use it when teaching their classes. Check out this helpful 10-point rubric at <http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/rubric.php>.

The winner of this year's competition will be announced at *Stories from the Heart*, the biannual SCN National Memoir Conference, in Austin, Texas, April 13-15, 2012. Much time and effort has been invested by many to establish this award project. And we all are looking forward with great anticipation to that special moment when we can recognize the work of yet another gifted woman author.

*Stories from the Heart is...
uplifting...warm...illuminating...open-hearted...
encouraging...inspiring... embracing...a work of
art...inclusive... compassionate...exhilarating!*

Stories from the Heart VI

Join us in Austin, Texas, April 13-15, 2012 for SCN's sixth national life writing conference.



Stories from the Heart VI 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, movement, and poetry—for sharing our stories.

This issue of the Journal is dedicated to giving you all the information you need about the conference. Start reading on page 3.

Register by February 15 to receive the special early registration rates. Use the form on page 23 of this Journal issue, or sign up online at:

www.storycircle.org/Conference

In This Issue . . .

President's Letter	2
Stories From The Heart VI News . . .	3-7
Take A Bow—Paula Yost	8
Members In Print & The News. . .	9
True Words: Change of Direction. .	10
Circles: Bounteous Rewards	21
SCN Book Reviews	22
Conference Registration Form. . . .	23
True Words: Looking Ahead.	24

Letter From SCN's President—

Lessons from the Roller-rink



When I was nine a popular place for birthday parties was the local roller-skating rink. There, on rented skates, my friends and I would roll around the wide expanse of very hard concrete bewitched by the strobe lights and disco ball rainbows on the floor, ceiling and walls; the pounding rhythms of the Bee Gees and the Village People, or the soulful soaring strains of Barry Manilow and Billy Joel. I was not an athletic child, so I spent much of the time picking myself up, dusting myself off and with one or two new bruises to add to a growing collection, venturing forth for another try. I remember thinking what a shame it was that it took most of the allotted time to get the hang of it, and just when I felt

I was becoming expert, when I could move myself smoothly through multiple circumlocutions without clinging to the wall or falling hard on my derriere, it was time to go.

I feel a bit the same way about the conclusion of my two-year term as SCN President. I have learned a lot in what feels like a very short time, and enjoyed most of the experience—bruises and the occasional fall notwithstanding. I've had a very solid wall to cling to in the form of my fellow board members, volunteers, editors, friends and our irreplaceable Executive Director, Peggy Moody, and awe-inspiring founder, Susan Albert.

It has been a great honor to serve as your President, and I have been grateful for the chance to give back to SCN a small portion of what it has given me—confidence in my writing and teaching and a renewed appreciation for women and women's stories. I have witnessed with pride the ongoing efforts of the board of directors to live out our mission to help women become "the authors of their own lives" with the expansion of our member programs and services.

It hasn't always been easy. The economy has had an impact on our organization just as it has everywhere else with rising costs and declining income. But I can tell you we are still strong, and I have no doubt we will continue to grow. We offer something unique—a safe place, a womb where women's stories are nurtured until they are ready to be born. Our stories take on a life of their own. They touch other lives, create a permanent record of our time and place. They change the women who write them down and all those who read them.

I leave you in good hands. Our President-Elect, Pat LaPointe, has spent the last year working hard as our Membership Chair, analyzing our current programs and services and dreaming up ways we can offer you even more. She is that unique combination of crystal clear vision coupled with the boundless energy to carry it out. I can hardly wait to see what she has in store.

I give thanks to you, our members, for joining with us in our mission, for writing and sharing your stories and encouraging each other to do the same. I thank you for leading and participating in our story circles on and offline, in our workshops, retreats, conferences and competitions, for adding your voices to our lifewriters listserve, twitter and facebook page, for submitting to our journal, anthology, herstory and one woman's day blogs and book review site. Thanks, in short, for your energy, optimism and courage. I hope you've had at least as much fun as I have.

Lisa Shirah-Hiers
November 10, 2011

Story Circle Network's Mission

The Story Circle Network (SCN) 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, websites, 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.

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.

Editor: Robin Wittig
journaleditor@storycircle.org

Contributing Editors:
Mary Jo Doig
Lisa Shirah-Hiers
Susan Albert
Robin Edgar
Barbara Miller

We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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Membership Rates

One Year \$45 US
\$55 Canada and Mexico
\$60 elsewhere

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

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: \$1.25 for 1 issue, \$5 for 2–5 issues, \$7.50 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.



Stories from the Heart VI Conference News

Conference Hotel

Wyndham Hotel
3401 South IH-35,
Austin TX 78741
512-448-244
fax: 512-443-4208

www.wyndham.com/hotels/AUSWC

To get the conference rate (\$107/night plus tax, double occupancy), call the hotel directly (512-448-2444); please be sure to say that you are with Story Circle Network, and make your reservations no later than March 22, 2012. Room rate includes complimentary airport shuttle service, parking, and high speed wireless internet.

Would you like to advertise for a roommate? See our **Roommates Wanted!** web page:

www.storycircle.org/Conference/roommates.shtml



Pre-Conference Workshops

Matilda Butler & Kendra Bonnett

It's 10 pm, Do You Know Where Your Story Is? Seven Steps to Successful Story Structure

Do you get so involved in the mechanics of writing that your true story gets lost? Do you worry about story structure but aren't sure how to develop, much less follow, one that is appropriate for your story? You want to write from your heart and tell your story. Yet, just like a house without a strong foundation and frame, the elements of your writing—character development, emotional expression, sensory description, strong dialogue, and time and place—may collapse under their own weight without a well-designed and executed framework for your memoir.

In our pre-conference workshop, we'll arm you with a powerful set of tools, techniques and devices to build a framework for your writing that will let the meaning of your story shine through. We call our simple, seven-step process Structural Alchemy™.

Let's play the Build-A-Story Game: Memoir-Writing Edition and in the process have fun building our memoirs by mixing and matching the components of a well-structured story. You'll play, write and share in this workshop.

As a bonus, you'll leave with an extra copy of our Build-A-Story Game that you can share with your writing group or writing friends. Come join us for an afternoon of story structure fun that will prepare you to successfully frame your memoir.



Matilda Butler



Kendra Bonnett

Jeanne Guy

The Power of Your Story: Rethink, Reframe, Re-Story Your Life

What would it feel like to explore your life's possibilities, have your story be heard without judgment, and practice deep listening? A Re-Story Circle is a safe structure for such deep conversation, and for generating ideas through writing prompts to "re-story" your life. A Re-Story Circle is a place where you can feel nurtured, supported and empowered—in community.

Re-storying means looking at your life, your story, as it is currently constituted and reframing it. Journal writing is the tool we use to open up a dialogue with your Wise Voice, who could care less about your writing and more about you knowing who you already are.

Jeanne uses Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea's Circle process (*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*), as the framework for her Re-Story Circles. The Circle is an energetic social container capable of helping a group draw on wellsprings of insight, information and story that inspire collective wisdom and action. Re-Story Circles rely on that social container of collective wisdom, but with the objective of inspiring individual growth through reframing of your life's story using journal writing prompts and deep conversation.

Join Jeanne as she leads us on an exploration of self-discovery to help us all rethink, reframe and re-story our lives. In addition to participating, writing, sharing and growing, you will also receive free a copy of "Re-Story Circle Guidelines" to help you practice and share this process in your own life with others.





Stories from the Heart VI Conference News

Program

Friday, April 13

9:00: Registration Opens
 9:30 AM–Noon: Heart-to-Heart Coaching
 Noon–1:45 PM: Jeanne Guy Pre-Conference Workshop
 2:00–3:34 PM: Kendra Bonnett & Matilda Butler
 Pre-Conference Workshop
 4:00–5:00 PM: Conference Welcome Session
 5:30–7:30PM: Dutch-Treat Dinner
 7:30PM: Keynote Address with Gail Straub
 (Dessert reception following)

Saturday, April 14

8:30AM: Registration Opens
 9:00–10:30AM: Session 1
 11:00AM–12:30PM: Session 2
 12:30–2:00 PM: Lunch, Entertainment: Susan Lincoln
 2:00–3:30: Special Sessions
 3:30–5:00PM: Session 3
 5:00–8:00PM: Dutch-Treat Dinner
 8:00–10:00PM: Open Mike, Storytelling from the Heart

Sunday, April 15

9:00–10:30AM: Session 4
 11:00AM–12:30PM: Session 5
 12:30–2:00PM: Lunch Speaker, Susan Tweit

Sessions

Pre-Conference Workshops

~See Page 3 for details
 (not included in full registration, additional \$30–\$40)

Session 1

~Writing the Truth: Issues, Ethics & Poetic License~
 Suzanne Sherman, Sebastopol CA
 ~Marketing Your Memoir With Heart and Gusto~
 Carol O'Dell, Fernandina Beach FL
 ~The Wedding of Fact & Imagination:
 The Essential Partnership in Writing Life Story~
 Gail Straub, West Hurley NY
 ~Juicy Writing With Fruits & Veggies~
 Jan Seale, McAllen TX

Session 2

~How 20 Minutes a Day Can Help You Become a Better Writer~
 Helen Leatherwood, Beverly Hills CA
 ~Expanding Your Publishing Options:
 eBooks, PODs, Self-Publishing, Oh My!~
 Kendra Bonnett, Millbridge ME
 ~Life Lessons from the Crossroads~
 Joyce Boatright, The Woodlands TX
 ~Beyond Words~
 Mitzi Boyd, Fort Worth TX

Special Sessions

~The Power of the Circle~
 Panel, Moderated by Barbara Miller, Austin TX
 ~Keep Your Day Going With Restorative,
 Relaxing Chair Yoga~
 Regina Moser, Austin TX
 ~LGBT Conversation~

Session 3

~Creating an Awesome and Sustaining Blog~
 Judy Miller, Zionsville IN
 ~Memoir Writing: Brighten Your Leaf on the Family Tree~
 Marilyn Collins, Rogers AR
 ~Moments of Being: Writing a Spiritual Memoir~
 Linda Joy Myers, Richmond CA
 ~Of Journeys and Treasures~
 Betsy Boyd, Maryville TN; Cindy Flora, Clearwater FL

Session 4

~Harnessing the Present Moment
 for Deep, Authentic Writing~
 Carolyn Scarborough, Austin TX
 ~Writing Alchemy: New, Fast, Fun, Cool,
 Quick-Start Method~
 Matilda Butler, Corvallis OR
 ~Opening (and Reopening) Creative Portals~
 Lynn Goodwin, Danville CA
 ~Our Stories, True Stories:
 Research for Memoir and How To Do It~
 Marlene Samuels, Chicago, IL

Session 5

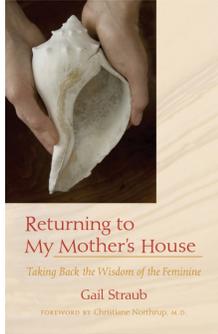
~The People on the Page~
 Mary Daniels Brown, Ballwin MO
 ~Rewrite Your Life: How to Transform the Tragi, the
 Ordinary and the Dull-as-Dirt into Compelling Memoir~
 Donna Johnson, Austin TX
 ~Pearls of Wisdom: Memoirs about Mother~
 Kate Ferrell, Sebastopol CA
 ~Journal Writing for Memoir:
 Capturing the Past, Present, & Future~
 Amber Lea Starfire, Napa CA



**Friday Night Keynote Speaker
Gail Straub**

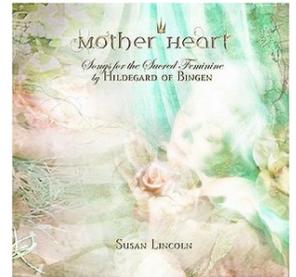
Gail Straub, our Friday night keynote speaker, is the author of four books, including her award-winning memoir, *Returning to My Mother's House* and *Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It* (with David Gershon); *The Rhythm of Compassion: Caring for Self,*

Connection With Society; and *Circle of Compassion: Meditations for Caring for the Self and the World.* She is the co-founder with her husband, David Gershon, of Empowerment Training Programs and co-director of the Empowerment Institute certification Program, a school for transformative leadership. She is also the founder of Grace: A Spiritual Growth Training Program.



**Saturday Luncheon
Entertainer
Susan Lincoln**

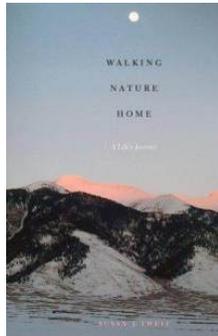
Susan Lincoln, our Saturday lunch entertainer, began her career in opera and vocal performance at UT Austin, but soon branched into a broader understanding of music as a source of healing power. After a pivotal experience at the German Abbey of 12th century mystic and composer, Hildegard of Bingen, Susan committed herself to helping women heal through the power of their own voices. She returned to Austin and founded the Hilde Girls, spirit-song-circles of women she leads through Hildegard's music and healing wisdom. A gifted and charismatic teacher, Susan facilitates workshops, leads retreats and works with individuals using sound and vibration to heal. She has taught on the faculty of The School of Conscious Harmony, Sedona, and The Journey School, New Orleans.



**Sunday Luncheon Speaker
Susan J. Tweit**

Susan J. Tweit, our Sunday luncheon speaker, is the award winning author of twelve books (including her memoir, *Walking Nature Home: A Life's*

Journey, and *Colorado Scenic Byways,* winner of the Colorado Book Award), numerous magazine articles, and newspaper columns.



Wanted: Volunteers With Heart

Want to take on a responsibility that might actually be fun? One that directly affects SCN's ability to put on this phenomenal conference? Volunteers are being accepted now for our April, 2012 Stories from the Heart VI, SCN's sixth national women's memoir conference. Contact Pat LaPointe, this year's volunteer coordinator, at confvolunteers@storycircle.org to get your name on the roster of volunteers.

Assignments range from working the vendor room, registration, sales, open mike, story wall, scrapbook, heart-to-heart coaching sessions, and that all encompassing duty known as floater. You'll be assigned a wonderful job and should be prepared to serve a mere two-hour shift. Assignments, times and contacts will be given to you in March.

We are also looking for a volunteer to photograph our public conference events (Friday night keynote/dessert reception, Saturday and Sunday lunches, Silent Auction, Open Mike, & Coaching Sessions) & our public conference areas (Registration, Vendor Room, Story Wall). No photos will be taken in the individual workshops. The photographer will be asked to select 50 of the best photographs and email to us for posting online.

Please contact us by email, at confvolunteers@storycircle.org, the earlier the better. We're making up our schedule NOW and we don't want to leave you out. So please volunteer before you forget it!



Heather Summerhayes Cariou was our keynote speaker at the 2010 Conference.



Story-Telling From the Heart: Open Mike Saturday Night Live

It's Saturday night in Austin TX—what would you like to do after you've enjoyed a fine dinner at one of Austin's many great restaurants? How about we all hang out together and swap stories?

Hey, what a great idea! After all, isn't that what Story Circle is all about? And who has more stories to swap than women—women who have loved and laughed and cried and succeeded and failed and survived and, yes, triumphed! Creative, canny, crafty, clever, courageous women. Women who have lived ordinary, extraordinary, and sometimes downright outrageous lives!

All you have to bring is you, and your story. Maybe it's a piece you've already shared with your Story Circle, or a poem or two that you've just finished, or a short autobiographical fiction piece. Maybe it's a story to be sung, or danced (if you need music, let us know ahead of time). Or perhaps you'd like to bring a piece of art that you've made—pottery, painting, textile, whatever—and tell us how and why it is part of your story. The sky's the limit and the only thing we have to fear (as some famous man said once) is fear itself. So let's see how many different stories, and how many different ways to tell a story, we can all come up with.

To give each story-teller a chance to participate, we'll divide into three separate meeting rooms. We ask you to limit your turn at the mike to five minutes including opening remarks. (Please note that it takes one minute to read one double-spaced page, and plan accordingly). There are a limited number of spaces available, so sign up will begin Saturday after dinner and will end when all places have been reserved.

Open Mic begins at 8 p.m. Whether you come to read, listen, share or all of the above, we look forward to seeing you there! And please bring a copy of your piece to post on the Story Wall—and plan to email it to us, as well, for sharing with the attendees!

Remember that wonderful '60s song that began "When you come to San Francisco, be sure and wear flowers in your hair"?

When you come to Austin, Texas, be sure to bring a story from your heart. We're eager to hear it.

"Deep listening from the heart is one half of true communication. Speaking from the heart is the other half."

~Sara Paddison

Special Interest Tables Saturday Night at Dinner

We'll have Special Interest Tables at dinner. Each group will meet at a nearby restaurant or in the hotel restaurant—the choice of restaurant will be made by each group. Table topics, restaurant information, and sign-up sheets will be at the registration table. And if you don't see your favorite topic, start your own sign-up sheet!

Heart-to-Heart Coaching: Big Questions, Helpful Answers

Heart-to-Heart Coaching is back by popular demand! We offered the coaching sessions at the 2010 conference for the first time, and they were tremendously successful.

If you have questions about writing, publishing, and/or marketing your work, or about journaling, blogging, creating videos and audio books, we have answers! Our helpful, enthusiastic SCN consultants will be glad to share them with you in free 15-minute mini-coaching sessions. Heart-to-Heart Coaching is scheduled for Friday morning, April 13, from 9:30 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Here's how the program will work. A webpage on the conference site (<http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/coaching.php>) lists the coaches who have volunteered to help you, with a description of their areas of expertise and their special-focus topics. If you are registered for the conference, you'll receive an email on March 15, inviting you to sign up online. You'll have until April 5 to register using the online registration form for the sessions you want; list up to three coaches, in the order of your preference. On a first-come, first-served basis, we'll do our best to schedule you with at least two of the coaches you choose. You'll receive a confirmation of your selections and your schedule.

The best coaching sessions allow the coach and her client to focus on one specific question or on a one-page piece of writing. To get the most out of each one of your sessions, think hard about what you want to learn, frame your questions carefully, and bring them with you. The more specific your questions, the more helpful the answers you'll get from your coach.

If you needed another reason to attend the conference, this is it: free one-on-one conversations with strong teachers, published writers, experienced marketers—women who have been there and done that. We hope you'll join us on Friday morning for our Heart-to-Heart Coaching.



Community Activities @ the Conference



Works of Heart Vendors' Marketplace

Vendors in the Marketplace are SCN members and offer to you their creative work--books, unique artist-made gift items, and writing-related services businesses. Look for the vendors' rooms on the conference notice board.



Works of Heart Marketplace Hours:

Friday:
12:00 - 4:00 p.m.
and 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.

Saturday:
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.

If you would like to be a vendor in the Marketplace, see the Call for Vendors on the back page, and visit the website:

<http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/callforvendors.php>

The Story Wall

We'd like to create a Story Wall to introduce ourselves. For those who would like to participate, please bring a short introduction of yourself. Here's one way you can do this: set a timer for 3 minutes and write whatever you feel is important for us to know about you. Then polish it up a bit (type, if possible). Bring it and, if you like, a current photo of yourself. In addition to your written introduction and your photo, you may also want to bring a postable item that illustrates a part of your story. (This might be something you've created, a different photo, a newspaper clipping, or a symbol.)



SCN's Silent Auction

6:00 p.m. Friday to 5:30 p.m. Saturday

Shawls, prints, quilts, bags, art objects, jewelry, origami, and books, books, books! Something in our auction is bound to be perfect for you or someone you love, so bring your cash or checkbook. Credit cards will be accepted, too.



Heart to Heart Table

Do you have some brochures, descriptive literature, or cards that you'd like to share with other conference participants? We'll have a table set aside for this use. Bring up to 100 copies of one or two items for the table. (If there are any left, be sure to take them home with you.)

Great Gifts for Yourself...or the Writers in Your Life

Visit our online store! Choose from a number of products with the Story Circle Network logo, and some with quotations by, for, and about women.

Your purchases help support the Story Circle Network.

We plan to add new products, so stop by often.

www.cafepress.com/storycircle





Take A Bow! Spotlighting Our Volunteers

Paula Yost

by Robin A. Edgar

2012 Conference Volunteer



Originally from Tyler in East Texas, Paula Yost returned to her roots in 1996, after thirty years in the big city of Dallas. A personal historian, memoirist, and publisher with a background in journalism and public relations, she is the founder of LifeSketches/Heirloom Memoirs Publishing. As a member of the Story Circle Network since 2001, she has served on the Board of Directors and managed the SCN Book Review Website. Paula also co-chaired the board's Curriculum Workgroup and the 2004 national conference program committee, and served as a co-editor for the SCN book *What Wildness is This*, published by the University of Texas Press. She has facilitated SCN

Writing from Life workshops and the Women in Crisis story circle at the East Texas Women's Center, currently participates in the SCN Mentorship Program, and serves as co-coordinator with Susan Wittig Albert for the newly established May Sarton Memoir Award project. She is the editor of the Association of Personal Historians' anthology, *My Words Are Gonna Linger*.

How and when did you get involved with SCN?

I was organizing a conference for the Association of Personal Historians in Dallas in 2000 and contacted Susan Wittig Albert to appear as our keynote speaker. We became acquainted in the process, and I was intrigued by the idea of this wonderful organization (Story Circle Network) that Susan had founded for women writers. I joined SCN the following year.

What attracted you to SCN?

As a personal historian and a long-time lover of history, I was painfully aware that, more often than not, we hear or read about the history of our towns, states, countries, and even people through the perspective of men. To me, the things that men seem to find important—the battles, dates, armory, and so on—are of less interest than the things a woman would pick up on, such as attitudes and social challenges. For instance, I wonder about how women at home coped during the Civil War, WWI, WWII, and the Great Depression. How were they affected by elections in which they had no right to vote? How did women make a difference in the flow of history and what was their influence on world or even local leaders? When I heard about how Story Circle encourages women to gain their voices and record their histories, I became an enthusiastic supporter.

You have served in many capacities for SCN over the years.

What are you involved in now?

I had managed the SCN Book Review Website for several years and then (2009) Susan Albert asked me to come back for a while to work with her to expand and rejuvenate the site. I am now an "Editor Emeritus" and take great pride in the success of this venture. I also participate in the SCN Mentorship Program and serve as the co-coordinator (again with Susan) of the May Sarton Memoir Award project, created with the help of all the SCN past presidents, who served as a kind of "think tank" to design the program. We will be presenting our first award at the SCN Stories from the Heart Conference in 2012.

How does your expertise add to the capacity as editor of the SCN Book Reviews and as chair of the May Sarton Memoir Award?

In addition to many years as a freelance journalist and as lifestyle editor for a daily newspaper, I have been creating biographies and memoirs for others through my own company (LifeSketches/Heirloom Memoirs Publishing) since 1999. I also greatly enjoy teaching writing classes, both online and in person. I've also invested a lot of time in reading great books in order to hone my craft. So I feel like my experiences in those areas come together nicely as an appropriate and quite comfortable fit for both positions.

What do you hope to accomplish as co-coordinator of the May Sarton Memoir Award?

As co-coordinator with Susan, we both hope to continue to encourage women writers to tell their stories and to realize how valuable their life experiences, once recorded, can be to others. It is an honor and a real pleasure to be in a position to recognize outstanding achievements in the field of women's memoirs. It's also a way for us to bring Story Circle to the attention of authors and publishers across the country and in Canada. We are an important voice for women, and the Sarton Award is an important addition to Story Circle's overall mission.

How and when did you become President and Founder of LifeSketches & Heirloom Memoirs Publishing?

I established the company in 1999, after discovering the Association of Personal Historians (APH) and spotting a glimmer of hope for a future career doing what I love to do best—writing about the extraordinary lives of ordinary people. It was a true leap of faith for me to give up my day job and hit the ground running, but I've never looked back. I've been extremely fortunate in finding some remarkable clients over the years and I haven't had to eat beans too often. Seriously, I'm always telling folks that I have the best job anyone could ask for; I get to meet so many interesting people, who become dear friends along the

way. As they learn to trust me to tell their stories, they quickly begin to recognize the value of passing along their stories as well as their life-lessons to their families, friends, and others.

Do you have other writing activities and projects?

One of my favorite things to do is to teach other writers, so I especially enjoy leading online classes and holding workshops in different areas. Writers are a great bunch to work with, always so eager to learn more. I've always thought the best writers are the most inquisitive ones. Many of my students have returned to me upon completion of their manuscripts and asked for my editing assistance, which always is a delight. Much of my time is devoted to planning annual conferences for APH as their Events Manager. We just finished a great conference in Las Vegas with one of NPR's Kitchen Sisters as a keynote speaker and a great lineup of workshops and special events.

When you are not working for SCN, what is your favorite way to be creative?

Promise not to tell anyone, but I've never completed my own memoir. So when I have time, I love to write short stories from my life to share with my grandchildren as bedtime stories. My hope is to someday pull these together and at least have a good start on that long delayed project. Originally from Tyler in East Texas, Paula Yost returned to her roots in 1996, after thirty years in the big city of Dallas. A personal historian, memoirist, and publisher with a background in journalism and public relations, she is the founder of LifeSketches/Heirloom Memoirs Publishing. As a member of the Story Circle Network since 2001, she has served on the Board of Directors and managed the SCN Book Review Website. Paula also co-chaired the board's Curriculum Workgroup and the 2004 national conference program committee, and served as a co-editor for the SCN book *What Wildness is This*, published by the University of Texas Press. She has facilitated SCN Writing from Life workshops and the Women in Crisis story circle at the East Texas Women's Center, currently participates in the SCN Mentorship Program, and serves as co-coordinator with Susan Wittig Albert for the newly established May Sarton Memoir Award project. She is the editor of the Association of Personal Historians' anthology, *My Words Are Gonna Linger*.

What is your tried and true advice for memoir writers?

Most don't like to hear it, but my best advice is to toss the idea of waiting for the muse to show up. Just do it—and do it for you. Good writing is hard work and requires your butt in the chair on a regular basis, not just when the mood hits or you have plenty of free time. Set a goal and establish deadlines to meet that goal. Then make the time to sit down and write. Remember, it doesn't have to be a masterpiece the first time out. My best writing doesn't usually show up until sometime around the third draft. Just know that your work is important and treat yourself with the respect that is due to a person doing important work.

To learn more about Paula and her work, go to <http://www.alifesketch.com>.

September - October - November Members In Print & The News

If you're an SCN member who has made the news, please email us: news@storycircle.org.



Susan Wittig Albert's latest book, *The Tale of Castle Cottage*, came out in September from Berkley Prime Crime.

Judy Miller recently presented "Tips from the Trenches: Finding Middle Ground in Open Adoptive Parenting" at the Open Adoption Symposium: Realities, Possibilities and Challenges at the University of Richmond Law School (Richmond, VA). She is also presenting "Your Adopted Child and Racism" and "Adoption versus Normal," and sitting on a panel about adoptive family advocacy.

Carol Smallwood co-edited (Molly Peacock, foreword) *Women and Poetry: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing by Successful Women Poets* (McFarland, 2011); *Compartments: Poems on Nature, Femininity and Other Realms* (Anaphora Literary Press, 2011).

Jackie Woolley's new book *Sex, Lies & Stories, Memoir of a Frustrated Writer*, has just been published. The book is a memoir during one year of Jackie's life at Lake Livingston, and it is also a book about writing, containing the best things she has learned in the 40 something years she has been writing.

Cathy Scibelli's essay, "God is Redirecting You," has just been published in the collection *A Book of Miracles* by Dr. Bernie Siegel.

Sharon Blumberg will write a new column on book reviews for *Off the Water*, a newspaper in Southwestern Michigan. Sharon also writes book reviews for *Voya Magazine*.

Janet Lucy's book, *Moon Mother, Moon Daughter: Myths and Rituals that Celebrate a Girl's Coming of Age*, was released in a second edition publication by Publishing by The Seas in August 2011.

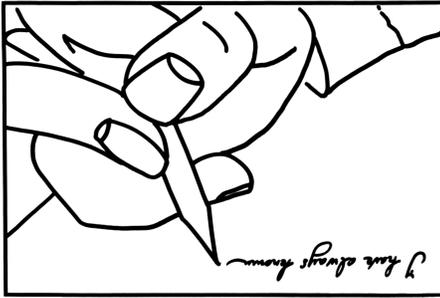
Janet Caplan's story, "Jour de Neige", about a long ago snow day in Montreal, has just come out in the new book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: O Canada*. Janet also has a couple of travel articles about British Columbia's Vancouver Island on the travel website Northwest.com.

Jamie Patterson's memoir, *Lost Edens*, has been published. It is available in print and will be available for the Kindle in about a month. Read an excerpt on Stephanie Barko's blog.

Leila Levinson's memoir, *Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma*, received the President's Award from the Military Writers Society.

Barbara Heming's mystery novel, *Death Wins the Crown*, a Hall of Fame Mystery, has been published. It is available in print and will be available for the Kindle in about a month. To learn more and read an excerpt, go to Barbara's website.

Amy Greenspan has a poem published in the 2012 Texas Poetry Calender, published by Dos Gatos Press.



True Words from Real Women

Holiday Stories

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Mary Jo Doig. The theme of this issue's True Words section is "Holiday Stories." Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 24.

Galveston Thanksgiving, 2009

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX
e-circle 4, Austin Reading Circle

A family gathers at the beach
thankful for the blessing
of a treasured home
that almost blew away

Fourteen months before
tidal surge submerged its pilings
wind devoured shingles
siding flew far as the bay

The beach is closer now
but the beach house is restored
replete with food and laughter
on a bright November day

This place is sanctuary
bestowing love and light
the calming of the mind that comes
from gazing at the sea

The generations gather
more aware than ever
of the beauty of the moment
and its fragility



Untitled

Barbara Carr, Austin TX

Lay-
ered
with warm
clothing,
booted, muffled
and gloved,
we strolled through a small
German village in December.

I had made Xerox copies of the words
to the Christmas Carols we were singing
for the fortunate locals who were getting to hear
us sing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht"
und "Adeste Fidelis," plus other holiday favorites,
like "Jingle Bells," auf English.

After we had traveled a few blocks, the cold began
to seep in through our clothing and creep into our bones,
our noses turned red, like Rudolph's, and then began to run down
our faces. You never realized how hard it was to wipe
a runny nose with gloved hands until you were caught outside in the ice
and snow where you didn't want to remove a glove to make it easier
to use a Kleenex or handkerchief because your hands were all warm and snuggy.

At several of the homes, the Volk offered us a cup of steaming
Gluhwein or Schnapps to warm our tonsils and our spirits.

It was amazing how much better we could sing after a few cups of their good, warming,
generous appreciation. I could even remember all the Deutsch words to the first verse of
"Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht." After some time had passed and we had walked through
many icy ruts in narrow streets, our bodies had become numb before we came to the end
of the village. But as we trekked back to our cars to return to our heated,
holiday-decorated government quarters, our Christmas spirits were rejuvenated,
because when we peeked up at the huge, bright stars in the cold, dark, night
sky, our faith in "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" was reborn and peace on earth,

goodwill
toward men,
seemed somehow possible.



From Under the Christmas Tree

Jane Louise Steig Parsons, Austin TX
Jackie Newman Writing Circle, Austin TX

Late one evening I lay on my back under the Christmas tree gazing nearsightedly
into the panoply of lights and hand-made ornaments. Without my glasses, the fuzz of
myopia enhanced the magical effect I had experienced as a child.

Exhausted from holiday preparations, I felt revived by the shimmering images
above me that permeated my being, catapulting me back through decades of lying under
Christmas trees and feeling their magic. My mother had shown me this remarkable
vantage point from which to experience Christmas and I, in turn, had shown my own
children. Often the three of us gazed up, sharing the sense of beauty and wonder—each
dreaming our own dreams of Christmas.



Our Own Tradition

Cindy Flora, Clearwater FL

Thanksgiving was a haphazard holiday as I was growing up. I vaguely remember my mother, brow furrowed, as she rinsed off turkeys in the kitchen sink. I don't recall anything special about our dinners and I'm fairly certain by the time I was a teenager, the turkeys had become chickens. With most of our relatives in Pennsylvania and my older sister in and out of marriages, there were no formal family gatherings.

This did not seem odd at the time, but after boyfriends began inviting me to their family dinners, I began to sense, perhaps, I had been missing out on a cherished American tradition.

Later, I gave some thought to initiating our own tradition for my husband and young stepsons, but, by then, my in-laws, who now lived close by, had begun inviting us over. Being with them reminded my husband so much of their cherished Thanksgiving meals back home in Maryland that I put that idea on the backburner, so to speak.

Eventually, his parents' health began to fail and my sister took over, inviting family, neighbors, friends, and total strangers. The meal was a feast to foil famine, my sister undoubtedly compensating for Thanksgiving memories even more meager than mine. After one of these, my niece's second marriage blew up, her husband disappearing to a conference that didn't exist but to a girlfriend that did. A few years later my niece began to over compensate for the holiday herself. The year we sat down with a roomful of her third husband's kin while he refused to join us because his deep fried turkey wasn't ready yet, I decided then and there, the turkey might not be done, but I was.

A quiet Thanksgiving at the La Plazuela is a wondrous thing. Later, after Bill Hearne finishes his final set in the La Fiesta Lounge, a gentle snow begins to fall outside. Santa Fe is so beautiful that my teenage daughter begrudgingly forgives me for our traditional non-traditional Thanksgivings, smiling as her older brother takes her photo, the cathedral glowing behind her in the soft evening lights.

As a child we spent one Christmas with Mom's family in Quebec. Everyone arrived on Christmas Eve. An enormous banquet table was set with gleaming dishes, cloth napkins in golden rings, silver, wine glasses and cut-glass wine carafes. The table was crowded with flowers and ornaments, the room decorated in hanging garlands, lights, and bells. What a joyous zoo, crowded with Mom's parents, siblings, their various partners and many children. Everyone was in high humor, clapping each other on the back, grins wide, and eyes aglow.

Just before midnight, everyone bundled up for midnight mass. We took up three full rows in this enormous cathedral. Gazing about, I found myself in an enchanted castle, the enormous stone church towering around me. The ceiling reached five stories high, walls beautifully appointed with candles alight, stone arches disappearing into the darkness above. Colorful stained glass depictions of biblical scenes soared to the ceiling.

Christmas Dolls

Jane Louise Steig Parsons, Austin TX
Jackie Newman Writing Circle, Austin TX

Auntie, a widow lady employed to take care of Mother and me after my premature birth, was the only grandmother I can remember and the best I could have had. Just before my fifth Christmas, Mother decided to make dolls for Auntie's two grandchildren. I watched as she cut around the pattern; embroidered the facial features and name on each doll; selected and sewed yarn for the hair and cloth for the dresses, hats, and panties. I watched her sew and stuff the body parts and assemble them. The dolls were so beautiful. With each step completed, something deep inside me became increasingly disheartened. Over and over I wondered, *Why no doll for me?*

My sadness was nearly forgotten during the many other preparations for Christmas, and suddenly it was Christmas Eve. The tree was breathtaking: its lights and ornaments gleaming, its branches and base bulging with gifts. Mother and I read *The Night Before Christmas* to Daddy and prepared Santa's cookies and milk. Sleep came slowly.

"Mother, Daddy, come quick. Santa came!"

After we opened our gifts, Mother whispered, "Jane, I see one more gift." I raced to look. Sure enough, I found it and it was for me, a beautiful doll with blue eyes and golden hair with "Janie Lou" embroidered upon her chest.

"How?...When?...Where?" I gasped. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

"I could never forget you." I ran to her and hugged her, but deep down I wished I had known she had been making a doll for me. Thinking she hadn't, had hurt too much for too long.

Epilogue: Years later Mother confided that she regretted keeping my doll hidden in the service of "surprise." She urged me not to make that mistake with my children, a lesson I had already learned well.

A Quebec Christmas

Rayn Plainfied, Portland OR, w-ecircle,
ecircle 1

The bishop appeared wearing robes of gold and purple velvet, laden with precious stones, with a matching silk ornate pointed hat. Altar boys swung incense holders down the aisles, the scented smoke wafting in swirling clouds. Standing to sing the hymns, I felt camaraderie, warmth, and safety.

Afterwards we drove home to the sound of tires crunching in the snow under an ever so gentle snow-fall in the dead-quiet night. At my aunt's, all were greeted with affectionate hugs, glasses of hot cider and good cheer, and led to table! I gazed lengthwise down the table, and the family just seemed to go on and on forever! How amazing that all these warm-hearted people were my relatives! Before me lay a feast of a magnitude I had never seen before. Every square inch of table was piled high with food, a true groaning board. Rivers of wine flowed and many toasts proposed to much ringing laughter. I was allowed a glass of wine, my very first!

A Gift of Quiet Joy

Sue Kreke Rumbaugh, Glenshaw PA
sue_rumbaugh@yahoo.com
www.suerumbaugh.wordpress.com

Dark skies and quiet corners are delicious at the holidays.

I know this. It is Christmas Eve and I am in my family's home. I am a child, languishing in my room, drawing a picture. My model: an elephant on hind legs, posing on this cracker box. A single elephant, dancing.

My mind and mood shift to the evening's festivities soon to begin. A small pile of boxes, wrapped, awaiting their unveiling. I hear conversations from school, church, and home in my head. I become overwhelmed with emotion. Where will I be, this same day, years from now? I wonder. Footsteps in the hall pass my door. I am safely stowed here, but hold my breath. I hope they will not come in to ask why I am here, in the quiet, on Christmas Eve.

Interrupted, I move from my bed to the window. The black and white scene: a picture of stillness. I search for life in our snow-covered neighborhood. A leaf cartwheels by—head over heel, tumbling.

A chill runs down my back and I jump back onto my bed, pulling on a blanket. I nuzzle, then find my pencil and begin drawing again. Muffled voices from downstairs, where the others are cooking, comfort me. Dull chopping on a wooden board, they are preparing the final dishes, I imagine, but do not dare leave my space, this place, to see.

I am content, beyond my wildest imagination. I lie back and utter my Christmas wish: a quiet celebration.

How could a child desire this? Loud music, bright lights, crumpling paper, excited voices all at once—aren't these the things that make Christmas joyful?

Within the hour I am wearing a dress and seated at our dining room table with my parents, five brothers, and two sisters. Above us, two candles stand, flickering. Music from the hi-fi floats through and I am overwhelmed with joy.

Christmas 2011, forty years later, my husband and I are planning our holiday celebration: a meal accompanied by soft lighting and lovely music—our shared love of quiet joy.

I stare at the tree in our 1958 living room that we decorated two days ago with disappointment, thinking how pitiful it looks—like it's made from Tinker toys.

Just then Mother opens the door, wrestling a huge spruce through it. It's almost as wide as it is tall. "Nobody else at school wanted this, so I brought it home," she explains. Its fragrance instantly fills the house. In a seeming flash the old tree is stripped and the new one stands in its place. Santa's crew of elves couldn't decorate a tree better or faster than we do. When we finish, we catch our breath in awe. The tree glows with more than colored lights. It glows with Christmas Spirit. With joyful hearts, we load the record player and sing our hearts out.

Trees for the Holidays

Mary Olivia Patiño, San Antonio, TX

My favorite holiday memories center on family, friends, faith celebrations, and the Christmas tree! *What is Christmas without a fresh tree?* I still remember December, 2000, when I prepared to celebrate my first Christmas in my new home.

Cathedral ceilings and soaring living room windows called out for the tallest tree we could find. At least, that is what my sister, Ana, said, "Let's get the biggest tree!"

Yes! We drove to a nearby corner lot where trees of all shapes sheltered under a big white tent, just waiting for someone to take them home. Beautiful Frasers, Nobles, and Douglas firs greeted us with zesty fragrance.

Walking around green and flocked trees, we finally settled on a proud Noble. David, Adriana, Ralph, and Annette (Ana's children) lifted the tree over their van's rooftop. We drove away happily as the tree waved jauntily at passing cars. Back home, we placed it before the window with pride. Knowing it must be thirsty after its long journey from some far-away forest, we gave it water and took out the tree decorations.

My favorites are the bubble lights. Back in the 1950's, these candle-shaped lamps were made of glass. Mom unpacked them each year. To this day, I tuck myself into a corner of the sofa and meditate on them, recalling the joy of Baby Jesus in His Mother's arms.

Although those holidays were several years ago, sharing them reminds me of a more recent experience. Last summer, I flew from Texas to Vancouver, Washington, to visit my daughter Catherine, her husband Chris, and my grandsons, Stephen and Brennen. This was my first acquaintance with the Pacific Northwest and my first visit in two years after their move from Michigan.

My summer holiday was like Christmas in August, surrounded by family and the tallest pines I could ever imagine. Driving to Mount St. Helens one morning, the emerald majesty landscaping the mountains captivated my senses. That evening, relaxing on my daughter's terrace, I gazed at these magnificent wonders, knowing they had no need for artificial lights, for they glowed with their own natural splendor.

The Perfect Christmas Tree

Sharon Lippincott, Monroeville PA
slippincott@windstream.net, <http://heartandcraft.blogspot.com>

The next day Daddy saws up the old tree and stuffs it in the fireplace. I'm torn at the seeming brutality of burning this poor tree because it wasn't beautiful enough. I feel more than a little guilty at rejecting it for the sake of appearances. Then I look at the new one and relax—we didn't deliberately go looking for it. It was a gift, a gift of abundance in this season of blessing. It was a gift of Christmas Spirit, something lacking in the first tree. This is the perfect Christmas tree, and I know it will never be matched in all my years.

Continued page 13

Holiday Transformed

Lynn Weiss, Lake Dallas TX

How can I write about the holidays when I haven't exactly liked most of the ones I've known?

Film clips flash in my mind:

Frenzy!!!

*Gift-wrap strewn creating clutter. Gift contents ignored;
Moaning human overstuffed sausages lying prone;
Shouts, arguments, alcohol-driven rages . . .
propelling me to my room . . . alone.*

But wait, I remember another image.

Years later, my childhood past, my children grown and gone, I remember feeling alone again at New Years. I already knew that aloneness could bring me protection from what I didn't want.

So I drove to Arizona's Monument Valley to view a full moon rising—a nice way to spend a holiday.

Two days later, daylight ending, I drove by food and craft stalls that were mostly closed for the winter. Hunger-driven, my eyes saw a sign: "Navajo fry bread."

Stopping I met Mary and her cooking. I ate just the right amount to feel wonderful.

Hours later, I stopped again at the same door, now fulfilled from the rising moon—a moon that pleased my soul. Mary agreed to join me for coffee at my motel. Bundled up we hurried to my car.

In my room, we two women talked and sipped coffee. We found we were more alike than not.

Though:

One had five children, the other two,
One lived with an extended family, one alone,
One was BIA educated; one had a PhD,
One lived on the "rez" in a winter Hogan, one in a metropolitan city,

We found our similarities—through sharing our fears,
both with sons threatened by a far off war
And women's dreams and wishes for our futures.

I doubt she ever forgot me as I have never forgotten her and the wonder of a holiday transformed.

(The Perfect Christmas Tree, cont.)

"Thank you for yielding your place so gracefully," I whisper into the flames, glad that at least the meager tree can give us the gift of warmth to help us enjoy its replacement.

Fifty years later, I look at our lush, perfectly shaped artificial tree with vague disappointment, then realize it's the best tree that it can be. Not even a fresh tree could live up to the legendary Perfect Christmas Tree. "Thank you for giving us joy each year and being so dependable and easy to live with. And especially, thank you for not dropping needles all over the floor!"

Billy Bear

Helen Ginger, Austin TX
helen.ginger@gmail.com,
<http://straightfromhel.blogspot.com>

I was three when my parents divorced. Memories of Dad involve Saturday trips, mostly to battlefields where we tromped until worn out. Occasionally, he'd stop at a store, which always came with a rule.

"Okay." Dad turned to two grinning faces in the back seat. "What do you want?"

"Ice cream," Cathy squealed. "No, wait, a candy bar."

"Jacks," I yelled.

"Okay, candy bar for Cathy; jacks for Helen."

Inside, Cathy grabbed her candy while I headed to the toy aisle. I found jacks, but also discovered a bin of teddy bears. Huggable, furry laughing bears. I dug down into the bin and pulled out a crying bear, two tears on his cheeks. I hugged him and smoothed his fur, named him Billy Bear, and put the jacks back.

Dad, a tin of pipe tobacco in hand, found us in the toy aisle, Cathy holding the candy and a laughing bear, and me hugging Billy Bear to my chest, while patting his back. Dad stared silently at us. "Cathy, you chose a candy bar. Helen you wanted jacks. Put the teddy bears back."

Cathy slid her bear back into the bin. I hugged mine tighter and begged. In the end, Cathy left with her candy. I left with nothing and cried all the way home. As Dad drove away, I stared silently. By the time I went inside, Cathy had finished her candy bar.

We didn't see Dad on Christmas. It wasn't his weekend. Mom gave us nuts and fruit and had sewn us new clothes. Cathy's present from Dad was a laughing bear. Mine was jacks. She held her bear with one arm while throwing the ball and grabbing jacks with her free hand.

In the end, I wasn't any good at jacks because I couldn't stop crying. I had learned my lesson, though.

After dinner, Cathy went outside to play. I slogged to my room, climbed to the top bunk, and found Billy Bear sitting on my pillow. Grabbing him up in a hug, I squeezed him close as we both cried.



They Would Have Told Us

Dorothy Ross, Davis CA

Hi Sis,

January 1st

Weren't you astonished by this year's Christmas greetings from the folks back East? Isn't it amazing that there was no bad news in the cards and letters, except for Acts of God? Speaking of which, you did read Aunt Ellie's words about Great Uncle Herbert's ongoing struggles with the gout? And wasn't it good to learn that Cousin Esther's house survived the hurricane, except for that old magnolia falling on the sleeping porch? But, not counting those AOG, can you believe there was not a tad of trauma visited on any of our friends and family—no affairs or estrangements, no separations or divorces, no firings or foreclosures? I'm sure it's true; otherwise they would have told us.

Should we be surprised that the teenagers are doing so well, what with the college scholarships, honors in music and drama, athletic awards? Can you make out the alphabet soup of accolades—MVP, POY, MIP? Isn't it remarkable that not one of our friends has a grandchild who dropped out of high school, or flunked out of college; that nobody's kid failed to make the grade? Can you believe there isn't one of these children taking dope or addicted to alcohol, and no one has a son who's in trouble with the law? It has to be true, otherwise they would have told us.

Isn't it hard to fathom that in the whole stack of notes there were no mentions of unwanted pregnancies: no unwed mothers, no shotgun weddings, and absolutely no abortions? To what should we attribute this phenomenon: abstinence or birth control? (Or could it be a case of immaculate deception?) And isn't it wonderful to read about all the successful young doctors, lawyers, and stockbrokers in the family? Aren't you thrilled that none of our nieces or nephews is out of work, down on their luck, and moving back home? It must be true, otherwise they would have told us. If there was anything wrong, I'm sure they would have told us.

Happy New Year!

When I was a little girl, Christmas was a magical time. We were not rich and even for those who were, the Depression and World War II had left an indelible mark on the economy. There was, however, bounty from a prolific garden painstakingly canned and stored from the summer harvest of fruits and vegetables, and eggs from our hen house. Uncle Joe's goat farm provided milk for cheese. My mother and aunts made loaves of Panettone, stuffed with raisins and nuts, Fuccidate, delicious Italian cookies, and cannoli shells with carefully hoarded rations of sugar and flour.

A week before Christmas, a huge box would arrive from family in New York City crammed with Italian salami and cheeses, oranges, prickly pears, figs, and nougats only found in "Little Italy." Mom bought dried codfish when available and hung it in the cold pantry. She scrounged the Italian stores for calamari, squid, eels, clams, sardines, and octopus.

The greatest challenge was the Italian Christmas Eve fish spectacular when my mother wove food magic. At the heart of

A Magical Time

Connie Katusak, Leander TX

Thankful For Best Friends

Lorna Hongola Penland, Elkhart TX

I had never been without family during the holidays until 2002, the year I moved to South Texas from California. Thanksgiving was fast approaching and the loneliness had its talons tight on my heart. My one friend in Texas, the man who convinced me to move here from California nine months earlier, wasn't speaking to me. I went through the motions of preparing a holiday meal, even if I was going to eat alone, yet a thought kept nagging me, taunting me: *it isn't going to get better; just end it.*

It was a beautiful morning that Thursday when I woke, so I decided to delay my final act and cook the Thanksgiving dinner we always had in California, not caring that it was just me who would eat it.

In the middle of preparations someone knocked at the door. Hoping it was my only friend coming to make peace, I opened the door to a policeman. He introduced himself and asked if he could come in. Of course I let him in and offered him a seat. His reason for being there was that my friend, fearing for my well being, had the police check in on me. We chatted for awhile, me enjoying the company, the young officer studying me to make sure I wasn't going to do anything stupid.

After awhile he felt comfortable enough to leave me and I had to say there was lightness in my chest that I hadn't felt in some time. Everything had changed in just a short time. I did such a good job of convincing the police officer that I was stable, that I convinced myself as well.

I ate a wonderful Thanksgiving feast, then sat down and called my best friend in California. Before telling her what I had been dealing with, she told me she knew I was in trouble, so early that morning she visited my late husband Paul's grave telling him I needed help.

I was thankful for my best friends, Paul and Fran.

the meal was a huge cauldron of fragrant fish soup. I remember the pungent smell of garlic, onions and peppers frying, the tomato base for the soup bubbling, and fish baking, steaming or sizzling as it fried. After an unhurried dinner, too slow for restless children, black espresso coffee, liquors and delectable deserts were served. The men picked up guitar and mandolin, Daddy played the piano, and we sang carols while the ladies cleaned up.

The finale was midnight mass at the beautifully decorated Saint Mary's Assumption church, then home to sleep and await Santa's arrival. As my sister and I reminisce, we realized that the presents left by Santa were practical things: mittens, scarves, socks, sweaters knit or crocheted by Mom or the aunts, and—if I was lucky—a book. We were surrounded by love and if there was more to be desired in the outside world we did not miss it. Most important was the love shared by every family member that made the holiday so special.

Unexpected Surprise

Carole S McGhee, Riverview FL
 carolesmcghee813@yahoo.com
 Busy Pens Writing Circle, Brandon FL

Newly divorced, mother of three children under six, I struggled some weeks to stretch the weekly pay check. Divided into envelopes marked rent, sitter, groceries, and laundromat. Diapers and formula were a constant need. Somehow we had what we needed. The court-ordered support was often weeks late, but we managed and I had faith that we would be okay.

With no car, we depended on others to take us to the babysitter's house and to my early morning job at a small factory that manufactured auto parts.

One Christmas, a family member loaned us an aluminum tree. It had an electric color wheel and as it turned, the colors changed the tree from silver to red, blue, or green. My boys, ages six and four, thought it was magic and my infant daughter watched the moving lights bounce off the walls. As we decorated the tree with colored glass balls, the boys talked about the toys that Santa might bring them. I reminded them that Christmas is Jesus' birthday and it was more important than Santa. Secretly, I wondered how we would manage, but knew somehow we would be fine.

One week before Christmas, a coworker handed me an envelope. "This is for you, 'Merry Christmas.'" Later, that evening I opened it and found fifty dollars. What a blessing.

My sister stayed with my children on Saturday, just five days before Christmas, so I could shop for gifts. We would have a good Christmas.

On Christmas Eve, after the children were fast asleep I heard a light knock at the door; no one was there. On the step was a box with a gift for each child, along with a box containing laundry soap, milk, bread, peanut butter, Christmas cookies, and diapers. A secret Santa had been so thoughtful.

Christmas morning was delightful and memorable. What mattered most was Faith. We would be okay, and we were provided for.

It reminded me of Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

The Christmas Dilemma

Doris Anne Roop Benner, Richardson TX

What a dilemma! Every year I have to decide—do I send out Christmas cards to everyone in my address book (I have two of them—those that are close enough to be in the good leather book and all the rest that are in a three ring binder) or only send to those that sent one to me last year. Then comes the question of how early the cards should go out. If I send them in early December then I hope (for their sakes) that I get one in return—otherwise they go on my bad list. Or I could put off mailing out my cards until I get one from whomever and then I only have to send to them.

Last year, I waited so long to see which of the whoevers

The Last Package

Susan Flemr, Fairfield Bay AR

Snow gusted off Lake Michigan and the sky darkened early that December afternoon as I carried a brightly wrapped package into an elevator, relieved to escape the icy pellets hitting my face. I entered one of Chicago's "projects"—those utilitarian housing towers built to replace the hundreds of condemned and demolished brownstones—home to the city's poor.

Having completed delivery of my patients' gifts, I was free to help a co-worker distribute hers. One more stop and I could head home. I pulled a smeared list from my coat pocket with my wet mitten and checked the apartment number and patient's name: Eloise Johnson, a ten-year-old girl with painful rheumatoid arthritis. My friend had told me the disease was so advanced that Eloise was bedridden with swollen knee joints.

When the elevator door parted, I pushed myself down the open-air hallway against blasts of bitter wind. Reaching the last apartment, I banged on the heavy metal door repeatedly, with no response. As I turned away the door opened a few inches. A boy of eight or nine peered up at me, spotted the box, and grinned broadly. "Who's that for?"

"Eloise Johnson. Does she live here?" Even in the darkness, I could see his smile disappear.

"Nope. She lives in 512—two floors up. She doesn't come to school 'cause she's real sick. Is she getting a present 'cause she's sick?"

"Yes," I said. "You're right, she is real sick. This is for her."

He opened the door wider. "Would having chickenpox last month count?"

"I'm sorry, I've got to take this upstairs to Eloise." I turned to make my way back to the elevator and found that my aching heart from a child's longing eyes slowed my steps. I looked back. He had stepped into the hallway.

I yelled, "Thanks for your help."

Then I heard him above the noisy wind. "Hey, Nurse! My name is Jimmy. Remember me—I live in 312—if anybody ever decides I count."

As people gather on Wall Street wondering about who counts, I especially remember Jimmy.

found me worthy, that mine went out in January. I made them Happy New Year letters complete with a family photo. My plan was to send only to those that had sent one to me. But then I got to thinking: what about the others—the infirmed, the forgetful, and the non-card people? Do I punish them for neglecting me, or take the high road and send to all: be benevolent, look good? I ended up mailing over 100 letters. What a nightmare!

I went shopping the other day and when I saw the Christmas stuff being displayed in the store (it's just September), my only thought was—oh no, it's time for the Christmas card quandary again.

Turkey Tales

Carol Ziel, Austin TX

This is the story of two turkeys. One was properly stuffed and trussed on a long ago Christmas Eve. The other one was me, the mother of all turkeys. And it's the story of how sugar plums saved both the turkeys and the day.

It began on a Christmas Eve morning as I shoved the holiday turkey into the oven. The sugar plums in question were still asleep in their beds and I was out the door in pursuit of a bagel. Suddenly a horrific whoosh pulled me back into the kitchen. Armageddon had arrived in 3D. Flames were licking up the walls and leaping across the ceiling. Or were they? Perhaps a different point of view would be helpful.

I rushed out into the bitter winter day and stood outside the kitchen window. If I saw flames from that perspective, I could then believe that there actually was a fire. Suddenly the glass exploded and sparks flew out. Yes, there was a fire, and it wasn't a burning bush. I rushed back inside, gathering coats, hats, and shoes. If my children were to become homeless, they would at least be warm. And then I grabbed the 20" TV and threw it on the porch. Entertainment could be handy in the Red Cross Shelter.

I stood on the edge of the flames determining if I had done everything possible. Suddenly a herd of feet tromped down the steps.

Although it was too early for reindeer, before my wondering eyes appeared: the children. "Fire" they shouted. "Where is the fire truck?" Even when half asleep they functioned better than I did. They called 911 and deposited me onto the porch with the clothes and TV.

Within minutes the fire department arrived and put out the flames. The oven was destroyed, but the turkey was perfection: golden brown and juicy. A neighbor finished the cooking process, and brought it over just in time for Christmas Eve supper.

The best Christmas gift of all that year was not in a stocking or under a tree. It was the story of two turkeys and the sugar plums that saved the day.

Broken Shell

Khadijah Lacina, Shihr, Yemen
w-circles 3, 12, 14, and 4

Christmas was a magical time for me as a child. From Thanksgiving onward I decorated my school notebooks with lines of Christmas trees counting the days until the holiday's arrival. For a full two weeks before the big day I would sneak out of my room late at night, or in the pre-dawn hush of morning, turn on the Christmas tree lights, and just sit, cuddled in my blanket, and admire the tree with its skirt of gaily wrapped presents. The most exciting thing for me, though, was anticipation of homecoming that Christmas always brought.

I am the youngest of five children—my eldest brother is almost twenty years older than me, and my sister Patty was a year younger than him. I don't even remember Patty and Michael living with us. They were mysterious; I thought they were so incredibly cool, living fascinating lives outside of my range of experience.

With Patty it was simple—I wanted to be like her when I grew up. With Michael it was more complex. He would fly home with his guitar and a suitcase of gifts. When he sang *Leaving on a Jet Plane* I would always tear up—he even looked a little like John Denver to my young eyes.

In later years, Patty and I grew closer, while Michael and I grew farther apart. I remember the Christmas when I was sixteen and I began to see it happening. I was a pseudo-punk alternative, and he had grown out of John Denver into a yuppy. He pulled away, and I watched him go and couldn't stop it.

Being Muslim, I no longer celebrate Christmas. Mom, Patty and my father have passed away, and Michael and I no longer have contact. I live across the world from what remains of my family. The childhood feelings the holiday once brought are still there—the excitement, the sense of anticipation, the enjoyment of family—but the shell in which they live is irretrievably broken. It may just be part of growing up, but I wish, somehow, I could glue it together again.

My Big Sky Christmas

Betsy Boyd, Maryville TN boyd.betsy@yahoo.com,
<http://www.bboyd53.blogspot.com>

I think of winter as a season not only for sharing traditions with family and friends, but also for going within, for reflecting on the year past, and adjusting one's course. My Christmas of 2003, however, had nothing to do with introspection. It was all about exploring new territory.

I suppose James and I were flagged for each other on eHarmony because of our mutual interest in family, our introverted personalities, and my fascination with the West. Following phone conversations, a letter exchange, homemade videotapes, and James's November visit to Tennessee, he invited me to spend Christmas at his home, a cattle ranch in eastern



IN MEMORIUM

Richard Cabe, artist, SCN friend
and husband of Susan J. Tweit

Sr. Mary Sullivan, poet, writer,
and lover of life

A Christmas Plan

Marilyn H. Collins, Rogers AR

Christmas Eve loomed near. For the first time I would miss a Christmas of my dreams. Instead, the most Charlie Brown of trees stood in my new apartment laden with guilt gifts from my soon-to-no-longer-be husband.

Our sons hated my apartment and understood what happened only a little less than me. Christmas Day would be with their father—called: your turn, my turn.

Determined to avoid waking up alone this Christmas morning, I decided after the midnight service I'd drive all night circling Washington, DC on the beltway. I would avoid the inevitable—waking Christmas morning truly alone.

I picture the night in my mind—damp pavement, misting snow, the heavy traffic diminishing as night wears on. Hours go by. My headlights the only ones I see.

In the night, Christmas comes. Animals in the forest kneel in awe of the Holy Child and angels sing *Hallelujah to our King*.

Slowly, dawn breaks—first one car, then double-wide trucks join me.

I don't wake up alone.

I explained my plan to the newly-found friends in a singles group at church. No one had a better idea. Except Jill.

“Why don't we have a house party?” she said. “Everyone come over after the midnight service and we'll spend Christmas together.”

A rim of light began to shine like the glow around a dark moon in total eclipse. We'd bring gag gifts and cook something delicious, eat popcorn in our pajamas, and sing Silent Night around the piano.

And we did just that. We put together jigsaw puzzles, played cards, and danced as the darkness eased away.

One night became a weekend. We went to the Washington National Cathedral for services, walked around the lake below her house, and opened our gifts. The frigid specter of loneliness was held at bay. It would surely come again. But for a while our laughter rang a little louder, our hugs held a little tighter, and the star shone a little brighter as it had long ago—chasing away the shadows in our souls.

(My Big Sky Christmas, cont.)

Montana. My excitement was uncontainable; this trip represented a perfect storm of “firsts” for me: first trip to Big Sky country, first ranch experience, and first meeting of James' extended family, some of whom resided in a cluster of homes huddled together on the exquisitely beautiful high prairie. No reflecting on the year gone by for me that Christmas! I was on an adventure, and I could not have been more in my element.

When one is an adventurer, one must be willing to go wherever the road leads. The road to Montana that Christmas took me to unforgettable experiences: 6:30 am cattle feedings,

Mystic Riddle

Ruth Wren, El Paso TX
rmbwren4791@elp.rr.com

“I don't want to go, Mama,” pleaded Briana. “I want to help Grandma decorate. You know; the Baby Jesus and the camels.”

My seven-year-old great-granddaughter was actually quibbling about going to the annual Sun Bowl Parade with her mother, Aunt Marilyn, and a slew of cousins she hardly knew. Her mother, Tylene, my eldest granddaughter, looked at me; I winked and nodded my approval. Tylene yielded to her daughter's wishes.

After waving goodbye Briana ran through the front door shouting, “I'm ready, Grandma. What are we going to do first?”

We retrieved the small step stool from the bedroom closet. Briana opened the door to the hall closet where I stored the Christmas decorations. “Briana, I'll hand the decorations to you. Your job will be to place them on the dining room table. Be very careful because the manger, animals, and other items will break if you drop them.”

My best friend had given me the hand-made ceramic manger scene years ago and it was priceless to me.

“Okay, Grandma,” said Briana. “I'll be real careful.”

Briana cradled each figurine while she carried them down the hallway. Soon we were prepared to place the decorations in a fashion that transformed the house into a Christmas wonderland.

Stepping into the entryway, I stood mute, mesmerized. Briana had placed the baby Jesus in the crib on the front windowsill. Then she created her manger scenario by appropriately positioning three camels, three shepherds, three wise men, the little drummer boy, the donkey, and lastly Joseph and Mary were placed close to baby Jesus. Briana turned towards me. “Look, Grandma. Isn't my manger scene peaceful?”

Drawing her into my arms, I whispered, “Precious, Briana.”

Did the mystic manger scene belong where it would be safe on the mantle above the fireplace? Or did it belong where she could see and enjoy it throughout the season?

home-cut Christmas trees, sharing in the warmth of the Wagners' family circle, and a New Year's Eve party with all five of the families living within a 100-mile radius of my hosts' ranch. But it also took me one step closer to a reality I ultimately had to face.

I eventually did the inside work of getting clear about who I am and claiming my right path. But that came much later, in August, after I had spent the summer on the ranch and realized with some sadness that, at my core, I was not designed for ranch life. While I did choose not to join the Wagner family permanently, I cherish the friendships we still maintain. And I will forever be grateful to them for the most adventurous Christmas of my life.

Laughing at Christmas Past and Yet to Come

Arlene Roman Howard, Rancho Mirage CA
w-ecircle 14

It is hard to know what memory from Christmas past makes me smile the most. Was it when I was ten? I had asked Santa for an American Character doll. When a big brown package was delivered and I discovered where Mom had hidden it, I secretly opened it every day. I had to fake surprise on Christmas morning. Mom outsmarted me. Another surprise was a package of clothes Mom had knitted for my new doll. "Mom, you knew, didn't you?"

Or was it the Christmas when my husband was working in France. We decided we would go to Egypt. It was almost midnight on Christmas Eve when we arrived in Cairo. The hotel was located in the middle of the Nile River. My seven-year-old daughter was worried. "How will Santa know where we are? How will he get here?"

The first thing we did was to put our twelve-inch tree with lights in the window. As we did, the porter exclaimed, "Oh, you're Christians. I am too." I can still see the big smile on his face. Assured that Santa would find us, our daughter slept. I wrapped packages in the dark bathroom. In the morning, my daughter found a stocking hanging on our door.

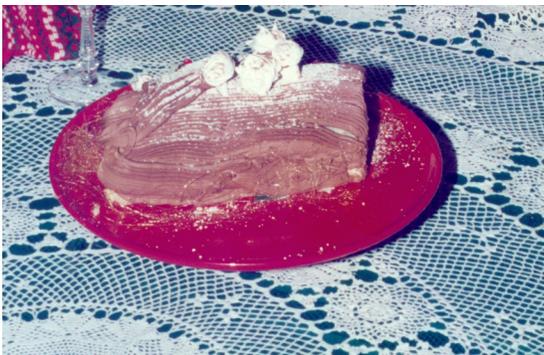
It is Christmas 1987 that not only makes me smile, but makes me laugh. I was never one of the moms who got all the packages wrapped ahead of time. Usually there was something I had to finish or start sewing on Christmas Eve. By Christmas night, I was beyond exhausted. My bouncing full of energy ten-year-old daughter exclaimed, "Let's make a Bûche de Noël."

"A Bûche de Noël? You're kidding! It's 8:30 p.m."

"Mom, you just don't like to do fun things anymore."

Ooh, ouch. For the next three hours, we played Julia Child wannabes: baked a chocolate sheet cake, created meringue mushrooms and spun sugar over a broom stick. We went to bed with chocolate on our faces.

I am waiting for her child to make the same request. I will be there with my apron on, laughing.



Making New Memories

Mona Posinoff, Riverview FL
mposinoff@earthlink.net
Brandon Writing Circle, Brandon FL

I grew up with pictures of Norman Rockwell's mom serving the golden brown beautifully roasted turkey to her smiling family at the perfectly set table. Television shows of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver* rounded out my beliefs of what a "good family" was supposed to be like.

Our family of four was not like those I saw represented outside of my household. My father was unpredictable. We never knew if the calm, easy or the angry madman was going to walk in the front door.

Holidays were the worst. There would always be a fight between my parents. In their bedroom, voices rose as they yelled and cursed each other. Then the words were muted, replaced by the slapping sound of hand meeting flesh, screams from my mother, then quiet.

Sitting in my room with the door shut, I would tune them out with a record story. The large 33rpms came with books that toned to turn the page. I could lose myself in the story as the record slowly spun.

As an adult, I went home with my then-partner to her family gathering for Thanksgiving. I was nervous. I knew not to be fooled by the lovely china and glassware that adorned the table. Her mom bustled around the kitchen, the aromas filled the air. We all waited with anticipation and hungry appetites to take our seats.

After the meal, we moved into the living room. I took a seat on the edge of the sofa, knees practically touching the coffee table as I perused a magazine. Others took up the newspaper, and the television was turned on for football.

My partner came over and sat down next to me, relaxing into the comfy softness of the sofa. "What are you doing?" she asked me.

I turned my head and whispered into her ear, "I'm waiting."

"Waiting for what?" she asked.

"For the fight to start."

"What fight?"

"You know, the fight."

She reassured me that there would be no fight. I learned a valuable lesson about myself and family that day.

"A broken heart is what makes life so wonderful five years later, when you see the guy in an elevator and he is fat and smoking a cigar and saying long-time-no-see. If he hadn't broken your heart, you couldn't have that glorious feeling of relief!"

~Phyllis Battelle

Uncle Ivan

Jo Virgil, Austin TX

Uncle Ivan was always one of my favorites. He knew how to giggle—as much as a grown man can—and to a 5-year-old, that was magic. I was thrilled when he came to visit for the Christmas holidays. We had just moved and had no relatives nearby.

Uncle Ivan was a Yankee; he talked funny. He had a round face, reddish complexion, and a round nose and eyes. He would let me sit on his lap and talk about anything, and he paid attention to every detail. With Uncle Ivan, I could share everything.

On the second day of his visit, I was outside playing with new friends when my Mom called, “Someone is here to see you.”

Uncle Ivan AND another guest? I couldn't wait to find out who it was. I slammed through the front screen door and then stopped like a startled cat when I saw, sitting on a stool in the middle of the living room, Santa Claus himself! It was still three days before Christmas. But there he was, in his long white beard and red coat and pants.

Santa opened his arms for me to come sit in his lap, so I edged closer, never taking my eyes off him, just in case he was imaginary and might disappear if I looked away. When I sat in his lap, though, it was clear that I was looking into Uncle Ivan's eyes. It made no sense. Was this Santa, or was it Uncle Ivan? Or, stranger still, why would my Uncle Ivan be acting like Santa? He even did the “Ho, Ho, Ho” thing. Had he gone crazy? I patiently let him talk on and on about Christmas, and his reindeer, and his list of good children, and when he finally ran out of words and I only stared, he gave me a pat on the shoulder, stood me up and wished me a Merry Christmas. I had been dismissed.

Just as well. I needed some time alone to try to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Another Auld Lang Syne

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX
mimi10417@sbcglobal.net
e-circles 4, 5, and 6

The years pass too quickly now, my love...
speeding up as I age and you age...
where have the years gone?
The boys are grown and sadly
one is gone, well, two
if you count the tortured soul in prison
who is more tortured him or me...
let's not go there today...
Today, I prepare a little feast
fish and olives, a crusty bread
and a tiny cake I've laced
with the last wee bit of bourbon
leftover from last year.
I suspect you have secretly brought in a bottle
of champagne in hopes I will
be slightly in the mood to celebrate this year
uncommonly, I find that I am.
I have furtively squirreled away fine chocolates
for you. I celebrate you...
you and me,
the we of past,
and the we of future;
the whatever and wherever it
takes us...
Oh, you'll recognize me...
the quixotic girl
in the front yard
with a sparkler or two
waving in another year
and waving out another too...

My Tear Drop Ornament

Candi Byrne, Martinsburg, WV

Thirty years ago, my mother presented me with an enormous, vintage glass Christmas ornament she'd purchased on a trip to Poland. It was, in a word, ugly. Anemic squiggles of silver glitter outlined bands of flat red and green paint which bracketed a primitive rendering of a slender Santa carrying a fir tree. A shaky hand had inscribed “Poland” across the equator. The bottom tip of the teardrop-shaped ornament was broken off, revealing the silvery interior. “It's still very valuable,” my mother insisted.

She'd gone to the trouble of raiding from her gargantuan stash, a sleek gold box from Poor Richard's, an upscale gift store long since out of business. The nest of repurposed purple tissue paper inside cradled “the Poland bulb,” as it became known.

Despite the damage, size (think athletic cornish hen), and tragic aesthetics, we made a big deal every year about hanging the Poland bulb on our tree. We'd open the gilded box, gingerly peel back the limp tissue paper, and marvel at the colossal

homeliness of the aged orb. I'd lift it out by its short slender neck and we'd survey the tree for the perfect hole to frame it.

One year, my then-first grade daughter, in her eagerness to help decorate our freshly cut balsam, ransomed the Poor Richard's box from the bottom of the Christmas ornament cache. The Poland bulb shattered at her touch. She was heartbreakingly contrite and inconsolable despite my assurances that the most important thing was that she hadn't been hurt or cut by the slivers of glass. Her older brother took great pleasure chastising her for “ruining Mom's Christmas.” His dramatic and highly embellished account of the Poland bulb's demise has been a Christmas ritual ever since.

Until last year that is, when my daughter held up a quieting hand as he began his recitation, and bestowed upon me a bronze-glittered, honeydew-sized, unbreakable sphere with “Poland” emblazoned around the middle in bright blue puffy-painted script. It is, in a word, ugly. And...priceless.

Christmas Cards

Margo Johnson, LaGrange TX

Christmas cards are full of various sayings, some sentimental, some funny, some boring, some touching. It is a treat to open the mail and read the creative or not so creative wishes that friends have sent.

And there are those wonderful Christmas letters tucked inside the cards, letting friends and neighbors catch up on your trip to Barcelona, or your cruise through the islands, or how your kids graduated *summa cum laude* from some unheard-of university.

I always try to write my personalized notes at the last minute in order to outdo the adventures of those who have detailed their wonderfully busy and exciting lives.

This year I might write about the interesting adventures I've had such as exiting my garage—through the garage door. Or becoming aware that people slur their words so I'm left clueless whether they said “been,” “send,” “kin,” or “uncle.” Who would know? Yes, I will mention my new hearing aids!

I will want to include a picture of myself during one of my bad hair days to let people know that my life is absolutely perfect all the time.

Don't you know that the folks who receive this informative year-end review will be absolutely bored to death about my life? The reality is my life really is about the little things that occur to each of us each day. We spend most of our days just 'living', being with friends, coping with stress, greeting neighbors, emptying the trash and the kitty litter box, kissing our kids when they leave for school, washing dishes, and rooting for the Cowboys. That's what our lives are about. I'm just busy living, hoping to bring a little peace to my home with the hope that it will spread to the world.

So, as a friend wrote in her letter this year, “We wish each of you all the beautiful blessings of Christmas—yeah, the blessings that warm the heart and lap faster than a new puppy with incontinence!”

Holiday Humor

Amanda Zimmer, Safety Harbor FL
arsunmorn@aol.com, Safety Harbor Story Circle

Christmas Carols sang out as Gram and I sat at the big dining room table. Boxes of cards were lined up like soldiers before us. We held our positions armed with address books and pens.

One by one we looked up a name, selected an appropriate card: funny, sentimental, or politically correct. Then in our neatest handwriting we addressed the envelope, opened the card, and wrote a personalized note. Gram always said that a handwritten note made the recipient feel special.

As Dean Martin sang about the weather outside being frightful, I glanced out the window noticing a palm frond dancing in the tepid Florida breeze.

Sweet Goodbye

Betsy Kelleher, Granite City IL
w-ecircle 15, goduseshorses@aol.com,
<http://betsykellehermarebooks.blogspot.com>

My first husband and I always hosted Thanksgiving or Christmas for our three sons and their families, and my greatest holiday joy was being together. Our divorce changed that.

When we gave each other freedom to find happiness with someone else, I was more fortunate than he was. After our divorce, he kept the house. My new husband and I had a small mobile home in the same town.

When the boys celebrated holidays with their dad, they spent some time with us. We usually went out to dinner at a restaurant. But one year, they spent a week together at one son's house far away, and I felt terribly left out. We had been invited, but my husband didn't want to spend the holidays with my ex. I just didn't know how to handle this new situation yet. After all, my ex was alone, so it was natural for the boys to spend time with him. Did they realize how I felt?

They seemed friendly to me and my new husband, but I had a secret fear—did they still love me? I finally mentioned my feelings privately to each son on the phone. They had planned to celebrate next Thanksgiving at another son's house, so I asked if I could enjoy a few days with them all together before their dad arrived. They adjusted their travels to oblige my request, and I discovered being with my family was better now than ever!

We said our goodbyes with hugs and kisses in the warmth of the living room. As we went to the car, my oldest son came out and stood on the porch. The other two joined him. As I drove away, they waved until we were out of sight, and I cried. Not from the usual sadness at leaving family, but because of their thoughtfulness in coming out to see us off. The image of three young men standing on the porch waving goodbye is forever etched deeply in my heart.

Gram captured my attention when a belly laugh escaped her. “Here!” she cackled, trying to catch her breath. “Read this.”

She slid the card across the table my way, unable to stop herself from laughing. I looked down at the card to read, “Let it snow. Let it snow. What the hell do I care!”

I burst out laughing too. Leave it to Gram to put such humor in a Christmas Greeting.



Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network *Bounteous Rewards*



by Barbara Lindquist Miller

A Story Circle is a group of women who come together to read, write, and celebrate the stories of their lives. A Circle may be made up of as few as two or three people, or as many as twenty. Each meeting of your Circle will probably include a period of writing, a time for voluntary reading, and discussion. Some Circles have chosen to share a meal or refreshments before they settle down to writing and reading.

The story circles of Story Circle Network are the places where we, as SCN members, have the precious opportunity to share our own stories with each other. My own personal journey with Story Circle Network has had a powerful shaping effect on my life choices during the past ten years.

Early in 2001 a close friend and professional colleague recommended that I check out SCN because she knew of my interest in and commitment to women's stories. The information on the webpage quickly engaged my imagination. I ordered Susan Wittig Albert's book, *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story* and worked my way through the text, making my first attempt at writing memoir. In the fall of 2003 I began a writing group in my home in Denton, Texas. Ten women, who had never written life stories previously, began by using Susan's book as a guide. A diverse bunch, we quickly bonded and discovered great wealth in each other and through the synergy of the group. The book is still available through Amazon; I highly recommend it as a way to begin a writing circle.

One of the huge rewards of moving to Austin, Texas in 2006 was coming to the heart of Story Circle Network. I immediately found a writing group to join, which was only the beginning of my engagement with SCN. Jackie Newman, facilitator of my circle, shares the story of the Millwood Story Circle below.

"The Millwood Writing Circle has tried three different names over the past several years, but has, nevertheless, remained the same core group of memoir collecting-sharing-writing ladies. During nearly six years we've slowly become not only more sophisticated in our writing styles, but more trusting in the sharing of our lives' adventures, some delightful and some "not-so-delightful."

During one discussion earlier this year, we all realized

that we've collectively written many dozens of stories about our lives. Thus a whole new project was born. Currently we are each contributing up to ten stories to a "booklet" that we'll print up so that each of us has copies for our family and friends, or, if we are not yet ready to share, to be left as part of our legacy. Everyone in our group is very excited about this, everyone has submitted their ten stories, and we've even decided that this "first" edition is just the beginning for us. We'll be moving on to Part two with our next set of ten as soon as we've finished Part one.

I admit that I, too, am thrilled with what we're doing, and I, too, would not be working so diligently on my memoirs without the inspiration of the other ladies in the Millwood Writing Circle."

Yes, the rewards keep coming. Never doubt your own ability to facilitate a circle where you find yourself. There are many resources available to assist you and many women who will stand by your side with suggestions, answers to process questions and encouragement once you take the leap to lead other women into life story writing. Our children and grandchildren will truly value the windows we provide into a world which is unfathomable to those living in the digital age of social media and constant change. Please feel free to contact me with any questions and/or suggestions about story circles. Find me at circles@storycircle.org.

One important resource for SCN members is the booklet, "Facilitating a Story Circle: A Guide for Story Circle Facilitators." It is available as a free download from the SCN website: <http://www.storycircle.org/facguide.shtml> You might also want to check out our list of "Circles Around the World—And in Your Town, Too": <http://www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml>



Visit the Story Circle Network Blog

**Telling Herstories: The Broad View
And Now...One Woman's Day**

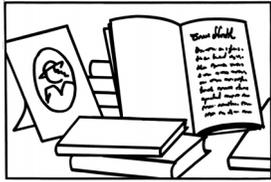
<http://storycirclenetwork.wordpress.com/>

SCN's LifeWriters Group

The SCN LifeWriters Group on Yahoo.com boasts 120 members, many who post more than one message a week. This group is very active, and you can join the conversation.

Join Us

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/scnlifewriters/>



Story Circle Network's Book Reviews *Bookstores in Our Future?*

by Susan Ideus

One of my favorite pastimes is browsing through bookstores—large ones, small ones, whatever. Being surrounded by new books, new authors, new ideas is a special delight. A bookstore always seems to me to be a haven of quiet in the company of kindred souls, a thoroughly pleasant way to spend time. I don't *always* buy something—sometimes just the experience of perusing and craving (I try not to actually covet...) is enough.

In a recent Wall Street Journal article (<http://on.wsj.com/qviSDK>), Penguin CEO John Makinson talked about the difference in book owners, book readers and why he believes that bookstores—particularly independent bookstores—are still viable.

...people will willingly pay a higher price in an independent bookshop knowing they can buy [the same book] for less down the road. That's because consumers feel an emotional engagement with the bookstore and feel that bookstores are providing a public service as well as a commercial service.

He also sees similar differences in those readers who favor physical books over e-books.

There is a growing distinction between the book reader and the book owner. The book reader just wants the experience of reading the book, and that person is a natural digital consumer: Instead of a disposable mass market book, they buy a digital book. The book owner wants to give, share and shelve books. They love the experience.

Makinson speaks from a commercial perspective. I wondered how an author might feel about the present and future importance of bookstores to his/her livelihood. So I decided to ask prolific author and founder of Story Circle Network Susan

Wittig Albert. She speaks to both the bookstore issue and to that reader who loves bound books.

Lots of people are buying books online for the convenience, but plenty of readers still want to be engaged with their local bookstores. For example, I recently gave a talk at the Book Spot, in Round Rock, TX, which was crowded with people who had come to get a book, browse the shelves, and look for new authors. At another store, a specialty mystery bookstore called Murder by the Book, in Houston, I spoke to an overflow crowd. Bookstores are important to authors, because booksellers "handsell" books to people who are looking for a new author to add to their libraries. They're important to readers, too, who are convinced that there's no substitute for a bound book with real paper pages that they can hold in their hands.

Some of our SCN members are published authors as well. We'd love to hear your thoughts on how bookstores impact you. And, for all of our readers, let us know your thoughts on your favorite bookstores, why you shop there, and your own book buying habits. To comment, please go to <http://storycirlenetwork.wordpress.com/2011/10/06/bookstores-in-our-future/>

With this column, we're saying goodbye to Susan Ideus, whose writing we have enjoyed reading for the past few years. She is moving on to other activities, but we hope to hear from her often! You'll be hearing a new voice online and in our next issue. More about that later.



Special Notice:

Membership Dues to Remain at Current Levels

In their third quarter meeting in July the Board of Directors voted to temporarily forego the planned incremental increase in member dues because of the struggling economy and concern about the impact such an increase would have on our members. For the present, regular member dues will remain at the current levels of \$45 in the US (Canada & Mexico: \$55, elsewhere: \$60).

Lisa Shirah-Hiers, President SCN



Registration Form

Send this form 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/frmregister.php

Name _____

Street Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Email _____

Phone _____ Current Member of Story Circle? yes no

Registration Type		Early Registration (Through 2/15/12) Member/Non-Member	Regular Registration (2/16/12-4/5/12) Member/Non-Member	Late Registration (cash/check only if registering at door) Member/Non-Member	Amount Due
Full Registration (Friday night Keynote/Saturday/Sunday)		\$240 / \$290	\$265 / \$315	\$290 / \$340	\$
Partial Registration (Please check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Friday (Keynote/dessert/ reception)	\$30	\$35	\$40	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday only (includes lunch)	\$95 / \$115	\$115 / \$135	\$135 / \$155	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Saturday lunch only	\$30	\$40	**	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday only (includes lunch)	\$75 / \$100	\$100 / \$125	\$125 / \$150	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> Sunday lunch only	\$30	\$40	**	\$
Friday Pre-Conference Workshop (Not included in full registration; option; extra charge)	<input type="checkbox"/> Noon-1:45 pm Session: Jeanne Guy	\$30	\$35	\$40	\$
	<input type="checkbox"/> 2:00-3:45 pm Session: Matilda Butler/ Kendra Bonnett				
Saturday/Sunday lunch preference: <input type="checkbox"/> Chicken <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarian		Total Due		\$	

What is included in my full registration fees?
 All General Sessions
 Workshop Sessions
 Friday Evening Keynote Address & Dessert Reception
 Two Meals (Sat. & Sun. lunch)
 Refreshments/Snacks
 Informal Sessions and Networking

What is not included in my full registration fees?
 Optional Friday Pre-Conference Workshops
 Hotel rooms are not included. Contact the hotel to serve your room.

Male guests are welcome at our three public events: the keynote address and the Saturday and Sunday lunches. Our conference sessions are designed for women only.

* Non-Members who choose to join prior to the end of the conference on Sunday, April 15, 2012 will have a portion of their registration fee applied to their dues.

** You MUST register for lunches by April 5, 2012! Registrations for these events will NOT be accepted at the door.

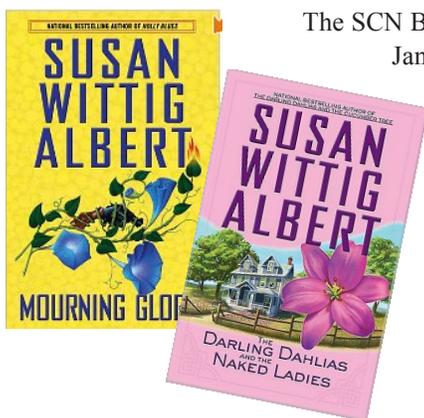
Refund Policy: Cancellations are accepted until March 13, 2012, and are subject to a cancellation fee of \$50 for a full conference registration or \$25 for a one-day registration. No refunds after March 13, 2012.

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

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Win a Guest Appearance in a Mystery Novel!

You could win a cameo appearance in one of Susan Wittig Albert's two mystery series: the China Bayles Herbal Mysteries or the Darling Dahlias Garden Mysteries. What's more, your raffle purchase will help a Story Circle member attend this year's conference by subsidizing registration fees and travel/hotel costs. Susan (who founded Story Circle in 1997) will personally work with the two winners to develop characters who will represent them in two 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 ask you to 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.



The SCN Benefit Raffle opens on
January 2, 2012. Go to:
[www.storycircle.org/
Conference/raffle.php](http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/raffle.php)

Call for Vendors: Works of Heart Marketplace

We welcome vendors (including small publishers) to Stories from the Heart VI who would like to sell books that they have written or published, paper products, print-related services, writing-related items, and hand-crafted items of interest to women. We have a limited number of tables available in a reserved "shopping area" for Friday-Saturday, April 13-14. Vendors must be members of SCN. (To join, click the button in the Vendor Application below: "I want to join now & pay the annual dues of \$45") Apply early! Postmarks will be considered when assigning table location to accepted artists. The application deadline is February 15, 2012. For all the details, go to:

<http://www.storycircle.org/Conference/callforvendors.php>

True Words: Looking Ahead

We're always looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We prefer that you submit your work directly to the website at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/members/frmjournalsubmission.shtml>.

Future Topics and deadlines for upcoming Journals are:

March, 2012 (due January 15)—A Quilt
June, 2012 (due April 15)—One Summer Day
September, 2012 (due July 15)—A Harvest Story and Recipe