



The Sarton ~ The Gilda

Story Circle Network is pleased to announce
the winners of the 2022 Sarton and Gilda Women's Book Awards.



Sarton Award Winners

Memoir: *Chasing Zebras* by Margaret Nowaczyk (Wolsak and Wynn Publishers)

Contemporary Fiction: *Blurred Fates* by Anastasia Zadeik (She Writes Press)

Historical Fiction: *Cora's Kitchen* by Kimberley Brown (Inanna Publications & Education)

Nonfiction: *Manifesting Justice* by Valena Beety (Kensington Publishing)

Gilda Prize Winner

Yes Again by Sallie H. Weissinger (She Writes Press)

See pages 12 & 13 for engaging interviews with Margaret Nowaczyk and Sallie H. Weissinger,
two of our 2022 winners. Other winners will be featured in future issues.

The 2023 Women's Book Award contests are now open. For more information, go
here: <https://www.storycircle.org/contest/story-circle-womens-book-awards/>



Len Leatherwood

Letter from the President

Dear Story Circle Network Members,

We have exciting news. We have hired and are now working with our new marketing consultant, Libby Jordan. Libby was the Executive Committee's unanimous choice for this role and she is already proving to be an absolute gem. She is currently doing an overall audit of SCN to determine our best marketing strategy. You will soon start seeing the results of her work in three specific target areas: our website, our online teaching platform, and our publications. We're excited to have Libby as part of our marketing team so we can reach even more women with stories to tell.

We have lots of wonderful activities brewing here at SCN thanks to the dedication of all of you. This wonderful *Journal* (thank you, Paula Yost, Robin Wittig, Pat Bean, Jo Virgil, and Teresa Lynn) is an excellent way to really see all that's happening at SCN. You'll learn about our new Sarton and Gilda contest winners, our blog contest winners, news on our excellent book review site, our webinar and online class offerings, info on our newly formed reading circle, the latest on our ongoing writing circles and roundtables, our College Match partnership, news on our DEI efforts, a call for submissions to our yearly anthology, examples of our One Woman's Day and Telling Herstories blogs, our "Tips from Our Teachers" and "Our Future is Female" features, and, of course, Jeanne Guy's latest "Unvarnished" column. We also have a big announcement regarding an in-person writing retreat with our beloved Jeanne Guy in Fredericksburg, Texas in September!

Yes, a lot is going on here at Story Circle Network, and it couldn't happen without the aid of all of you—our members. We are an organization run primarily by volunteers, so if you are not already lending a hand at SCN, please consider going to <https://www.storycircle.org/opportunities/> to explore the different programs we have that might be the right fit for your skills and expertise.

Thank you for all your hard work in furthering our mission to encourage all women to tell their stories. *You* are the reason that Story Circle Network is now in its 26th year. Here's to our sisterhood of writers!

Hugs around the Circle,

Len

Len Leatherwood, SCN President

Editor's Corner

Yay! Summer's here, and our gardens and minds are sprouting wondrous things. To help you follow through, check out this issue to discover the countless and creative ways Story Circle supports and encourages women from all walks of life to share their stories.

Have questions about a particular article or ideas for a follow-up? Is there something you'd like to see addressed in a future *Journal*? Email storycircle@storycircle.org (subject line: *Journal* Idea) and let us know.

Happy reading, *Paula*

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Story Circle Network's Mission

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

The *Story Circle Network Journal*, our quarterly newsletter, is 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.

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The *Journal* is an important member benefit. We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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Membership Rates

One Year \$60 if receiving
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Foreign Memberships: Please pay by
 International Postal Money Order.

Missed Issues: For members subscribed to printed issues of the *Story Circle Network Journal*, we try to ensure that it 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.

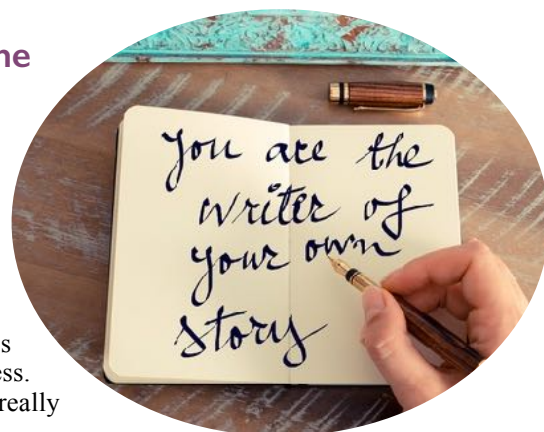
You can read our monthly *Flash* eletters online [here](https://www.storycircle.org/publications/).

<https://www.storycircle.org/publications/>

AI Writing: The Good, the Bad, and the Unacceptable

by Teresa Lynn

One can hardly glance at the Internet or turn on the news without seeing something about AI (artificial intelligence) and how it's going to put writers out of business. What is this new phenomenon? Is it really the end of authors?



Actually, it's not new. Believe it or not, we've all been using AI for years. Have you ever used a search engine (like Google or the old Explorer)? Used Microsoft Word's "Spelling & Grammar" check? Ordered something from Amazon and then received related ads? These are a few of the many forms of AI that have been in use for decades.

Then why all the recent hoopla? Because AI can now do something it couldn't before—*generate*. In years past, it could only regurgitate the work that humans had fed into it. The latest iterations of AI, though, can produce new works, and at a rate much faster than humans can. Not only literary works, but graphics and music as well. And it's pretty good at some things. Short fact-based pieces such as essays or blog posts, for instance, are probably AI's best writing. It can also distill a writer's synopsis into back cover copy well. The Japanese graphic art form of Manga is something it seems to excel at.

So is that it? Artists will be replaced by machines? Happily, no. For all AI can do, there's still plenty it can't. For example, longer literary works—and in this case, *longer* means anything over about 400 words—almost always come out a disjointed, repetitive mess. The facts it provides in even short pieces are not always accurate. AI-generated works also lack style. It may copy another artist's form and tone if prompted to do so, but it doesn't have any original style of its own. That's another thing . . . AI must be prompted regarding *what* to generate. It can't produce ideas (at least not yet!).

More importantly, AI lacks the one basic thing necessary to create any art form that will make a connection with its audience: emotion. What makes literature, music, paintings, performance, or any other art great is that it touches our heart while making its point. A machine might randomly hit a poignant line or two, but it takes humanity to understand the feelings needed to produce an entire piece of work that we—its audience—will appreciate. So, while AI is clearly a sea change and a new obstacle to creators, it's not the end of human artists.

Given all these facts, what is Story Circle Network's stance on AI? Susan Schoch, SCN's vice president and books editor, said it best: "We've always supported the individual voice and asserted the creative legitimacy of women's unique stories."

That's still the case. No one, human or machine, can tell *your* story but *you*. Our focus and mission are on amplifying the voice of real women. Thus, entrants in the Sarton and Gilda book competitions and SCN's other contests will now see in the guidelines a restriction against works created using artificial intelligence. Submissions to our *Real Women Write* anthology, True Words in the *Journal*, One Woman's Day and HerStories blogs, and book reviews will see the same restriction.

You can count on the same kind of personal communication from SCN as well. All our writing is done by humans. In full disclosure, we want to let you know that we will continue to use AI as we have in the past. We may do research, for example, or run a first-level edit with artificial intelligence. But every *Journal* article, *Flash* paragraph, webpage, email, and other correspondence from Story Circle Network is, and will continue to be, written by a real woman.

BREAKING NEWS

Connect with your creative self . . .

You've Got This! Claiming Your Creative Life

Story Circle Network's Fall 2023 Women's Retreat

Fredericksburg, Texas / September 25-27, 2023



Fredericksburg Inn

American poet and novelist Charles Bukowski posed the question, "Can you remember who you were, before the world told you who you should be?" Who are *you*? Story Circle Network is offering a retreat where you can experience the freedom to connect with your creative self.

What can you expect at this retreat? Time and space to experience the freedom of being who you already are. Your creative essence has never left you, and this retreat is a renewal and celebration of your creative spirit.

Through insightful writing prompts, self-reflection, deep listening, and meaningful conversations, with a healthy dose of humor throughout, you'll enjoy the opportunity to claim and enhance your creative life and to explore new depths of intimacy with your creative self and others. Unstructured leisure and renewal time for breathing,



Join us for a rejuvenating getaway on five acres of lush landscape.

writing, meditating, taking walks, shopping, fun, and laughter will also be included.

Here's the deal. Don't come wanting change. Come to this retreat to:

- *Find out who you already are.*
- *Be open to what you find.*
- *Discover the freedom of Female Fortitude.*
- *Bear witness to your life; witness others.*
- *Be vulnerable and in the moment.*

Bring your own magic wand, the one you didn't know you had.

The retreat will be facilitated by award-winning author and veteran Re-Story journal-writing coach Jeanne Baker Guy of Jeanne Guy Gatherings and will include a session led by award-winning author, podcaster, and all-around amazing story-gatherer Stephanie Raffelock.

We hope you'll join us in the charming setting of Fredericksburg, Texas and give yourself over to a new vision of creative strength, courage, and personal wisdom. Are you ready? Mark your calendars *now* for Monday, September 25 through Wednesday, September 27. Details and registration [here](https://www.storycircle.org/2023-retreat) (<https://www.storycircle.org/2023-retreat>).



Stephanie Raffelock.



Jeanne Baker Guy

Spoiler Alert:
You've got this! That's the takeaway.

BREAKING NEWS

Enhance your writing skills and connect with fellow writers this fall . . .

SCN Announces Third Annual Virtual Conference

Get ready to unleash your writing potential! We're excited to announce that Story Circle Network will be hosting its third annual virtual conference this fall. Join us for a day of engaging workshops, inspiring speakers, and opportunities to connect with fellow writers. You won't want to miss this unforgettable day. Stay tuned for more news on the date and speaker lineup. Meanwhile, be sure to spread the word and let your writing friends know about this exciting event. More information and details about registration will be announced on our [events page \(https://www.storycircle.org/programs-and-events/\)](https://www.storycircle.org/programs-and-events/) very soon!

Accepting submissions now . . .

Real Women Write Mothers and Mentors: The Art of Nurturing

One of the great benefits of membership in Story Circle Network is the opportunity for publication in our annual anthology, *Real Women Write*. (See previous editions and all SCN books [here: https://www.storycircle.org/publications/story-circle-network-books/](https://www.storycircle.org/publications/story-circle-network-books/)) Members may submit up to three pieces of their original writing for consideration for the 2023 anthology, *Mothers and Mentors: The Art of Nurturing*.

Nurturing is what the world needs right now. The impulse to “care for and encourage the growth or development” of any life provides nourishment to all life everywhere. From protecting our planet mother Gaia to rearing a healthy child, we give and receive nurturing throughout our lifetime, and we feel the power of nurturers in our lives. Teachers appear, and helpers make a difference. Helping life to thrive is an essential part of being human.

For the 2023 issue of *Real Women Write*, we ask you to reflect on the varied ways—whether the good, the bad, or the ugly—that we mother and are mothered, and on the significance of giving and receiving guidance and care. What part has nurturing played in your life? Who or what has nurtured you? How have you experienced mothering and/or mentoring?

This is a powerful topic and a great publication opportunity available to the enormous Amazon community in November 2023. It's definitely time to start writing!

Submissions accepted May 1 thru July 1.

Members log in and complete the entry form here:

<https://www.storycircle.org/anthology-submission/>

Story Circle Network 2022 Poetry Competition

The deadline for submissions is **June 10**, so get creative soon. The topic this year is "Lost and Found." Full contest details here: <https://www.storycircle.org/contest/the-story-circle-poetry-competition/> Our competitions are open only to members. Time to renew? Go [here: https://www.storycircle.org/registration/](https://www.storycircle.org/registration/)

BREAKING NEWS

Introducing Libby Jordan SCN's New Marketing Consultant



"I am delighted. I am excited. And I am humbled beyond words."—Libby Jordan

We are thrilled to introduce you to our new marketing consultant, Libby Jordan. With over twenty-five years of experience in the publishing industry and senior positions at major publishing houses like Penguin/Random House and HarperCollins, Libby is a marketing and social media expert who will be instrumental in increasing awareness around SCN and its offerings.

Her primary goal is to enhance SCN's marketing efforts by assessing our strengths and identifying opportunities for growth. Libby has already begun evaluating the design, user interface, and backend of our website, and she has provided valuable suggestions to make

user-friendly. Next, she will review our courses and recommend ways to improve their enrollment and engagement. Finally, she will analyze our content and data to help us develop an editorial and outreach calendar that will allow us to effectively promote our publications.

As someone who is deeply involved in author education and advocacy, and whose goal is to help writers "live out loud," Libby is a big believer in SCN's mission. We are excited about working with her and seeing the positive impact she will have on our membership and our mission.

Please join us in welcoming Libby to the team and stay tuned for more updates on our progress.

SCN's Young Women's Advisory Board Springs into Summer

We're delighted to announce that Tina Games, member of the SCN Board of Directors, will be stepping into the position of advisor for the SCN Young Women's Advisory Board (YWAB) effective May 1, 2023. Tina will be working with YWAB members over the summer to create a strategic plan that accomplishes three goals:

- Discuss ways to attract younger SCN members, specifically in the age bracket of 18 to 30.
- Determine programming and/or projects of interest to young women that are aligned with the mission of Story Circle Network.
- Research grant opportunities to fund YWAB projects and programming.

Current YWAB Members:

- **Rachael Beaty**, who has a bachelor's degree in English and American Culture from UCLA and a master's degree in English Literature from Loyola Marymount University.
- **Lona Tehrani**, who is a graduate of Brown University. Lona is currently exploring a career as a physician or nurse practitioner.
- **Melissa Ortiz Martinez**, who has a master's degree in Administration and Policy in Higher Education. Melissa is working at the University of Mount St. Mary's as a graduate advisor.
- **Holly Evans**, a junior at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, is majoring in sociology and political science. Holly is currently studying abroad in England and will return to the United States in June.

We are looking to expand our board and are interviewing candidates. If you know someone who would be interested in serving on our SCN Young Women's Advisory Board, please email Tina Games at StoryCircle@StoryCircle.org.

BREAKING NEWS

Pushcart Prize Honoring SCN's Nominees

Last year, in celebrating the 25th year of Story Circle Network, we initiated a program of nominations for the prestigious [Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses](http://www.pushcartprize.com/) (<http://www.pushcartprize.com/>), which annually honors the best writing from this country's small and independent publishers. This national recognition means that simply being nominated is a high honor, one that gains pride of place on authors' resumé's.

If you are not familiar with this program, here is a brief description from the Pushcart website:

"The Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses series, published every year since 1976, is the most honored literary project in America, including [Highest Honors from the American Academy of Arts and Letters](https://artsandletters.org/pressrelease/2020-special-awards/): <https://artsandletters.org/pressrelease/2020-special-awards/>. Since 1976, hundreds of presses and thousands of writers of short stories, poetry and essays have been represented in our annual collections. Each year most of the writers and many of the presses are new to the series. Every volume contains an index of past selections, plus lists of outstanding presses with addresses."

This year, if there are works that are deemed deserving by our panel of editors, nominees will be selected from SCN's annual members-only anthology, *Real Women Write, Vol. 22—Mothers and Mentors: The Art of Nurturing*. Responsiveness to the theme, originality of approach, and clarity of imagery, description, and language are among the criteria the panel will be using. To be considered for inclusion in the 2023 anthology, and possibly a Pushcart nomination, submit your work [here](https://www.storycircle.org/anthology-submission/): <https://www.storycircle.org/anthology-submission/>

Last November, drawn from the 2022 anthology, *Real Women Write: Seeing Through Their Eyes*, six SCN members were recognized with nominations for a Pushcart Prize. These excellent writers enriched the book's theme of *empathy* with their writing.

- Sharon L. Charde: *Five Women Around a Table*
- Linda Healy: *Will Work For Food*
- Len Leatherwood: *My Mother and Her Pain*
- Teresa Lynn: *Lines*
- Janet Grace Riehl: *I Will Take You Halfway*
- Christina M. Wells: *Talking About Buffalo With the Dead*

There are many submissions each year, and with good fortune we hope to see these works appear in the 2022 Pushcart Prize volume, which will be published in November 2023. To read the nominated pieces, and discover more excellent writing on an important topic, check out our 2022 anthology. Details are [here](https://www.storycircle.org/publications/story-circle-network-books/2022rww-seeing-through-their-eyes/): <https://www.storycircle.org/publications/story-circle-network-books/2022rww-seeing-through-their-eyes/>

Please spread the word about these nominations, which should provide powerful encouragement for our writers. We anticipate making more nominations of outstanding writing annually. Watch SCN's monthly *Flash* and quarterly *Journal* for further news of Pushcart nominees.



In the circle, we are all equal. There is no one in front of you, and there's no one behind you. No one is above you; no one is below you. The circle is sacred because it is designed to create unity.

—Lakota Wisdom

Unvarnished

Questionable Notes on the Writing Life

by Jeanne Baker Guy

Write How the Story Ends First? Yes, Make It Up

Don't you love it when a book shows up at just the right moment? While in the throes of caregiving for my unhappy elderly sister, I read writer-friend Gretchen Staebler's memoir, *Mother Lode: Confessions of a Reluctant Caregiver*. An alternately heartbreaking and hilarious memoir, *Mother Lode* is the story of Gretchen's move across the country to live with and care for her ninety-six-year-old mother.

Her memoir provided breathing space and stabilized me, and when I went off the rails, I knew Gretchen understood. I texted her, "Cannot thank you enough for *Mother Lode* and your excellent writing. Each chapter makes me cry and laugh and feel sad and understood and vindicated and held."

Staebler, a 2022 Sarton Award finalist, recently posted a blog about the beginning of her writing journey as she penned the memoir some ten years earlier. Author/teacher Christina Baldwin had challenged her to write the unknown end of the story first.

"Make it up?" Gretchen asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Christina said.

Referencing that important moment in a recent blog, Gretchen wrote, "What emerged was a piece of fiction that, five years after the writing, turned out to be not that far from truth." Gretchen then challenged her readers to do the same. "If you're a caregiver, how do you imagine the end of that both holy and fraught relationship?"

Hmm. How would I write the ending of my "holy and fraught" caregiving story with my sister, a woman who is almost eleven years my senior and like a second mother to me?

In an ideal world and in a nutshell, my eighty-six-year-old sister, under-tall and no longer able-bodied with bad knees, would get strong, lose weight, and fight to get healthy. Her longing to be independent would prompt her to move to Prescott, Arizona where, years ago, she lived as a happy hermit and writer-in-residence in a rented rustic cabin in the Prescott National Forest. Wouldn't that be lovely?

However, with durable power of attorney in hand and considering her growing needs over the past two and a half years, we moved her into a private care home, not in alignment with her fierce independent nature. I over-functioned, obsessed with following doctors' orders and keeping her safe. Alas, I usurped her agency, depressed her, and exhausted myself.

A mind-changing message finally pierced through my anxiety. "Live your life." It took another month for the true meaning to soak in. "Live *your* life, not hers."

So, what did I do?

Guided back to my senses by supportive friends and family, I decided to let my sister live her life, which proved the right thing for me as well. Despite my fears for her, I backed off. Her dreams are hers to manifest. I'd rather she navigate her independence and ultimately die happy in her beloved hermit cabin in the woods. Though we disagree on her ability to handle her life, cook, clean, do laundry, and manage her medications, I needed to let go. She doesn't want to be handled. She wants her independence, and so do I.

What have I learned? Several unexpected and valuable lessons, many of which are applicable to writers. Whether you're caregiving or writing, or trying to do both, here's what I discovered.

- Having supportive people who let me vent, repeatedly, is priceless.
- I'm not in control, however well-intentioned I may be.
- My health and her health are of equal importance.
- Being perceived as an unloving example defeats the whole purpose.
- Beating my head against a wall only gives me a headache.
- I am not my stress. Listening to it and choosing kind self-talk is great self-care.

Guess where she's planning to go for an undetermined length of time? Prescott National Forest, back to her cabin in the woods. Though not without worry, I'm happy for her . . . One of life's many paradoxes. I think our relationship may be salvageable.

By supporting her dreams, my health is better, my stress has lessened, headaches are gone, and I no longer have the need to polish my, ahem, martyr button. I can focus on my life and my writing. Just like my sister, I cherish my independence.

And that's how the real story may end. My imagined story—of our holy and fraught relationship—might turn out to be "not that far from truth."

Your turn.



Jeanne Baker Guy is based in Cedar Park, Texas and is the author of *You'll Never Find Us: A Memoir*, the true story of how her children were stolen from her and how she stole them back. Past president of SCN, Jeanne also co-authored *Seeing Me: A Guide for Reframing the Way You See Yourself Through Reflective Writing*. Learn more about her books and writing workshops at www.jeanneGuy.com.

ONLINE CLASSES

Spring II Term

Story Circle Network strives to provide its members with quality instruction in all types of writing so women may gain the skills and confidence they need to share their stories with one another and the world. Course offerings may be accessed [here](https://www.storycircle.org/online-classes/): <https://www.storycircle.org/online-classes/>

- Writing Autobiographical Fiction (Michelle Parks)
- Write Flash, Right Now—A Workshop in “Flash” Fiction/Memoir (Len Leatherwood)
- Breaking the Silence: A Four-Week Explorative Journey to Your Truth (Mary Tuchscherer)
- Continuing the Hearing Journey of Spring; Nature, Writing, Listening, and Our Walks in Hope from Grief (Christine Hassing)
- Finding the Writer Within (Linda Steele)
- Introduction to Guided Autobiography (Sarah White)
- Writing Your Wild Life Into Existence (Bianca Morgan)
- Build a Sandcastle with Your Words—Creative Essays, Poetry, or Both! (Lisa Baron)

UPCOMING WEBINARS

Watch for future webinars information and registration links at

[Programs & Events](https://www.storycircle.org/programs-and-events/):

<https://www.storycircle.org/programs-and-events/>.

If you missed one of our many fantastic webinars in the past, you may purchase (\$10) a link to a replay [here](https://www.storycircle.org/webinars/): <https://www.storycircle.org/webinars/>



IF OUR STORIES WERE PUZZLE PIECES, WHAT PICTURE COULD WE BUILD?

IF WE LOOKED AT CHAPTERS OF OUR STORIES AS PIECES TO A PUZZLE, WOULD WE FIND EXTRAORDINARY PICTURES IN DEVELOPMENT? WOULD WE WISH CERTAIN PIECES HAD FALLEN AND BEEN SWEEPED AWAY BY THE BROOM? COULD WE FIT EVEN THE MOST JAGGED PIECES TOGETHER SUCH THAT THE PICTURE BECAME NOTHING SHORT OF BEAUTIFUL?

THIS WORKSHOP WILL OFFER ATTENDEES THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE THESE PIECES AND THEN COMPASSIONATELY WRITE A PARAGRAPH, CHAPTER, OR STORY WITH A NEW VIEW.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2023
6 PM CENTRAL TIME / 4 PM PACIFIC TIME
COST: \$25

A WEBINAR PRESENTED BY
STORY CIRCLE NETWORK



WITH CHRISTINE HASSING
LIFE STORY WRITER/TEACHER, AUTHOR, COACH



WRITING YOUR LIFE: POEMS FROM LIFE EXPERIENCE

WE'VE ALL HAD THOSE TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS THAT WE WOULD LOVE TO SHARE WITH OTHERS. IN THIS WEBINAR, WE'LL LEARN HOW TO MOVE BEYOND MERE TELLING TO TURNING EXPERIENCE INTO ART.

WE'LL EXAMINE SUCCESSFUL POEMS THAT CENTER ON LIFE EXPERIENCE, USE PROMPTS AND EXERCISES TO HELP YOU TAP INTO MEMORIES, AND CRAFT POEMS THAT USE IMAGERY, METAPHOR, AND RHYTHM.

ONCE THE POEMS ARE WRITTEN, WE WILL WORKSHOP THEM, DISCUSS TECHNIQUES FOR REVISION, AND TALK ABOUT POSSIBLE MARKETS FOR SUBMISSION.

THIS SEMINAR IS OPEN TO ALL LEVELS OF ADULT STUDENTS.

SATURDAY, JUNE 17, 2023
11-12:30 CENTRAL TIME
COST: \$25

A WEBINAR PRESENTED BY
STORY CIRCLE NETWORK



WITH ELLEN BIRKETT MORRIS



MAKE YOUR MARK: CREATING A FIRST INDUSTRY RESOURCE

THIS INTERACTIVE PROGRAM BALANCES PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE ELEMENTS BY HELPING YOU TO NAVIGATE DIFFICULT CONTENT DECISIONS, DRAFT WINNING PITCHES TO PUBLISHERS AND MASTER THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING SKILLS REQUIRED TO BRING YOUR VISION TO LIFE.

PARTICIPANTS WILL GAIN A COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF THE IDEATION AND PUBLISHING PROCESSES BY OUTLINING EFFECTIVE MARKETING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES. PARTICIPANTS WILL BECOME EMPOWERED TO CREATE UNIQUE RESOURCES, STRENGTHEN THEIR WRITING THROUGH FEEDBACK PROCESSES, BUILD EFFECTIVE BOOK PITCHES, SECURE CRITICAL BOOK IMAGERY, AND SUPPORT THEIR BOOKS' MARKETING PLANS.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23, 2023
6PM CENTRAL TIME
COST: \$25

A WEBINAR PRESENTED BY
STORY CIRCLE NETWORK



WITH LINDSAY KARCHIN AND DELPHINE HORVATH



SCN 2023 Blog Post Competition

Congratulations to the Winners!



First Place Winner: Lorinda Boyer for “Starting Again”

Lorinda Boyer is a Pacific Northwest native who spends her days writing, reading, and exploring with her wife Sandy and dog, Mollie. Lorinda’s journey through fundamentalist Christianity, sexual addiction, and eventual self-acceptance unfolds in her memoir, *Straight Enough*. More than a coming-out story this is a coming-into story—coming into an authentic life and self.

See Lorinda’s winning entry below and visit our website to find more links to all the winning blogs and information about the authors. <https://www.storycircle.org/contest/the-story-circle-blog-contest/>



Second Place Winner: Julie McGue for “Connections Matter”

Julie Ryan McGue is an American author. Her award-winning memoir, *Twice a Daughter: A Search for Identity, Family and Belonging*, released in May 2021. Julie’s work has appeared in the Story Circle Network *Journal*, *Brevity*, *Imprint*, *Adoption.com*, *Lifetime Adoption*, *Adoption & Beyond*, and *Severance Magazine*. Her personal essays have appeared in two anthologies: *Art in the Time of Unbearable Crisis* and *Real Women Write: Seeing Through Their Eyes*. She is currently working on a second memoir and a collection of essays.



Third Place Winner: Gretchen Staebler for “Connection to Home at Life’s End”

Gretchen Staebler is a Pacific Northwest native transplanted to the southeast for 36 years. In 2012, she returned to her childhood home and fell in love with her corner of the country again. She is a grandmother, a story-catcher, a teacher, an attention payer, a hiker, a back roads wanderer, and a caregiver survivor and ally. Check out her blog [Writing Down the Story](#), her [website](#), and her memoir, *Mother Lode: Confessions of a Reluctant Caregiver*.

Starting Again

by Lorinda Boyer

*“The living mother-daughter relationship, you learn over and over again, is a constant choice between adaptation and acceptance.”—Kelly Corrigan, *Glitter and Glue**

I rest a foot on my shovel, wipe the sweat from my forehead, survey my progress. Anytime I work outside, I can’t help thinking of my beloved Auntie Gayle toiling tirelessly in her own flower beds. Mom’s younger sister, Auntie is like a second mother to me. She rarely wears shoes much preferring the feel of the earth beneath her bare feet. She would pull weeds while smoking a single cigarette, out of our sight (or so she believed). Her skin bronzed from hours under the sun, her freckles prominent across her nose and cheeks, she was happiest outdoors. As I squat down to tug at a weed, I remember Spring being her favorite season. At least until my uncle left. After he left, she was never the same.

In the beginning I tried to rally her, encourage her via phone calls, cards, but my immaturity, limited experience in the cruelties of life left me impatient, not compassionate enough. I’m ashamed to admit I never tried to know her again, I wanted to protect the memories I had of my fun-loving auntie from before.

Adrift in memories, I’m jarred when my phone rings.

“Your Aunt is dead.” Dad’s voice is calm, steady, matter of fact.

I drop my shovel; tears blur my vision.

“Lorinda,” Dad speaks more firmly, “Your mother needs you.”

And because she needs me, I go.

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Crowded into my aunt’s tiny apartment bedroom, I peer at her withered shell cocooned in blankets. I brush a kiss across her hollow cheek, leave the room.

Mom is last to leave, but eventually I hear the door shut behind her. She takes hold of my hand, her grip painful, the cold wind whips at us. I’m struck with the unceremonious way in which two men carry Auntie’s body, zipped into a body bag, down two flights of stairs, roll it into the back of a minivan. She’s so slight, so small, she could easily pass for a bag of rubbish.

Once the van carrying Auntie’s body pulls away, I offer to take Mom home. As we drive, it weighs heavy on my heart the distance that’s grown between us. Since coming out to her as gay then marrying my wife, our relationship has changed. Sure, we talk near daily at the gym where I work and she attends classes, but our conversation is surface. I long for more, I miss hanging out, I miss my mom.

My timing may not be ideal, I'm acting out of fear, but I love my mom. Love her so much the thought of living without her makes me gasp for air. Our relationship will never be perfect, we will continue to fail one another, I can live with that, can she?

Once I've pulled into her driveway, parked, I get out and walk her up the stairs. As she reaches for the door handle, I summon my courage, grab her hand.

"That could have been you in that body bag today." My throat tightens. "What would it matter then, Mom, if I'm gay or straight?" Mom's face is white, whiter than I've ever seen it, but I continue. "I want you in my life, mom."

Mom is crying but she shakes her head defiantly. "You *have* changed, Lorinda. You may not see it, but you have. I'll never accept you being gay." Her words hit as hard as they did the first time I heard them, but still I press on.

"Then don't, but don't shut me out either." I'm pleading, desperate. "We are going to die, too, someday. Why waste what time we have left because we don't agree on this? I love you. I want to spend time with you. I miss you."

By now Mom is sobbing. She pulls me into her arms, squeezes me tightly. My tense body relaxes, and I feel the prickle of tears in my nose. "Oh, Lorinda. I do love you; I do! We will start again. From here on out, we will start again."

~~~~~

A week after the funeral, six months after I've married and four months after we've moved into our new house, Mom pulls into my driveway for the first time. I peer from the window as she approaches the porch. I don't wait for her to ring the bell, instead I swing the door open wide. Cradled in her arms is a pot of sunshine daffodils and purple hibiscus. She hands the pot to me, a smile spreads across her face. "Beautiful house, Lorinda."



Sarton/Gilda Book Awards Program Just Keeps Growing!

by Susan Wittig Albert

With the announcement of our 2022 winners, the Sarton/Gilda Awards program has completed its twelfth year and moved into its thirteenth. The publishing landscape has changed remarkably since we began in 2011, with many more independent publishers offering many more innovative opportunities and a wider welcome to women writers. SCN's banner award platform has shared in that growth. Over the life of the program, we have presented thirty-nine awards. In this issue of the *Journal*, you may enjoy interviews with two of our current winners—those in the Memoir and Gilda categories. Interviews by SCN staff writer Pat Bean with all our 2022 winners will appear throughout the year.

These awards are named in honor of the memoirist-poet-novelist May Sarton and the comedian-memoirist Gilda Radner. This year, we've added Young Adult fiction, expanding our 2023 entry categories to seven: Memoir, Historical Fiction, Contemporary Fiction, Young Adult Fiction, Middle Grade Fiction, Nonfiction, and the Gilda, for comedic memoir/fiction. Once again, entries will be accepted in either print or eBook formats.

The program is managed by a team of experienced coordinators, several of whom have been with us since the very first year. Memoir and Nonfiction: Christina Wells and Susan Albert; Contemporary Fiction: Jo Virgil; Historical

Fiction: Ellen Notbohm; Middle Grade and Young Adult: Regina Allen; Gilda: Paula Yost. The coordinators manage the many entries in their categories, giving each one individual attention—no easy task as the program grows. They also work with the jurors and judges to ensure that the process goes smoothly from start to finish.

The success of our program depends on our wonderful jurors and judges. The competition is held in two rounds, with SCN member-volunteers serving as jurors in Round One and librarians (not affiliated with SCN) serving as judges in Round Two. What does it take to be a juror? "We need *you*," says Susan Albert, who has been working with jurors for the past decade-plus. "If you're an SCN member who enjoys books by women and are willing to devote some of your reading time to support women writers and their publishers, we would love to have you join us. Sarton jurors tell us that they look forward to the experience every year and are proud to be part of the program."

Jurors have six weeks (usually during the months of August–November) to read and evaluate three assigned books, scoring them via our online rubrics. You can see those here: <https://www.storycircle.org/contest/rubric-list/> Interested? Email Liz Beaty elizabethbeaty@gmail.com



An Interview with Margaret Nowaczyk Author of *Chasing Zebras: A Memoir of Genetics, Mental Health and Writing*

Winner of the 2022 Sarton Award for Memoir

by Pat Bean

In her first year of medical school, Margaret Nowaczyk, author of this year's Sarton Award winner for Memoir, was taught to always consider common diseases before the rare. "'If you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras' is the adage," she explained. But Margaret went on to become a pediatric clinical geneticist who spent her career chasing those rare zebras; hence the title of her memoir: *Chasing Zebras: A Memoir of Genetics, Mental Health and Writing*.

Born in Poland, Margaret emigrated to Canada with her family in 1981, which the author says involved six months as a stateless person in Austria and then many years of adjusting to a new world, a new language, and a new reality.

"Being functionally mute for over a year, being alone and very lonely, I became a doctor in 1990 and then qualified as a pediatrician in 1994 and a geneticist in 1996."

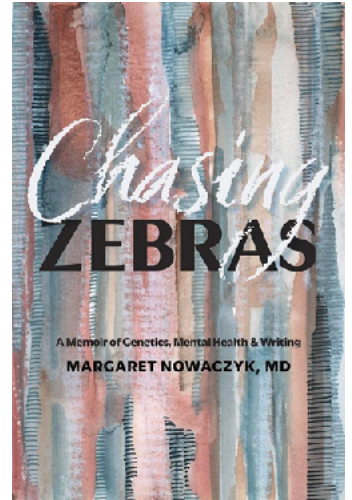
Along the way, Margaret married, had two children, and suffered from recurrent depression, finally being diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1999.

Margaret says she always thought "writers sojourned on a higher, rarefied stratum and that mere mortals could not join them." But in 2006, when she was hospitalized for depression, she signed up for her first writing course. "It took getting accepted into an MFA to strengthen my writing resolve and determination ... And I realized how much writing and sharing one particular story of my life helped with my mental well-being." She says the breakthrough came during a narrative medicine workshop in 2011, when she read a story she had written about a very difficult patient. After that encounter, she decided she needed to share stories and tell people how beneficial to mental health writing and sharing one's stories can be.

"That's *Zebras*' message," says Margaret. "It's the story of growth, tragedy, and triumph, from leaving Poland to dealing with the demands of medical school, and to living with mental illness."

Margaret trained in pediatrics and genetics at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, with elective training at Boston

Children's Hospital in pediatric neurology and at Hôpital Enfants Malades in Paris for six years. In 1997, she was offered a university faculty position as a clinical geneticist at McMaster Children's Hospital in Ontario, Canada. Since then, she has been caring for children with genetic disorders and providing prenatal diagnosis and genetic counseling for adults. She authored 120 peer-reviewed papers in genetic journals and rose to the rank of professor in 2014. Margaret is a great advocate of the narrative approach to medical care.



According to Margaret, the best writing advice she received was simply to keep writing.

"Keep writing, even if it is for your desk drawer, never to see the light of day. But a story shared is that much more powerful, so try to share your stories. Because somewhere out there is that one person just waiting to hear or read it, and it will change the world for them. Write for that person."

Currently, Margaret is finishing the edits on a collection of essays that will be published in the spring of 2024. She has also finished writing the first draft of a thriller—genetic-medical, of course—and a collection of short stories that she says she is constantly tinkering with.

Winning the Sarton, she says, "is a great honor, which goes without saying. But it also means that my story will reach the membership of Story Circle and that my message of writing as a balm for hurting souls will continue to spread to more and more people. Thank you so much for this opportunity."



An Interview with Sallie Weissinger Author of *Yes, Again: (Mis)adventures of a Wishful Thinker*

Winner of the 2022 Gilda Award

by Pat Bean

Sallie Weissinger's book, *Yes, Again: (Mis)adventures of a Wishful Thinker*, started as a journal that kept growing until it finally reached a true fairytale ending. Once the Gilda-winning author decided that what she had written in her private journal, which had a lot to do with her search to find the perfect soulmate, could be turned into a book, she enlisted two girlfriends as writing coach and editor.

"I wasn't sure how it was going to end, but then the end presented itself somewhat magically."

Sallie was born in New Orleans but because of her father's career as a military officer, she grew up between the ages of two and sixteen in places like Germany, Ohio, Japan, Michigan, and New Mexico and attended eleven different schools.

"I had the benefit of being raised with roots in the South, the Midwest, and overseas," recalls Sallie, noting that she inherited both a love of travel and a love of family from her parents, and that her exposure to different cultures helped form who she became.

While Sallie says she had written newsletters for volunteer organizations and for her job, and at one point was a corporate communications director, she never set out to be a writer. "But here's a personal confession: I always wanted to write one book, just to say I'd done it. Until *Yes, Again*, that could have been a book of poetry that she published in her 30s. But when asked if there was another book in her after *Yes, Again*, Sallie answered with a resounding "No!"

"I liked the writing part, but the business and sales part were overwhelming—getting copyright authorizations, getting blurbs, deciding on layouts and fonts and such, running with social media, tracking sales, keeping up a website, marketing and publicity. I didn't cotton to that, as we say in the South. My grandmother always said, 'I'll have no more truck with that.' That's my current feeling. That could change, but I doubt it."

For her writing, Sallie says she turned to Anne Lamott's advice to accept shitty first drafts as a given, not to let them get you down, and not to be a perfectionist. "In fact, I like everything Lamott's written in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. I'd love to be her pal and go to breakfast or lunch with her on a regular basis. Or sit at the next table while she's talking with her friends and listen to everything she has to say."

Sallie's memoir covers sixteen years of her life. One question that loomed large during those years, she says, is why she was spending so much energy seeking a soulmate, especially since she had a rich, meaningful life that was far better than most.

"I came to understand it was because I wasn't willing to have the best years of my life be over at age fifty-seven. I knew I might not succeed, but I wasn't going to stop trying. The search couldn't be my whole life, but I was determined to make it be part of my life. To me, not trying was failing. It was okay not to succeed, but it was not okay not to try."

And try she did. Now, she says it was an amazing experience to win the Gilda Award.

"It's rewarding, after three or four years of writing to have the work be recognized. I honestly don't know exactly how long it took me, but toward the last year and a half, it was nose-to-the-grindstone intense. I keep pinching myself, asking if it really happened, or if it will turn out to be a mistake, like the Oscar announcement blunder for best picture of 2017, when *Moonlight* won and not *La La Land*, as initially announced. I'm so grateful!"



Pat Bean, a regular contributor to the *Journal*, is a retired award-winning journalist. She traveled the country in a small RV for nine years with her canine companion, Maggie. Her book about that time is *Travels with Maggie*. Pat is passionate about nature, writing, art, family, and her new dog, Scamp. She blogs [here](https://patbean.net) (<https://patbean.net>).

From the SCN Blogs:

One Woman's Day

For over a decade, our One Woman's Day blog has provided a venue for Story Circle Network members to share stories about a day in their life. That's a lot of life stories! This post from April 2023 was selected by Linda Hoyer, our blog coordinator. She welcomes your submissions about a day in your life at: <https://www.storycircle.org/category/one-womans-day/>.

Like Koi by Carol Newman

Like koi swimming in circles, we circled through our house, trying to decide what to take and what to give up as we downsized to a retirement community apartment.

In the first thirteen years of our marriage, Tom and I had seven corporate moves. Those were relatively easy. Movers packed and loaded up everything. Then movers unloaded and unpacked everything at the destination. While it was great to have everything unpacked, we were left with our belongings piled on every surface.

This time, we chose a moving company that specializes in moving older people to retirement communities. Not only do they pack and unpack and place your furniture, they put away all your kitchen items, hang your clothes, and make your beds.

Still, we circled. Trying to decide. Forgetting what we had chosen. Were we taking the blue sofa or the gray one? Which office chair had Tom chosen? What about his two-piece desk?

Molly, the moving company advisor, helped. She left us with rolls of wide blue painter's tape. We were to put a piece of tape on anything we wanted to take with us. Now we had a visual reminder of what needed to go or stay. Our two favorite chairs—blue tape. The gray sofa—blue tape. What about grandpa's smoking stand? Blue tape. What about the ugly bargain lamp? No tape for that thing.

One day, Molly met us at our future apartment to check its size and layout. Then she returned to our house, measured the length of our closet rods, and said we would have room to take all the clothes from our closet. She opened kitchen cabinets and drawers to see how things were organized so they could be placed the same when they were unpacked.

Determined not to be the person who took clutter, I veered into a tchotchke obliteration zone. Molly pulled me back. She said I should take my small collection of water pitchers because they are pretty, and my small collections of vintage hats and vintage inkwells because they are fun. She said there would be room in front of our new living room windows for my plant stands and plants.

Moving day was like a scene from *Jaws*. No more tranquil koi pond. The moving truck opened its big doors and in went our future lives. Then everything was flung out and placed just where it had been in our house. The same—but different. And then they drove away. And here we were. Now what? A few items had dents, but nothing was ruined. Tom's office was still arranged as it had been. I still had those things that made me feel as if I were in a familiar pond and was still myself.

We were at the end of our swim. We were home.



Carol Newman is a former freelance writer for newspapers and magazines. As a writing teacher and coach, she founded *Angel in Your Inkwell*. Her blog is now silent, but she is not. She hopes now to write (sometimes humorously and sometimes seriously) about being an ordinary elderly person. No weightlifting, no tango contests, no marathons. Carol lives in Leawood, Kansas with husband, Tom.

From the SCN Blogs:

Telling HerStories

This blog is written by women writers and teachers who want to share their passion for women's stories. Our topics include the art, craft, and publication of women's memoir, fiction, biography, poetry, drama, and more. Blog coordinator Jude Walsh selected the post below to share with you. Jude also invites you to enjoy other posts and welcomes your submissions [here \(https://www.storycircle.org/category/herstories\)](https://www.storycircle.org/category/herstories).

Character Misbehavior by Gerry Wilson

What do you do with someone who won't behave?

This person is secretive, aloof, and moody. She's keeping me up nights and interfering with my novel in progress. She's the character who "wants to be alone!" Her name is Robin. She's a twin. An accomplished photographer. She has dark hair and green eyes, she's twenty pounds overweight, and she's married with two sons. Her marriage is in trouble. Her twin sister has died, and she carries a terrible secret.

All these complications in her life, and yet, even after excellent feedback at a workshop, I remain stumped by what Robin *desires* and what will keep her from getting it.

So I start over at the beginning, revising as the story seems to lead me. I try applying a rubric the workshop leader shared. It's a good tool to get a handle on what a story is about (can you say it in a sentence?), determine what the "container" is (time frame and place), and sketch out the main characters and plot points. The rubric helps, but I'm not there yet. I'm still worried about not knowing clearly who Robin is and where she's going.

I have to confess I've never been big on plot points. I tend to let the story evolve, which means I may do more work than someone who is able to plan the story out, from start to finish.

Sometimes, because of my tendency to "pantser" rather than plot, I feel inept as a writer.

Many writing experts contend that we should know everything we possibly can about a character before we begin. A fine teacher of writing and an exceptional fiction writer in his own right, David Jauss, takes the stance that *we don't have to know everything*. In fact, Jauss says it may be preferable *not* to know; not knowing every detail ahead of time may lead to richer characterization as we discover things about characters *as we write them*.

What a relief!

What Jauss says doesn't absolve me of all responsibility where the story is concerned. I can't put the writing on automatic pilot. Wouldn't it be interesting if we could? But I don't trust the recent developments in AI to do the job. Jauss's take allows me the freedom to write about this character and her circumstances, to write *into* her, and see what unfolds. Maybe I'll discover along with her how she ticks, where she's headed, and how she'll get there.

So here we go, my make-believe friend, Robin. Let's see where the words on the page take both of us.



Gerry Wilson's novel, *That Pinson Girl*, is forthcoming from Regal House Publishing in February 2024. Her debut story collection, *Crosscurrents and Other Stories*, was published by Press 53. A story, "Life Line," was a finalist in the Curt Johnson Prose Contest 2022 and is forthcoming in the Spring issue of *deceMBER magazine*. A retired teacher, Gerry lives in Jackson, Mississippi.



Story Circle Book Reviews

Find your next great read at Story Circle's Book Review website (<https://www.storycircle.org/book-review/>). We're adding new reviews steadily, and all the books are by, for, and about women, published by independent or small presses. Interested in reviewing for us? Details are here: <https://www.storycircle.org/call-for-volunteers/>. Below is a recent review.

Truth Tellers: The Power and Presence of Black Women Journalists Since 1960

by Bonnie Newman Davis

Reviewed by Lisa Braxton

"Well-behaved women seldom make history," coined by a prominent historian, has become one of feminism's most popular sayings. The experiences of the women featured in *Truth Tellers: The Power and Presence of Black Women Journalists Since 1960*, could take that phrase one step further: "Trailblazing women, knocking down barriers despite the odds against them, are inspiring."

In *Truth Tellers*, journalist Bonnie Newman Davis tells the story of 24 Black women in print and broadcast journalism whose careers spanned the last 40 years of the 20th century. In exquisitely written chapters, Davis provides mini memoirs of courageous women whom history writers have largely ignored. These unsung "she-roses" faced racism, humiliation, and depression but also community support and success.

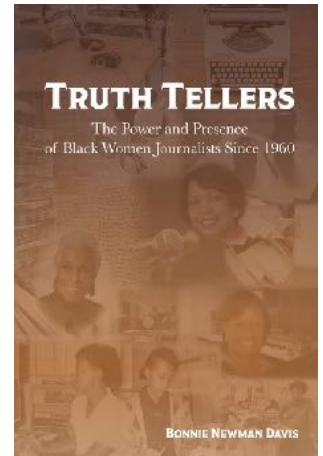
Davis begins chapters with pivotal moments in the lives of the women, such as watching TV news in the 60s as a child and seeing for the first time a Black person reporting the news, reading comic books about the fictional reporter Brenda Starr and books about teen detective Nancy Drew, writing for the high school newspaper, and starting a journal to document the chaos in the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the bombing of the Birmingham church in which four young girls were killed.

One common thread in the stories is each journalist's perseverance in spite of road blocks—unequal pay, being passed over for promotions, being denied high-profile story assignments, being repeatedly turned down for jobs. Strategies

for prevailing include being nimble—leaving a news organization and being willing to move multiple times to move up the career ladder—and cultivating mentors who have clout in the news industry and a network of peer journalists as a support system.

One of the more poignant chapters tells the story of Barbara Ciara. Ciara became pregnant at the age of 13 and left her son with her mother to raise. Her drive for a career motivated her to move out of the Pittsburgh projects. For a time she was homeless and slept on the balcony of the Apollo Theater. Later (though long before she came to WVEC), she got a \$2.10-an-hour job as a TV production assistant. Since then she's interviewed presidents and countless celebrities, provided analysis on CNN and CBS, and been honored with numerous awards. Unfortunately, her personal life didn't fare as well. Twice divorced, her son never lived with her on a permanent basis.

Truth Tellers is an important read for young generations of aspiring journalists and social activists, scholars interested in the history of American journalism, and anyone interested in women's history. Getting to the last page of *Truth Tellers* may lead to more reading. Many of the journalists featured have written memoirs.



Bonnie Newman Davis became a reporter and editor for the *Richmond News Leader* after graduate school, and later the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. In 2022, Davis became managing editor of the *Richmond Free Press*, a 30-year-old Black-owned newspaper in Virginia. Davis was inducted into the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication Hall of Fame at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.



Lisa Braxton is the author of the novel *The Talking Drum*, winner of a 2021 Independent Publisher Book Awards Gold Medal, overall winner of *Shelf Unbound's* 2020 Independently Published Book Award, and winner of a 2020 Outstanding Literary Award from the National Association of Black Journalists. In addition to being a novelist, she is an Emmy-nominated former television journalist, an essayist, and a short story writer.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Story Circle Network in 2022

by Shawn LaTorre

A yearend reflection helps us celebrate successes and make note of any changes we wish to make going forward. Here are some of my takeaways from 2022:

Story Circle Book Awards Program

Sarton Memoir: One of seven short-listed authors hailed from another country. *Chasing Zebras*, Polish-born Margaret Nowaczyk's memoir, highlighted genetics, mental health, and writing.

Sarton Contemporary Fiction: Two of the six authors who made the shortlist were Israeli born Linda Moore with *Attribution* and African American author Melanie Hatter with *Malawi's Sisters*.

Sarton Historical Fiction: One of five short-listed authors was a woman of color—Kimberly Garrett Brown with *Cora's Kitchen*.

Sarton Non-Fiction entries saw a firestorm of books on hot topics that *all* seemed relevant to our DEI efforts:

- *Her Name was Margaret* by Denise Davy: While not an author of color, her background as a journalist specializing in stories of mental health, homelessness, and gender issues brings her important book to attention at this time in our communities.
- *Manifesting Justice: Wrongly Convicted Women Reclaim Their Rights* by Valena Beety: Another critical look at what's going on in our criminal justice system today for women.
- *Formidable American Women and the Fight for Equality: 1920-2020*: "In this riveting narrative, Dr. Elisabeth Griffith integrates the fight by White and Black women to achieve equality."

Gilda Award: One of two hilarious books was written by Tassie Kalas, an author of Greek heritage who brings her quirky family story before the public in *Ya Ya's Big Black Purse*.

2021 Author Interviews

Three of twenty-nine interviews featured authors of varied backgrounds.

- Marita Golden, author of *Strong Black Woman: How a Myth Endangers the Physical and Mental Health of Black Women*, shared a very interesting interview.
- Jennifer Smith Turner, author of *Child Bride*, joined the lineup of SCN interviewees.
- Soviet-born Yelizaveta Renfro is the author of several books, including a short story collection entitled *A Catalogue of Everything in the World*.

We continue to try to locate and connect to women authors of color or unique backgrounds to add to our amazing list of offerings. We may want to collect and share data in webinars, conference keynote speakers and workshop presenters, and class instructors.

Our December 2022 quarterly *Journal* received thirty-five submissions by twenty-seven members. SCN's annual anthology, edited by Susan Schoch, received eighty-two entries written by forty-nine members. The foreword was written by a woman of color, Marita Golden, who wrote: "These narratives are diverse and surprising and take us from a writing workshop for women struggling to overcome addiction and the walled off cities and hearts of the Middle East, to the world of social media seen as a thread allowing us to literally reach out and almost touch somebody's life."

Story Circle Network's publications look and feel like a wondrous circle enveloping talent from all walks of life. Somehow, we are capturing the here and now of a changing world in stories and even recipes that illuminate our shared humanity, shared struggles, shared triumphs. In *Kitchen Table Stories 2222*, Judy Alter wrote in her foreword: "The collection is remarkable for its cultural diversity...Nothing bonds us together like breaking bread."

But I think we have more work to do. Of nineteen book review copies requested, only two were submitted by women of color. What might be keeping some authors from submitting? Of fourteen book reviews posted by our reviewers in 2022 (including one reviewer of color), only one reviewed book was written by an author of color or unique background. Our reviewers may not select books by authors of color because so few are submitted.

We are witnessing new visitors to our website at the rate of 70 to 80% over last year at this time. These visitors are mostly from the United States, but some also come from China, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other places. Our membership reveals 531 members, primarily and historically white. It feels like we are making strides to include fresh voices, too, of any color or background. We want to continue to ask ourselves, as Teresa Lynn noted, how we can reach out to support women writers of *all* backgrounds and circumstances, even younger writers.

Last year, 2022 saw Story Circle on a fantastic trajectory of making meaningful inclusions. Our board members rose to the occasion of meeting our DEI mission head-on. With the talents of our board, we can continue to be mindful of our DEI vision going forward in 2023 while not leaving anyone out.



College Match Mentorship: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

by Marilea Rabasa

Marilea Rabasa attending Esperanza's graduation from George Mason University in 2012.

When I heard about the College Match Mentorship Program, I jumped on board. I knew from experience how passing along what I know can make a difference to someone, and that always made my heart smile.

I'm a retired English as a Second Language teacher; my students were new immigrants to the United States. Without knowing English fluently, they were at a disadvantage. Like many other high school seniors, a few of them wanted more than a subsistence-level job. Some of them dared to dream about going to college and studying to become a professional in a chosen field. To achieve that goal, some needed a leg up.

I bonded with many of my students, but one Bolivian girl in particular, Esperanza, became a friend after she graduated from Washington-Liberty High School. She was accepted into an excellent state school—George Mason University, where she felt challenged.

Esperanza wasn't at the top of her class in high school anymore, wowing her Bolivian friends who watched her skate

through classes. She found herself interacting with mostly American kids. It was a level playing field for them, but she still had trouble with fluency in composition class. She didn't come to America as a child; she was sixteen years old at the time. It takes years to become fluent in a new language, so I determined to see Esperanza regularly. Every week, she brought me her English composition, and we reviewed what I had taught her in my advanced class. Then I sat back and watched her revise her writing.

She got through freshman English and went on to graduate in 2012. Five years later, she earned her nursing degree at Marymount University. She had realized her dream, and I cannot tell you how gratified I feel knowing that I helped her achieve it.

College Match is looking for writers who can help give students like Esperanza help with their supplemental essays as they apply to college. The "Dreamers" are still dreaming! Contact me at marilea.rabasa@gmail.com if you are interested.



Spotlight on Story Circle Volunteer: Juliana Lightle

by Shawn LaTorre

Volunteers provide the energy that keeps Story Circle Network (SCN) going and growing, and the sticking power that holds us all together. Standing tall among this team of dedicated women is Juliana Lightle, an active member since 2006 who has served on the board, taken numerous SCN classes, and been published in many of our publications, including the recent anthologies available on Amazon.

Juliana Lightle moved to San Dimas (Los Angeles County), California in September 2021 after living two decades in the Texas Panhandle, where she worked as the human resources manager for Battelle at the Pantex plant and later taught high school. She also raised and trained racehorses while living there. Although she grew up on a farm in northwestern Missouri, she has lived in eight states, farmed in Missouri and New Mexico, and worked at two universities and two large corporations.

Through SCN, Juliana learned about College Match LA, an organization that helps low-income, high-achieving students find and enroll in the best colleges and universities in the United States. During the first semester of the 2022-2023 school year, she traveled to Mendez High School in the Boyles Heights area of Los Angeles every week to work with their students, helping them decide which colleges fit their goals and providing editing and direction with college essays, applications, and financial aid forms. She will continue to assist them as they decide on their future and already has met the students with whom she will be working over the next school year.

A published author of three books available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble, Juliana is currently working on a feminist poetry chapbook. After enrolling in SCN's "23 & Me" reading group led by Cynthia Davidson, and reading the first assigned book, Juliana committed to reading at least one book per week for 2023 and writing a blog post about each book. You can find her blog posts at www.julianalightle.com. One of her favorite authors is Octavia Butler. She has read all Butler's novels and found the last one, *Parable of the Talents*, incredibly prophetic given it was published in the 1990s and predicts many current political realities.

From Story Circle: Grateful thanks and a warm hug to Juliana for the time, attention, and energy she dedicates to our organization. Learn more about her books on Amazon (<https://www.amazon.com/stores/Juliana-Lightle/author/B001JRXNSY>).

Interested in volunteering? We'd love to hear from you! Go [here](https://www.storycircle.org/opportunities/) to let us know how you can help: <https://www.storycircle.org/opportunities/>



Circle Voices

The following interview was conducted by **Caroline Ziel**, SCN's eCircles Coordinator, with Carol Blatter, an active eCircle participant. We hope you'll enjoy learning more about Carol through her thoughts and comments below. Discover more about the Circles Program [here](http://www.storycircle.org/circlesprogram.shtml) (<http://www.storycircle.org/circlesprogram.shtml>).

Carol Blatter is a wife, mother, and grandmother—roles that inspire much of her writing, especially about her granddaughter, whose activities, thoughts, and personality makes Carol “bubble with joy.” A recently retired clinical social worker and psychotherapist, Carol has lived in Arizona for many years and thrives in the desert.

On Discovering Story Circle Network . . .

A valued member of Story Circle Network for four years, Carol Blatter joined our e-Circles in 2021 and also attends our monthly Writing Extravaganza group facilitated by Lynn Goodwin. One of the things she found most beneficial at SCN was the support she received. “We are all timid when we first write” she said. “I had a lot of trepidation about sharing my writing. I was uncomfortable with self-disclosure. I feared that in showing my writing I would not look as competent as other writers. I did not want anyone to know me in such a personal way. But as time went on, my embarrassment waned. Everyone wants everyone to win, to be successful, and to improve our writing. And we do this with mutual help.”

Carol continues to be grateful for the opportunity to participate in Story Circle, and we are grateful for all that she brings to us.

On Motivation and Inspiration . . .

Carol began writing early in life by doing book reports and compositions in grade school. As much as she loved writing as a child, her talents remained dormant until twelve years ago when she began taking classes with Sheila Bender, a

published author and poet. This started her on an adult writing journey. Once Carol joined Story Circle, Len Leatherwood helped her expand her ability. Together, these women contributed to her growth as a writer.

On Writing . . .

Carol taught writing classes in her synagogue for five years and wrote a commentary on high prayers for the synagogue. Several of her pieces were published in the *Story Circle Network Journal*, including a poem on aging that appeared in an SCN anthology. Also, “One Woman’s Day” published a piece on her mother’s death. Recently, she was informed that her story “I Always Wanted To Be More Jewish” will appear in the *Jewish Writing Project* in mid-June. Her writing includes family traditions, especially recipes like pumpkin bread and applesauce kugel. She continues to live by the motto “Keep growing, keep dreaming, and laugh some every day.”

Her advice for women who are struggling with whether to join an e-circle is to participate, see what other writers are writing first, then use that to find their own comfort zone. She further suggests it might be helpful to share one’s writing with a friend or a circle facilitator before sending it to the whole group.

If you have a limited amount of time to write, you just sit down and do it. You might not write well every day, but you can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page.

— Jodi Picoult

Writing Tips from Our Teachers

Travel Tales

Three Elements that Set Travel Writing Apart

by Rhonda Wiley-Jones

Have you tried writing your travel tales? Have you wondered what the differences are between nonfiction essays, personal narratives, and travel tales? While there's much overlap, there are nuances that provide particularities on how to craft travel stories.

One, your story is told from a first-person, point of view (POV) with rare exceptions. As you tell the tale, you will use yourself as the reference point, such as "Ramona and I agreed on the pub over the opera." However, inserting yourself throughout, such as by writing "I felt, I observed, I wondered, or I recalled . . .," becomes boring and is needless. Just telling the story achieves a deeper POV. Opposing examples illustrate this point.

Boring: I recalled the night before graduation, when we broke curfew and Ellen sprained her ankle stumbling in the dark.

Deep POV: On the night before graduation, we broke curfew, and Ellen sprained her ankle stumbling in the dark.

Two, a travel story showcases a strong sense of place. Using five senses is a suitable way to make a place come alive. Location is often a character in your narrative. "Showing" instead of "telling" is key, as in any good writing. However, in this specific genre, allowing the reader to experience an environment with all their senses is unparalleled writing.

Telling: I thought, Key West was quaint and charming. (Remember point one.)

Showing: Key West retained clapboard houses, even in new construction, built close to the street and each other with the smell of saltwater always present.

Three, the structure of a travel narrative takes a different form from persuasive essays or personal stories. These aren't set in stone, but they provide a path forward.

- ◇ A travel story begins with a critical action to hook the reader in one to three paragraphs, called the lede.
- ◇ Notice the author steps back to ground the reader in the why and how the writer found herself in the situation. In

this genre, it's referred to as the nutgraf paragraph(s) because it gives you details in a nutshell.

- ◇ The story proceeds with more scenes of action, description, and dialogue. This includes effective writing as mentioned in points one and two. But wait . . .
- ◇ Then, the story needs breathing room. Often the writer will insert researched information about the place, such as historical or geological background or perhaps social and cultural insights strategically placed. This is like offering the reader a bench to sit on for a moment before resuming the story.
- ◇ As dramatist, the writer will reconvene the action. There will be obstacles, conflict, or potential for change. Without this, there is no story. The goal is mounting tension, whether of an external series of events or of an internal emotional conflict.
- ◇ But again, you will find the storyteller taking a breath to insert information about the place or situation that adds distinctive details. Perhaps it is personal history that informs her reactions to what is happening and possibly increases the tension.
- ◇ Throughout the travel narrative, notice the author provides musing or an emotional response. It may be part of a sentence or a full paragraph. It may show up in dialogue or in internal thoughts. (Example: When offered dinner with a local, I shivered with delight.) Without an emotional reaction to what is happening in the story, the tale will fall flat.
- ◇ And finally, you will discover at the end whether there's a resolution, transformation, or an opening of possibilities. A sense of resolution or a shift in attitude, beliefs, or a promise of a different future can each create a satisfying conclusion.

These are not the only particularities of a travel tale, but durable factors that will take your writing toward transformative stories and potential publication.



Rhonda Wiley-Jones is an award-winning travel writer. Her fiction and nonfiction is published online and in print. She has written travel tips and travel stories for two local lifestyle magazines in the Texas Hill Country. She published her debut novel, *Song of Herself* in 2022, and her coming-of-age travel memoir, *At Home in the World: Travel Stories of Growing Up & Growing Away* in 2014. The theme of each book, and much of her other writing, asserts the transformative nature of travel to build psychological agency, particularly for women. You can find more of her work [here](http://RhondaWiley-Jones.com) (<http://RhondaWiley-Jones.com>).



Our Future Is Female

***Sara Hakim** is a high school senior who lives in Southern California. She has been accepted to several excellent colleges for Fall 2023 and is currently deciding which one to attend. Sara won a regional Silver Key for this essay in the 2023 Scholastic Artists and Writers Contest presented by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers—the oldest and most prestigious contest for youth in grades 7-12 in the United States.*

Life Lessons Through Cooking by Sara Hakim

When I was growing up, every weekend I woke up at my grandparents' house, walked into the kitchen, and saw my grandmother chopping herbs. The smell of fresh cilantro, basil, and mint filled the air, and I knew that Grandma was making her famous Persian dish, ghormeh sabzi—a chuck roast stew with herbs, dried lemon, onions and celery, served on top of rice. Often I asked to help, and she pulled a chair up to the stove and handed me a spoon. "You can stir the onions and meat in the pot," she said as she helped me climb up onto the chair. "But I want to chop like you're doing," I insisted. She would shake her head. "When you're older. The knife's too sharp for you to use now." These times of cooking with my grandmother are memories I will cherish. I loved spending time together, creating a wonderful meal, and learning from Mamani by watching and doing. My efforts weren't always successful, however. One time I put too much saffron in the rice and ruined it. But Grandma assured me that it was okay to make mistakes because that was the only way I would learn.

As I got older, I started cooking in my own ways. One night at my grandparents' house, my cousin and I decided to have a cook-off to determine who could make the best dinner. The dish we both decided to make was spaghetti, and we cooked side-by-side in my grandmother's kitchen. I sautéed onions and garlic before adding ground beef, then stirred in basil, oregano, tomatoes and butter and let the sauce cook down until it was thick and flavorful. My cousin, on the other hand, cooked her ground beef and added nothing other than salt, pepper, and a can of tomatoes. We presented both of our dishes to our grandparents. They each took a big bite of my

cousin's dish, and, not wanting to hurt her feelings, they obviously tried to act like they really liked it. However, when they tasted my spaghetti, their eyes got big, and they in unison said, "Wow, this is delicious." My cousin took a bite of mine and said, "This is way better than mine!" I felt very happy when I saw the look of excitement on all their faces when tasting my food.

Often when I am looking for new ideas, I turn to *Chopped*, *Top Chef*, and *The Next Food Network Star*. I am captivated by these competitions because the chefs are challenged to cook creatively. Watching them has taught me that imagination is the best recipe and that being challenged is the only way to grow. After watching these chefs work, I am inspired to toss in some freshly ground ginger to add an extra flavor to my traditional chicken soup or to add even more coriander, garlic, ginger, bay leaves, peppercorns, and chilis to my signature birria tacos.

Through cooking, I have developed a taste for independence not only in the kitchen, but also in everyday life. I relish taking risks, savor new flavors, and appreciate the learning opportunity that comes with mistakes. In addition, whether I am making lasagna or studying for an exam, I plan ahead, make sure I have all my needed materials, manage my time, and stay focused on whatever I am doing. Moreover, I love that while doing something I truly enjoy, I can bring happiness to other people. Cooking teaches me how to live a better life, and I also get the benefit of getting to eat whatever I create.

True Words from Real Women

Coordinated and edited by Jo Virgil, *True Words* is a quarterly selection of short lifewriting pieces by Story Circle Network members. For this issue, the optional theme was “One Thing That Scared Me.” The suggested topic for the September issue is “Forgiveness,” but we welcome all entries should a different topic strike your fancy. **Deadline: July 15.** Prose or poetry, the voice and the perspective you bring are welcome. Member submissions happen [here](https://www.storycircle.org/journal-submissions/) (<https://www.storycircle.org/journal-submissions/>).

The Whole World Is a Narrow Bridge

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*The whole world is a narrow bridge,
but the essence, is not to be afraid.*
Rabbi Chaim Nachman of Breslau

It is a narrow bridge,
at the end of a dusty country road. There
the shaky planks tied with vibrating ropes
expose wide spaces where foam is rising
to meet your feet.
Don't be afraid.

Sun's rays dance on the water,
lightning the dimness with tiny fish
turned into fluid gold.
Water murmurs, licking the shore,
singing in a joyful pretense. To
put your mind at ease.

It's a narrow bridge, hidden under shaded trees.
From birth to death, only one person
can cross at a time. Don't be fearful.
Instill sureness in your step,
use your inner powers to traverse.

One day you'll be traveling the Milky Way,
billions of stars twinkling, calling. Then you
will gaze at the blue planet left below
with remnants of sadness admitting
a promise that faded away.

The Artist's Way

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You can write into the air.
You can speak upon a page.

A painting can be a novel.
A story can paint the perfect picture.

Dance can express deep emotion.
Emotions can stir deep movements with a chance observer.

We dream in deep metaphors and visual puns.
We weave them into stories that speak to our very souls.

Artists tell those stories with or without words.
That is the artist's way.

The Heart of My Fear

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In May 1980, I stood in the front yard of the Pleasant Valley, New York, home I shared with my husband, thinking about planting marigolds and zinnias. I was seven months pregnant with our first child, and I looked down to see the fetus moving against my yellow maternity top. I counted the days until the birth of my baby, but there were also many aspects I feared. Would I survive giving birth? Would I be a good mother? The thing that scared me most, though, I realized standing outside on that sunny spring day, was that I would love this child so much that I would die if anything ever happened to him or her.

I have always been prone to anxiety, but motherhood, with its overwhelming demands, joys, and total exhaustion had me close to a state of panic at the beginning. The birth itself was nothing compared to the simultaneous wonder at the beauty of my infant son and the fear I felt about my responsibility for keeping him safe and alive. One thing was sure, though—I knew for the first time in my life that I was capable of absolute and unconditional love. When my daughter was born almost four years later, I had my parenting sea legs, but I felt the same intense, terrifying, and steadfast love.

They are both grown now, approaching middle age, with children and lives of their own. They've survived so many things I feared would happen, and I love them as intensely and unconditionally as I did the day they were born. But the thing that scared me most standing in my yard forty-three years ago is still there, and I have the same level of intense love for each of my three grandchildren. If something happens to any of them, it will be the end of me. I've decided, though, that if the price of loving five of them the way I do is my fear of losing them, it's a price I'm willing to pay.

CONGRATULATIONS
to Juliana Lightle!

Randomly selected from among this issue's “True Words” authors, Juliana is the winner of a free one-year extension to her SCN membership. Submit your work, and you could win, too.

Worrisome Thought

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It scares me to think about not living my best life. I have always believed that the emotional presence of my female ancestors is embedded within my DNA, reminding me how blessed I am to be a free and independent Canadian woman at this time of history. I have every advantage and don't want to waste a single moment. Sometimes, I can feel an innate self-pressure to experience what they never had an opportunity to know—education, employment, global travel, solo property ownership, financial independence, living and loving on my own terms. I am grateful for all of this and don't take it for granted.

In December, I will celebrate being sixty-five years of age. Growing up with the knowledge that a huge percentage of my birth family do not live past the age of seventy had a huge psychological effect on me. As a result, I was never one to delay or to think about that when I am retired, or when I have more time and money, I will do such-and-such or see this-and-that. I do not sit around with regret for what I have not done; however, I recognize it is a privilege to grow old. Although early deaths may have had little to do with genetics and more to do with the harsh conditions of their life circumstances and personal choices—famine, wars, poverty, alcoholism, and the severity of eastern European circumstances in the last centuries—the reality that I may die within five years is a driving force to live presently.

Every decision has led me here—living in a light and spacious condominium in the seaside walkable community of Ambleside; a twenty-one-year companionable partnership with Michael who lives across the bridge, through the park, and near the university; prioritizing time and energy for loving friendships, walking, writing, and reading. Only I am responsible for all of my life's joys, challenges, tragedies, and dramas. And even though it is all closer to ending than beginning I go forward into the world each day with an open heart, setting personal boundaries, yet trying hard not to say no.

Maternal Instincts

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I worked at a friend's antique shop located on the main street of San Juan Capistrano. For the past three years, a little brown hummingbird returned to make her nest in the base of the light fixture hanging in front of the back door. Whenever I came to work, I could see her tiny three babies' beady eyes and beaks pointing upward toward the light. We kept the light on all the time to give them warmth.

On Friday, the day before the annual Swallows Day Parade, I closed the shop at 5:00. After locking the front door, tallying my sales, I turned out the lights and walked out the back door. At that moment, the mother hummingbird flew out of her nest and into the store. Frantically, she flew from one high rafter to another. I opened the door and flicked the lights on and off. If only she would fly low enough to see the open door and fly away. Trying to get her attention, I clapped my hands, whistled, and waved a broom in the air, hoping to swoosh her towards the door.

I kept pleading with her. "Please little one, come down, come down."

I called my husband and told him what happened. "I don't know when I'll get home. Because of the parade tomorrow, we're closed over the weekend. I'm afraid she and her babies will die if I can't get her out."

None of my tactics worked, and for three hours I listened to her babies chirping for their mother. Finally, I decided to close the back door, and shut off all the lights except the one over the front door. Perched on a rafter, she suddenly swooped down and flew through it. I quickly locked the door and waited another twenty minutes to see if she returned to her nest. She didn't, but I felt assured she eventually would, so I left.

When I arrived at the shop on Monday, I looked at the light fixture. She was there. I could start a new day, relieved that all was well.

What Scares Me

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I'm scared of the scarcity of love
What frightens me is the illusion of
the scarcity of love

I'm scared of the puzzle piece that doesn't fit
Or I can't find
because it fell down the torturous
well of being

I know some call it
the great mystery
So I must be scared of the
mystery of being

I am scared of my lack of understanding
in this world of opposites
It's truly a divine system of learning
Of owning our inherent meaning to life

This is my understandable void
The sovereignty of life
allows for the void,
This illusion of mystery.

Silent Monkeys

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Behind the glass
two aging monkeys
sit in a tree,
tenderness between them.
They are fast asleep.
Despite surrounding voices,
knocks on glass,
leaning towards each other,
tiny monkey hands clasped fast.

Clearly it is touch,
keeping them asleep.
Holding on, need each other,
just as I need you.
Tender moments
missed this fateful year.
Sometimes it seems touch alone,
would give us courage
to go on.

These days it takes courage
to touch another hand.
How peaceful
it would be if this could
be our reality—
sit with fingers intertwined,
say some silent prayers,
share sacred space—just be,
be like silent monkeys.

I long for days of yesteryear,
when I took for granted
that I could touch you, dear.

Dogs I Have Known and Loved

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My little Yorkie, Murphy, died in his sleep late last December. He was a tiny boy with special needs. When we got him, we accepted his challenges, not knowing how long he would be with us. It turned out that it wasn't nearly long enough; we lost him a week before his third birthday.

"I don't know how . . ." I sobbed to my husband as I rested my hand on Murphy's motionless body. I didn't know how I would manage without my little shadow and I didn't know how I could bear the sharp pain of fresh grief that overwhelmed me.

We lost our first Yorkie a decade ago. What I remember most about losing Chelsea (I used to call her "my perfect dog") is the first gift of grief—numbness. Having lost close family members when I was young, I knew that numbing allows us to walk through those early days until we're strong enough to feel the pain of loss.

Now, we are left with only our fifteen-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, Maya. She, too, has learned to carry on without Chelsea and Murphy, has grown more affectionate and—like many of us in our senior years—a touch crotchety at times. I watch her closely and can't help but wonder how much longer she'll be with us.

Bringing a dog into your home means accepting that there's a good chance you'll have to say goodbye to them at some point. We focus on the joy they bring us and the companions they are, and gloss over that truth until we have no choice but to look it in the eye.

People ask whether we are considering getting another dog into our home and I say, "I don't know." My husband is reluctant to start over again with a puppy for valid reasons, given our age. I think about adopting a senior dog.

Either way, down the road, there's a good chance we'd be faced with tough choices and grief to navigate. I can't help but think it's a risk worth taking.

That's Ridiculous

Jude Walsh
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Have you ever been in a bull session where people pose a question and everyone answers? "What was the worst thing you did as a kid?" "What lie did you tell that people still believe?" "What's your biggest fear?" You know—a true confessions thing. Most of these happened during my college years, so you can assume what you like about what else was happening at the time.

I once was in a group where that last question was posed. I knew my answer but was hesitant to share it. It sounded weird, even to me, and it was MY fear. I kept jockeying around from seat to seat as people shared, hoping no one would notice that I hadn't participated. No such luck. Suddenly I heard, "What about you? You haven't answered. What's your biggest fear?"

I blurted it out, "Getting a paper cut on my eyeball."

"What?" "That's insane!" "That's ridiculous!" "Who even thinks about such a thing?" "WHY would anybody even have

that idea?" This was followed by gales of laughter and general mockery. And a few "ewes" and "icks" from the folks who visualized it. I answered truthfully. They can laugh, but I shivered when I shared it. I shivered as I wrote this down.

Years later, the question came up again. We were an older and wiser group. I took a chance, told the truth, and steeled myself for judgment. The most unexpected thing happened. One guy in the group said, "That happened to me!"

What?!! I was both delighted and horrified. Delighted that I was vindicated that my fear was not crazy. Horrified that it happened and now was not just theoretical, but possible. He described it in such excruciating detail that my worst fears were not only confirmed but escalated. Note to self: Keep all paper away from eyes!

If only I had that second conversation on tape, or better, video. I know a bunch of people I'd like to send it to with a note. "Not so ridiculous after all!" Maybe I'll just send them this piece!

Who Would I Be?

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I felt a tremendous wallop in my chest when Dr. Franklin said, “No doubt about it. You’re pregnant.” It was 1968 when I had only a few weeks left in my first year of nursing school. I fretted over being pregnant at my wedding—not that marriage was in the works. My boyfriend of two years, an ambitious sophomore at Notre Dame, decided to finish college rather than get married because, unlike me, he did have a choice.

I was suddenly and unexpectedly alone.

My parents were mortified. I dropped out of school, made up a story, and disappeared into a home for unwed mothers where babies were born in secret and signed over for adoption. Afterward, Mom insisted that I forget it ever happened.

Shamed and guilt-ridden, I did my best to hide my past and leave it behind, but I was no longer a virgin, plus my belly was scarred with stretch marks. What I feared most was that no one would ever want me, that I’d end up an old maid. Who would I be without a husband? A spinster like Mom’s middle-aged friend, Miss Meredith, for whom she felt sorry for never having Mrs. before her name.

I married at twenty-one—never mind that my new spouse and I were a poor match. It didn’t matter to me; I knew I could make him happy, and I did. But after a few decades, I was tired of doing the dance of a loving wife. It was either the marriage or my life, and so I chose life, my own life. But divorce didn’t change my self-worth. The withholding, emotionally unavailable men were the ones I was attracted to, and each time, I tried to make them love me.

After years of therapy, I discovered, like Dorothy in Wizard of Oz, I had it all along. I had worth and only needed to forgive myself for being human. What scared me all those years ago was a myth. If only I’d known then what I know now—that I am enough, just the way I am.

Scared

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Scared? No?

Angry? Hurt?

Maybe.

Can’t cry.

What’s the point?

Remembering, “You want to cry?

I’ll give you something to cry for.”

Mist floats; birds sing; flowers bloom.

It’s spring.

Pain, the kind that breaks your heart but doesn’t, not really.

Does everyone feel this way?

Probably. Just hidden behind

sunny smiles, “I’m fine, thank you.

Have a nice day.”

Danger

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Walking straight into danger

Aware of the possibilities

Curious, detached and bemused

Taking risks, strolling into the future

When you want to sprint

Empowered by compassionate intelligence

And searing experience

The transformation of the last decade

Following the long journey of the soul

Out of the shadows, into the glare of the sun

Taking better care of myself

Grateful to be here and be me

Making better use of my gifts and energies

In more harmony with myself

On the verge of achieving long deferred

Goals and freedom, you barge into my life

The transit of Uranus, demanding my attention

Thrusting me into an altered reality

Bringing color into my life and into

Sharp focus the essential conflicts of each of our lives

Wasn’t it you who said no two paths cross by accident?

Robot

Kathie Arcide
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<https://chosenperspectives.com/>

Sometimes, it’s a pain in the butt to be me.

I am house and dog sitting for dear friends. I am alone for several days (and worse, nights) in an unfamiliar house, in a very remote setting. It’s a gorgeous modern country home, with a lovely pool, Cabana, and music studio. It is surrounded by beautiful modern horse ranches with acreage.

Absolutely nothing about this place speaks of *danger*.

When I arrived here, I did all the things that, for me, are normal any time I am staying in a new place. I immediately checked out all conceivable exits—finding the quickest routes away from the house. I took note of all the fast-exit dangers (locked gates, stuff to trip over in the dark, etc.). I memorized any weaknesses in normal security like windows and door locks, and—this is very important—I tested how they all sounded. Then I looked for the best hiding places inside the house, in case escape was not an option.

I never actually think about these things in a new setting. I simply do them.

Even though I have done many years of therapy about having been raped, one result remains exactly the same: My body still remembers.

Simply Two Dimes and a Nickel

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Sunday evening at 7:30, Larry, my husband, phoned me from Chicago. I was in Sun Valley, Idaho, eighteen-hundred miles away. Our two sons were at summer camp in Culver, Indiana. Larry calling wasn't a big deal. He did so multiple times daily while he was in Chicago and I was in Idaho. During summers we had a "commuter" marriage. But his call startled me because that Sunday was his firm's annual partners' dinner at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. That was a big deal.

"We have a serious problem!" He shouted into the phone—no hello, no nothing. He sounded beyond frantic. "It's Michael. The camp nurse just called to tell me an ambulance took him to the town's only clinic and the only doctor has never done that procedure. Let's airlift him to Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago!"

"What are you talking about? What happened to Michael? What's their doctor thinking of doing? Jesus! Back up and give me details!" Michael, our younger son, was eleven.

My husband inhaled loudly. "Michael's cabin was returning from a fieldtrip. While on the bus, he swallowed a quarter. It's lodged in his throat and he's having breathing issues. They're worried if it moves, it could block his airway!" Larry explained. "The doctor there is young and isn't sure how to extract the quarter while keeping it from moving."

My heart pounded. "What have they been doing?"

"The camp's nurse had him swallow a spoonful of olive oil and told me to sit tight. She said she's been a camp nurse for decades, so has seen such craziness before. She said it should pass. But if it doesn't, for God's sake? Is she qualified to gamble with our kid's life?" He was furious and about to call Life-Flight.

Suddenly, Larry's phone beeped and he disconnected me to take the call. I struggled to stay calm and then he was back. "The quarter just passed down his throat, likely headed out the other end!" Simultaneously, we expelled loud sighs of relief, more exhausted than Michael would ever know.



Jo Virgil, *True Words* editor, has been a member since 2005 and currently serves on the SCN Board (Publications Workgroup and Programs Committee). She has contributed as editor of *True Words* in the *Story Circle Network Journal* since 2015. Jo has a master's degree in journalism and has worked as a reporter, a writing workshop teacher, community relations manager for Barnes & Noble, and community outreach coordinator for the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. Writing and sharing stories are her passions.

Gephyrophobia

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Today, I have an appointment on campus. I am going alone. Only one thing stands in my way—the Poplar Street Bridge spanning the Mississippi River. My heart is pounding like a beginner playing kettle drums. The car's air conditioner is set on high, but I'm sweating. My breath is erratic and shallow. I clutch the steering wheel tightly. What if I have a flat tire? There's no shoulder to pull onto. I could get stuck in the middle of four lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic. I envision disaster.

I marshal the weapons of visualization, breathing techniques and positive self-talk.

I'm on the entrance ramp. I attempt to slow my breathing. Inhale. *Our Father, who art in heaven.* Exhale. *Hallowed be thy name.* I continue praying and breathing. I promise myself the biggest Diet Coke I can find as an incentive.

Why are the four west-bound lanes so narrow? I ignore the shuddering of my tires on the metal grids of the bridge. I spy a beacon of hope: Forest Park Avenue, Next Exit. As I exit, signs direct me to Saint Louis University. I did it! I drove across that damned bridge. I was soaked in sweat and panting like an Old English Sheepdog on an August afternoon, but I did it!


I conduct my business at the graduate school office and float back to my car. It dawns on me as I buckle my seat belt—I must drive back across the bridge to go home. But first, I drive to the Del Taco near campus for my hard-earned treat—nachos and Diet Coke. I approach the entrance ramp to the bridge with less trepidation. Wait—is this confidence I feel? Yes, just a bit. I smile at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

There will be other bridges to cross to new beginnings—classes, research, a dissertation, an internship, and a new career. I will live on my own for the first time in my life and, most importantly, come to believe in myself. But it all begins with my first solo trip across the Poplar Street Bridge.

Anxiety

Lucy Painter • Willow Street, PA
e-Circle 6

Pulse, throb, quiver
I hold my breath,
Pretend the tremor is not there.
Something moves under the surface
Deep in my core.
I feel its tremble, I feel its twitch,
Something on the brink
I hear the quake of steel from a passing train
The flush of bird wing in still summer air.
They try to tell me
Listen, look up, it's coming
The ocean breathes its restless breath.
The trees whisper its approach.
The volcano explodes, the flood drowns.
Annihilation nears.
Something is coming.

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Fins

Melanie McGauran
Viera, FL

<https://leavingthedoropen.com/>

It was Labor Day weekend, 2015. My husband and I had only been living in our newly adopted state for thirty-three days. We had driven from the Chicago area to our new community; just a twenty-minute drive to the Atlantic coast.

On this last weekend of summer, the beach called to us. Armed with our newly purchased striped chairs, we set up our home base in the crowded sand between some teens spread out on ginormous beach towels and a couple that looked a lot like us—retired. After a brief walk, we decided to take our turn conquering those bossy Atlantic waves. We pushed past the initial breaking line of waves bashing against our legs. We navigated outward towards calmer waters. We leaned back, let our legs float up, felt the occasional soft rise of a wave beneath us.

Before long, we noticed something new. Four pelicans were flying around us; dive-bombing for fish. We dog-paddled while watching them. Our backs were towards the shore. When I finally looked behind me, every swimmer was exiting the water.

“That’s odd,” I thought. Then I saw a lifeguard, standing at the water’s edge, waving his arms and blowing a whistle, its sound finally registering. He was waving at us. Everyone else was out. By now, I was alarmed. I could see people standing on the sand pointing their fingers; some were pointing to the left and some to the right.

“Shark! There are sharks!”

With water surrounding me, fear flooded in. A fin could be anywhere, invisible beneath me. I didn’t want to look around the water’s surface, I wanted to blindly push the water aside, over and over, heading towards shallow water. My adrenaline flowed. Finally, our feet hit the beach.

“Didn’t you see the shark?” one beachgoer asked.

I hadn’t. I ran to our beach bag and got my glasses out. People were shouting at gray fins appearing. Still, I saw nothing, but that didn’t mean something hadn’t been there moments before. That fear of the unseen made it into my dreams for a long time.

Stitched Together

Mary Ann Parker
Richmond, TX

<https://stonesandfeathers.net/>

I trace a row of embroidery on a quilt made by my grandmother. The seam of patching has briar stitching. Nearby there is feather stitching—not just decoration but reinforcement.

Today our sons and my husband attended the burial of my husband’s brother. My spinal injury kept me at home. Memories surface as I picture family gathering.

There were five brothers. Now Joe, the youngest, remains. As siblings decrease, descendants grow. Our sons added wives and six grandchildren. Family. Stitched together by blood and bone.

Now I am the grandmother. As we lean into the days ahead, there is uncertainty. There will be loss. But also connection, something we cannot lose. Those who have gone before and those who will come are stitched together.



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Georgetown TX 78626

NOTEWORTHY

SCN's 2023 Poetry Competition is open for submissions through June 10. The topic this year is "Lost and Found." Full contest details here: <https://www.storycircle.org/contest/the-story-circle-poetry-competition/> Our competitions are open only to members. Time to renew? Go here: <https://www.storycircle.org/registration/>

Submit your "True Words" to the *Journal*. The suggested topic for the September 2023 issue is "Forgiveness," but we welcome all entries should a different topic strike your fancy. **Deadline: July 15.** Member submissions happen [here](https://www.storycircle.org/journal-submission/) (<https://www.storycircle.org/journal-submission/>).

Congratulations to Juliana Lightle! Randomly selected from among this issue's "True Words" authors, Juliana is the winner of a free one-year extension to her SCN membership. Submit your work, and you could win, too!

Our 2022 anthology, [*Real Women Write: Seeing Through Their Eyes*](#), looks at the subject of empathy in seventy-five unique ways, and our all-new [*Kitchen Table Stories 2022*](#) includes a broad range of cultures and foods. Both books reflect SCN's commitment to supporting women and diversity. Submissions open through **July 1** for the **2023 RWW anthology, Mothers and Mentors: The Art of Nurturing**. Check our website for [updates](#).

Our **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative** seeks women of color and unique backgrounds to share their work by becoming a part of SCN. Questions? Contact Shawn.latorre@gmail.com.

See books by, for, and about women listed in our [**Virtual Members' Library**](#) (<https://www.storycircle.org/member-library/>). Anyone can view the library, but only SCN members may place books. [Join here](#). A fantastic marketing tool! A submission link is available on the library's homepage.

Partnering with **College Match**, SCN volunteers help high school seniors from diverse populations and backgrounds write their supplemental essays and personal statements as part of the college admission process. Beginning each summer with a Zoom College Match orientation meeting, mentors are paired with students, and the mentoring begins in earnest in September. If interested or have any questions, please contact program coordinator Marilea Rabasa at marilea.rabasa@gmail.com.

Members are invited to **blog with us** at [**One Woman's Day**](#) by writing about a day in your life. [*Telling HerStories*](#), a blog created by women writers/teachers, seeks posts about writing strategies. Reprinted posts from your own blogs are accepted by both venues. Submit/subscribe [here](#).

Call for Volunteers: We're always looking for volunteers to help with upcoming and ongoing projects. Not sure what you'd like to do? You'll find an array of important ways to participate here: <https://www.storycircle.org/call-for-volunteers/> Email us at storycircle@storycircle.org with Volunteer in the subject line. We need your support.