Abstract

My research is a creative text of lived experiences, which will highlight unique thought processes, in that they are my own. I have studied and reacted to some of the ideas of scholars of phenomenology, feminist thought, post-modern and structuralist ideas, literary and curriculum theory, and to the techniques of creative writers whose work I admire. It includes vignettes or snapshots of happenings captured in prose or in my recent attempts at poetry.

The truth is that I have always wanted to be a writer, and that I have always written, but not for publication. In Part One of *The Rustle of Language* Barthes (1986) discusses the idea that the verb "to write" is intransitive; it is something a writer does. I have written in journals, in letters, in daybooks, in essays and in notes to myself on my readings, and I can see change. As Barthes says, "the one who writes *I* is not the same as the *I* read by you" (p. 17), and it is very different from the *I* writing now, of the past.

I include all seasons of my life using the introductory poems as an overview, as an introduction to how I see myself now as I must have been then. My love for ballet and for the video I have of the National Ballet of Canada dancing *The Four Seasons* to Vivaldi’s score have been my inspiration. I expect that as I proceed, I shall add some references and delete others. As in all creative writing, it is difficult to tell exactly where my research and writing will take me. At this time I would like to concentrate on just one basic idea, which has been stated succinctly by van Manen (2002) in *Phenomenology Online* when he says, "phenomenological inquiry-writing is based on the idea that no text is ever perfect, no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge" (p. 1).
Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Table of Contents iii
List of Illustrations v
Acknowledgements vi
Introduction—Seasons of My Life 1
Literature Review 5

Part One: Diaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journey of Writing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From My Own and Other People’s Diaries</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography, Autobiography or Memoir</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Need for Miracles</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Boccaccio is Right</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Insights</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks, Nice Work and Dr. Lodge</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David’s Birthday</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at Books from a Woman’s Point of View</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism and Women’s Studies</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part Two: Memories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On Memoirs</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapshot</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Princess</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly Duckling</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward Becoming a Swan</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Remember</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skating</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Up Absurd</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Living</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way We Were</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Child of the Fifties</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward R. Murrow and Me</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time: The Second Snapshot</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spitting at Your Mother 88
Metromania 89
Babbling and Doodling 90
Writing and Spirituality 91
Natalie 96

Part Three: In-Class

Let's Put on the Toleratin’ Pot 100
School Stories 101
Presentations 105
What Winston Weathers Thinks 106
A New Term 108
Writers Who Teach 109
Note from David Lodge and from My Students 113
Lines on Language 116
Timed Exercises (Bread & Red) 117
Language One 119
Language Two 121
Self and Other 124
Just Fooling Around 125
Verbarian 126
May 1, 2005 130
Saturday, August 13, 2005 133
A Place by the River 134
Back at the River 137
Working by the River 140

References 143
List of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Myself as a Toddler circa 1940</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brownie graphic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Direction graphic</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brothers and I circa 1948</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom and Gaggie in the early 50’s</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Rose Park Drive in the 50’s</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea Island Learning Centre circa 2002</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spider Lake in August</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House at Spider Lake</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom, Dad and Me, Acapulco 1961</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardess Me, 1960</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me and the Boys, 1945</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof That I’ve Earned My Wings</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave, Natalie and Me</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young David</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David as Amadeus</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie, Baseball Player</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Natalie</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave and Nat at Gambier Island circa 1979</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbarian graphic</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane and David, 2005</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraser River Looking South</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barges and Dogs on the River</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Boom</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driftwood and Birdhouse</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November Flowering Shrub</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School 2003</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

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This is dedicated to my late parents, Bill and Elsie Carroll, whom I never thanked for giving me such an excellent start in life. I recognize this now more than ever. It is also dedicated to Paul, who was right up to his death, my best friend for over twenty years, and with whom I learned to look for the heart of the matter, to throw out the detritus and to laugh about everything.
Introduction – Seasons of My Life

Spring

Me

In the beginning was the word and my first word would be
What I saw in the mirror. Dad heard me say ‘me’
So I became Mimi but what’s in a name?
A rose called a cabbage would smell just the same.
But ‘Mimi’ or ‘Meem,’ as the lazy preferred
For a poodle’s OK; for a person’s absurd.
When the boys came along it didn’t get better
They couldn’t say Sheila, not even a letter
I was stuck with the mmm sounds and hadn’t a chance
For a real girl’s name till my very first dance
And that was a sock hop at dad’s alma mater
Where the priests there all knew the true name
of his daughter
And told the young men that my name was
Mimi
And it stuck into college and then I was free.

So I introduced me by my true Irish name
And was Sheila indeed, till the first football
game
When who should I find in the line up that fall
But a friend of a friend who soon after would call
And we fell in love. So that was the last
Chance I had to be new and get rid of my past.
I was about to be married and still was Mimi.
Till we came out here to my favourite city.

When we got to Vancouver the kids started school
And the name thing became more than just my own rule
As I said I was Sheila to every new friend
So that naturally Mimi just came to an end.
At home I was Mom and then Dad left, quite fast
And I was on my own namewise; both first name and last.
**Summer**

Natalie wanted to be a Brownie but the pack was full up
So I took her to Steveston with her blonde friend Jenny
And they said you’re a teacher aren’t you?
You’d be a perfect Brown Owl
And the girls are welcome if you will do that.
And the Japanese children, so beautiful and clean
Sparkled a welcome to the two on my team
(Trying not to rhyme is so hard).

David was a cub
Cub mothers drive the boys to all their special events
And paper drives. And summer camps
DYB DYB DYB

And catechism must be taught by parents on Saturday mornings
And dance class requires mothers to make costumes
For her child and another whose mother doesn’t sew

And my report cards are due next week and I’m sick
And my grade fives and sixes came to see why I wasn’t in school

And I frizzled the baby chicks in the incubator John made
And placed over the crack in the floor
Between our portables
And the children were in tears
And why do they make me teach science
When I never saw anything under a microscope in my life
Except a piece of dust, which I thought was the cell
We were supposed to be studying.

And Judy and I took the kids and the bikes
For a ride around the seawall in Stanley Park
And swimming at Second Beach with the policeman on his horse

And we skied down Grouse Mountain and looked at the city at night
And the kids fell asleep in the back seat
Before we got home
One Friday just before he left when I knew
That he would.
Autumn

Self and Others

In childhood dreams, I was always being rescued by the knight, who
loved my perfectly helpless and lovely self—
But I became older and had to get real.

Work hard now. Work hard now.

Still I found a best friend,
who for twenty-three years was there to listen and to lean on
Although I had to do it on my own... earn enough money... shop... cook...
And he didn’t leave. He simply died.

Stop! Look! Listen! Friends, Students, Children
Lend me your ears. I am my own grandma...

Must get me to work on time no matter what and must work hard and
One must fit in. One must learn the buzz words, like
P.O.’s and MRO’s and vendors and contracts and
C.I.F and C.O.D. and CPP and RFQ and FIFO and F.O.B.
And my personal favourite caveat emptor
Which I used to confuse with carpe diem, but a buyer should beware and
Seize the day as well. And me with Latin to grade thirteen.

Being a buyer was almost as good as being a teacher and it only
happened
Because in 1978, there were no jobs for teachers anymore.
And in 1991 the airline did not want so many buyers either
And it’s hard to go back to arts after case studies
Principles of purchasing, inventory control, organizational behaviour.
But I love English literature, literary criticism and philosophical
Argument, up to a point.
Just wish they would NOT call one by the other’s name
And ideas for teaching adults and teens and grad school
And there are new buzz words which are even worse,
Like CUST and TSED and CCFI and LLED and CSHC
Has the acronym taken over the language because we’re all lazy?

And the kids grew up and have careers of their own
And I have help from one with computer, another with TV/VCR’s
And Nat sets up my phone and we go to the ballet
And what more do you want, they all say.
Winter

My Newest Self

This is the winter of my discontent
Made glorious summer if I can earn a small living
That's what more I want, so that
The deep ocean of my despair can be buried.

But they do not still need you or want to feed you, John
When you're past sixty-four.
They make you stay home and write your memoirs.

If to make rabbit stew, you first have to catch the rabbit
To write memoirs, you first have to read a few.

Like By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept which is a
wonderful prose poem by Elizabeth Smart (1966) and her autobiography
explains how she fell in love with the already married George Barker and
had four of his children and shared him with his wife because she says
“there is nothing worth anything in life but love” (p. 44). Mary
McCarthy’s letters to Hannah Arendt, Between Friends edited by
Brightman (1995) say much the same thing. “I’ve never been so happy or
so totally, entirely in love, so that it doesn’t appear to be an emotion you
feel but an element you’ve been submerged in” (p. 84). And Nuala
O’Faolain (1998) was desperately in love with a man who left her and it
almost destroyed her at the time. But I love her book, Are You
Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman?

Annie Dillard (1999) in For the Time Being is remote and cerebral, more
like Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) in Writing a Woman’s Life and Virginia
Woolf (1993) in Three Guineas (first published in 1938) who wrote it, as
Heilbrun points out, in her fifties. Woolf came to feminism late in life,
even before my mother’s generation. Mom might have, too, given a
chance, as she always listened to me go on about it in the sixties. And
Renee Norman (2001) combines in her House of Mirrors: Performing
Autobiography(ically) in Language Education, some poetry, story,
educational bits, and the work of others.

How am I to begin?
I’d have to learn to write free verse
And (re) discover and (re) imagine
(De) structing and (re) (con) structing
What I think was my past
Which may not be what others I know are (re) minded of
But it’s my life and my vision (re) viewed (re) born (re) called (re)
lived and (re) told (really)
Literature Review

Phenomenological writing is the very act of making contact with the things of our world. It is in this sense that we can say that to do research is to write and that the insights achieved depend on the right words and phrases, on styles and traditions, on metaphor and figures of speech, on argument and poetic image (p. 1).

van Manen (2002)

All writing is an act of discovery. We discover our identity however, by living, even before we think about it. I returned to scholarly pursuits when structuralism, incorporating linked elements and embracing uncertainty was on the wane and the accepted view had become post-modern. I felt as Grumet says she did, in Kincheloe (1995)

... uncomfortable with structuralism’s overarching systems, but I am also uncomfortable with post-structuralism’s contempt for identity. Identity is lived before it is thought, and even though thought may help us to press against the borders of our habits and personalities, it is out of these lived and situated intuitions that we make love, war and all decisions that are later described as our values (p. 16).

And now we begin a new period explained by Eagleton (2003) as After Theory. The rise and fall of cultural theory, he says, “broke out in the only period since the Second World War in which the political far left rose briefly to prominence, before sinking almost out of sight” (p. 25). He says further that “structuralism both challenged and reflected the prevailing social order and that post-structuralism and postmodernism proved similarly ambiguous” (p. 29).

And despite these changes to the prevailing social order, I write in my usual way, for as I mature I discover that I don’t really know what I think until I see it written. Writing it down clarifies my thinking and is as necessary to my knowing myself as my breathing is to my life.
Today, the memoir has become popular, and the woman’s personal story is especially so. This was not always the case. In Women’s Lives: The View from the Threshold, Carolyn Heilbrun (1999) deals with the work of five women who refused to accept the restrictions imposed by society’s conception of a woman’s place. She says they are in a state of liminality; taken from the word ‘limen’ meaning threshold. They are on the threshold of leaving the conventional behind in order to become free and to become themselves. As biographers have “suppressed the truth of women’s lives to conform to societal expectations” Heilbrun concludes that the ‘liminal state,’ is “the place where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays” (p. 102). My own lines do not try to be on the edge but I hope to convey, now that I am living alone for the first time, how I feel free enough to write down some of my own reflections on the events of my life.

My guide in how to become a virtuous woman—a lady—is based on my mother’s, my aunt’s and my own convent school tradition. A fairly recent book of essays called Edith Stein: Woman, Gelber (1987) describes Dr. Stein, lecturer at the German Institute for Academic Pedagogics in Munster, teacher of high school girls and teachers in training and former assistant of Edmund Husserl, as she discusses women’s education and professions. Her philosophy is very similar to the ideals I was taught in the forties and fifties, and to what my mother learned in her day. Gelber quotes a speech on vocations when Stein is said to have made an “unforgettable impression” (p. 18) when she said:

...the feminine psychic attitude with its perceptive and loving focus on the personal and the whole is a necessary attitude for the development of humanity. And it is also needed in order to recognize what lies dormant in the individual, to have an open mind, and to practice self-effacing love. This is precisely the basic attitude of woman. From this stems her vocation as ‘man’s
companion' and also the reality of her maternal attitude toward her husband. Her gift for empathy can also be developed in matters, which in themselves are foreign to the feminine nature as long as these matters are of a personal nature. The desire to cooperate in such a beneficial manner exists in every person, and this desire fulfills one of the higher functions of education (p. 19-20).

In Stein’s view on a woman’s vocation, she utilizes Husserl’s phenomenological view when she considers why phenomenology has a peculiarly feminine aspect. She explains “that the philosophical method differs in principle from that of the positive sciences: it commands its own function of cognition [and]... this peculiar function of cognition [is] intuition” (p. 167-8). Her intuition did not protect her however. The last essay in the collection is dated 1932, as she entered the Carmelite order the following year and took her final vows as a nun in 1938. But the convent could not keep her safe. Tragically, she died in Hitler’s gas chamber in 1942; she was a nun, but she was also a Jew. (I find it impossible to write that last line and to then just move on—but I must).

Feminists of every ethnicity would, no doubt, agree that women are intuitive. And many agree that women are still on the edge—both in the kind of writing they have been doing and in the innovations they have been making in memoir, autobiography and in the re-emergence of the 18th century term ‘life writing’ to include letters, diaries and journals.

Her way of approaching her own memoir, says Nancy Mairs (1989) in Remembering the Bone House, is to “let go of lifelines and plunge into the multiple modalities—sensory, emotional, cognitive—which have encoded the past and will release it, transformed, into the present... [so she works in]... the fragmented form of essays, each concentrating on a house or houses important to [my] growth as a woman” (p. 9). I relate to
her experience of coming of age in the 1950s when girls and boys were ‘saving themselves for marriage’. We were not ‘living on the edge’ then, but many of us are doing so now.

Another discussion on liminality comes from an article entitled “Provoking Signs” Bruce et al. (2003) in the on-line journal Educational Insights. The article written by six educators discusses liminal...as playing to the edge of the possible at the edges of im/possibility where language leads language into direct, non-conceptual awareness...

Liminal spaces of appearance—or masks—that simultaneously reveal while concealing...in momentary fragments before self/other has congealed, a glimpse of shared open space shines through...a space without concepts of self/other...an in-between... (n.p.)

What masks there are indeed! Bearing in mind the Florence Krall (1988) maxim to suspend judgment and to write the essence of experience as remembered, I write this memoir for my mother who always claimed to deplore masks or pretence of any kind.

She told me that Somerset Maugham (1970) was a good storyteller but not an important writer. I always thought he was great and some of my favourite novels are his. I like especially Of Human Bondage, his autobiographical novel. He said something wonderful about writing as well. He said that the trouble with young writers is that they are all in their sixties. Maybe I can reverse the trend and write as though I am in my thirties, which is how I like to picture myself in any case.

Also, I read, and usually have half a dozen books on the go at one time. It is a lot easier to read than to write and I have Dr. Samuel Johnson’s word for how important reading is. He said that in preparing to write, the greatest part of a writer’s time [should be]
spent in reading; that in order to write, a man [should] turn over half a library to make one book.

Then there is Flannery O’Connor. She said that everywhere she went she was asked if she thought that universities stifle writers. Her opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them, which comment worries me. And of course, I’m humbled by Henry David Thoreau’s observation on how vain it is to sit down to write when you have not [yet] stood up to live. Finally though, I’ll go with William Zinsser who is at least a positive thinker. He says that writing is thinking on paper. That is what is important about it.

I did a little writing when my children were small if I could get them to have naps at the same time, or if my husband were out late and they were in bed. It wasn’t momentous but some of the thoughts stay with me. I usually remember best when I see something in print, even a person’s name. I well remember reading Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem et al., and writing about the woman’s place and her rights. I remember collecting demeaning things that men had said about women, although the only one I can come up with now is, “a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke!” Rudyard Kipling said that. It may have been more or less true as women in the past were discouraged from thinking, reading and conversing on weighty subjects. Even though he created such brilliantly cunning characters as Becky Sharpe in Vanity Fair (first published in 1848), William Thackeray (2001) is quoted as saying that women are jealous of cigars; they regard them as strong rivals.

I tried a novel once. I wanted to show how my young children thought and felt about their world, but it was so silly it embarrassed me and I destroyed it. My characters were exactly like they were at the time, and looking over my shoulder as I typed into my
first computer, my Commodore 64, they figured it out. I thought about doing an ‘epistolary novel’ because when I was first engaged and was flying all over the States for American Airlines, I wrote long, long letters from airplanes, hotels, airports and from our apartment in New York to my fiancé. He answered with equally long letters, usually philosophizing about something, as he was still in university. After we split, I threw them all out in a fit of pique and I regret it to this day. They were markers in my life and full of young, hopeful, wonderful ideas and of dates and of places, now lost forever.

Then when I was sick for three months in 2002, I kept a diary and it is full of ideas about the things I was reading at the time. That was before I was accepted into grad school. But it is from there that I shall start...

I have just finished Graham Greene’s (1971) *A Sort of Life*. He, a professional writer, tells what he wants to tell of his life now that he is in his sixties. He begins by saying that an autobiography is only a sort of life and this is what William Zinsser (1995) says also, in *Inventing the Truth; The Art and Craft of Memoir*, in which eight writers describe the delights and difficulties of writing a memoir. Greene says he has spent as much time with imaginary characters as with real men and women, which is why his is a sort of life. He writes about a horribly unhappy adolescence when he tried to kill himself a few times by playing Russian roulette with his older brother’s gun. Fortunately he missed, and later on, this same brother, now away at Oxford, advised his parents to have Graham psychoanalyzed. This resulted in a very happy period of tutoring with an admirable man who encouraged him to keep a dream diary as an aide to understanding his memories. Greene, whose novels I have read and re-read, talks about the far more lasting influence literature can have on us than religion. His father, the headmaster at his school, loved
Browning and he says that “some lines of Browning have stayed in my memory for fifty years and have influenced my life more than any of the Beatitudes” (p. 114). I can say the same about many lines of poetry and of Shakespeare learned as a child, and I’m forever grateful to the teacher who gave us extra points for memorization.

Zinsser, on the other hand, had a happy childhood. The only thing that annoyed him was being the youngest and the only boy, who had to play baseball by himself. But he has compiled a book of several writers discussing the issue of memoir so he says little about himself. What he does say is significant for me:

When I started writing that memoir I was half paralysed by the awareness that my parents and my sisters were looking over my shoulder... and would read whatever version of their life came out of my typewriter. My first drafts were stiff, and though the style became warmer with each rewrite, I never really relaxed and enjoyed it. Since then, reading other memoirs, I’ve wondered how many passengers were along on the ride, subtly altering the past (p. 7).

We all worry, I think, about our family looking over our shoulder.

An insight from the Greene memoir is that he says he made the mistake, when he was young, of writing about unseen places and cardboard people when the village people around him that he might have used were superb! Except for Carl Leggo, who describes the somewhat bizarre characters around him growing up in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, I haven’t personally run into many outlandish characters (except the lady next door, who never cut her grass or her hair or her nails, and the shy, old and deaf, but kindly sister and brother across the street, who nursed their ancient mother, and who silently asked my brothers and me into their ‘castle-like’ house with a real turret, for cookies when we wandered over to watch them as they gardened)... well, maybe just a few.
Zinsser says that the title of the book he edited, *Inventing the Truth*, suggested itself “by an insistent theme that kept bobbing up: that the writer of a memoir must become the editor of his or her own life, imposing a narrative pattern and an organizing idea on an unwieldy mass of half-remembered events” (p. 13). That is what I will try to do.

Yet my greatest influences lately have been women writers, now that I have learned that our different way of writing is not only acceptable, but valued. For example, discovering bell hooks (1997) was an eye-opener, and I am not surprised she uses a pseudonym considering she tells everything there is to tell in *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*. This page-turner is unlike any academic writing I have ever seen. Apart from the very personal parts, she gives us some insights into her method when she tells us that she imitates experimental memoirs, mentioning *Zami* by Audre Lorde, who “introduced to readers the concept of biomythography to encourage a move away from the notion of autobiography as an exact accounting of a life... encouraging readers to see dreams and fantasies as part of the material we use to invent the self... to challenge notions of absolute truth...[as] ...there is no absolute truth when it comes to how we remember the past, that there is fact and interpretation of fact” (p. xix). Greene has already mentioned dream diaries and he has said that there is as much of the truth about his life in his fiction as there is in his autobiography. hooks says that it may be “that the conventional narrative form of the autobiography lends itself to this obscuring of the inner reality and consciousness of an author precisely because it is usually so focussed on the unfolding of a chronologically based genealogy” (p. xix). This may be so and it leads to an observation about a difference between autobiography and memoir.
In her excellent book, *Writing the Memoir*, Judith Barrington (1997) says that one can write several memoirs but only one autobiography. This is so because, “rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge” (p. 20). She says that this retrospection is rather like the informal essay written by the newspaper columnist, “whose chatty style is immediately recognizable” (p. 21). She sees the memoir as “moving backwards and forward in time... re-creating believable dialogue... switching between scene and summary... a hybrid form with elements of both fiction and essay,” whereas “an autobiography is the story of a life” (p. 22).

I plan to define myself as I was behind certain masks in my past, and as I am now, as far as I am able to understand it. (Virginia Woolf has been credited with saying that if you plan to drop a mask, you had better have another one ready.) I was a buyer for a long time and have been a teacher for just as long. The mask I take up now is that of writer, but I do not pretend to be a writer of books and articles yet. In *A Barthes Reader* Susan Sontag (1982) says that “Barthes divides writers into those who write something and the real writers, who do not write something but, rather, write” (p. xxi). Barthes sees this as “not only the source of the writer’s felicity but the model of freedom” (p. xxi).

It seems obvious that I need a theme of some kind and in reading about Bakhtin, I believe I have found it. Years ago, I had a copy of Rabelais’ (1955) *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, from a course in either English Lit. or French, I can’t remember. I was living at the time, with three friends in London, Ontario. I was trying to do my second year Arts, and two of the girls, graduates from U of Toronto in what was then called POTS, for Physical and Occupational Therapy, were working in the Children’s Hospital. My best friend was
teaching grade one and she claimed to hate a child I'll call Patsy Plumb. Every day she'd come home from school and say, "I hate Patsy Plumb!" And we all screamed at her that you cannot hate a six-year-old child. She'd admit this to be true, only to come home the next day saying, "I hate Patsy Plumb!" This absurd fact, coupled with reading Rabelais, kept us all in fits of laughter. We were equally appalled by the idea of hating a child as we were by finding such scatological descriptions at all funny. A history of humour from Clark and Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin* Clark (1984) repeated in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984) reads as follows:

Every age has its own norms of official speech and propriety. And every age has its own type of words and expressions that are given as a signal to speak freely, to call things by their own names, without any mental restrictions and euphemisms.... All peoples... have enormous spheres of speech that have not been made public and are nonexistent from the point of view of literary, written language. The history of Rabelais scholarship is the tale of how successive generations of experts have suppressed those aspects of Rabelais which they considered, in light of their own prejudices, to be improper or uniliterary (p. 299).

Rabelais disappeared from my life after 1959. Maybe he wasn't profane in a way that would have appealed in the sixties, although I do hear echoes of him in the oaths from French Canadian friends, like *maudit tabarnacle!* or *le diable m'empporte!* However, I have no interest in ribald or sacrilegious humour; only in taking a light-hearted view on a serious project—my thesis. Writing this is significant work for me but the tone is jocular because that is who I am. I do not know how else to write about myself and so much cannot be said. The passage continues:

Thus, when Bakhtin seeks to hear what is unsaid in *Gargantua*, he does two things. First, he literally recovers those portions of Rabelais' texts that, insofar as they were ignored or repressed in
previous ages, have gone “unsaid.” Second, he charts the parameters of the Renaissance social system which enabled a more balanced ratio of permitted versus unpermitted language than has since then obtained. Bakhtin treats the spheres of permitted and unpermitted language as texts in their own right, each with its own characteristic gaps and holes. He identifies two subtexts: carnival, which is a social institution, and grotesque realism, which is a literary mode. Rabelais and his World is a study of how the social and the literary interact (p. 299).

This memoir is also a study of how the social and literary react. I found the combination intriguing when hearing Frank McCourt (2000) speak recently. I came home and read his memoir 'Tis, which has sat unread on my bookshelf because I disliked Angela’s Ashes (1999). But in 'Tis, I could hear his voice the whole time I was reading, bursting with its Irish lilt and humour. He writes just like he speaks, and although I know he edits for effect, his story sounds natural, especially dialogue like this:

"You see McCourt, that’s your problem, always looking for relevance, a sucker for logic. That’s why the Irish don’t have philosophers. Lotta goddam barroom theologians..." (p. 218). But McCourt says he read Finnegans Wake for seven years after which time “you want to put your head under water” (p. 260). My quest in writing this memoir is to try to understand the scholars on the subject but to stay above water as I try to discover my roles at various phases of my life. I hope to recall a kind of truth in light of my most recent readings.
Part One: Diaries

Journey of Writing

I recall how excited I was to discover, while taking the first course toward this degree, "Foundations of Curriculum," that personal memoir is acceptable as a thesis; that I don't have to write a formal paper only. I can actually write what I feel because scholars like Max van Manen (2002) show us the value of phenomenology in their work. I learned of it when I had to do research to write a paper on Edmund Husserl, the twentieth century philosopher who invented it. I learned that phenomenology is a return to an appreciation of concrete human experience. It became popular during the early years of the twentieth century; and it is perhaps the most crucial reaction to an excessively scientific view of the world, which before Husserl, had held the key role in shaping European thought since the Renaissance. Phenomenological writing is based on the idea that all of us experience the world individually and that there are an infinite variety of human experiences and explications of them: mine included.

I have had the chance to do some creative writing in classes in the past two terms. What I have enjoyed mostly is using ideas such as doing imitative poetry, timed writing exercises, and sharing ideas with other teachers. Most important to me is the encouragement Dr. Leggo has given me, as I have been afraid that my writing lacks the serious scholarly tone, that it is too jocular for inclusion in a thesis. Now I trust my own narrative voice.
Why I Want to Write

It was grade ten and we were doing medieval history; studying the crusades. There was a medallion in the text—it was in colour and it had a name. I looked it up somewhere and discovered that every single curve, line or cross in it had symbolic significance. This was fascinating to me. I began with the basic shape and showed how the design had evolved through the centuries. By telling this sequence of events I had a plot. Of course, this included the most important conflicts between a protagonist and his enemies, which generally illustrated his heroic nature and explained why his followers wore the symbol, particularly in battle. Although I remember no detail of it now, I remember that I wrote what everyone wanted to hear—a story. The teacher said that one day my classmates would read novels written by me. They haven’t yet.

The trouble is, reading is so easy and I prefer it. I’ll read anything—news on-line, novels, memoirs, short stories, verse. I write because I sit down to do it, whereas I read as naturally as drinking water. I read on buses, in line-ups, in the middle of the night when I can’t sleep. The only time I don’t read is when I’m in conversation, listening and talking, when I’m teaching or in a lecture or seminar, or when I’m in the swimming pool or shower. I read when I’m walking by listening to tapes. I read all of War and Peace that way. Even when I’m tired and turn on TV, I read during commercials or do crossword puzzles. Reading is as natural as breathing.

Writing isn’t, although it sounds like it here. But that’s because this is like writing a diary or journal. I can’t approach stories that way, although I think I should. It’s the word ‘I’ that gets to me. I want to write a story in the third person; omniscient or limited
omniscient—I don't care. But that does not come so naturally, unless I call myself by another name, maybe. Something like this...

Amy knows she has to get to the vegetable market before six when it closes. That is *all* she really *has* to do, of a physical nature today. But it is five thirty and she is still in pyjamas, reading, taking notes, having gone back into the library catalogue for new articles to download since early morning. Is she getting anywhere at all with this research, or is she just getting into more and deeper trouble? More trouble, she suspects, and it’ll be worse if dinner isn’t ready when Ben gets home. Maybe there’s something in the freezer...

But I know that one must create a strong character first, someone who isn’t yourself with another name. I’ve read that one should invent a character about whom one can write down everything... age, height, weight, appearance, national origin, education, interests, and so on. This person could be a composite of many people you know, but you must particularize that person. You must discover what makes her an individual... what drives her... what she cares most about in the world. Then you must put her in a situation with other people you know well also... all of them fictional... and let her go ahead with whatever it is she wants to do. She will meet obstacles, dilemmas, and a crisis. It’s easy!!

Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women

In *Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women*, Carolyn Heilbrun (1990) contends in the chapter, “What Was Penelope Unweaving?” that Penelope was unweaving a story. She has chosen to remain faithful to Odysseus, who is away on his quest; and she is lonely, far from the place of her birth. She misses her father, Ikarios, and her sisters. She tries out stories on her loom and unravels them the next day, not only to delay her many suitors,
but because she is trying to write a story that has never been written before. She is faced with “not one story, or even two, but with an as-yet-unwritten story: how a woman may manage her own destiny when she has no plot, no narrative, no tale to guide her” (p. 108).

As all women have been restricted to only one plot, we are without story. We have had to live by a script we did not write. Our destiny is, “to be married, circulated; to be given by one man, the father, to another, the husband; to become the mothers of men” (p. 108). Our quest, such as it is, has been only to get the right man. Our plot has been to accomplish marriage. When this is achieved, our story is over.

But mine wasn’t. I was not willingly given by one man to another. Dad refused to give me to any man as he thought no one good enough for his child. I became, morally bound to marry the man I loved. My quest had no story or map to follow. And I’ve been weaving and unraveling and re-weaving since the man left in his deep purple, two-seater Alpha Romeo sometime before 1978, the year Dad died. Now, finally, I can write it.

Preparation

In preparing to write this thesis, I have cleaned out a closet, untouched for ten years, searching for essays from the past. I do not intend to submit a bunch of old essays, but every so often I come across something in my readings, which reminds me that I have researched and written on that very subject; so why re-invent the wheel? But I have also, uncovered many skeletons from my past.

Some are files from my days as a buyer for the airlines. One of these is a contract I negotiated with a local glove company for various types of safety gloves, on behalf of my company, to the tune of almost 82 thousand dollars for one year. These gloves were
to be used in all our stations across the country, so the order was huge. And we agreed to a two-year contract at an estimated value of $164,000.00. A hundred and sixty four thousand dollars! No wonder the sales rep gave me a safety jacket and cyclist's hat as a present for Natalie when I mentioned that she was riding her new mountain bike to work.

Another is a file full of correspondence dealing with the distribution of moneys collected from employees for the Charitable Donations Committee. This amounted to over $300,000 in 1989. I served on that board for several years and our job was to go and speak to requesters about their needs and bring back a report for the members to consider. We gave an IVAC Pump to Peace Arch Hospital, for example, for the monitoring of patients on I.V. Therapy. We donated $5000 to Oakridge Senior Centre for a piano. I remember talking to the young lawyers at Legal Aid. I think we gave them office furniture. We gave equipment to Cancer Research down on 10th Avenue, for a mobile screening unit to take around the province. I remember visiting and donating to a daycare centre in Mount Pleasant and a crisis centre for battered women. It was one of the most edifying volunteer jobs I can ever imagine doing.

I found mind maps I had drawn for study purposes, colour coded to boot. One is from *The Brain Book* by Peter Russell (1980), and I chose to map chapter 13, which is entitled “Mind Maps”. Another advice book suggests that when you are about to begin an enormous task that makes you anxious, you apply right effort. Back off, slow down, and take one step at a time. Thinking about a whole project when you first start is like imagining a lifetime without cigarettes when you’re trying to quit. It is hopeless. One day, hour, or minute, however, is manageable. I know this. I broke that forty-year habit six years ago!
This is excellent advice to have come across this morning. I know that if I just sit here and type each day, the day will come (and it follows, as the night followeth the day, says Polonius) that I will have written my thesis.

I also found a copy of an article I wrote about my brother for an American publication called *Lifeglow* for people with low vision. I wrote better than I remembered, (if a little maudlin), in 1986, and they paid me a lot of money for it. I found too a copy of my first book, written in the first person and through the eyes of a teen-aged boy. What could I have been thinking of? It is not very good at all.

**From my own diaries** (Christmas Break, 2002)

To suit my mood, *The Dead Poet's Society* came on late last night and I watched it again with great enjoyment. Robin Williams was the perfect Mr. Keating, doing Whitman honouring Lincoln in, “Captain, My Captain”. A few summers back I did Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”; also in honour of Lincoln. I can’t think why! But the response from the kids was impressive. They liked it. It was the same summer I did John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace* for the first time, and the two worked well together.

Good Lord. I’m accepted into the Master’s Program in the Faculty of Education at UBC. What that will mean I do not know. (Dr. Karen Meyer phoned; she sounds lovely.)

**January 1, 2003**

Happy New Year to All and to All a Good Night! I hope that this wonderful spirit keeps up all through 2003. Last night was lots of fun with everyone congratulating me and today the family will be here for dinner. I will try to write something in this year’s diary every day of 2003. I promise because my journey this year will be an important
one and I need to have a record of my first year in a master’s program and of what might be my last year teaching.

**Other People’s Diaries**

I’m reading Virginia Woolf (1979) In her diary from 1915-19 she writes of trivia so I know that it’s a place to start. Her trivia is now glamorous stuff as she knew everyone and wrote about them the way they were all young together. She seems very supportive of her husband Leonard, referred to as L., and has Maynard Keynes to dinner as well as Lytton Strachey, goes to hear Bernard Shaw speak at the Fabian Society and talks about how the London School of Economics was started by Sydney and Beatrice Webb (nee Potter, author of Peter Rabbit) with money left in trust to the Fabian Society in 1895, to advance Socialism. They also founded the socialist weekly, *New Statesman*, for which Leonard wrote. She knew Lady Ottoline Morrell, the great hostess who introduced Marjorie Strachey to a man, married 20 years, father of seven, with whom she had an affair before he went to the front where he earned the D.S.O. for gallantry at Gallipoli. Virginia’s sister Vanessa (Nessa) was a friend of Ottoline’s and helped set it up. The thing about reading her diary is that the families of the intelligentsia seem to connect and to have been connected for centuries. She talks of writing a letter to Thomas Hardy thanking him for a poem he wrote in honour of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen. I’m reading Hardy also now...not his best stuff, but it’s fun, about ladies of a century before his time, *A Group of Noble Dames*. It was either a great privilege to have been born into the privileged classes of past centuries or we’re very lucky to be living today. I waffle between the two, but I love reading 18th and 19th century novels, especially 18th. That is probably due to Dr. David Evans at UBC, who introduced us to Samuel Johnson, whom
he greatly admired, and to Boswell, his eulogizer, one summer, as we sat out on the grass discussing *The Rise of the Novel* by Ian Watt (1985).

**Biography**


When James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* was published in 1791, it almost immediately became both a best seller and an object of puzzlement. How could ‘Bozzy’—known to be a sot and (as we would say) an airhead and a shameless groupie—have produced such a book, so brimming with life and intelligence that it was unlike any biography yet written? The answer, the critics eventually decided, was that Boswell didn’t exactly write the Life, he merely took it down—a faithful but mindless stenographer; the virtues of the book simply reflected the virtues of its subject... it was a book only a fool could have written. That verdict stood more or less unchallenged until well into the last century, when troves of Boswell’s papers—letters, journals, notes, drafts—began popping up in attics and closets both in Scotland and in Ireland...” (n.p.)

The book shows Boswell in a new light and the review reminds us that...

English biography was then in its infancy, and though some of its more daring practitioners (including Johnson himself, in his "Lives of the Poets") had abandoned the convention of never mentioning a subject's flaws, no one had ever gone as far as Boswell, who was determined that "there should be shade as well as light." Boswell was by temperament a reporter, not a thinker, and he had a reporter's respect for factual accuracy, a notion that was foreign to even the most realistic of 18th-century biographers, who were content to invent whatever they didn't know firsthand. (n.p.)

Today's paparazzi could take a lesson from Boswell.

**Autobiography or Memoir?**

I thoroughly enjoyed his memories of Sri Lanka, entitled *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje (1993) which I’ve just finished, as it includes poetry in the middle of a memoir of self-discovery. It is a loving tribute to a much-loved father and a happy
childhood and to a time in the world of Ceylon which can never happen again. He makes me realize that the way to write is to capture the spirit, the essence of the experience, and to disregard all the teacherly things I have to correct in students' work, so that the words can soar on their own strength. Forget sentences. He could have given in to an impulse to dwell on the negative, on the father's gross alcoholic behavior rather than on the humour of the events long after the fact. He is on the side of life and the love of his own ancestors and he brings them to us in the fullness of their humanity. They teem with energy as does all of life in Ceylon—the flora and fauna so loved by Lalla, the grandmother who "died in the blue arms of a jacaranda tree," as well as the animals and insects; the leopard that walks the verandah, or the bear who sleeps in any available bed, or the army of ants which carries off page 187 of a book not yet read, and the "midnight rat". His memoir is sheer poetry. He got it just right.

Diary for January 11, 2003

I seem to have missed diary keeping a few days so far. Governor Ryan of Illinois has just commuted the death sentence of 165 men on death row in his state and thrown the country into a tizzy. He quoted Lincoln and Handy who said, "if we take an eye for an eye, pretty soon we'll all be blind" but he neglected Shakespeare, like Portia's speech from The Merchant of Venice.

The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blesst;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes...

So God bless Governor Ryan and all those who were on death row.
The Need for Miracles

Whatever a man prays for, he prays for a miracle. Every prayer reduces itself to this: Great God, grant that twice two be not four.

Turgenev (1998)
(from Fathers and Sons, 1862)

Having read that novel so long ago, I am listening now to the audiotape. That is a great way to get nasty jobs done; like cleaning bathrooms. But besides that, now that there is the net, you have instant access to what other people have thought about favourite novels. I have always wondered what people mean when they say they are nihilists, or for that matter, existentialists. I hadn’t realised that that particular Russian, Turgenev, had coined the term nihilism. It comes from his character, Bazarov, who says that a nihilist is a man who does not bow to any authorities, who does not take any principle on trust, no matter what!

Heavens, he’s talking about those of us who were under thirty in the sixties. We defied authority and did not trust anyone over thirty. Did we know we were nihilists? Now we are of the generation who make the rules, or at least try to.

In Bazarov, Turgenev drew a classical portrait of the mid-nineteenth-century nihilist—who later was manifested in many ways, as a terrorist, an anarchist, and even now, as the atheist or materialist or Communist. Turgenev may have invented the term, but would he have sanctioned its different uses, especially its terrorist manifestation?

He was most definitely a humanitarian, who understood the problem of the generation gap, but do we? Do we understand why do so many of today’s disgruntled youth listen to desperate music, rock bands and singers who love the idea of death and destruction and tearing down traditional values? I say this because I was just given a poetry project on the theme of death and the song lyrics the student uses are disturbing.
How do we help the young who feel so alienated from their peers that they are attracted to themes of death and destruction? Why do they think they know everything simply because they’re faster with all of the electronic gadgets, including the computer that they grew up using? Why do those who appear to be “born-again” Christians, think that they’re the only ones who love one another? Why this polarity? Do the youth of the sixties, now that we are grandparent-aged, fail to understand our own children, and grandchildren?

**Why Boccaccio Is Right**

Friend Judy, lab technician and shift worker, who lives on the island and works here once in a while, came just after five yesterday and has just now left for work. It is 6:15 in the morning on a Sunday. She looked at my books, and at the Shakespeare I’m working up for summer school and asked, laughing,

“What is etymology?”

She had picked up one of the references I have on my computer desk, along with a thesaurus and an Oxford. She was also eyeing a copy of *The Decameron*, which I’d pulled off the shelves.

“I’m preparing for retirement. I plan to read everything I have missed and to finish Boccaccio. I plan to become a writer when I have time. This is hardly a new idea”.

(Judy’s son has just submitted his master’s thesis to the mathematics department at SFU. She sent me a copy which she apparently understands. I definitely do not!)

This comes from a book review I saved from the NY Times of April 22, 2001, by Ingrid D. Rowland (2001) on *Career Women*. She is reviewing a book by Boccaccio which is translated and edited by Virginia Brown (2001). Boccaccio was a professional
writer who cleverly identified a burgeoning new public for literature: women who read for pleasure—to remove the spirit at least for awhile from unpleasant thoughts. He wrote stories he got from young aristocrats and Rowland says:

Their tales—tragic, comic and above all ribald—have lost none of the appeal they held when they first appeared in 1351. Boccaccio's masterpiece was written in Tuscan vernacular and addressed to the pretty ladies, the limits to whose freedoms the author hotly deplores in his preface. He says that "restrained by the desires, the pleasures, the commandments of their fathers, their mothers, their brothers and their husbands, they spend most of their time enclosed within the small circuit of their chambers. Indeed the ladies among the merry company in Decameron are cultivated and urbane, striking an impeccable balance between flirtatiousness and upright sobriety."

We know Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) best today for the Decameron set just outside Florence in 1348 as the Black Death ravages the city. Famous Women ("De Mulieribus Claris"), begins with 'Eve Our First Mother'. Here is an excerpt which reminds me of all those cribs about Hannibal crossing the Alps, and Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres, but who cares? Brown shows Boccaccio (2001) saying:

Scripturus igitur quibus fulgoribus mulieres claruerint insignes, a matre omnium sumpsisse exordium non apparebit indignum: ea quippe vetustissima patens, uti prima, sic magnificis fuit insignis splendoribus. As I am going to write about the glories for which women have become famous, it will not seem inappropriate to begin with the mother of us all. She is the most ancient of mothers and, as the first, she was singled out for special honors.

Good for him. No chauvinist he! Brown is such fun! Boccaccio gives us capsule biographies of 106 most influential women. I must buy this book.

On his deathbed, Bakhtin asked to be told his favourite Decameron story about miracles performed at the tomb of a man regarded as a saint because he had duped his final confessor into believing he had lived an exemplary life when he lied, cheated, and fornicated his way through it.
According to Clark and Holquist (1984) this is a favourite for him because Bakhtin rejoices that "there is always a loophole" and "God works in strange ways" or "nothing is ever completed, no word is final, there are no ultimate explanations that everyone, without exception, will accept as exhausting all possibilities" (p. 347). This suits his emphasis on dialogism, that is, on how a literary work may incorporate a rich variety and multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view, on how we must listen to many voices, as no claim is absolute.

The point about listening to many voices or to voices other than our own, is what I have often suggested to others; that reading is positively therapeutic. You cannot think the same miserable thoughts about yourself and others when you are thoroughly involved in someone else’s life. Maybe that involvement in another’s life is what saved that obsequious reporter, Boswell. And for the generation who has to read on-line, as they have to do everything on-line, there are some excellent journals and newspapers, one of which is UBC’s own Educational Insights.

Educational Insights

The following is from the journal which we are editing for Dr. Lynn Fels’ course—from conceptualizing to publishing. She has asked us to comment on three works from past issues. Gary Rasberry (2002) says:

Words falling. On to the page. In fits and starts. In bunches. Gathering themselves, sometimes, into tiny patterns, shapes recognisable for an instant only to disappear then reappear somewhere else in a slightly different guise. The process is ever and always beguiling, intoxicating, frustrating, compelling ...(n.p.)

I read that just before reading the new course in creative writing I have been made responsible for administering. In making up the outline for it I discover that the author(s)
say that writers think in patterns, because we learn in patterns and we like to discover patterns in life and in art. Man is the quintessential pattern maker. We can grasp anything if we can discern the model or the pattern. It is amazing how much more beautifully that idea is expressed by Rasberry, a poet. He also says, "I've always taken writer Natalie Goldberg's advice to heart: keep the pen moving. The rest will take care of itself. And it does, for the most part" (n.p.).

I too have Goldberg's books and tapes and I try to follow her advice. But when I keep the pen moving I don't seem to get anything like Rasberry does. He talks about giving a class something other than a blank page to begin with. He gave them a form to work with and he was pleased with the results. He says, "It was an opportunity to begin to slowly seek out structure and form on my own terms now that desire (not the Grade 12 Curriculum) was fuelling the search" (n.p.). I wonder if, in Ontario, he is teaching a Grade 12 Creative Writing Curriculum similar to mine.

One of the suggestions on my course says to pretend to be a fish or a bird or an animal and to speak from that point of view. Lacking zoological training, I looked up a word I like the sound of, polliwog. It said 'see tadpole'. Tadpole—the limbless aquatic larva of a frog or toad, having gills and a long flat tail. As the tadpole approaches the adult stage, legs and lungs develop and the tail gradually disappears. It is interesting that what seems to be of the fish family can at a later stage of development live outside the water; a little like what is supposed to have happened with our own species.

**Polliwog**

I want to grow up but to not be a fish  
A-swimming around in this pond  
I want to get out and go where I wish  
To see what's above and beyond
Who wants to spend all her life in this bog?
One might wish that she’d never been born
Yet there’s beauty in being a young polliwog
Awaiting her lovely new form.
My brother’s a tadpole; I guess he will be
A toad, greyish-brown and revolting
But me, I will be as green as the sea
Forgive me, but now I am quoting
‘Tis a wise child who knows her own dad’
I know mine by his deep dulcet bass
Which he used to lure mother off her lily pad
The result, being me, is sheer class.

I am not being racist when I tell you that
Emerald green is the blue blood of frogs
Toady brown makes one think of a rat or a bat
Found in sewers, dead trees or old logs.
It’s not easy being green, as Kermit has said
To have greatness thrust upon one
But when gill-less and tail-less my youth I have shed
I plan to have fun in the sun and to shun
All toads!

I cannot do real poetry. It always turns into nonsense verse.

Luanne Armstrong read us a sentence from a book of hers. She read, “This piece of land holds my life the way a mirror holds light or a glass bowl holds water.”

She writes well about the farm where she grew up, reminiscent of the way Margaret Laurence identifies her prairie home in all her novels. She writes about being her father’s handyman the way Alice Munro describes the relationship between father and daughter in her short story “Boys and Girls.” In that story the young girl fights everything associated with being a woman and doing inside work instead of outside. She balks at the endless amount of canning her mother undertakes every year and is proudest when her father introduces her to a salesman as his “new hired man.” I’m fascinated by the fact that Luanne, like Munro, lets us in on what has to be personal experience—that she has the courage to write a whole novel using the first person point of view.
She brings me back to many childhood memories that I have been going to write about for years. When she talks about feeding chickens, I am reminded of myself, doing the same thing, as I was the eldest and the first to be assigned chores. I remember the smell of the coop and collecting the eggs. But right now I have to write about right now.

The idea of autobiography as research fascinates as does the idea of a novel as a thesis. None of this would have been possible in my past experience. How did I ever get so lucky as to be back at university at this time in my life? So the next article from Educational Insights I’d like to refer to is called: Autobiography in/as Re-search and Pedagogy: Writing, Reading and Considering Women’s Lives by Renee Norman (2002).

Norman introduces the reader to her students’ works. I especially liked the story of the woman with the sick child who died in someone else’s care, and her constant feeling of guilt over the fact that she is human and can only stand so many days and nights of sleeplessness while she tries everything to stop the crying and cannot. And I am moved by the story of the mother who writes in Punjabi and whose daughter explains her mother’s shame at having only a grade ten diploma. Norman is sitting at her kitchen table where she reads and grades her students’ papers and plans her courses, does her prep. She says, “It is an irony that the busyness of this life leaves little space for my own thought and writing. As I encouraged others to write and made a place for autobiography, I could not seem to make much of a place for mine” (n.p.). This has been my frustration for years. The most I can handle is my journal, and that is not a daily thing. I have now and then an idea for a story but it disappears before I get around to it.

Elizabeth Smart is mentioned in this article. I remember how amazed I was that anyone would write such a personal and intense description of an intimate relationship as
obvious autobiography and then have it published. I’m surprised that her lover didn’t sue
her, or that her children didn’t raise a huge objection to having their lives made public, or
that she didn’t somehow disguise her novel’s characters. One of the women says:

Because we were exploring the ethical issues of autobiographical
writing in research, as well as the way in which we construct our
lives through our words, I asked students to follow up an episode
they wrote by approaching those whom they wrote about, to get
other views and perspectives, to complicate the original writing
by considering the many complexities of how we see ourselves,
how we see others, how others see us, and how others perceive
how we see them” (n.p.).

What keeps most of us from honest writing is that we hate to expose ourselves
this way. What keeps most of us from getting the opinion of those we have written about
is that we know they won’t see it our way. And even when you invent characters out of a
combination of known personalities, someone will accuse you of writing about them.
How we see others and how they see us is, indeed, a complicating problem; as is the
problem of what is ethical and what is not.

I am here at UBC and I am writing this because I am not dead. I came very close
to it though. Four years ago I nearly succumbed to death by pneumonia. Then I was
bedridden for three months and had a chance to do some reading and writing. Six months
after recovery I was accepted into the Master’s Program in the Faculty of Education.
Having learned that life experience is considered a valuable part of qualitative research, I
am imitating Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) and writing my thesis, mostly as I consider my
own life and thoughts over the past few years, as she has done in Writing a Woman’s
Life.

I must do this. I feel I’ve been given a second chance.
Thinks, Nice Work and Dr. Lodge

I’ve just finished Thinks, a book by David Lodge (2001). I’m glad that I had reread Nice Work recently as his thought continues from one novel to the next as do his characters. His idea now that he is retired from university teaching is that deconstruction and so much that goes with it is just clever intellectualizing. He has Robyn Penrose who explains ‘signs’ and ‘texts’ so well in Nice Work reappear in Thinks and give a lecture, which fits with the argument I’d like to make against the idea of intertextuality being the be all and end all. She says that the idea of a “subject” in literature turned out to be a “multiple pun” or a “bad thing”—whether you are referring to “an experiencing individual, the subject of a sentence—of a political state—of English Literature in the curriculum—all of which are repressive and tyrannical and phallocentric and have to be deconstructed...”. Lodge says that this is depressing for the young. He says:

Where was the pleasure of reading in all this? Where was the personal discovery, self-development? But the argument didn’t allow for the self, the very idea of the self is a miss-reading or ‘mister-reading’ (or myster-reading?) of subjectivity, apparently. The individual is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed continuously by the stream of semiosis into which she is thrown by the acquisition of language. (p. 225)

On the same note, David Solway (2003) had a wonderful argument supporting how I feel but could never articulate the way he does in Books in Canada. His on-line article is entitled On Text and Hypertext, or Back to the Landau. He says, what I know to be true, that students have a lot of trouble with intertextuality or decentred thinking. In discussing the “absence of a centre” in “nonsequential tracking” which is “favoured by our current crop of hyper-theorists,” Solway says:

[It] clearly does not ground, expand and complexify a reader’s response to a given text as its proponents confidently maintain.
Quite the contrary. It disperses and distracts the attention, leading the reading mind down a coiled labyrinth of links, webs, nodes, maps, illustrations, diagrams, sound bites and animations into a state of HyperCard intellectual convention. The text is not enhanced so much as vaporized by the practices. The concrete sense of realized, consistent and tensile meanings that need to be laboriously commanded by an attentive, centre mind are scattered and ephemeralized in a kind of astral dislocation of the reading self. (n.p.)

I watch my teenage students searching for they know not what in our online classroom at the Adult Learning Centre, where I am administering Open School’s online courses, and have to curb the search as it wastes a whole day. Then I remembered the terrific literature site which George Landow (1992) keeps and wondered whether he had something to say on intertextuality. He does and of course, his view is directly opposed to Solway’s. He writes:

[T]his absence of a center means that anyone who uses hypertext makes his or her own interest the de facto organizing principle (or center) for the investigation at the moment. One experiences hypertext as an infinitely de-centerable and re-centerable system...a directory document that one can employ to orient oneself and to decide where to go next. (n.p.)

Solway says that his own students could never do this well and he feels further that “the presence of the teacher and the parent and the agency of the book are absolutely indispensable” (n.p.). He quotes Landow as saying that hypertext “involves a more active reader” (n.p.) but this, Solway suspects, means really a more frenetic reader who at the same time is “a reader passively locked into digital space, an electronic cubicle about three feet square” (n.p.). Much more in the article rings true. He says:

we sit down with Dickens because we want to read Dickens and to reflect in privileged solitude on what we are reading. We certainly don’t want to lose our bearings in a glut of academic papers about Dickens that start up into disruptive existence at the scamper of a mouse, or to be buried under an avalanche of links, facts,
illustrations, animations and sound gobbets, or to find ourselves reading, not Dickens, but some interloper’s self-important annotations. (n.p.)

But this is what happens every time we look up anything on any text or author...none of whom are dead to me, thank you very much, Mr. Barthes. Our young people are bombarded and distracted at every turn as they research on the net, and are no longer able to enjoy the simple reading of story and writing about it. They cannot compete with what is out there, and they know it. So they give in and cut and paste and pretend they have accomplished some kind of critical thinking of their own.

Despite what I have seen with my young, inept students, I must give the last word to Landow because his argument is best when he refers to Bakhtin:

In attempting to imagine the experience of reading and writing with (or within) this new form of text, one would do well to pay heed to what Mikhail Bakhtin has written about the dialogic, polyphonic, multivocal novel, which he claims "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (18). Bakhtin's description of the polyphonic literary form presents the Dostoevskian novel as a hypertextual fiction in which the individual voices take the form of lexias. (p. 11).

And this is no doubt, the way of the world of the future. Some of us have trouble leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar and I for one, do not want to read a novel on-line. I want to curl up or lie down in comfort to enjoy it.

October 17, David's Birthday

My son is 36 today. I am old Father William. And my hair is exceedingly white. If I could I'd incessantly stand on my head as I think at my age it's my right. Paraphrased
from Lewis Carroll, (sadly, no relation) who wrote it as a parody of The Old Man’s

Comforts and How He Gained Them by Robert Southey, who wrote:

You are old, father William,” the young man cried,
“The few locks which are left you are grey;
You are hale, father William, a hearty old man;
Now tell me the reason, I pray.

He then spends the rest of the poem giving advice to the young, both

physical and moral. Lewis Carroll, on the other hand says:

“You are old, father William,” the young man said,
“And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

He then goes on to have fun. My dad, a lawyer, loved the lines:

“You are old,” said the youth, “and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—
Pray, how did you manage to do it?”

“In my youth,” said his father, “I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life.”

It’s fitting to be nostalgic when you discover that your son is becoming middle-aged. But it is not fitting for this journal....I shall move on.

Looking at Books from a Woman’s Point of View

Although I have been reading women’s works since the sixties, I have been rather

out of the mainstream of feminist thought, and have been delighted to make my own

discoveries. In Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice, edited by

Marlene Kadar (1992) she discusses life writing as the most flexible and open term

available for what was once autobiography, journal, memoir, or simply letters. This
includes metafiction, which is fiction that plays with its own conventions, and immediately makes me think of Margaret Atwood. Kadar has collected theoretical essays by diverse scholars who discuss mainly Canadian works, including a favourite of mine, *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood (1988) which Natalie Cook describes as “fictive autobiography”. Cook points out that Atwood avoids closure, refusing such endings as marriage or death, and leaves her novels dangling, suggesting that they are unfinished and forcing us to look beyond the text to consider how much they relate to the life of the author. In the case of *Cat’s Eye*, the action took place in my neighbourhood, more or less. When we were growing up, Atwood was in the district next door to us, Leaside, while I was in Moore Park. She went to our rival school, Whitney, and I went to OLPH (Our Lady of Perpetual Help) which she refers to in the book. Because we are the same age I suppose, I did not read Atwood in my twenties and thirties, I was reading Margaret Lawrence, like everyone else in the sixties, and Doris Lessing, and later, Alice Munro. I came to Atwood when visiting Toronto from Vancouver. I was staying with my brother and sister-in-law, and she handed me *Cat’s Eye*, and said, “It’s wonderful. Read it. She talks about all the places you know.”

She was right. As this branch of my family live a block from where we grew up, I walked along Heath Street to Welland Avenue to look at the Heath St. Bridge, no longer the old wooden swing bridge I remember, now a modern, concrete and a very safe-looking affair. I turn to Atwood to remember it and she describes it accurately, but with her own flourish, “I dream that the wooden bridge over the ravine is falling apart. I’m standing on it, the boards crack and separate, the bridge sways. I walk along what’s left, clinging to the railing, but I can’t get onto the hill where the other people are standing
because the bridge isn’t attached to anything....” (p. 155). That recalls exactly the feeling I had, as a child, walking over it.

Atwood is known as a fiction writer, but much of this novel feels like autobiography to me, although I think Cook’s label of ‘fictive biography’ is apt. All the essays in Kadar explore aspects of post-modern sensibilities, so that, as Kadar says, “self-reflexive... life writing becomes both the ‘original genre’ and a critical comment on it” (p. 12). What was once intolerable, ‘the self-in-the-writing’ is now seen as humanistic interpretation.

Helen M. Buss discusses Anna Jameson’s Winter Studies and Summer Rambles, which is really a travelogue of her impressions of people and places, which she admits are conditioned by her own biases and by how she remembers her visit to Toronto in winter, and her tour of the Great Lakes in the summer of 1837-8, one hundred years before I was born. The other travelogue is that of Mary Wollstonecraft, discussed by Eleanor Ty. She kept a diary-journal published as Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (1796) (more than forty years earlier), which was considered autobiography, as she could not refrain from infusing her feelings and ‘sensibilities’ (a favourite 18th century word) into her work. She was accused of “extemporizing on her own psychological and spiritual condition” rather than producing “purely factual” (p. 65) masculine writing. This was necessary practice at the end of that century, if she were to make a living at it. Her difficulty was that she was expected to write as her father’s daughter, but had to create a “constructed self” (p. 72) because as a woman she was silenced and marginalized and textually confined to this masculine point of view.
The masculine aristocratic point of view has created of course, the famous 'canon' written about so extensively by Harold Bloom. What is not included in it are accounts from the point of view of ordinary people, woman and men alike. Elizabeth Cohen discusses court records from the past as a form of life writing for those who otherwise would never be heard and Thomas V. Cohen gives us an example of such a record, which is a fascinating story. Sally Cole, writing about 'anthropological lives', says that because of the contradiction between the personal experience of the field and the post-field experience of producing a scientific monograph, two groups of contemporary anthropologists are addressing these issues: feminists and postmodernists. Both recognize that objectivity is a relative concept, that what one sees or experiences depends upon who one is, individually, socially, and historically.

Kadar says in “Whose Life Is It Anyway?” that women have always found it easier to write their own stories, albeit in an unacceptable style. But the post-modern world is post-scientific. It no longer moves toward abstraction, away from life. It has moved back to experience. So today, thanks to post-modern and feminist studies, women’s writing is prized. We have come a long way, baby!

Another feminist writer, Carolyn Heilbrun (1999) in Women’s Lives: The View from the Threshold, deals with the work of five women who refuse to accept the restrictions imposed by society’s conception of a woman’s place. They are said to be in a state of liminality; taken from the word ‘limen’ meaning threshold. They are on the threshold of leaving the conventional behind in order to become free and to become themselves.
Dr. Heilbrun discusses the memoirs and novels of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Gloria Steinem; all of whom challenged the accepted patriarchal form of the novel by offering a female perspective. Pointing to the fact that feminism has altered our perceptions, she demonstrates how their works differ from male narratives that follow a linear path from arousal through to climax; whereas theirs meander in multiple circular configurations, discernable only when one comes to the end of the story.

This book is a compilation of the Alexander Lectures given at the University of Toronto in 1997. Underscoring the historical importance of a woman’s beauty, the title for the first lecture is “Deliciously Hideous, A Powerful Beauty,” taken from a letter from Henry James to his father describing Marian Evans or George Eliot. This homely woman, says Heilbrun, ” found herself on the threshold of a society controlled by those for whom women’s personal beauty was paramount” (p. 10). Eliot chose the threshold over societal affirmation and learned to use her talent to create her own beauty. Thus, we find that all of her fictional heroines are physically attractive, as required. It was Charlotte Bronte who took a stand and refused to impose beauty on her sympathetic heroine, plain Jane Eyre. Yet Bronte is reported to have said that she would willingly have traded all her genius for beauty. Writing today, Heilbrun says “that to have written Jane Eyre and Villette should even for a moment be considered too large a price to pay for not being beautiful seems to me preposterous” (p. 25). Had they been beautiful, one wonders, would Eliot and Bronte have let their talents dissipate?

At the conclusion of these lectures Heilbrun says, as regards the ‘liminal state,’ that the threshold is “the place where as women and as creators of literature,
we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays” (p. 102). Years ago, I remember reading a book with the word androgyny in it and suddenly one day, in reading the list of books Heilbrun had published, I realized that it is one of hers. Curious, I ordered it from VPL and am having a wonderful time reading *Toward A Recognition of Androgyny* Heilbrun (1973) — first published in 1964.

“The Hidden River of Androgyny” discusses how “the Judaeo-Christian tradition emphasizes patriarchy almost to the exclusion of any feminine, or androgynous, interpretation” (p. 16), ignoring an earlier near-Eastern tradition which suggests a divinity which was feminine as well as masculine. It is apparently, St. Paul, that misogynist, we have to thank for keeping women out of religious life, allowing her only her wifely and motherly functions. The patristic tradition denied sexuality its place in the religious world and idealized celibacy, which has caused so much grief up to the present day. Most people, it seems, are not androgynous and are seeking the half of themselves that is missing. Heilbrun says that in the medieval lyric, “man projected onto a woman all his most idealistic qualities, perhaps in an attempt to redeem his own lust” (p. 21). But the feminine principle as a civilizing force came into medieval literature in the romance. Whereas the epic told the tales of heroes of nations, the romance made woman a metaphor for justice and right. They were to be served by men as epitomized in Dante, where a woman, Beatrice, stands for Christ (p. 24). Androgyny returned.

Shakespeare’s plays are full of androgynous characters, of girls disguised as boys (often they are supposedly an identical twin of their brother, which is impossible) but *Twelfth Night* works, based on that concept. An exquisite example of an androgynous character is Lady Macbeth, who downs her feminine side and begs the spirits of hell to
make her mother’s milk turn to gall, that she may become man enough to commit murder. Her husband says in admiration, “Bring forth men children only.” Men could appreciate androgynous women.

Later, we see woman as heroes with the birth of the novel in the eighteenth century, in Richardson’s Clarissa, and in the Bronte sisters’ portrayal of androgynous protagonists in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights. Heilbrun tells us that George Eliot had “what we are pleased to call a “masculine mind” and that “had Jane Austen been a man, most of the critical nonsense written about her until recently would have been avoided...[she]...is no more a feminist than Dickens” (p.74). She claims, to move to more immediate history, that we can date the birth of “The Woman as Hero” at “1880, when almost at the same moment Ibsen and James invented her” (p. 49). She is quite distinct from the woman as heroine, and for the next fifty years or so other major writers like Shaw, Lawrence and Forster were to find that, “at the height of their powers, it was a woman hero who best met the requirements of their imaginations” (p. 49).

Now, we get to the early twentieth century with ‘The Bloomsbury Group’. They had the advantage of living at exactly that point in history when all their benefits and advantages could be used to the full. If they appear to have had more breeding, education, money, leisure, and brains than most, perhaps the answer is not that they were, in Angus Wilson’s words, well provided with upper-middle-class security, but that they made greater use of what they had. It is questionable whether most of us, given all their advantages and talents, would have done as much with our lives: is this question what nourishes the worm of envy? (p. 117)
This is the period when women got the vote in many countries. It was acknowledged that they could think, at least enough to be responsible for voting alongside their husbands so as not to cancel out his vote, in many cases. (How well I remember hearing women say that!) Vanessa Stephen describes the group's start fifty years later:

Thursday evening gatherings at which the Stephen brothers introduced their sisters to their Cambridge University friends soon blossomed into a myriad of friendships, philosophical discussions and the dissolution of the very strict, traditional rules governing social interaction in English society. Virginia eventually married Leonard Woolf, Vanessa married Clive Bell, and they kept company with Molly and Desmond McCarthy, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, E.M. Forster, Saxon Sydney-Turner and Roger Fry.

This information is more or less general knowledge, although I did find the above paragraph attributed to Vanessa (Stephen) Bell on the Internet.

In the series on 'Writers and Their Work' published for the British Council, Bernard Blackstone (1962) says of Virginia Woolf that her great achievement was to portray the working of the individual, feminine mind in the context of her own small world, for the first time. He says she borrows the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique (in which we are privy to an interior monologue), from Sterne and Proust (p. 11). She also borrows from the post-Impressionists by showing how a thing appeared to the mind of the character at that moment, under those particular conditions. So, although the novel as a genre had been 'developed and exploited' by men, Woolf, the writer, "was sure that a woman novelist had to create her own form. Jane Austen had done it; but the Brontes and
George Eliot had stuck too close to the old masculine pattern. The feminine mind, the feminine sensibility, cannot profitably imitate the masculine” (p. 12). He goes on to say that the theme of Virginia Woolf’s novels is often “the patient effort of the woman towards the reintegration of the man” (p. 30).

Byatt (2000) points to the fact that these early ‘modern’ writers, were of her mother’s generation as they were of my mother’s. Woolf was born in 1882, and published her first novel in 1915, while my mother, who gave me A Room of One’s Own to read when I was in my teens, was born in 1903 and was one of a handful of females to graduate from the University of Toronto in 1924. She felt, I always thought, that she was vindicating Woolf’s position on the right of women to be university educated. In On Histories and Stories, Byatt admits to being born in 1936, before the war of which she has just a childish, hazy memory, but says that she can discern or sense the ‘edge between lived and imagined history’ in the novels by young men about the war they were too young to have experienced; their fathers’ war (p. 12). I was born at the end of 1938 and cannot ‘remember’ the war either, only the talk of it around me, which left an impression of fear that something bad could happen at any minute. Byatt also says about that generation:

I was struck by Graham Greene’s assertion that with the death of Henry James ‘the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act’. The characters of Woolf and Forster, Greene said, ‘wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin. I don’t think this concern is the same as a nostalgia for the existential crisis....(p. 79)

A.S. Byatt, and her sister, Margaret Drabble, were raised in a religious (Quaker) family, by a mother who was, like her daughters, a graduate of Cambridge. I have often
felt, when I can understand her, which isn’t always, a certain empathy with Byatt, who had an educated and faith driven background. Today, if one meets a university graduate who admits to having had such a background, one usually discovers that they are in the process of ‘overcoming’ it. I do not feel the need to do that, but rather get satisfaction from building on it. But, as with Iris Murdoch, I read her and weep, as she is truly an intellectual giant.

**Postmodernism and Women’s Studies**

It seems that postmodernism and women’s studies will become even more prominent in curriculum studies than before. I hope so as I’ve been reading women’s journals for years and I want to do research in that area. A favourite book of mine is *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, in which, Eva Hoffman (1990) tells the story of her family’s move from Poland to Canada in the late 1950s. Vancouver was then, if possible, even more provincial than Toronto, where I lived, and I too, recognized a need to experience a larger world. The child Eva, from Europe, finds Vancouver attitudes stifling. But what happens in language when a person changes culture and country?

Hoffman’s book is a complicated narrative, dealing with the trauma of parting from the only world and language she knew in childhood, and the usual search for identity, but in a new culture. The author vividly describes the loss of everyday words and the inability to tell a story to an audience of friends. She explains that it is not only language that changes, but also all cultural references. Hoffman shows those of us who work with so many students from other cultures what it must be like to realize that because you do not know the background of whatever is being discussed in class, you simply cannot grasp the foreground. You must have to put that aside in your mind, telling
yourself that you will check it out later. Obviously, the young girl who arrived in
Vancouver in 1959 at age 13, (just past the age when language acquisition is easily
accessible) overcame these obstacles. When she graduated from Eric Hamber school, she
was class valedictorian and had won many awards for academics and music, as well as a
scholarship to Rice University in Dallas, where she would also excel, amazingly in
English literature, and she explains how this could be:

Even in literature, that most sensuously textured of expressions, my
abstracting bent turns out to be useful. The Rice English Department
in the mid sixties is firmly in the grip of New Criticism—that
laboratory method which concerns itself with neither writers’ lives
nor their worlds—and whether I’m reading Chaucer, or Jacobean
tragedy, or The Sound and the Fury, I’m asked to parse pieces of text
as if they were grammatical constructions. “Form is content,” at this
time, is taken to mean that there is no such thing as content (p. 181-
2). (italics mine)

This is wonderful good fortune for a young scholar who knows nothing of the
‘Western Canon’ or indeed of our literature. Yet, amazingly, academics of the period
could acquire a PhD in English literature without having read any, or very little anyhow.
I have read Harold Bloom (1995) and have always been of the view, handed down from
Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards and my mother, that being exposed to the
great writers of all time is required reading for literate people. Or, as the blurb on the
back of my copy of The Western Canon says of his vision:

[it is]... infused with a love of learning, compelling in its
arguments for a unifying written culture, it argues eloquently and
brilliantly against the politicization of literature and presents a
guide to the great works and essential writers of the ages. (back
cover)

But the 1960’s proved to be the beginning of the end for this view, and it is
useless to even try to discuss it among the post-modernist group. I do feel, however, that
everything that has gone before is not necessarily obsolete. It is the old argument which affects all disciplines and which is articulated in an article by Emily Eakin (2001) which I first read in the NY Times. She, like Hoffman, graduated in English while the postmodernists reigned. She worries about what she has missed and takes solace from advice from one of her professors. He tells her that she may feel a little deficient for not having read Milton, but that her thinking about Derrida was likely far more profound than that surrounding the apparently only vestigial study of Milton and Shakespeare by college kids in the U.S. He tells her that putting Great Books on the syllabus does not magically produce educated and thoughtful students.

Eakin says also, that:

...fluency with the Great Books is no longer a prerequisite for professional or social success. Critical thinking skills arguably are...[and] those, some English professors are willing to admit, can be honed just as well through considerations of ‘Sex and the City’ as [through] ‘Middlemarch.’ This may be lamentable, but it’s a social reality nonetheless... (p. 1)

Replace Middlemarch with Sex and the City?

A transformative process for me has been realizing that because critical thinking skills can be applied to works outside the canon, fluency with the works within it is no longer necessary for one to call herself educated. It was my belief and prejudice, I realize, that certain classics could not be overlooked. I now understand that no one has all the answers. I also have learned that just because certain theories prevail (the new canon, or the old one), does not mean that they will endure. There seems to be a certain circularity to methods of teaching anyhow. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) nails the idea in Peripheral Visions when she says that “even what appears to be a repetition is often a
return at the next level of the spiral or more mysteriously, the other side of the Mobius strip” (p. 29).

My transformation has been an ongoing process, and although I continue to include Shakespeare in my course outline, I am amenable to alternate choices. But I did urge a second language student to choose *Hamlet* over an easier play, as I felt she’d enjoy it. In return, she gave me a copy of the movie, *Renaissance Man*, with Danny DeVito teaching *Hamlet* to unwilling soldiers. Transformation occurred in the film when the soldier-students explained a character’s motives to each other in their own idiom, and when they turned blank verse into a rap session so they could hear the iambic pentameter. Transformation occurred for my student when she and I explicated parts of *Hamlet* together.

But Hoffman had a step up on these students. She had a cultural background which caused her to realize that it was as important for her to speak well as it was to play a piece of music without mistakes. She says, it was odd “that I know what is correct, fluent, good, long before I can execute it” (p. 122).

She had apparently, an inner timer, an intuition guiding her. She says:

> Being an alien myself in the midst of all this alienation turns out to be no disadvantage. For one thing, New Criticism is an alienated way of reading meant for people who are aliens in the country of literature. It prizes detachment, objectivity, and the critical rather than the sympathetic faculties. It is a very cool criterion, but also an egalitarian one, for it requires no privileged acquaintance with culture, no aristocratic, proprietorial intimacies of connoisseurship. (p. 183)

As an alien in the world of New Criticism, I have had to discover Barthes and Bakhtin and consider their take on writing and narrative, which breaks from the conventional narrative style and invents anti-linear forms of narration, (well, not quite,
there is the 18th century’s *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy Gent. 1759-67* by Laurence Sterne (1997) which leads to “a recasting of the genres of fiction, autobiography and essay,” says Susan Sontag (1982). When he writes about himself, she tells us, Barthes says on the first page of *Roland Barthes*, that whether he uses ‘he’ or ‘I’ one must consider the person speaking as a character in a novel. “Let the essay avow itself almost a novel,” (p. xv), he says. Sontag quotes Barthes further saying:

Strategies used to achieve... an ideal digressiveness and an ideal intensity... [are]... to abolish some or all of the conventional demarcations or separations of discourse, such as chapters, paragraphing, even punctuations, whatever is regarded as impeding formally the continuous production of (the writer’s) voice—the run-on method favored by writers of philosophical fictions... Joyce, Stein, Beckett... [or]... to multiply the ways in which discourse is segmented, to invent further ways of breaking it up. Joyce and Stein used this method, too... (p. xv-xvi)

All this is difficult for a teacher of proper grammar and style who circles the run-on sentence, the fragment, spelling errors and incorrect or missing punctuation in her students’ work on a regular basis. It often occurs to me that I must quit teaching if I want to be a real writer, according to Barthes’ theory.

Rather than seeing all writing as a political act, as some socialists suggest, or as an act of a writer who only exists in a moment of time, as Barthes sees it, Bakhtin’s view is that words have social significance and language is dialogic, that is, that more than one voice is heard. In the novel, all voices or many opinions are discussed and the writer presents them and then backs off.

Dostoevsky is Bakhtin’s model novelist, not because he is the only author who is dialogic in nature, but because he is the writer in whose language the root of all human communication - dialogic relationships - is most clearly in evidence.
If Barthes' assertion that the author is dead means that there is simply text, which is a compilation of ideas filtered down to us through time, the novelist's job is to present the various faces such ideas might express. In *after Bakhtin*, David Lodge (1990) says when he taught contemporary British fiction including Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* of the fifties, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Muriel Sparks' *Not to Disturb*, Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and *The White Hotel* by D. M. Thomas, *The History Man* by Malcolm Bradbury and *Money* by Martin Amis, he showed how recent developments owe much to Bakhtin and his theory of the novel:

... the carnival face-pulling, the parodying and travestying of academic discourse in *Lucky Jim*, the invented polyglossia, the *skaz* energy and vitality, the *Notes from Underground* subversiveness of *A Clockwork Orange*; the disconcerting hybridization of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, its deliberately unresolved juxtaposition of nineteenth-century discourse with twentieth, and of two antithetical types of fiction categorized by Bakhtin as the existential adventure story and the social-psychological novel of everyday life; the parodying and travestying of literary genres in *Not to Disturb*—the whodunit, the Gothic novel, the Jacobean revenge tragedy; the violent clash of discourses—visionary, parodic, clinical, pornographic, documentary....(p. 23-4)

Lodge, of course, writes carnivalesque novels about academics. My memoirs strike me as being somewhat carnivalesque also.
Part Two: Memories

On Memoirs

I’ve been reading other people’s memoirs all my life it seems, but lately it’s a concentrated effort. The other day I bought Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman, by Nuala O’Faolain (1998). But it is only accidental methinks, because she took her diary and edited it for publication. I’m enjoying it as it is about an Irish Catholic girl who grew up in that stifling atmosphere before she broke loose in the sixties. After that time she had a most interesting life as she won a scholarship to Oxford and taught university English at University College, Dublin. She met all the people we only read about in Canada at the time, especially later when she was working for the BBC. She interviewed Norman Mailer, Kingsley Amis and John Betjeman and she refers to Joyce Carol Oates and Edna O’Brien and the (almost non-existent) effect these early feminist writers had on the establishment there, compared to the rest of the world.

She describes how the old Ireland was ending in the 1960’s, but so was old everywhere else, as I recall it. She says she once passed Elizabeth Taylor in Oxford where she was hired to stand there as Helen of Troy in Richard Burton’s production of Doctor Faustus. Funny, I saw Taylor too, in the sixties, at The Westbury Hotel at College and Yonge in Toronto (I remember dinner there with the famous ‘cherries jubilee’ dessert) and I was also impressed by her violet eyes, so large in the face of a very small woman. She was hiding out there with Burton for a while. She was, is, beautiful.

The sixties reminds me of reading the group from Big Sur: Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, Alan Watts’, On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are, Ram Das (Humphreys), R.D. Laing, whose books I still have, like The Politics of the Family,
William Schutz in a book called *Joy* and all of James Baldwin, beginning with *Another Country*, and all of Doris Lessing: *The Four-Gated City; Martha Quest*.

I’ve been reading Elizabeth Smart’s memoirs lately and Mary McCarthy’s, too, as well as her letters to Hannah Arendt. I’ve been reading excerpts from an anthology of Canadian writers like Richler, Barry Callaghan, Timothy Findley and Joe Rosenblatt, and I find that these novelists all write from their own pasts even when it’s disguised.

O’Faolain’s book came out in 1996 but she’s writing about being young and at university in my time in the world. She is from a poor, working class family in Dublin, and her experience of Catholicism is far more negative than mine in Protestant Toronto. Also, my parents were university educated and liberal minded and we were not poor. But she was active in the women’s movement of the time and I can relate to everything she is reading and writing about. When finished, I should do a book report on it.

**Snapshot**

I’m standing in the middle, a brother on each side. We’re holding hands. I’m standing with my tummy protruding as usual; so that my tunic is raised in the front and the top of those ribbed brown stockings are showing. My hair is longish and curled the way hair looks that is done up in curl rags every night and it is held in place by a ridiculously large ribbon tied in a bow on the right side of my head. The boys are in corduroys—brown for Bill and navy for Tony—and Bill’s head is to one side so he can see through his good eye. His head is always to one side in pictures. (This snap is substituted for the one I remember)
We are standing on the side lawn next to the ivy-covered brick wall of the side porch, in front of a flower bed with reds-geraniums, I think, and whites and pinks and yellows, maybe some mums as Mother loves them, especially yellow. The Japanese gardeners take such good care of the grounds around our house, which is not gigantic, or a mansion, but just a respectable looking house on a corner lot in Moore Park, or North Rosedale, as mother insists on calling it. Down a slight incline is a tricycle with a wavy line down the front wheel where someone held a tool—a screwdriver maybe, against it while turning it, forever identifying the bike as belonging to our family. (The picture on the left is another substitute snapshot)

Mother and her sister are in front of us; Mom taking the picture and Gaggie, (my Aunt Sheila) trying to make us look up and smile. She lives with us and she and Mom and I have lots of fun together. Gaggie always looks smart as she works downtown as a secretary and wears chic business suits and huge earrings and lots of bracelets and spike-heeled shoes and she’s beautiful, I think, and she can play anything you can hum for her on the piano. When I grow up I’m going to be just like her.

I love Mom best of course, but she just looks like a mother. She wears a cotton dress and sandals. She used to be a librarian and she reads a lot and gets our meals and says she is not a good cook. But I don’t believe her as she always cooks the food we like and we eat at 5:30, before the grownups. They eat late at night, sometimes even after we’re in bed.
Little Princess

I’m turning ten at Christmas. Mother has decided I must have my own room. She has had a series of girls, teenagers from large French Canadian families, living with us to help out while they go to school in Toronto to learn English. Mom needs a hand as she had three of us in five years; me when she was 35 and the boys 2 and 3 years later. As I approach adolescence, she has decided to sacrifice that help and give me the girls’ room with the Ensuite bathroom. The boys no longer have to share the double bed held up by books on two corners where they’ve broken off the legs by jumping on it. They fight over my single bed next to the window.

Mom and Gaggie work for days preparing my ensuite. They buy new furniture—a bed with a bookcase headboard and matching dresser; they create a dressing table with folding mirrors and make the skirt to match my bedspread and drapes. They decorate the tiny two-piece bathroom with Roarin’ Twenties wallpaper. Later, Dad has the new grey,
indirect fluorescent lighting over the wonderfully wide counter space, which has built-in drawers and cupboards under it. The tiny floor is newly tiled to match the grey and pink of the counter. The small window over the toilet has fluffy pink curtains with ties. The bedroom barely holds the double bed and dresser, but it looks out on the back yard and flat-roofed double garage onto which we get by climbing a tree on its far side next to our neighbour’s porch, and from where, by the time I’m 13 or 14, neighbour and boyfriend Mike, throws stones at my window when he wants me to sneak out.

This room is where my friends stay on sleepovers, where I stay up late reading *Nancy Drew* and in my teens, to devour Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*. I read Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Evelyn Waugh, Somerset Maugham and E.M. Forster—from mother’s bookshelves. It is where I write my first of a series of diaries. I never have a phone in it though, just a clock radio. It is where I try on my first formal (strapless but mother makes a tulle wrap which drapes my bare shoulders and hooks into the dress on each side), and it is where I cry over the expensive shoes she won’t let me keep. It is the room I live in until I leave for college at age 18 and the one I occupy for a few weeks before I leave for Stewardess School at 20. Except for the dressing table, which is obsolete after the new bathroom, nothing in that room changes until I leave to get married at 23.

My aunt moves out of the basement suite, which is really our recreation room. It has a fireplace and bathroom with shower. While I will miss her, I’m glad to have the room back; I escape family feuds and sleep there on the couch. When Dad is away on business, I make my move.
Ugly Duckling

I get Mike and a pal and my brothers to move all the contents of my room to the basement. I am seventeen now and I crave privacy. I have a blissful week until Dad returns home. He’s flabbergasted.

“How dare you make over my house without my knowledge,” he cries.

“But Dad, it’s only my room I’ve moved and I need a little peace and quiet... mostly quiet. I can’t think in this family!”

“You’re spoiled and it’s my fault! I have given you everything including driving lessons at 15. How many other girls have had that?”

“That was for you and Mom. You don’t drive. You needed a chauffeur!”

“When I need you to pick me up you complain.”

“I’m in grade 13. It is a lot of work and I have to study!”

But Dad points out that my grades do not reflect even a modicum of effort and that I may have to take the year over to get into university. Also he tells me that while I live in his house I will obey his rules. We have to put my room back before he gets home tomorrow. And he stalks off.

I think what annoys him the most is what I hear him mutter next.

“It’s a fait accompli! She’s 17 and she presents me with a fait accompli!”

My marks are terrible. I’ve spent all my time arranging for our graduation dance as I’m class president and it’s my job. But, it’s not supposed to interfere with studying. It is 1957, and Dad is working hard for the conservative party with a view to making Diefenbaker our next Prime Minister. This means a certain amount of traffic and parties in a house that is not conducive to study anyhow, odd as that seems, as both parents are
university graduates. I’m desperate to go away to college. Dad arranges for me to take the courses I failed in first year at Western University in London, Ontario. He reminds me that it is a second-rate school and that I have disappointed them by not getting into St. Mikes at U of T, their alma mater. I am sad they are hurt and happy beyond measure to be going away. I pass my first year by the skin of my teeth and move from a convent dorm into an apartment with 3 other girls to begin my second year. This is a disaster!

We go to football games and date the players and become dancers and singers in the college presentation of *Pyjama Game*. We rehearse and party and sit up all night talking about intellectual things; all the books that are not on my curriculum are discussed, and pretty soon it’s exam time and I fail. Dad is furious and won’t waste more money on me and I’m so ashamed I could die. I get my eldest male cousin to co-sign a loan (women have to have a male co-signer), go back to school and work harder and pass this time. How did I get along for so long without studying and get passing grades? It is obvious that I’m only playing at being a student. Besides, I’m in love and I want to get married like so many of my friends. I’ve been a bridesmaid for four girls, oddly, all named Patricia. My bridesmaid dresses have all been pale blue as it’s May or June each time. I don’t want to be an old maid but I do want to live a little first. It’s time to change my life but I’ll spend the rest of it trying to make up to my parents, taking business courses including the principles of buying, inventory and quality control, contract law and so on, through the Purchasing Management Association of Canada, and later by getting my undergraduate degree and a certificate in teaching literacy, and a PBD and most of a second one. I have enjoyed doing these extra courses in English and the Humanities and in doing all the recent ones in curriculum studies toward getting my M.A.
Toward Becoming a Swan

Working at the CNE (Canadian National Exhibition) the summer of 1959 in the Queen Elizabeth building where Trans Canada and American Airlines have a booth, I apply to both companies, and hear from American first. They fly me to LaGuardia Airport via Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Schenectady, and Albany on a DC6. When I arrive I’m a nervous wreck from the half-dozen cups of coffee I’ve devoured on each leg of the trip. I’m taken into a room full of strangers who ask a lot of questions and make me walk and turn around and say they’ll let me know and I return home. I tell my Dad not to worry, that I hope I don’t get the job as I get airsick. But I’m notified that I’m hired and told to get a permanent working visa for the U.S. Dad talks to a friend of his and gets things rolling that fall and I go first to the police station to verify that I have no record and then I am finger printed. Then I go to the American Consulate on University Avenue and swear on a bible that I am not going to the States to commit various awful offences, including prostitution. I feel that I’ve narrowly escaped jail. I’m in Dallas at Stewardess School by August of the following year.

Our six-week training is intense. We learn first aid and safety procedures including how to get out of aircraft down chutes, over the wings and down ropes. We learn airplane parts, especially how to operate the buffet area. We learn that the passenger is always right and that the captain is in charge. We have an awful lot of fun except that I am always on a weight check and always hungry. We graduate and my base is New York. Dad is proud of me when he gets to travel first-class and free to Mexico and enjoy the hotel discounts I’m entitled to get for all of us. I’m sort of redeemed. But not really.
I Remember

I remember that I don't remember being born, but of course, I remember what was happening in the first years of my life. I remember a constant feeling of fear and of horror even. I remember that the adults stopped talking when I walked into the room.

I remember going over to the corner of Mt. Pleasant and Moore Avenue to see “Arty March.” My Uncle Art was a soldier. It was sometime during the war and I was 3 or 4 years old. I remember the kilts. He was in the black watch regiment, I am told. He marched away that day and we didn’t see him until well after the war as he went straight to hospital after he was released from prison camp. He was suffering from starvation among other things... and some of the whispering I heard had to do with his being only ninety pounds, and having had part of his throat grow together (did I make that up?) due to lack of food. I remember being in school and learning to knit squares of 40 stitches down and 40 across, to make quilts for the refugees overseas. I remember Mom and my aunt knitting khaki socks and gloves to send to Uncle Art in prison. They were sent in Red Cross packages, which also had chocolate, biscuits and tinned milk. I remember that in later years, I always had Carnation milk in the frig. when Art was coming, as that was the only thing he liked in his coffee. I remember hearing about the atrocities when the concentration camps were liberated. I remember having nightmares about lampshades made of human skin and soap made of human fat.

I remember the films that came out after the war when I was old enough to sneak in with my friends. They were the cheap movie houses, smelling of popcorn, which showed double features, newsreels and cartoons. I remember that the Japanese prison guards were so evil and often had buckteeth. I remember a film where they cut out the
tongue of one of our boys and put out the eyes of another and together they struggled along a path and over a mountain to the Allies. The idea was that the one who could see to get them there could say nothing without a tongue about where they had been, and the blind one with the tongue could tell nothing about what he couldn’t see. Now it makes me think of Gloucester in King Lear and his bravery and redemption. Then it only gave me nightmares.

I remember later years in school when we were told that the Communists were evil and just like Hitler had tried, were hoping to take over the world.

I remember hearing about further atrocities, of nuns and priests being flayed alive and of children informing on parents who were then tortured in any number of disgusting ways. I was brought up hearing such horrors as only people entranced by the idea of suffering nobly for the sins of the world, thus gaining a reward in heaven, can dream up.

I remember my father telling me that we were the first generation who had to live with the knowledge of the bomb. I remember watching On the Beach about the last people alive after a nuclear war, waiting for the fallout to reach them. I remember that I was afraid all my young life, without knowing why.

Skating

In Toronto, we grew up on skates. At various times we had rinks in our backyards, as one dad or another shovelled off the snow and stood there with a garden hose making a large puddle, which froze overnight. These rinks were mostly for after supper skating and were bumpy and invariably not well lit, depending on how close to the kitchen or back porch light they were situated.
When I was eight or nine years old probably, we had a skating rink at our school. It was kept in good shape because the boys played hockey there after school. Girls could skate before school and at lunch. And sometimes at night and on weekends, there were “all skates”, open to everyone. But this was dangerous as the boys whisked by in any direction. The rest of us had to skate around them in a disorganized jumble. The paying rinks however, had music and you had to go round and round clockwise, and pass on the right, just like driving rules. A school skating party was planned with a disc jockey and music. He would announce rules and there would be guards to see that they were followed.

Some of the fathers who had played hockey were coming and my dad said maybe, but I doubted it. He was older than most fathers, and anyhow, football was his game. It was my mother who was the skater, I knew, although I’d never seen her skate. And at this point in her life, she had no skates or skating gear. But I had heard that she’d been on the skating team in university. She had been on the basketball team as well. Her U of T yearbook showed a picture of her and another girl holding the ball, and the team in skirts and midis behind them, but there were no pictures of the skating team. I pictured her in ski pants or a short skating skirt even, looking like Barbara Ann Scott in her white figure skates, as she performed a perfect figure eight, or a lovely twirl.

When the night of the party arrived my friends from the neighbourhood came by to pick me up. We were going early to put up balloons and streamers. Then we’d be allowed to get on the ice ourselves, as it was obvious we needed to burn up energy. The adults would not likely last too long. I watched one of the fathers who was shaky on skates, being put to shame by an ex-hockey player dad who was hustling around the
edges, right leg crossing over the left in perfect strides. He was breathing hard, a little out of shape. The old guys were hilarious!

Then suddenly, a solitary figure flashed by the show-off father on his inside, one hand folded behind the back, the other swaying in front in time with the sashaying motion of each stride, weaving in, out and around the other skaters, covering at least two laps to their one, on long-bladed, very long-bladed black racing skates. She wore an ordinary skirt and nylon stockings, a regular full-length coat and hat with a feather! And to my juvenile humiliation, every one slowed down, or stopped skating all together, to watch in amazement as my mother glided by gracefully, showing them all what skating was really about.

Growing Up Absurd

When we were young, we ladies of Loretto
In our dark surge uniforms, white plastic cuffs and collars,
Black tie, black stockings, black oxfords; no make-up,
Were a close-knit group.
No boys to be seen for miles but
We had first loves and girl talk

And cramps and heartbreaks
And pageants and choral groups
Like the Spanish glee club
And the beautiful Ave Verum
In three-part harmony, which gives you chills
And a medley of nursery rhymes
With the famous Dr. Lesley Bell directing,

"Girls and boys come out to play
The moon is shining as bright as day
Leave your supper and leave your sleep
Come join your playfellows in the street...
All around the mulberry bush the monkey chased the weasel
The monkey thought it jolly good fun, Pop goes the, Pop goes the,
Pop goes the Weasel."
And Gregorian chant done with 
Very careful breathing, and 
So many Christmas Carols in Latin, like Adeste Fideles 
And English, like Good King Wenceslas 
And I sang the descant in Silent Night. 
And Nativity plays and St. Patrick’s Day and I was 
The only St. Patrick who made up all her lines 
To the chagrin of our beloved Mother Flora 
Who had chosen me because she trusted me 
To learn them. Why didn’t I? That was grade eight.

In grade nine, Mother Kieran in Home Ec. said, 
“Use some elbow grease”, and I couldn’t find it. 
And Mother Mary Aloysius, ‘Big Al’ said to learn 
The Hound of Heaven, and I can still say,

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; 
I fled Him, down the arches of the years; 
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways 
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears 
I hid from Him, and under running laughter”.

What beautiful mind wrote that? Not Gerard Manley Hopkins, but Francis Thompson. I just looked it up. Not at all like The Windhover. But if ever I were to use a poem as palimpsest, it would be “I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding . . .”

I do not regret my somewhat classical, convent education in the same way that Azar Nafisi (2004) loves her background in Persian literature. That’s another biography I have read recently, Reading Lolita in Tehran. And she is another teacher of English Literature who taught her girls from her own home (when the Ayatollah Khomeini, came to power), all the banned western novels she had taught in America; not only Nabakov, but Henry James, Scott Fitzgerald and Jane Austen. Except for Lolita, which was banned even here when it first came out, one would think that a respectable list especially Gatsby which shows the failure of the American Dream to provide contentment. They’d never
have tolerated Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, which was banned here too. We all read it though.

I have finally got Annie Dillard (1987) *An American Childhood* from the library and have started to read it. I can relate to her childhood experience of waiting for that “something” to come into her room, which was going to kill her, so that she had to lie still, barely breathing. I also waited at age five, for footsteps on the stairs, coming up one after the other and across the hall to the door of my room, where it slipped in and went to my little rocking chair and sat down, and as soon as it began to rock, I could go to sleep, because I knew it was just my ‘imaginary’ friend ‘Bo Quint’, who had come to watch over me for the night.

Another little girl with two brothers and no one to play with when they went off to school tells about talking to her imaginary friends. *The Road from Coorain*, is the Jill Ker Conway (1990) memoir of growing up on an isolated sheep-farm in the grasslands of Australia and of her journey to America, where she earned a PhD from Harvard in 1969. From 1964 to 1975 she taught at the University of Toronto and was Vice President there before serving in 1973 and for the next ten years as the first female President of Smith College. She moved on to M.I.T. and is, I hope, now retired, and living with her husband in Milton, Massachusetts. I say, I hope, because she is just a few years older than I and has accomplished such a lot. Had I read the bio on the last page of the book, before reading the memoir, I’d not have enjoyed it nearly so much. I’d have been intimidated—not that my parents did not encourage me to succeed—but I was getting opposite messages from my peer group who had the usual 1950s notions of a girl’s role and I even married a man who told me that I was too ambitious for a woman.
But her memories are fascinating and I feel written honestly and with great love for her family and for the very tough and lonely life she describes. It is no doubt the spur (and her parent’s genes) required to be ‘successful’ on your own terms. Despite this, there are many points of reference to which I can connect as a child in Canada. One of these is her description of the Red Cross work her mother supervised in order to “raise money for comforts for soldiers, and to produce the standard khaki socks, scarves, sweaters, and balaclavas which Sydney headquarters of the Red Cross said were needed” (p. 47). I remember the khaki wool and my mother and my aunt knitting night after night, and I also remember the multi-coloured diamond socks, made on four needles, the various colours of wool wound around small cards, hanging down inside the unfinished sock, and magically forming the diamond pattern only to the ankle bone. They made diamond sweaters too, but maybe that was later. She also knitted squares in Australia just as we children did in Canada—what a lot of quilts must have been produced from these childish bursts of creative love for the oppressed!

Their curriculum was inherited from Great Britain as was ours. They took English grammar, “complete with parsing and analysis… were drilled in spelling and punctuation… read English poetry and were tested in scansion… read English fiction, novels, and shorts stories and analyzed the style… each year… studied a Shakespeare play, committing much of it to memory” (p. 98) just as we did and much as I still do with my English classes minus the parsing, drills, scansion and memorization, although I do touch on grammar, spelling rules, show them scansion and point them to the excellent website of Dr. Charles Darling in Maryland at COMMNET (found by putting the word commnet into Google or, alternately putting in the title, “Guide to Grammar and
Writing"). I too remember learning the great rivers of the world, the St. Lawrence being one of them, and that we were part of the British Empire shown by the pink bits on the map. This included "much of Africa, all of the Indian subcontinent, parts of Southeast Asia" (p. 101), and our half of North America. I remember being disturbed by the huge American influence in available textbooks when I began teaching in British Columbia in the seventies. Had all the British influence in British Canada disappeared? People in Vancouver seemed far more oriented to the States than people in Toronto. I found this odd then. But I was totally perplexed at the animosity expressed by the teachers I worked with at the time, at having French as a regular school subject. They balked at having French "shoved down their throats" and wanted instead, industrial arts. Now that French immersion is all the rage, no one believes me.

The war in the Pacific was a far greater threat to Australia than it was to us even though we, along with the Americans, sent our Japanese citizens to internment camps in the interior. Conway speaks of her parents' conversations around the earliest reports of the persecution of the Jews, (which snatches of conversation terrified me as a child) and of their most heated discussions concerning the rise of Japan as an industrial power. Her mother, an avid reader of Pearl Buck's novels, predicted that the Japanese would begin to expand in the Pacific. She says that "such conversations always ended with my father reminding her of the might of the British navy and the impregnability of bases like Singapore"(p. 33). I am reminded of how very British oriented is my Singapore born and raised, Chinese friend, Assunta, when Conway says,

we had been jolted out of complacency by the fall of Singapore, the supposedly impregnable British naval base, fortified with guns which pointed only out to sea... So great was the shock that Australians, the most taciturn
of people, had actually been moved to speak about the news to total strangers. Handfuls of refugees began to arrive from Hong Kong, but there were none from Singapore... Many of our friends and sons of friends had been in the Australian contingent in Singapore... the news of Japanese treatment of prisoners and the atrocities committed upon the civilian population of the Philippines... (p. 67-8)

The other person who exhibits such a British influenced education is my Trinidadian friend, Veda, who talks about O-levels in Trinidad, although like me, she was educated later in Toronto. She has read and enjoyed most of the same British authors I have and we are both fans of her fellow Trinidadian writers V.S. Naipaul and Neil Bissoondah. And way back in the sixties and early seventies, my friend Val May, from Australia, and I were devouring South African writer, Doris Lessing’s works which were Lessing (1973) says, of her so-called masterwork, *The Golden Notebook*, “more in the European tradition than the English tradition of the novel” (p. 14). I taught Conrad’s long, short story “Youth”, the chronicle related by the minor character, Marlow, and for the second language students, I used an audio tape which made it easier for them to follow the many events. (I play the audiotape for Joyce and O’Connor short stories also, as the Irish idiom of the last century is so hard for them to understand). They were all impressed with the fact that Conrad learned English at about their own age and went on to become one of the best writers in the English tradition.

But the transition from Polish to English must be easier than the one from an Asian language based on pictograms or ideograms to an English or European cursive script.
This is taken at Sea Island Adult Learning Centre, which was set up as a drop-in centre where we ran an individualized program. I was responsible for administering the Open School online courses for English 11 and 12. I taught History of Film, Family Studies, Communications and Creative Writing too. Like all individualized programs, where it is up to the students to work on their own, the dropout rate was high, and the on-line English courses were discontinued. It was really too bad for the adults who loved working at their own pace and worked so hard as well. The centre is still operating and my former co-worker and friend, Bob, administers various other courses. But administrators must play the game, that is, stoop to the truth of statistics.

**Toronto** – A Copycat Poem

“Hog Town” to the rest of Canada
Power Wielder, Stickler for Convention
Player with Politics and the Nation’s Party Picker
Once Righteous, Now cosmopolitan
City of more different races than any in America.

They tell me you are humid and I believe them, for I have suffered stifling summers in your parks and on your pavements
And they tell me you deceive and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the needy children on playgrounds in the downtown core
Hoping for careers for which so few will qualify
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of the
homeless teens I have seen the marks of wanton drug addiction
And as I grew up there, I turn once more to those who sneer at this my
city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:
Come and show me another city with such a proud array of races and
languages and cultures all pleased to be alive and strong and scheming
To beat the system that is designed to keep them down but cannot succeed,
as there are too many bold, diligent, dedicated and determined ones among
them
Fierce as tigers to make the city work for them and for all who come there
From every country
And every city
Fleeing poverty
And injustice
With hope in their hearts
To be able to work, to build, to live free
Outside of the smothering dust of dejection and with laughing white teeth
To embrace the hope of freely choosing a course appropriate to the person
Each man or woman has become, and each child hopes to become
Bragging and laughing that they have made it to Canada, to Toronto, to
dwell among the people,
Laughing!
Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of people, who hard
working, sweating, are proud to be from Hog Town,
Power Wielder, Stickler for Convention
Player with Politics and the Nation’s Party Picker
Once Righteous, now cosmopolitan
City of more different races than any in America.

Imitative poetry from Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago*
Western Living

Now that we live out west, we can enjoy what it has to offer away from the city. Friends moved their house board by board from Richmond to the island.

Spider Lake in August - An Exercise on Observation and Naming

My friend, Judy, asked me to visit. It is so quiet and peaceful here – you can hear the locusts, cackling. Judy is watering her mammoth garden and teaching me about the arbutus tree which you can hear growing as it sheds its skin like a snake. Last night we picked raspberries for dessert. We took our dish of ice cream outside and picked them to put on it. She has strawberries and blueberries too, from spring to late summer, as they are ever growing. Tonight we are going to have fried green tomatoes with green onion and zucchini; all just picked from her garden. Judy has taken down the little humming bird feeder to put in ‘nectar’ she makes for them (1 to 3 cups sugar to water). They’re here from mid-March to the end of July when they return to Mexico or Brazil. Now, I know how lovers of Robinson Crusoe feel. That novel is a favourite listed by men. And
the home ‘fix-it’ programs are popular for men as well as for women as Martha Stewart has made herself rich by proving.

Judy has multi-coloured petuniae, yellow and cream marigolds, pink and purple asters, cosmos growing out of a tree trunk, hydrangea and a beautiful blue, pink and coral coloured hollyhock and many little fir trees from a tree farm down the road. She has white and purple grapes for cabernet sauvignon and ivy growing everywhere. There are bald headed eagles, ravens, loons, herons and of course, Canada geese. Besides the pine, fir and cedar, there are alder and maple deciduous trees. Sweet peas are growing up the side of the house.

The mountain ash with orange berries, the cherry tree and walnut grow among the spruce and pine which droop pots of yellow leaves to match the yellow water lilies and the yellow canoe and yellow umbrella over the table next to the yellow begonia. The sunflowers are near the house alongside foxglove, also known as digitalis. All around us is the sun that warms us into a feeling of laziness and lustrous bliss.
The Canada Geese landed next door and we watched them swim by in single file, past the beach where Judy was afraid they'd land (and soil) on the way to the other side of the lake. This morning we went to the market in Coombs where I bought a full-length blue tie die dress with large pockets for comfortable wear. We went to the SOS store in Parksville that Judy likes, where I got some old dress patterns for 25 cents each. Yesterday, we went to Courtney and Comox and had lunch in Qualicum Bay at a seafood place. From Coombs you continue to Port Alberni, but the Courteny-Comox highway leads to Campbell River. The ferry to Denman Island leaves from Fanny Bay, between Qualicum Bay and Courtney.

The bus travel bit is now a cinch. All I needed was tickets on my luggage and I watched it transferred automatically. I must find out about jobs on the island...living expenses are so minimal here. I'd like to be able to work from home, whether writing or teaching or both. I must concentrate on doing that.

I am having a fine time sitting on the top deck in the wind. I feel as healthy and as large as a horse, but who's to notice or care anymore.

The Way We Were

Having bought the new Bob Dylan (2004) book of memoirs, called Chronicles, Vol. 1, as a present on Saturday, I am almost finished reading it, and must make notes before I wrap it up. The very good review in the NY Times on the weekend drove me to get it for Paul's son, Greg, as he is such a fan. Dylan is a poet, and he writes like one. He undoubtedly stretches the truth more than many memoirists but he is more creative by nature. I don't say he lies like James Frey has been accused of doing in his memoir A Million Little Pieces, but he creates his own bio as he goes. Still, it's an enjoyable read.
He writes about New York in 1961, when I was there. He opens by going with the music publisher, Lou Levy to Jack Dempsey’s restaurant on 58th and Broadway, where they sat down in a red leather upholstered booth and he met the great boxer. I remember that restaurant and the red leather booths. I think Dad took us there. He was such a Dempsey fan that we had a print of the Dempsey-Firpo fight in our recreation room and one of the earliest bits of history dad made us learn was, “Firpo knocked Dempsey out of the ring but Dempsey knocked Firpo out!” One of the best things that American Airlines did for us was to give us passes to travel free with our parents, and first class too!

This is Mom, Dad and I taken in Acapulco in 1961... and I had just become a smoker. At the end of the fifties and early sixties Dylan says, things were ‘pretty sleepy’ on the Americana music scene... years before the Beatles, The Who or The Rolling Stones “would breathe new life and excitement into it”. He was doing folk songs, as was Pete Seeger from the Weavers, but they were not yet the rage.

Dylan uses flashback enough that it confuses me and he admits that he lies terrifically to make a good story about having hopped a freight to get to New York when he actually drove in a 1957 Chevy Impala. In Greenwich Village he found many singers while he was trying to find Woody Guthrie. He played The Café Wha?—a liquor-less
sub-terranean cavern—where the amateur daytime performers stopped at about 8 pm to make way for the professionals among whom were comedians like Richard Pryor, Woody Allen, Joan Rivers, and Lenny Bruce. Tiny Tim, the falsetto-singer, played only in the afternoons. He heard Ricky Nelson on the radio and liked him.

New York for me in 1961 was different from Dylan’s, yet folksy from my point of view. Nat King Cole’s “Unforgettable” was big on my list of favourites that year as was our ‘college song’ stolen from a version of San Francisco, no one remembers now. It was an ode to female flight attendants, known then as stewardesses, and included such lyrics as, “...and the girl who serves you all your food is another tasty dish/ you know you can’t get a new way of livin’/ till you’re livin’ all the way’ In San Francisco, where is that? /California, that’s where’s that, /California, U.S.A.

My best friend from American Airlines Stewardess School in Dallas was a girl from the tiny town of King’s Mountain, North Carolina. Phyllis had been chosen ‘Miss Congeniality’ at the school, as much for her wonderfully double accented vowels (New York pronounced, Nee-uw Ya-ork) and her ‘you all’s’ (Mimi, don’t y’all tu-ouch those dishes, Ah’m gonna do ‘em all as soon as ever ah gets ha-ome) and general Southern drawl as for her naturally outgoing, friendly personality. She was so ‘small town’ and
naive that she'd even wave to truck drivers who honked at us on the street. She was stunningly beautiful in a very dramatic way, and I was always pulling her out of jams.

Those were the days in the sixties before the women's movement gained momentum and soon enough after the 'women in uniform' of the war years, for our uniforms to be copied from them, with one essential difference. Ours were designed to make us attractive to the men who travelled. Consequently, although we wore the army regulation style hat, white blouse and simple navy skirt and jacket, they were made to fit us absolutely. Mine was so tight that I was always on a weight check and told to lose 5 lbs or be grounded. Finally I had the cleaners let the skirt out an inch or so, after which time I had no trouble. A supervisor sitting at the back of a flight taking notes was our practicum. Later in the airport crew lounge, she would go through your “pocketbook” to ensure that you were carrying your crew manual, flashlight, and a list of other required objects and your overnight bag checking for extra hose, polish for nails and shoes, rollers for our 'bubble shaped hairdos,' and most importantly, for an extra 'waist to knee length girdle'. This was required uniform gear, as you could not have a bulge or panty line showing through your skin-tight skirt. Our stiletto heeled navy leather shoes with pointed toes, had to be polished and our fingernails painted a shade of red to match our lipstick.

We signed a form when we were hired agreeing to quit flying when we were (over the hill?) at thirty-two. However, if a ground job were available we could apply for that. Also, we agreed to quit if and when we got married. Consequently, many girls kept their marriage and in some cases, their pregnancies, secret. When I turned up sporting an engagement ring, I was encouraged by my supervisor to apply
for a job in reservations in Toronto. This was, as it turned out, a good thing for me. But what I find remarkable today is that, we didn’t know this was oppression!

Nor did we care. Coming of age in the fifties, we were in the habit of accepting authority. It didn’t occur to us to ask why things were the way they were; those were simply the rules.

I fell in love with everything about the sixties when everyone questioned everything. And this, in spite of the fact that my neighbour and friend lost her husband to the Haight Ashbury scene when she was pregnant with their second child. He went there one weekend and never returned. (I think now that he was probably gay). And she came close to having a nervous breakdown. They were from Buffalo and he, an ex-seminarian, had been studying at the Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto. I was afraid she was going to stay with us forever, as she had no one else, but a relative called and took her home. She married again happily, (she said) a few years later. I thought of her often when I was first on my own with the kids and had no income, and was going through my own nervous breakdown of sorts.

By 1962 I was married and we had no children for five long years. Instead, we had wonderful vacations, ski trips mostly, as my husband was an athlete who was crazy for the sport. Actually, his passion for skiing is the reason we moved to BC, but learning to ski is something I shall never regret. We had one glorious holiday in Kitzbuhel, Austria, where we skied the Hahnenkamm. I have pictures of the children in their Austrian outfits; lederhosen for David and a dirndl dress for Natalie. I also picked up a stuffed Bonhomme in Quebec, the mascot of their Winter Carnival, when we went skiing at Val Morin in the Laurentians. I think lovingly of the sixties.
A Child of the Fifties

Me and 'the boys' in 1945.

To tell the truth, I am a child of the fifties rather than of the sixties. I am loath to admit it, not only because it suggests my ancient age, but because the fifties was such a humdrum decade compared to the sixties. I have come across an account of what was expected of young women at the time, which has resonance for me, especially when someone says, "Why would anyone have been a stewardess? Did you ever think of being a pilot?"

“No, never.”

It was not even a consideration for a girl then, although I think now that it should have been. It would not have done for me though. I cannot even reset the stove clock for daylight saving without turning it off forever. But here is an observation from this morning's readings, which validates me, as I was, then. In Heilbrun's (1973) discussion of androgyny, she contends that "the connection between civilization and androgyny is close...the equality of the masculine and feminine impulses, are essential to civilization. It is of interest to compare J.B. Priestley on the degree of civilization in Dallas, Texas, in 1954 (where I attended stewardess school in 1960) and Clive Bell on ancient Athens. Here is Priestley:
I am convinced that good talk cannot flourish where there is a wide gulf between the sexes, where the men are altogether too masculine, too hearty and bluff and booming, where the women are too feminine, at once both too arch and too anxious. Where men are leavened by a feminine element, where women are not without some tempering by the masculine spirit, there is a chance of good talk. And if there cannot be a balance of the two eternal principles, then let the feminine principle have the domination. But here was a society entirely dominated by the masculine principle. Why were so many of these women at once so arch and so anxious?... They lived in a world so contemptuous and destructive of real feminine values that they had to be heavily bribed to remain in it. All those shops, like the famous Neiman-Marcus store (a remarkable creation) here in Dallas, were part of the bribe. They were still girls in a mining camp. And to increase their bewilderment, perhaps their despair, they are told they are living in a matriarchy. (p. 118-9.) (italics mine)

Stewardess School was a matriarchy. There were no men there at all. When there were men, after graduation, I do not remember the conversation. It cannot have been about the mind, so it must have been about the body.

About the body

We had classes on makeup, hair styling, on dress codes, on walking and sitting prettily, and on how to speak with a lilt and an invitation. We were to welcome the passengers on board just as though they were guests we were welcoming into our homes. We were to wear our hair in the same style, all of us had to use steel rollers (hell to sleep on) and curl our hair in a bubble sort of pageboy. We had exercises to do with various skin creams and toners; very expensive Merle Norman stuff which came from Neiman-Marcus and which we were forced to purchase. We had to smile most of the time, which always made me feel idiotic. We had to show our hands at any time to have our manicures inspected. How well I remember being told, “Mimi, your nails need fixin’.”
We used nicknames. We had to produce ours on the first day, or make one up, I suppose. Our first exercise was to introduce ourselves, give the nickname, and tell the fifty-odd other girls how they could remember that name. At the end of the hour we could all call each girl by her name. As the only Canadian in the class, Mimi was easy; it sounds French and everyone thought I could speak that language because I also had to sing a chorus of ‘Alouette’. (Did I have to, or did I volunteer?) Most of the Southern girls were ‘Sissy’, for sister. So we had Sissy Sims, Sissy Aimes, and Phil and Mimi, all in one room. We had to call the first two by their first and last names, of course. (I am amazed that I am remembering all this.) My Southern roommates could not spell; at least they spelled exactly as they spoke. They thought I was a genius as I could. I corrected their papers for spelling and grammar just as I do English speaking Canadian kids now who have managed to get through twelve years of school and avoid learning basic grammar or how to spell.

We studied also. We had to learn the parts of all the aircraft in our fleet by name and to have a basic understanding of how they worked. (This was a boon for me when I ended up buying rotable aircraft parts.)

But first and foremost we had to look good. We spent hours in classes on make-up which I had never worn before. I always felt like I were about to go on stage when I got ready for a flight. I learned to smoke. I was always on a diet and it looked glamorous, so I learned to have a cigarette instead of food at every break. We had to learn where everything was kept on board and how to close an aircraft door without losing a finger, and how to operate the obvious buffet items, and we had to practice serving in the required time. That is, we had to serve 108 people in 60 minutes between New York and Toronto. We had to learn the three letter codes of all the cities on the system. We had
tests every day and had to maintain a 90% average. Those who did not were sent home. We had to maintain the weight they demanded when the food in the cafeteria was fabulous. I tasted my first pecan pie; then I starved. We did a lot in six weeks.

On trips we had to obey the captain. He was in charge on layovers as well as in flight. Most of these men were WW2 pilots and old enough to be our fathers. That did not prevent the hanky-panky that went on, although there was far less of it than most people suspected. The captain’s job was to carry the bottle as well. The first thing we did on layover was to change into ‘civies’ and go to his room for a drink. From there we would go to dinner and dancing sometimes or pub-crawling or to a show, depending on which city we were in at the time. It was hard to break away and do things on your own, although I managed it often enough, sometimes to my peril. I have a distinct recollection of a drunken flight engineer beating on my door and yelling at me in Spanish to let him in, but that was rare.

On the way to Neiman-Marcus for supplies, Phil and I got on a bus. For the first time in my life I saw the sign telling Negroes to sit at the back. I had to get off at the next stop or throw up. Phil was amazed. She came from a little town in North Carolina and her ‘darkie’ had always picked up after her. They had their place and she had hers. This amazes me as I write it because the change in attitude today is so dramatically different. But this is how I remember it. After that I became aware of black shoeshine boys on the street and in airports. They did not look glamorous like they did in the old Fred Astaire movies where he would dance around them. I was learning about racism and about misogyny and about life.

Heilbrun (1973) quotes a long section from Clive Bell’s book Civilization. He was a writer and art critic in the Bloomsbury group, a champion of modern art, and
influenced by post-impressionist art critic and painter, Roger Fry. He married Virginia Woolf’s sister, Vanessa Stephen. He says:

For the housewife is a worker; and the Athenian housewife was recognized as such. She was treated with the respect ... The Athenians appreciated her importance; but they also appreciated the importance of the highly civilized woman—they appreciated her importance as a means to civilization. They knew that without an admixture of the feminine point of view and the feminine reaction, without feminine taste, perception, intuition, wit, subtlety, devotion, perversity, and scepticism, a civilization must be lopsided and incomplete.... (p. 119-120)

Perhaps we were important in the way that the Athenian woman was for our feminine taste and perception,

but I doubt it. We were there to serve and ‘lighten a hard-working man’s day’.

Graduating from school and going to work ‘on the line’ was harsh for those of us not yet hardened. Seeing the realities of places like Nashville and Knoxville, Tennessee, dirty cities then, with many poor blacks on the streets, looking aimless and unhappy, was not at all like the movies.
Edward R. Murrow and Me

And that was more than forty years ago. Now here's a clip from the NY Times for April 25, 2005. It's Murrow's obituary, based on the date of birth, which was April 24, 1908. He died April 27, 1965 at the age of 57. Of course, he smoked all his life and had had a lung removed. The second lung could not carry him into his sixties apparently. I quit smoking, which I took up in Stewardess School, where in classrooms, there was an ashtray on every desk. It was considered "in" in those days, and I can still picture a pretty instructress in uniform, standing at the board, chalk in one hand, cigarette in the other.

April 28, 1965
Edward R. Murrow, whose independence and incisive reporting brought heightened journalistic stature to radio and television, died yesterday at his home in Pawling, N. Y., at the age of 57.

(NY Times Obituary of April 28, 1965)

As I recall it, I was working a campaign junket on a DC7, (the aircraft used for long haul trips before the first jets...Boeing 707's took over) going up the eastern seaboard, stopping at all the important cities between Tulsa (we may even have started in Dallas) and New York. On American Airlines at that time, we would have covered probably, stops in Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, Cincinnati, Baltimore and maybe even a swing east to Columbus before reaching New York. I don't think we went into Philadelphia in those days; I cannot remember the three-digit code, which should be PHL, I suppose. Anyhow, I can remember the codes for many of the cities, (CVG for Cinci, when MEM was the logical code for Memphis—called Mempis by a room-mate who came from there). Between the piston and the jet aircraft, I flew trips, especially Champaign breakfast flights from New York to Chicago on weekend mornings, on the turbo-prop.
Electras. Those were the planes that were forever crashing on take-off as they sucked starlings into their jet engines, or whatever other birds were on the ground at the time. Mother would read in *The Globe & Mail* that another 'American' Electra had crashed, and panic. But 'American' meant all airlines in that country, not just the one I worked for...this did not reassure her, however.

I have just checked dates on-line. I see that President Kennedy was sworn in as 35th President of the United States on January 20, 1961. I believe that we were working a flight full of reporters who were covering the campaign, whether on Kennedy's or Nixon's side, I cannot remember; maybe neither, they were just the press entourage for the campaign. I do remember that there was a lot of alcohol and that we were not restricted to serving just two drinks a person. Many of these men were quite drunk when they boarded and I remember one of the girls went up to the cockpit and got the flight engineer to restrain the man who insisted on dancing with me in the tiny little buffet area. He was furious but stayed quietly in the seat into which he was seat-belted, for the rest of the trip. Mr. Murrow was amused, but serious and sober. When I had to make a PA announcement that we'd be landing in about twenty minutes, he asked me what part of Canada I was from. He knew, because I said "aboot" to his ears, not "abowt" like the Americans. Then he noticed my engagement ring and said he hoped some nice young American had given it to me and I was sorry to tell him that my boyfriend was Canadian.

Since those days I have had a certain fascination for Ed Murrow and have read various biographies of him and of William Shirer from the years when they covered the war. Murrow was the first allied correspondent inside the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. He considered his broadcast from there was a failure. He said of the 300
pairs of men's, women's and children's shoes he saw near 300 bodies, "I could have described three pairs of those shoes—but hundreds of them! I couldn't. The tragedy of it simply overwhelmed me".

When he died the BBC's principal news commentator, Richard Dimbleby said, "He reported on the blitz and our struggle to recover from the succession of bitter blows in the early forties. He saw our plight and he shared it with us—staying in London through the most devastating of raids. And he remained a friend of Britain in the difficult postwar years... He told our story in the United States...."

**Time: The Second Snapshot**

It's another threesome and I am again, in the middle. It's made out of numbers or something, as it was taken at the CN Tower in Toronto. It must have been a craze at the time. But it is a wonderfully clear and flattering picture of all of us. I remember the white cotton sundress I'm wearing, purchased to endure the August heat of the east; something we rarely have to suffer out west. David is eleven and Natalie is nine. It is the first or so year I was on my own with the kids and was with CP Air and had passes to get us home
for a visit. Toronto was still home then; we'd only been out west since 1973. David's head is tilted to one side, leaning into my neck, and Natalie seems to be a little in front of me. Her bangs are long, to the eyebrows almost. It reminds me of the pictures of my brothers and I as children.

I believe we were staying in Dad's place in the Sutton Place Hotel-Apartment at Bay and College. He moved there after Mom died and his apartment was on the 30th floor where he had a superb view of the city and of his beloved St. Michael's College. Actually, he lived close to the college so that he could spend time with some of his old priest friends whom he'd known since university days. Dad graduated in 1921 and went on to Osgood Hall from which he graduated in 1924, which is the same year Mom got her undergraduate degree. He had been overseas in WW1, when still a teenager, and had almost died of pneumonia in 1918. His stay in an English hospital resulted in his odd expressions, (or so we thought when children) such as 'the tube' for the subway and 'dressing gown' for housecoat, and for his passion for songs from the Great War, which he taught us to sing in bed of a Sunday morning. I'm one of the few people I know who can sing about Mademoiselle from Armentieres who hadn't been kissed in forty-five years, inky-dinky parlez vous. I also know all the words to Pack up your Troubles— in your old kit-bag, And smile, smile, smile, While you've a lucifer to light your fag, Smile, boys, that's the style— but I always sang 'While you falucifer'' thinking it was a verb and a grown-up thing to do and that a fag was something evil which had to be eliminated, which indeed has proved to be the case. And there was one about Hi dididly-ighty, Carry me back to Blighty, but Dad taught us to sing "Hi dididly-ighty, tickle me under the nighty" much to mother's chagrin.
We loved to stay with him at Sutton Place as there was a swimming pool on the roof and deck chairs for tanning and a superb dining room three floors above us, to which Dad took us for dinner as a special treat. He had a woman come in to cook dinner for him most of the time, so I didn’t need to and it was a terrific vacation for me in any case.

From that central location we took a cab over to the planetarium where one old man, a young woman and two young children sat spellbound watching the heavens and learning that they now had the technology to send a man far enough and fast enough into space that if he were 20 years old when he left, he would be 40 when he got back but the world would be a million years older. We also went by cab to the waterfront where we took a sightseeing trip to Centre Island and around Ward’s Island where mother’s family had had a cottage when mom was a girl. On my own I took the kids to the new waterworks park, which they loved and which was then a new concept. There we met a friend of theirs from school, which flabbergasted them, as we knew how far we were from home. It was a little disappointing too. They felt like I did when I went to Acapulco for the first time, dove into the pool and ran into the jeweller I knew from his shop at St. Clair and Yonge. It rather dampened the adventure to find a neighbour there.

By this time my father was retired from the bench. He had been appointed when Diefenbaker was in office as he had been an ardent supporter, seeing him as a kind of folk hero and solution to every national woe, as many people did in 1957. He worked hard in our riding of Rosedale North to put the man in office. To this day I see him as Canada’s Nixon, sort of, but not as blatantly sneaky. I personally thought he was an appalling fraud and liked Mike Pearson, as Dad did too, having grown up with him in Quelph, Ontario. But what do I know of the politics that made Dad a judge?
We also stayed with my friend, Casey, (whose real name is Pat) and her husband Dick, and their three children. She is one of my oldest friends with whose family I spent many happy holidays. We loved being with them and her daughter, Deirdre, came with us on our jaunts around the city, as she is in between David and Natalie’s age.

The CN Tower picture is not a framed, professional looking photograph. It still has that sideshow look to it. It has an orange border and is plasticized with a hole at the top to hang it on a nail. And that is what I have always done with it—stuck it on a nail in my bedroom, as I’m the one who loves it and treasures the memories it brings me. It was in the bedroom of our little condo; the one I was so proud of finding on my own with a four and six year old. I’d been two weeks looking for a place, the furniture and husband were on the way and I was getting desperate. I rented it with only five bucks down and bought sleeping bags on credit at Sears and moved us in. The kids were bustin’ with excitement because our third floor balcony looked out over a children’s playground and a swimming pool and across the road to the school. And the place had three bedrooms, one for each child; a luxury we had not enjoyed before. We were going to be happy.

We discovered a neighbourhood full of young children and it was July. We went to the playground in the mornings and spent afternoons at the pool and made lots of new friends. I discovered that the school took four-year olds in Junior Kindergarten, which is where Natalie would go, and David was ready to enter Grade One. I applied to have my teacher’s certificate from Ontario accepted in BC and relaxed. Life looked pretty darn good and it was for those very early years in our new environment.
I found the poem below when cleaning out a cupboard full of things written in the eighties when we had acquired our first computer.

**Spitting at Your Mother** – dedicated to the young David, who was leaning from the upstairs window, playing tricks on me as I sat in the garden.

Spitting at your mother isn’t nice  
Nor is throwing cubes of water, known as ice  
After all is said and done  
These are really only some  
Of the things I meant to tell you once or twice.

You have learned a lot of physics and some trig  
But did I ever tell you not to dig  
Into a person’s private papers, or her mail. Things like that?  
Or did I simply fail  
To think you’d think of doing that?

You were young and I was foolish to suppose  
I would think to tell you all you need to know  
But did I ever mention  
That if you want attention  
You mustn’t get it by removing all your clothes?

And while we’re on the subject of your dress  
Did I warn you what to wash on permanent press?  
Or will you shrink and stretch and bugger  
All the clothes of any lover  
Who will leave you ‘cuz I’ve made you such a mess?
Metromania – a mania for writing poetry - from Sir James Murray’s New English Dictionary, 1908

In Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (1711) Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, lambasted English poetry, saying that British poets spend so much time looking for rhyme that their elegant style and metred prose does not produce harmony, rather it produces shocking consonants and jarring sounds. This for some reason that certainly has nothing to do with jarring sounds makes me think of Carl Leggo (2005). It makes me think of his poem, “Lies My English Teachers Told Me” (p. 109). Among the kinds of poems Carl has mentioned is the imitative, which he suggests is an excellent way of motivating students to try writing verse. So as I aim for other than shocking consonants as I imitate his “Lies”.

Lies My Children Told Me

All the kids at school have one
(a pet python?)
We sold more brownie cookies than anyone else
(but at half-price!)
We didn’t drop eggs on their patio downstairs on purpose
(they slipped when you were making an omelette?)
All the kids wear shoes like this
(with spike heels and t-straps?)
We don’t care about that stuff
(porn on the web!)
Jen’s mom thinks its cool
(dying your hair lime-green?)
I stayed after school to help kids with math
(until nine o’clock at night?)
This skirt isn’t too short or too tight
(want to see a picture of you in hot pants?)
Mike uses a little pot, that’s all
(so why is he in jail?)
BUT
They were living, loving little people
looking to lighten my load
learning- -leaving; always
caring, calling, comforting
cooperating consenting
never intentionally making me miserable, seeing unnecessary suffering as
something to shun, in saecula saeculorum.

Last Christmas, Mo, (for Maureen) my friend since childhood, gave me a Latin
calendar, and as we both took Latin all through high school, it was appropriate and lots of
fun for me. This year she gave me the dictionary of forgotten English which is almost as
good... better, no doubt, for those who have never studied Latin. It is where I found the
quote from A. A. Cooper, (1711) who says that lately the poets have reformed gouty
joints by omitting whereunto, whereby, and therewith... and let whole verses pass in
monosyllables, which he considers no slender negligence.

Our choices may have some of “the shocking consonants and jarring sounds” or
the “complicated [thoughts, that] are so curiously strung one to another”, that perturbed
A.A. Cooper in 1711 (we don’t necessarily choose Frost, Gwendolyn MacEwen or
Brooks, or Wordsworth) and we might “let whole verses... pass in monosyllables” but
this is, methinks, a slender negligence. Poetry must be relished; needs to be chanted and
sung, a veritable wallow in words—even if you’re not a poet, you can enjoy it.

Babbling and Doodling

Today I’m marking poetry projects; almost everyone gets an A.

Contrary to what I was taught, I grade these artistic efforts
(The first assignment of the year),

with a well-deserved first or second class.

Encouraging even the least able of second language learners

To keep up the hard work. The project involves simply

Choosing favourite songs and rhymes
On a particular topic (I cite love, death, war, childhood)
And discussing the theme and poetic devices in three of them.
Charles chose ‘cars’ and found many poems on the net about them
And shiny pictures of his favourite models in magazines.
Alice did ‘clouds’ and made a tree of cloud shapes on which to write her verse
Kahori did ‘money’ and in the Japanese way of things, her simple collage of
Spaces was scattered with coins and flowers and colourful bogus bills and
Wise insights into the way money affects people.
Olena made a graduation robe and a scroll with pocket into which she put poetry
Pointing to that milestone in life.
Recognizing rhyme, assonance, couplet; tropes
Appealing to the English-speaking ear, posed problems, of course.
That is why the Exercise matters;
That and the fun of making a pretty project filled with words, words, words that
we cherish and sing and will always remember.

Writing and Spirituality

In her chapter on writing and spirituality, bell hooks (1999) says that little is
written about the connection between writing and spirituality as writers are reluctant to
speak about this subject for fear of looking foolish, but some have; Alice Walker, for one.
When describing the process of writing The Color Purple, she spoke “of images
appearing in her dreams, of voices, of spirits calling to her (p. 128). Then there is Jack
Kerouac, who is portrayed by hooks as surprisingly spiritual:

In 1959 Kerouac would tell the world that the heartbeat of his
transgressive spirit was triggered in the traditional church.
Sharing his perspective on the origin of the Beat perspective he declared: “Yet it was as a Catholic, it was not at the insistence of any of these ‘niks’ and certainly not with their approval either, that I went one noon to the church of my childhood (one of them), Ste. Jeanne d’Arc in Lowell Mass., and suddenly with tears in my eyes had a vision of what I must have really meant with ‘Beat’ as being to mean beatific…. (p. 129).

This is only surprising really to those who find the word ‘religious’ objectionable and who think of the term ‘spiritual’ as something either mystic or magic. Anyone who has seen the film Amadeus feels that indeed, Mozart had it straight from God, as do those of us who love Shakespeare.

Below is a picture of our ‘Amadeus’ – teen-aged David in a monkey suit at his uncle’s wedding, the year the film came out. Due to his long hair, he got called ‘Amadeus’. He was not pleased at either the name or more importantly at having to wear a tuxedo. It was such a battle to get him into it that I wanted to give up. Now I treasure this picture, as I doubt I shall ever see this ‘drummer’ dressed up again.

He must have spoken from a heavenly authority to have used phrases like this one from Macbeth’s speech after he learns that his queen is dead, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow /Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, /To the last syllable of recorded time” (5.5. 21-2). To the last syllable of recorded time is a killer of a phrase and ordinary mortals would not have thought it. And therein lies the rub. The men and women who get descended upon by a higher authority to create their masterpieces are already genii.

Blake’s genius is breathtakingly apparent when you look at the online William Blake Archive. Here you can see the artist and poet’s work shown in All Religions Are One, “through aphoristic declarations and accompanying emblem-like designs”, as he
argues for the essential unity of all religions. He sees creative ability and true spirituality as expressions of the poetic genius within all human beings. ‘All Religions are One’ implies the unity of the artistic and religious imagination. But we can call it spiritual if we dislike the word religious.

I have been quoting from hooks (1999). Her book is entitled, remembered rapture: the writer at work. She also says that she does not sit down to write expecting her pen will be guided by some unseen force as the proponents of ‘automatic writing’ do. But she does talk about the spirit that “moves into that writing, shaping its direction, that is for me a moment of pure mystery. It is a visitation of the sacred that I cannot call forth at will. I can only hope it will come” (p. 129). I have images appearing in my dreams that I don’t wake up and write about immediately, as they don’t make sense then. Besides, I read A World of My Own: A Dream Diary by Graham Greene (1992) and his dreams strike me as silly, but funny too. This is from a review by Malcolm Bradbury in the NY Times of January 8, 1995 and which he titles “The Man Who Shot W. H. Auden”.

Greene's "World of My Own" — a carefully organized and edited selection from his dream diaries, which he made and introduced himself, just before his death — is equally the world of his novels, his distinctive, adventurous life as an author, his enigmatic character as a man. It opens us to inner layers of his playful, guilty imagination; it follows the curve of his feelings and fantasies, through happiness and war and love to death. There are stories enough to make another 30 novels, if he were here to write them. This is a glorious short book: an absurdist glimpse into the inner world of a capacious modern imagination, a fine addition to the literature of fantasy. It amuses, it delights, and it reminds us where all the greatest writing comes from: out of a world of one's own.

How does one make sense of a dream?

The chapter called “A Touch of Religion” in Greene’s dream diary tells us that he hates being classed as a Roman Catholic novelist as one of his books, The Power and the
Glory was condemned by the Holy Office. So he gets back at them in his dreams. In what he calls the ‘Common World’ he has met only Pius XII and Paul VI and although he has never met the Polish pope, John Paul II, he does not seem to like him in dreams. He met him in some hotel and felt a strong desire to make his confession to him, but when he opened the door to his room, the Pope was sound asleep in bed and “his face on the pillow had the same charismatic look I had seen on so many television screens” (p. 54). He also shocked Greene by announcing that he was going to canonize Christ, which made Greene feel that “the man must be mad with pride” (p.55) and he later met him dressed in an old pair of very dirty white trousers and looking pathetic.

That’s one way to deal with the sin of pride. Another was when he dreamed of capturing Hitler, only the pride this time, was his. In his real life work in the Secret Service nothing adventurous happened like in his dreams. In one of these, he was in a “richly furnished drawing-room where Goebbels was sitting in a gilt armchair” (p. 15). He had a secret weapon for killing the man in a cigarette of which the fumes were fatal if inhaled. After some time of holding the cigarette as close as he could get to him, he grew desperate and thrust the end of the cigarette up his nostril. He didn’t stick around to see if the man succumbed.

I wish I could remember some of the funny dreams I have had. I have often waked myself up by laughing out loud, at signs I have read around town. In Richmond, almost at the corner of Three Road and Westminster Highway, on the SE side, on the second floor, a sign I looked for every time I passed it, read: “Beauty Saloon”. Somehow the vision of the ladies in curlers, swilling beer, amuses me.
At the deli, the owner specialized in “Roast Beast”. I thought at first, it was just the usual mistake of the oriental making a stab at what he thinks we say, but I have since discovered that it is a commonly known bit of humour. What the Chinese market gardener will always write is the sign for a very expensive berry. Our farm market sells strawberry, or raspberry, or blueberry, at $1.59.

“Be Wear Dog”. Where that comes from is beyond me.

“Half price Seniors on Tuesday,” presumes that someone wants to buy a senior, which is doubtful. This is a common sign, none the less.

“No Exit” “No Entrance” “No.” Here be dragons too. Before Peter Newman stole the quotation for his new book of gossipy memoirs (a very good read), the “here be dragons” was apparently a sign on an ancient mariner’s chart indicating unknown territory. But the list of negatives I made up myself as I have noticed most are cautionary, warning the interloper to stay away. No peddlers. Beware of dog. Keep out or off. Do not put bottles in this container. Don’t step on the grass. No smoking. No loitering. No junk mail. No peddlers. No cash kept on premises. No talking...whistling...sitting...standing... No! Be cheap, be smart, by God, and by the light of the silvery moon.

“No sexual activity allowed on deck” [of swimming pool].

That last one was on a hand note passed through my mailbox by the rather righteous manager of our apartment building!

He couldn’t have thought I was out there doing that! But then again, it went to the eighty-four year old widow down the hall too.

Now, if Natalie had been still living with me, that would be different.
May 10
Natalie’s Birthday and an important day ... 

Natalie was on a baseball team when only in elementary school. She looks so mature here that I think Mom was right when she saw her for the first time. She said, “She has such a knowing look about her. I think she’s been around before.”

According to Thomas Tyrwhitt’s *Glossary of Poetical Works of Chaucer, 1871*, found in my Calendar of Forgotten English, today is the feast of fools. On this day, you must be sure that you are not “awaped” or made a fool of... You, Natalie, could never be a fool!

the deacons ate cakes and sausages at the altar, played cards and dice on it, and burned their old shoes in the censers, with which they incensed the host and the book of the gospels. After the mass was ended, everyone ran, jumped, and danced about the church; some stripped themselves naked and were drawn about the streets in a manure-cart.

From William Walsh’s *Curiosities of Popular Customs, 1897*

Methinks we must be grateful to have been born in the 20th century, after such horrors as this feast where such disgusting revelry took place. Whatever you do to celebrate on this day, I am sure it will be a distinct improvement on that!

My Mexican student told me last night, that May 10 for him is always Mother’s Day, and that his restaurant is busy celebrating another holiday...the day they kicked the French out of Mexico, which the Mexicans no longer celebrate at home, but its big among Canadian and American Mexicans. Isn’t it lovely to know that in Mexico, May 10 is Mother’s Day. David took you and I to lunch at the golf club at UBC to celebrate the two dates, as he takes us out every year at this time.
Things have a way, as Paul used to say, of turning out well in the end. Or as the intuitive like to remind us, there are no accidents. Someday, we must discuss this, as I would truly like to know what you think about it. But in this practical world, our meetings are all about going to the theatre, buying presents for people, or about how a friend of yours or mine is doing. There are inevitably, the things we never talk about, and that is as it should be, it seems to me.

This clean up has revealed such treasures and given me such a backache. Bless Greg for coming last night and carting all those bags of papers to the bins. I lifted the first two and that was my first mistake. We had a good dinner and he said he really enjoyed being with us for Mother’s Day and your birthday.

This is you Natalie, a little older than you were when you wrote this in grade 2, Mrs. Barr’s class. It must have been 1977-78, as your grade 7-class picture is dated 1981-82. You have only written 19.. on the front cover.

Natalie’s Diary

Feb. 23: Melanie and I went down to the fishing boats. We went on a red fishing boat. It was very exciting. The boat’s name was Rockey-Boy. Feb. 24: Yesterday we had brownies. And we had a drawing of an owl and then we put glue on it and covered it with different kinds of seeds. And then we got our owl sprayed with a shiny spray.
Feb. 25: Yesterday night we went to the mall till 9:30 because my brother is a cub and he was going to be on TV. The cubs had to make something. My brother made a box that you roll marbles into and see how many points you get.

Feb. 28: I slept overnight at my friend’s house. My friend’s name is Meline. We were going to sleep but her sister Angie was bugging us.

March 1: We have two cats. My cat’s name is Etta. My brother’s cat’s name is Spot. My cat is pregnet. Spot is very fat. (that doesn’t seem to fit, somehow).

March 2: Our friends our moving and we went to their new house. It’s yellow. (This must be Judy’s house before Romeo took it down and moved it to Spider Lake on the island. Your drawing looks very much like their little house. Your brownie seems to be wearing a pumpkin on her head except that it’s brown).

March 3: Last night we had brownies. The older brownies worked on maps. The younger brownies learned to sew but we still have to practice a lot. (you never mention that Melanie’s mother, Elaine, was Tawny Owl and that I was Brown Owl, which means that one of us thought up and prepared these activities for you).

March 7: On Sunday we went to the swap ‘n shop with our friends. After we went to their house and made tacos. On the 8th you played in the rain and on the 9th you watched a special on Noah’s Ark at Melanie’s called It’s a brand new world. On the 11th, “me and my mom moved the furniture around [and] our house looks diferent”. It was off to the swap ‘n shop again on the 14th and to 2 garage sales and “then we went to the Serloiner for dinner”. On the 15th you report, “Yesteerday we had a fondoo dinner. My mom got stuck on the phone with an Uncle. So we just eated with our friends. On the 16th you tell us that your brother and the cubs are going camping. March 17th. “Today is Saint
Patrick’s day. Last night for brownies we went to the veterinary clinic and a dog had 14 babies and two more are on the way. Then we went to the Dairy Queen”. (Are you sure? 14 and 2 on the way?)

March 22: “Last night our dad took us out to McDonald’s and then to the Dairy Queen. It was fun”. (You have drawn a picture of the new two-seater car showing the little boot at the back that you kids rode in. You have coloured it blue... I remember it as mauve... deep mauve... or maybe deep purple, as in the song).

“Yesterday Rae-Dawn came over to my house and we caught a worm. We put it in a puddle”.

April 6: Tonight is brownies and we are having a fashion show because the brownies made easter bonnets and the mothers are invited for tea and to watch the show.

David was the only boy among the Brownies and I thought I had this picture to prove it.

But you tell me this was taken at Camp Latona on Gambier Island in Howe Sound, and you are right. The scenery alone identifies it. You cried all the way to camp as I was leaving you there and all the way home because you were leaving your new friends and the dogs you had come to love.

Thanks Natalie Anne, I’ve so enjoyed reading this diary and I’m keeping it for you, pictures and all. I will never forget the picnic at Shady Island or Camp Latona.
Part Three: In-class

Let’s Put on the Toleratin’ Pot

Woke up this morning with that on my mind—obviously a variant of Gallagher’s considerin’ cap, from Joyce’s short story “A Little Cloud”. Gallagher, when he was in a tight corner would say, “Half time now, boys, where’s my considering cap?”

A tolerating pot came to me I think, because of something I read in a student journal, which showed a little antipathy to the Chinese students. This girl said that she was tired of hearing these students sniggering in Cantonese about things in English they didn’t even understand. She has a point. She is in the 10% of the class who can enjoy the literature we cover at the grade 12 level. I often think that in Richmond, at least, our classes are unfair to our Canadian born students who understand the language well, as we kowtow to the majority who have to be led through the literature maze as they work at an elementary grade level in their written work, and often, in their reading comprehension as well. We always have discussions of every piece of writing; otherwise, the foreign students would have no idea about any of it. However, it often seems simplistic or lacking in depth due to the limitations imposed by the majority. Good students feel cheated. I try to be fair, but I am given every term, a class of 25, mostly foreign students, nearly all Chinese. They are all there because somewhere they got a piece of paper saying that they passed grade 11, or some equivalent thereof.

When they are tested after about three weeks in class, we get the results, which show the average level of achievement. Mine were at a grade 8 level, this term, that is with four students working at the grade 12 level, some at grade 11, 10, 9 and two at grade 5 and 6. I told the girl at the grade 3 level she could not do the work. I cannot tell the
others that. I have to wait until they have proven it to themselves. When we complain about this circumstance we are told that if we don’t accept these students who have a right to be there, they will simply be accepted in another district and we will lose money for our board and find we have no job.

I am not supposed to be teaching ESL or spelling rules or grammar. I go over the large problems—what is a sentence?—third person singular and plurals need an ‘s’ on the end—and don’t forget the article—and tell them to look up spelling rules (on-line or in a text) as they work, and to read, and listen to and speak English, and listen to radio and watch TV in English. I spend an inordinate amount of time correcting papers, which often, a student pays little attention to, so that I mark the same mistakes again. And on top of all that, I’m supposed to be teaching to a Provincial exam which many of these students stand no chance of passing. English 12 is way above their ability. What is the answer?

None of the foreign students is stupid. But we do them no favour by pushing them ahead in English. I know they are with me because they have been forced through the system by teachers who cannot think of another way of dealing with them. As the man (Truman?) said, the buck stops here, but is that fair?

School Stories: Narration or Story, or My History or Her Story and His Story

Narration is from the Latin verb, ‘narrare’, to relate, lit. to make known. This is what my Concise Dictionary of English Etymology tells me, and I have looked it up because it is question #108 in Carl Leggo’s (1997) article on “Curriculum as Narrative Narrative as Curriculum: Lingering in the Spaces”. He asks in what ways is writing a narrative diagnostic and therapeutic?. This is, it seems to me, the place to start.
There are several stories from school buzzing through my head right now. One has to do with a girl who was a diligent student until just before Christmas when she began to miss classes. She had to work late for three evenings. This happens in sales jobs at Christmas. But then she had a wisdom tooth out and had to miss four more. And I could see she was dissatisfied with her marks (she is a poor speller and guesses at words or simply misuses them) and I have the feeling that she thinks I pick on her and prefer a good student and hard worker who happens to be Chinese. Now, in almost any class, she has an edge on all the Chinese students, (who make up 90% of each class in Richmond) because she is an English-speaking Canadian. She is also pretty and popular. She needs good marks to get into Interior Design at Kwantlen, a four-year program with a BA at the end. She is concerned about having a unique portfolio. She has not yet discovered that her inadequacies in grammar and spelling will hamper her. At least, I think they will. But how did she go through our entire system to grade 12 and not know this? Has no teacher corrected her errors before me?

I suspect not, if that’s possible.

The other possibility is that I am all wrong—that I am a hard marker and am trying to hold her back. Maybe no one cares or will ever care whether she writes a sentence that makes sense or has read the story she is supposed to be discussing. Maybe she will never have to read another story. So what if she writes, “each caracter decides to partisipate but the result leaves them all tramatized”—we know what she means. But this is a bright girl whose only language is English!

She earned 20 out of 100 on her short story test. She was required to answer questions on four out of a choice of six stories, all of which we had discussed at length in
class. She answered three questions only and the best marks are for a story she had done before. She could not answer the questions on the story about point of view, as she doesn’t understand what it is, and she literally made up what happened. She said that part of the story was from his mother’s point of view but the lady is not in the story. She’s dead. In another story she said that the boy killed his father, but that did not happen in any of the stories we covered.

When I returned her paper to her, she flung it in the wastebasket and slammed out. There are two classes left. I doubt that I will see her again.

The second story is about a man in the class, the only one old enough to be called a man. The mistake I made with him has me really worried and it was stupid of me. He is obviously well educated, a science grad of some kind and he works in his field of interest, but he hopes to do his university work again in English so he can qualify here. I know this from a short conversation we had one day. Most information about class members I learn from their journals.

All my students keep a journal. It is in a portable plastic filing cabinet. These are free writings they do at various times in class and I tell them to write about whatever they like so long as it isn’t something they don’t want me to know. I suggest they discuss our literature or I give them prompts if they ask for them, and you can’t hear a pin drop for the 15 or 20 minutes that they’re writing. At Christmas I brought them home and read through them. Of the student in question, who put very little in his journal, I wrote: “Married with a child. He drives to work and cannot bear the thought of going by bus as it wastes time. He is with some kind of digital company and he’s very bright. His English is not too good yet; probably he has trouble making the transition from Chinese culture,
as he is a little older than the others. His journal shows that he thinks well in English when he is not thinking in Chinese and translating.

There is nothing damning there, I know. I have written nothing negative about any of them. However, as luck would have it he saw my list and read this. The only reason I took it to class was that we were writing essays on topics taken from past provincial exams. I had told them to stay away from generalities—to think of a story from their own experience, or that of someone close to them and to tell it in such a way that it fit the topic. These topics are things like, “We learn the most from those closest to us” or “Certain experiences mark the beginning of maturity”. But I knew that someone would say that he could not think of a thing. So I thought that with a paragraph about each of them in my hot little fist that I might be able to suggest something to such a blocked student. Stupidly, I put it at the bottom of a pile of papers I had marked and had passed out.

When I saw him reading it, naturally I told him that it was for my eyes only. He frowned and looked puzzled. Now, truly, I write these little pieces, also, so that I have something pertinent to say about that person to put on the report cards. I cannot abide the factory-produced comments that are passed around and used by many teachers.

Anyhow, he comes from Mainland China and he looked at me as though I were some kind of spy. And to tell the truth, that is exactly what I feel like at the moment.

Sheila the Spy, that’s me.

I cannot tell my students these things as I would be misunderstood. Other teachers have their own student problems and are not really interested. But I feel much better, rather like being shriven. Getting this off my chest was totally therapeutic!
Presentations and End of Term

Last night all 19 students turned up to see the presentations. After much ado about getting the equipment working, and a deal of help from another teacher with his new device for using Power Point, we managed to see three out of four groups present diverse ideas, on point of view, theme and symbol. Two groups made videos—quite wonderful!

The good thing about the equipment kafuffle is that I took the opportunity to pass out the teacher/course assessment and get them all to fill them out. Unlike what happens at university, I have to take them home and I’m supposed to total them and then hand in the whole batch and the summary. After all my worry about the two students mentioned above, they gave me top marks in all categories. I know this because they chose to sign their forms. Students are generally generous on these assessments.

I will have to spend some time on grammar even though it’s not part of this curriculum. I will cut back on short stories. They have cleaned Obasan and Under the Ribs of Death out of our cupboard. Kogawa and Marlyn were my staples. I’m waiting to hear about one of the shorter works of fiction by one of Findlay, Munro or Laurence that I’m trying to get accepted. Apparently, it takes an Act of Parliament. My choices now are the 381-page The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz or Of Mice and Men, which has been in the school since before I started in 1993. Students and teachers alike swap tests and answers. I like both Richler and Steinbeck, but the first is too long for these students and the second is too well used. When I hand out grammar texts next term, students like the girl I described above, who has such poor grammar and spelling, will suggest we have an ESL English 12, so that regular students won’t be held back!
Tomorrow I am having a clean up night after the presentation. Students who have missed assignments and a couple who got very low marks are writing or redoing tests. I will have to mark like crazy on Thursday to get the grades in by Friday morning.

These thoughts are more like a journal entry than free writing but it seems to me if I record them as they happen I will preserve some accuracy. Whether I stick to the truth in a story or not doesn’t matter—I tell the students they can lie a little to make a story better—but I want to preserve the essence of the dilemma, as that is what a teacher is truly faced with on a daily basis—at least this teacher is. The other day I read somewhere, that a personal story that reveals a general truth is going to resonate with readers better than the best essay ever written. I have always known that. But can I write that story?

**What Winston Weathers Thinks, Among Others**

The topic of grammar and spelling came up in my seminar full of teachers learning about how to teach writing. Among the stories told, I mentioned that when I had corrected a student’s spelling of a word, she said, “Yes, but I always spell it that way!”

Our instructor said something to the effect that at least she had her own firm opinion. But is that the answer? Can we all spell any word any way we want? He then told us that the rules were not even firm until about 1880 and that preceding literature had spelled the same word in many different ways. Shakespeare spells words differently, I know, but that was rather prior to 1880. So I’m flummoxed!

To try to get on his wave length and to try to understand how foreign students’ poor English is accepted in the academy, I have been reading the wonderful Winston Weathers (1980) *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, and so enjoying his own
writing as well as the passages chosen from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, from Blake, Whitman, Lawrence, Forster and Tillie Olsen, among others.

Weathers says that as he gets older, many things he wants to say don’t fit within the conventions. Of course they don’t. And as anyone who reads him can see, he knows the conventions and is well within his rights as an educated man to change his style and ignore them. This is patently not the case among the students learning English as a second language. They want to know the rules and ask me all the time, although they don’t want me to deduct too many marks for errors. This is, of course, the crux of the matter. Grade 12 is all about marks.

But he makes a valid point. He says that the practical, young person might just want to be “exposed to, and informed about, the full range of creative doables—to be introduced to all the grammars / vehicles / tools / compositional possibilities now so that even as I ‘learn to write’ I will have before me as many resources as possible” (p. 2).

When he first published this book we were not faced with a classroom full of more second language learners than English speaking students. When most of us were young and becoming literate, this would have been an admirable position to take. As a matter of fact, I can remember having time to fool around with verse forms and other kinds of writing in school. I doubt that they were as inclusive as the things Weathers includes in his book. It’s hard to remember that far back.

But apart from the fact that Winston Weathers is a delightful name, his book is a captivating read. What amazes me even more is that he writes it from Tulsa, Oklahoma. *Tulsa*, the city where just before take-off, we returned to the gate to get the right mix for Edward R. Murrow’s drinks. But that’s another story.
A New Term

It’s always interesting to look out over the 25 new faces at the beginning of term and wonder who will stay and who will go. I can often guess by a faltering failure to find words in English as the student presents himself to the class. But this was not the case with a man in his early forties maybe, who self-confidently introduced himself as an engineer from China. He had the deep, appealing voice of an announcer and very little accent. I asked why, with an engineering degree, he was doing English 12. He said doubtfully, that he’d have to take his degree over in English. I guessed we’d learn more.

And we did. Within the first couple of weeks he told us that he had business dealings in China and in the U.S. that would keep him from class every so often. He also said that he played golf and that we should call him ‘Tiger’. He took the e-mail addresses of classmates so that he could learn, when away, about discussions, handouts and homework. I was happy to see this was a cooperative group, and one that seemed to like the poetry I chose to share.

I like to begin the term with a poetry unit for many reasons, one of which is that there are a ton of tropes to learn, which Canadian students begin studying in grade school. Newcomers have a huge task ahead, and it is necessary too. In grade twelve, the poetry part of the provincial exam might refer to any of these terms and the student must be able to apply them to a given poem. But I give them a handout early so that we have the whole term in which to learn them.

I teach from an overhead to allow for clarification and to give students a chance to apply the terms to various poems. This they do in pairs or in threes and I try to assist each group as they struggle to discover whether ‘innocent tongues’ in “Dulce et Decorum Est”
is personification and/or metonymy, when actually it is synecdoche, which does not mean that it is not metaphor too.

Often, I can see that the students are enjoying arguing over these terms and I encourage that, as it seems to me that the most important attitude toward poetry must be enjoyment or fun. For this reason, the first assignment is that each student must present a poetry project. This is based on poems they find anywhere; in songs, translations from the Chinese, in haiku, in nursery and nonsense rhyme, and in poetry they have written themselves. At the end of two weeks I give them a matching test based on the forty or fifty most common terms from the list. It is not difficult. It is based on what Asian students do best; memorization. All they need to do is match the term with the explanation that defines it. They don’t have to write anything.

The night for handing in the poetry projects and writing the matching test arrived. Everyone wanted to admire the gorgeous artistry of the portfolios but I suggested we do the test first. About ten minutes into it, I felt someone standing beside me. I looked up.

“Do you not know the terms; didn’t you study?” I asked, glancing at the blank test he had put on the desk in front of me. He sighed a long and loud sigh. “Do you mind if I quit?” Tiger asked.

Writers Who Teach

This morning, thanks to Carl’s encouraging words, I pulled out three favourite ‘how to’ books on writing. *A Passion for Narrative* by Jack Hodgins (1993) is yellowed throughout. Many of the passages I marked refer to works I teach or have taught in various grades, which he obviously, has taught too. I have used this book in discussing such aspects of writing as voice, metaphor, symbol and allusion in classes. I was
delighted to discover in the section on revision a story that appeals to me. It may be the way I begin to write fiction.

A young soldier who was visiting William Faulkner as he was rewriting one of the stories in *Go Down Moses*, asked if he could have a handful of the rejected pages he noticed strewn on the floor, as a souvenir. Later, the pages came into the hands of an instructor at the University of Minnesota who made the remarkable discovery that Faulkner had been changing the story from first to third person narration, changing the ‘I’ to “he”. In so doing, the author became the narrator and the whole tone and language had to conform more to him than to the character, thus giving him authority for the story. Then Faulkner toned down the character’s vernacular, retaining just enough to hint at the kind of language used by the character...(p. 239).

Hodgins tells many such stories, often with quotes and excerpts from a variety of Canadian, Australian and New Zealand authors, as well as providing us with many humorous personal examples. I enjoy reading him, almost as if I know him. Well, I did meet him once at a book week fair where he was on a panel of writers. I told him how much I had enjoyed *Spit Delaney’s Island* Hodgins (1976) and asked him how he came to create such characters as those in it and in other works, most especially in *The Invention of the World* Hodgins (1978) which is a novel of delightful magic realism. He said that those characters had been percolating within him all his life, or words to that effect. Ever since, I’ve been trying to find the ones percolating within me. Well, maybe by now, they have stopped perking and I’ll have to make a fresh brew—or at least reheat the old.
I seem to have yellowed the entire 30 or so pages on plotting in *The Art of Fiction*, by John Gardner (1985). But even before I got to those pages at the end of the book I highlighted, the following:

Plotting... must be the first and foremost concern of the writer. He cannot work out his sequence of events without at least some notion of who the characters are to be or where the action is to take place, and in practice he will never design a plot without some notion of what its elements imply... though character is the emotional core of great fiction... plot is—or must sooner or later become—the focus of every good writer's plan (p. 56).

Lord, I can't even make a sensible outline for an essay. Whenever I've had to make one, it has usually been after the essay was written. But plot is after all your map, and I must learn to do it, even if the map has to change to suit the route I find I'm taking.

Anyhow, the subtitle of Gardner's book is *Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, so it doesn't even apply to me.

David Lodge (1992) also wrote a book called *The Art of Fiction* which is based on the literary criticism he taught for years at Birmingham University and is an expansion of a series of pieces he wrote for *The Independent on Sunday* after his retirement in 1987. The articles are topic centred and each refers to one or two short extracts from novels or stories, classic and modern, to illustrate some aspect of the art of fiction. In it I began to understand what the term 'intertextuality' really means. I also learned more about structuralism in his novel, *Nice Work*, Lodge (1988a) and in his book of essays, *Write on Lodge* (1988b). To illustrate, here is a quote from the novel in which Lodge has his heroine, feminist Robyn Penrose, who is a university professor, discuss language with the blue-collar boss of a factory, who is both fascinated and repelled by her. He has said that 'knowledge' and 'freedom' are just words.
“That’s all there is in the last analysis. Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.”

“What?”

“‘There is nothing outside the text.’”

“I don’t accept that,” he said, lifting his chin and locking his gaze on hers. “It would mean we have no free will”.

“Not necessarily”, said Robyn. “Once you realize there is nothing outside the text, you can begin to write it yourself” (p. 362).

She also gives us an excellent description of the difference between two words that are often troubling to students. She explains these words as he is smoking Marlboros, which advertise with a picture of the lone cowboy. She explains that it is not a suggestion of a repressed homosexual, as he imagines. It is simply a very straightforward metonymic message. She also explains the words saying that metaphor is a figure of speech based on similarity, whereas metonymy is based on contiguity. We all know that the Marlboro man is tough!

In metaphor you substitute something like the thing you mean for the thing itself, whereas in metonymy you substitute some attribute or cause or effect of the thing for the thing itself.” (p. 222)

Then she expands on the metonymy, saying the Marlboro ad,

...establishes a metonymic connection—completely spurious of course, but realistically plausible—between smoking that particular brand and the healthy, heroic, outdoor life of the cowboy. Buy the cigarette and you buy the life-style, or the fantasy of living it. “Rubbish!” said Wilcox (p.223).

And let’s face it. Lodge could never have anticipated Brokeback Mountain—the excellent film we saw recently.

I teach metonymy and synecdoche along with metaphor and the usual tropes but I came back to university after the sixties had changed everything. When I was confronted with phenomenology and hermeneutics and the thinking of such philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and others, I panicked. But it was nothing to studying structuralism,
and Saussure or semiotics and Levi-Strauss and Barthes, and recently, Bakhtin. When I was really stumped, I went out and bought two important books:


These two books, without even trying, taught me literary criticism and an awful lot of other things too. A course I took in literary criticism confused and rather appalled me, when I discovered that the professor teaching the subject had apparently read a single classic, *Moby Dick,* and a single poem, *Chicago*— not that I dislike either Melville or Sandburg. He knew Levinas well and his ‘god’, Derrida, inside out. But I could not understand how this philosophy connected with English Literature, or what had happened to ‘the canon’. I soon found out.

**Note from David Lodge and from my students:**

Lodge (1990) brings home these differences in *After Bakhtin,* when discussing “Roland Barthe’s analysis of the classic realist text in *S/Z* as a ‘braiding’ of multiple codes of signification” ... and he discusses how in Austen that “underlying themes and values of the story” are shown through connotation and a skilful use of language so that ‘narrative questions’ and ‘creation of character’ are all ‘bound together’, and “every gesture and conversation is charged with significance” (p. 122). He says:

Another way of putting this is to say that Jane Austen’s novels exhibit in a very pure form the dominance of metonymy over metaphor that Roman Jakobson argued is characteristic of realism as a literary mode. Metonymy is a trop that works by manipulating relationships of contiguity (as opposed to metaphor, which manipulates relationships of similarity). ‘Metonymic’ discourse thus emphasizes sequence and causality, and Jane Austen’s novels illustrate this bias very well. Her novels have a seamless quality, one episode leading logically and
naturally to the next. She is particularly artful in the way she introduces, or reintroduces, one character to fill the space left in the story by another. (p. 122)

This of course, drives one back to Austen to discover that what he says is right and not something you might have noticed had you not read Lodge. But all of this is more sophisticated than my 17-year-old grade 12's need to know for now.

Here is their discussion of these tropes on Nicenet, this summer:

Question:
Actually I get metonymy now but I don’t get synecdoche. "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears;"

Where’s the synecdoche?

Answer:

lend me your ears means... hey! listen up!

Another answer:

i think is because ear is apart of the body... the ear substitute “u” meaning pay attention or listen up.
it is the same as metonymy.. except it have to be apart of it.
 ie. All hands on deck (hand is part of the person)
 that’s how i look at it.. not sure is that right

Question:

mmm how does lend me your ears act as a substitution for a whole object or idea? What is the whole object or idea? To heed what he is about to say?

Answer from one who always gets an A in everything:

its synecdoche because the “ears” represent you....”ears” are a part of the whole, which is “you”....for it to be synecdoche....the thing must be a PART of the object it is representing....

Nicenet is valuable as a platform for student discussion and as a place where you can be yourself among friends. It is a safe place as nothing here is ‘for marks’.
One must remember that these kids are speaking to each other the way they do on-line in all their conversations and it is taken for granted that everyone knows what everyone else means. When they write in their journals it is different. Students often speak of their dreams, their worries, their loneliness, their troubles at home and any number of other personal matters. I tell them not to write anything they don’t want me to know. It is surprising that so many trust me with so much of a personal nature—but like any other journal—they are really writing to themselves. I am careful to shred them at the end of term.

The following are some exercises that we might do in class. These are simply a way of motivating someone to get started on writing a poem or paraphrasing a speech, or of getting words on paper within a certain time period.

Many of the exercises I have done in class myself and have given my students to do. Often we start journal writing with a prompt such as “I Remember” or “I Don’t Remember” or we imitate a piece of writing that we like for any number of reasons; its musicality, its humour, its theme or its content. Or we take on a mask of a particular character or animal or anything else that appeals.

OR we play with ideas like the one below, suggested to me by a student.
LINES ON LANGUAGE (each letter begins a line – a student exercise)

Love the sound of sibilant words like Sounds of Silence
In the song, one of my many Simon & Garfunkel favourites
Nothing is silent at all of course
Elst it wouldn’t be a song
Songs require words and music.
Oh, but I do love the sound of real silence

Nothing to take you away from the thoughts that you are thinking
Longing for noiselessness, I wait till dinner-time to turn on TV
And recall the days when poor sick Paul kept the thing on for 24 hours
Not to be mean but to keep his ruminations at bay
Giving diversion from whatever the body was doing wrong
Until blessed forgetfulness of it was altogether achieved
A brilliant man who always lived in his head anyhow
Gone only when the quality of life had so deteriorated that
Even thinking became impossible.

Or, one can put things in the perspective of Hamlet’s way of being in the world when King Claudius asks him where he has stowed the body of Polonius. Hamlet answers that he is at supper but is not eating as he is being eaten himself. He tells us that only the worm eats like an emperor as it eats bodies. We fatten all creatures to eat and fatten ourselves but at the end of the cycle the worms and maggots eat us. He explains that “Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That’s the end” (4.3.23-5). Or to put it another way, “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm so that a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3. 27-8). When the king asks where Polonius is Hamlet answers, “In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’th’other place yourself” (4.3. 33-5) And that’s one way to tell a king to go to hell. And that dialogue is also a way to find comfort, by contemplating death as a natural end of life, especially when a loved one is so very sick.
Timed Exercises (I wrote these in class. I give them to my own students also).

Bread—I’ve had to give it up mostly and how I miss it. Lost 10 lbs this Lent by not having any bread or scotch; but that’s another story. Bread substitutes just don’t take the place of the real thing... rye crisp and melba toast... but I have found a rice cake with cheese flavour that tastes good with cottage cheese and salt only. I can even work up a craving for it.

Bread is the staff of life and the bane of fat people’s existence... all those carbs to work off... but so little fills you up: leaves you satisfied. My doctor told me to eat bagels... she has one a day for breakfast. They’re OK; although I always wish they were fresh Kaiser rolls. They make the place smell positively scrumptious, —especially with the smell of coffee percolating nearby.

Bread is the other name for money. How much bread do you earn? It’s how I earn my bread and butter. It’s the money you win when you gamble. That’s your bread.

We have the bread of communion for spiritual nourishment. We break bread with family and friends — it is the symbol of the feast — the party.

You can buy black Russian bread; great with pastrami and pickles, or Manitoba rye which is lovely with corned beef and sauerkraut, or with Montreal smoked beef and a garlic dill pickle. There is multigrain, which I don’t much like, and pumpernickel at Christmas, especially for hors d’oeuvres.

Plain white bread or butter crust, which I love, is supposed to be bad for you, and there are sweetbreads ... but that’s another story entirely.

In the story of Exodus, the Jews in the desert were saved by ‘mana from heaven’, and what was that? Why, bread of course. I really can’t live forever, without it!
Red

My childhood friend has been called Red only because her hair is red; not really, but that’s what auburn is called. It is also the colour her shy brother’s face turns so easily, so that when he was called Red, some people thought it was due to his blush, not to his hair. Red, red is the colour of my true love’s hair—well, it used to be—then it went dark brown and black around the edges, the top red having disappeared with time.

Remember, “I’d rather be red than dead?” Well, he wouldn’t have—not a communist or socialist bone in his body.

Red is the colour of the flag they use to enrage the angry bull.

Red is also the colour of the sign used to make us stop.

My colour-blind boyfriend couldn’t always see red – that is, tell it from orange, and we had lots of arguments about running lights.

Red is a lovely colour on auburn haired people but when we were young redheads couldn’t wear red. It was said to clash with their hair. My fair skinned, dark eyed daughter looks lovely in it, even with red tints in her hair.

Red is a silly nickname. Hardly anyone known as ‘Red’ has red hair, or any hair anymore for that matter, a la Red Skelton.

I am told by non-university friends that I am well read – that is, I have tons of books at home and am always in the middle of several.

What else about red can I say? I’m glad we chose our simple red flag with only white and not blue as contrast. Red, white and blue belong to the Brits or to the Americans. At least our red and white flag is distinctly Canadian.

Red roses have often been a gift for me—when I was in hospital I got some and I always get them or red carnations or poinsettia at Christmas. When Diane, my son’s
girlfriend, asked me what colour I’d like in the flower arrangement she’s making for me in her horticultural class, red and white or blue and yellow, I chose the latter. “It’s too early for Christmas colours, I told her.”

When I was in my convent school residence the boys from the Anglican residence next-door, snuck over in the middle of the night and painted the light over the front door – you guessed it—Red. The nuns were not pleased.

I was in love in those days, with a boy from that residence who wore a red jacket. I’ve always wondered if he was part of the painting party. Now I’m very aware of red. President Bush and his group all turn up in red ties on some occasions, and during the debate, both Kerry and Bush wore ties in the winning colour... red, just as the Chinese use red for weddings, for pocket money as presents, and because it means ‘good luck’.

Red means blood.

“Who would have thought the old man would have so much blood in him,” laments Lady Macbeth about the slain King Duncan.

Language One (this was a ‘free-write’ exercise but it was not timed)

Well there’s denotation and connotation and poetry and prose and drama and the accepted forms of speech and rules of grammar and dialect and slang and other languages and second language learners and the changes in styles from medieval to romantic to modern to postmodern and there’s vocabulary and tone and mood and imagery and language that appeals to the ear like such rhetorical devices as alliteration, assonance, cacophony, consonance, end and mid rhyme, masculine, feminine and triple rhyme, euphony, onomatopoeia, repetition, feet such as iambic, trochaic, spondaic, anapestic, dactylic and meter, such as monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter,
hexameter, and so on; and these are used in sonnets along with octaves and sextets and quatrains and couplets and in lyric and narrative poetry which includes ballads with refrains, and there are fixed forms like limerick and there is free verse which is just what it says. There are figurative devices, which appeal to the mind, like allusion, antithesis, apostrophe, conceit, epigraph, epilogue, epitaph, epithet, hyperbole, litotes, metaphor, metonymy, oxymoron and paradox, parody, personification, simile, and synecdoche. Then there are a ton of other ways of using language like allegory, anachronism, anadiplosis, analogy, antagonist & protagonist, anti-hero & hero/heroine, aphorism, apostrophe (I do that all the time...I talk to the dead or my bed when I stub my toe) and there are archetypes, and in the theatre there are asides, monologues and soliloquies. There is autobiography, biography, and ballads, black humour, blank verse, and (take a breath) caesura. There are characters, who are round, dynamic or flat or static or stock or consistent. There is dialogue. There is setting. There is cliché and sentimentality and comedy and history and comic relief. There is conflict; man versus man, the environment or himself. There is exposition, and initiating incident, the rising action, the climax & epiphany, the falling action or denouement. There is mystery and dilemma. There are essays and escape literature or interpretive literature. There is flashback and foreshadowing. There is mood and tone and morals and honour and idealism and motivation and motif. There is myth and epic and ode. There is paraphrase, pathos and passive voice and prologue and epilogue and an afterwards. There is active voice and point of view such as first person, second person (used by Damon Runyan in *Guys and Dolls*), and third person limited omniscient and omniscient and there are reliable and unreliable narrators. There is punctuation. I have read some wonderful essays on such
things as the lowly comma. There are sentence fragments and run-on sentences. There is
grammar of all kinds but I can’t bear to go into that except to say that there are nouns,
pronouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and no one ever teaches parts of speech to
newcomers so that you cannot point out the incorrect use of an adverb with a noun or
show them why they have misused an adjectival form when they need a noun without
going into the grammar lessons they have missed, and who has time? And if you do not
they will never learn to use the language properly; so I cheat and send them to terrific
websites designed for that purpose which mostly they never use... not the young ones
anyhow. The forty somethings do...the wonderful adults who mostly have degrees in
their own countries and who know how to study and who care about more than just
marks. There is humour and punning and sarcasm and irony. There are stereotypes and
styles and surrealism and symbols and themes and tropes and understatement or meiosis
and unity and verisimilitude and vicarious experience and vignettes and villains. I’m
rushing now at the end of the alphabet and villanelles and witticisms and I’ve run out of
steam.

Language Two (this is not an exercise at all...it’s just something I thought of...)

When I was in elementary school no one cared about any of the isms. Who in
‘Canada the good’ was conscious of racism, feminism or ageism? I’m from the Fun with
Dick and Jane era with a Mom in the kitchen in high heels, cotton dress and apron and
Dad being greeted at the front door by the dog Spot and Baby Sally carrying her cat, Puff.
Everything was as it should be and everyone in our readers was white, as were all my
friends and neighbours. There were Catholic and Protestant and Jewish kids but no one
cared that much...we went to separate schools in Toronto; so did kids who were disabled
in any way. Old people didn’t exist for us kids except as nanny and granddad who visited.

Language was simple in those days.

Then in about the mid-sixties, things began to change. Someone noticed that the schools were filling up with children of different races; different colours. So it became important to show these children in textbooks and it was no longer cool to use what came to be seen as derisive terms for other groups. Negroes became Blacks, Indians became Aboriginals and Asian people were still Asian but were recognized as Chinese or Vietnamese or Japanese, which identified nationality and not just race…a distinct improvement. Crippled people became handicapped and then feminists got into the act and we argued over that awkward he/she format in writing and we had ‘people power’ for ‘man power’ and ‘person hole covers,’ not ‘manhole covers’ and ‘mail carriers’ rather than mailmen. Now it’s got to the ridiculous point that when I refer to my Chinese students in one of my classes, who are mostly middle-aged mothers and who are so polite and who treat me so nicely, as ladies, I’m told that I’m being sexist.

Language changes constantly. This is a problem for all of us, not just the newcomers. We used to refer to the ‘Iron Curtain’ countries but since 1989, this term is no longer valid. A new euphemism has been found in which we refer to “countries of the former Soviet Socialist Republic”. The term for using the right expression for something is PC, which stands for ‘politically correct’. Many of the common terms I grew up using are no longer PC. You cannot speak of “the man on the street” because there are women and children there too, or suggest that someone is ‘part Indian’ which is what my part Metis friend calls herself, but ‘part Aboriginal’ or ‘part First Nations’ sounds awkward and somehow does not convey the idea well. It’s still all right for me to say I am Irish and
French because that suggests I'm descended from whites, which one look at me confirms. But even dead white males are becoming less than PC now and the recent books published and winning awards in the west are by authors of what used to be 'minority races' who have settled here from what used to be called 'third world countries' and I've no idea what it is PC to call those countries anymore. Among my favourite authors in this country are Mistry from India, Ondaatje, from Ceylon, Trinidadians, Naipaul and Bissoondah. And I love Black American writer, Alice Walker, whose The Color Purple is featured on more college courses than Shakespeare. Ah me, the only politically incorrect thing to be it seems, is a descendant of dead white males!

In one of my classes we were asked to write about self and other which took me back to Martin Buber as I have always remembered his emphasis on what we would now call dialogue or dialogism. In speaking of the birth of the novel and what it owes to folktales in its use of language, Bakhtin (1981) says that, "contemporary life as such, 'I myself' and 'my contemporaries,' 'my time'—all these concepts were originally the objects of ambivalent laughter, at the same time cheerful and annihilating. It is precisely here that a fundamentally new attitude toward language and toward the word is generated. Alongside direct representation—laughing at living reality—there flourish parody and travesty of all high genres and of all lofty models..." (p. 20-1). It seems that dialogue is necessary to thinking about actual events and about lofty concepts as well, including God. It is suggested that "there is a crucial difference between a person-to-person and a person-to-God relationship which Bakhtin's model seems to obscure" (p. 14). Nevertheless, the emphasis on you and I or self and other relies on conversation, spoken and written. We all write, I think, with a reader in mind.
Self and Other

It has been many years since I read Martin Buber’s (1958) *I and Thou* but its essence has stayed with me and I remember that dialogue and silence were equally important to our understanding of ourselves and others. Because we are writing about self and other, I quickly looked up Buber on the net as a way to get my mind working around the basics.

Self

All my adolescent and adult life
I have been recording things
In the fancy diaries I was given
At Christmas and Birthday
Leather bound or otherwise
Permanent looking.

In college I tried poetry
A play with words, which I showed
To a teacher for whom I felt a passion
And he, a happily married man
Simply corrected it
Imposing his style as teachers do

That didn’t suit my mood at all.
I didn’t try free verse again
Or verse of any kind until
My children filled me with such happiness
That my words overflowed my boundaries
And I wrote some sorts of verse
But never free verse
That book was locked forever.

In dialogue, a person is present to another (and the other), they are attentive and aware - listening and waiting. In the stillness of this ‘in-between world’ they may encounter what cannot yet be put into words. One of the significant features about this stillness is that it is generated in dialogue, when people are gathered. It has, therefore, a rather different quality to that which may be experienced through individual meditation.
The experience of being out of time and space that this can involve helps to explain how Buber came to see that God could only be approached through an I-You relation.

Other

She’s crazy, always writing the same thing
Over and over and over
As if she’ll get it right
By repetition.

Now I know my writing
Is neither brilliant nor original
But I do not apologize
It is simply my writing

It is a living formulation
Of how I change over time.
It proceeds at its own pace.
I do it over
Only so that I may move on.

Just fooling Around

What’s the Right Answer?

There are no right answers
Only right questions
I tell them term after term.

You must know it, they say
Please tell me if I got it right

When we’re adult we think and
We have an opinion, and yours is just as
Good as mine. No one’s right.

Oh, I see. So I just write down
What I think the answer should be.
Is that right?

Now, you’ve got it. Okay I’ll write
Down what I think if I should, but
Is it the right answer?
This dialogue is getting ridiculous
And it’s my turn, so I ask you
What’s the right question?

The Bakhtinian self is never whole, since it can exist only dialogically. It is not a substance or essence in its own right but exists only in a tensile relationship with all that is other and, most important, with other selves (Clark, 1984, p. 65).

**Verbarian** (from my calendar of forgotten English on April 23, 2005).

A verbarian is an inventor or coiner of words; so says Sir James Murray’s *New English Dictionary*, 1928. I love to tell my students that many words have disappeared or have changed almost beyond recognition over the years, and that our language is living, not dead like Latin, which never changes. Still, I tell them, that *Hamlet* is not so difficult really. It is English, and as my daughter once said, “It sure is full of quotes”. However, this is the date of birth as well as the date of the death of William Shakespeare, (1564-1616) who was *the* verbarian and who would be 441 years old today.

Some of the expressions we have incorporated into the language of today from his plays are: be-all and end-all (Macbeth), laughable (Merchant of Venice), hobnob (Twelfth Night), gnarled (Measure for Measure), flawed (King Lear), negotiate (Much Ado about Nothing), quarrelsome (The Taming of the Shrew), and last but not least, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks”. (Hamlet)... not to mention, “Frailty, thy name is woman-“, “In my mind’s eye”, “He was a man, take him for all in all: I shall not look upon his like again”, “to the manner born”, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”, “O my prophetic soul”, “Leave her to heaven”, “One may smile, and smile,
and be a villain”, “put an antic disposition on”, and “the time is out of joint”... and that is only Act One.

I was asked the other day, why Shakespeare’s works in the original were necessary when we can get a modern English translation. The answer is simple. Is there a better way to say,

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time...

I think not! And I shiver at the thought of what some fool would put in its place.

Then there is this wonderful speech of the soon to be King Henry 5, presently Prince Hal, from Shakespeare’s Henry 4.

My father is gone wild into his grave, For in his tomb lie my affections, And with his spirits sadly I survive, To mock the expectation of the world... (5. 2. 123-6)

wild – uncivilized, affections – appetites, spirits – character

Hal is getting us ready for his own transformation. He is not the young roustabout of Part 1, friend of the lowlife of Eastcheap, particularly of one aging and loveable knight, Sir John Falstaff.

I teach Henry 4, Part 1 as it is on the curriculum for English 12, and I like to have a break from Hamlet. Macbeth is the standard English 11, and when I went out to Burnaby to teach English 11, they just handed me the texts I was to use, Macbeth and Lord of the Flies. You would have to answer to administrators were you to try to change it, and they’re an exceptionally narrow minded bunch when it comes to buying texts... it must be a text on the IRP, and that list changes rarely. They did get me Henry 4, Part 1, because it is an IRP text and because I insisted. But summer school is a different kettle of
fish as I have the school library to borrow from and not just the small Continuing Ed.
bookroom. Even so, last summer I had to get my Shakespeare off the net as it was not in
the school and not on the list for En12. I’ve done *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,*
*Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, The Tempest,* and *The Taming of the
Shrew,* among other things. Last week I filled garbage bags with stuff going back to
*Twelfth Night,* which was several summers ago. Whatever *Bard on the Beach* does, I do,
so that we can see our first Shakespeare stage play as a class.

I’ve begun a new writing exercise. I copy a line or two that appeals to me, from
something I’ve read recently and try to work it into my own work and I use it to get my
students started on their journal writing for the evening. For instance, you can learn to use
such remarks as ‘It’s always a mistake, to suppose that you know what’s going on inside
anyone else’s head’, which I found in this morning’s paper. From Shakespeare, there are
wonderful lines, but how do we fit them in to our own writing? For example, now that he is
king, Hal belittles his former best friend, Falstaff:

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.
Leave gormandizing. Know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men. (5.5. 54-55)

Presume not that I am the thing I was
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turned away my former self.
So will I those that kept me company. (5.5. 57-60)

Till then, I banish thee, on pain of death. (5.5. 64)
I have a note in my text that this speech of Hal’s is precisely the speech of Peter when he denied Christ, saying, “I know him not”.

Richard Hillman (1992) sees Falstaff as Hal’s and England’s scapegoat. He is the *trickster par excellence* (p. 115). He sees himself as others see him but stands solidly by who he is. In *Henry 4 Part 1* when Hal is playing his father and is listing his faults, Falstaff says that to banish plump Jack is to banish all the world (2.4. 489). Hillman says that Falstaff “looks not only backward—perhaps with a certain nostalgia—to ... Pantagruel ...[that his]... self-consciousness is not a constant; it evolves together with other aspects of his role” (p. 117). He refers to the speech in Part 2 when Falstaff reintroduces himself when he analyzes his comic function, which is truly carnivalesque until Hal, unable to reform the old knight, isolates and diminishes him at the end of Part 2. But Falstaff announces his function first.

Men of all sorts take a pride to gird at me. The brain of this foolish-compounded clay, man, is not able to invent anything that intends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me; I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men. (1.2. 6-10)

Hillman says, “This veritable decarnivalization in the direction of the ‘isolated bourgeois ego’... as Holderness applies Bakhtin, is helped along by Falstaff’s growing moral stigmatization... (p. 117). The moralists among my students most certainly disapprove of Falstaff, but most of us laugh with him.

As a favourite character for me and for many students, I love to see the fun they have imitating him in their presentations at the end of term. One of the girls stuffed pillows under the man’s overcoat she was wearing and stole from classmates’ supermarket buggies. She threw her hot groceries into the boot of her car and was about
to make a quick getaway when her belly became entangled with her shopping cart. The kids loved it.

May 1, 2005

This is the month that is truly spring
These blessed and beautiful days
When our souls and our spirits
Are flowing with love in all ways...

How we see the world and our place in it and how we see others and how they see us, is what makes us who we are. I cannot imagine why it has taken me a lifetime to look around and see that my world and my place in it is good... so very, very good. But on the first of May, it has always felt good to me.

This has to do, no doubt, with the fact that I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, in May. All through my life in education, the first of May heralds only six weeks to the end of term, with the promise of summer and holidays to follow. And in my working life elsewhere, this is the month when girls can wear white pants and skirts for the first time, and you begin to see the joyful colours in clothes that reflect the shock of spring in the flowering trees and plants in people's gardens, which are part of the spectacle of our surroundings in May.

I once had a student who, when asked her Canadian name, said it was March. I commented that that was an interesting choice; that some months of the year were used for girl's first names, like April, May and June, but that March was unusual. She said that she was not thinking of a month of the year, but that she always liked the sound of soldiers marching. And she stood up and marched around the room chanting, march, march, march, march. That is a telling way in which to see yourself, I suppose. I just can't imagine what it is she was telling herself. Maybe it had to do with a husband or
lover, coming back to her! Now I'm remembering the song, "Lover Come Back to Me" by Peggy Lee, just as the verse above is from a hymn we sang each May "'Tis the month of our Mother" which was in honour of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May. That's two hymns ... but well... as Hamlet said of weapons (rapier or sword).

I'm reminded of something Arlo Guthrie said the other night. He said that his dad stole tunes and put his own words to them as it seemed obvious to him that if his audience knew the tune he had won half the battle. (He was referring, I think, to "This land is your land, this land is my land").

I suspect that the verse that comes from within when we are composing, was placed there long ago in a beat or a rhythm that we have incorporated into our bones and sinews. They are a part of us, just like dance steps are there and we can't remember having learned them. Black people have taught us that rhythm is a part of the life of each of us. With them it is close to the surface. We need to relax and just give it a chance to come out.

When I began writing this morning I had just re-read the lovely and encouraging note Carl attached to my portfolio, which says that I can write, whose writing shows "playful wisdom and a willingness to ask questions and take risks". Well then, Carl, nothing can stop me now!

Actually, as I have been reading memoirs written by women for some months now, I have picked up on the sort of intimate style they use. I do have trouble sticking to the point when using that style though. It doesn't require the unity that an essay or other formal paper does. And it discusses writing, love, art and family and all the issues that
make up a woman’s life, which leads on and on...to the next idea about which one must take issue.

Then yesterday, we went to see Unless, from the book by Carol Shields (2002). The play is written by her daughter, Sara Cassidy. It deals with goodness mostly, and family and happiness and helplessness and sorrow and death and resurrection too. For surely the daughter, Norah, who dies to life in empathy for the suffering she witnessed of a woman (outside Honest Ed’s for godsakes), is resurrected when she comes back to the world in the end. I say Honest Ed’s for godsakes, because that used to be my neighbourhood. We were given our children when we lived in a house owned by the University of Toronto, a few blocks from Honest Ed’s. I used to wheel the kids over there in the stroller, always looking for bargains, usually in cheap material to make them matching outfits. I did a little sewing in those days and loved to take the children out similarly dressed, so that people would remark on how alike they were! Dave, so white-blonde, and Natalie, so dark haired, both so beautiful, one of Hungarian descent, the other with huge Spanish eyes, but people wanted them to resemble each other and their parents. A tall order for an adopted, or for any, child! (What amazes me though is how some children look like both parents when the parents do not in any way look like each other!)

Oh Lord, how I digress. Back to Unless. The play is well done but I enjoyed the book more. It fits my work right now in that it is an “unabashedly feminist” novel.

Rather than quote (copy), I tell my students to paraphrase so that I can see what their perception of the play or story is. Some, due to uncertainty in word meanings, come up with astounding misunderstandings, and I’m itching to set them straight. Others
however, come up with unpredictable and incisive insights, that those of us familiar with the language would never have dreamed of... this is such fun!

I once said that I did not want to write an account that jumped around from poetry to prose to unconnected ideas and so on. I said I wanted to write a memoir that had a beginning, a middle and an end... that told a story and that one wanted to read in order to find out what happens next. But I cannot do it. Now that I have learned that a memoir is not a continuous story, I can write about the last two years of learning in the masters program and still recall incidents from life as they seem to fit the context. I have to hope that the writing itself will incline the reader to want to continue.

And now I must wrap a present to take to a little girl's birthday party but I have told Deb, her mother, that I am too old for sleepovers. She knows that anyhow. She gave me the book, *When I am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*, which is a collection of writings by many older women, many of them humorous. I haven't read it yet though. I'd like to at least graduate, first.

**Saturday, August 13, 2005.** Diane, David's girlfriend for a long time, passed away in her sleep. I am numb and David cannot accept that a woman not yet forty, who has suffered and overcome so much pain in her short life, can just die because her heart stopped beating.

Farewell. Sweets to the sweet.
Farewell.
I hop’d thou shouldst have been my David’s wife:
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck’d, sweet maid,
And not have strew’d thy grave.

Stolen from Hamlet (5. 2. 236-239).
Last weekend, Gerry, Diane’s 80 year old mother, called me from Manitoba.

“Are you sitting down?” she asked.

When I said I was, she said, “There is no easy way to say this. Diane died this morning”.

And because he had just moved and Gerry hadn’t his new number, I had to phone David and repeat that awful and awesome message.

**A Place by the River**

![Image](image_url)

Men may come and men may go
But I go on forever.

_Tennyson, from *The Brook*._

The sun sparkles up the waves like jewelled stars in an evening sky...but only right in front of me. Further on, the river widens, taking on the shape of a small lake, but it is brown and still. Behind me I can faintly hear the drone of traffic, trucks and buses especially crossing the bridge into or out of Richmond. I’m on the Vancouver side, a few blocks from where I live, on the opposite side of an arm of the Fraser River from the airport. Thus I am in Fraser River Park not far from the Fraser Arms Hotel, which my brother, visiting from Toronto last year, called one very tough place. The clientele are not like those he’s used to at Yonge and St. Clair. But here by the water, people are friendly and approachable.
It is suggested in this lovely writing class of Karen Meyer that we use the formula of: Reflection/Attention/Imagination. The fundamental existential questions for me are:


My attention focuses so much on the river, which goes on whether we do or not and I have so much trouble letting go and getting into wild mind.

**Who am I?** Our position in life defines us. I remember when my ex used to refer to me as ‘my wife’ and my back would go up as I felt he was implying ownership. He was, of course. Right now, I only know what I was. A teacher, a buyer, a flight attendant, a wife, a mother. Maybe I am getting to be obsolete, or at least, without a label.

**What am I doing?** The very best I can under the circumstances, which have never been easy. Luanne was telling me about being a single mother of four and running a farm and trying to earn a living and always being hard up and I felt ashamed. I was only a single mother of two, earning the only income, at a woman’s wage at first, taking night school courses, and being scared most of the time. My father died the year I was on my own, and my brothers were in Toronto and besides, they had their own lives. But that was more than 25 years ago.

**Where am I going?**

I’m staying here for the moment. And it’s quiet. There is no noise until a motorized craft comes along—loud, little and light—it is a racing skiff of some kind and the driver is just ahead of his buddy—it is a race. This is dangerous. This river has always been a logging river and the booms lose logs regularly. There are four, maybe five tied together right in
front of me and I can see a loose one, most of its bulk below the surface, which would be as disastrous to a small water skidoo as the iceberg was to the Titanic.

The wildlife here is noteworthy. There are the usual families of ducks and Canada geese but there is the odd blue heron or other exotic species, which has found its way over from the bird sanctuary in Delta. I could use a lesson or two in bird watching and recognition. The same could be said for plants, and dogs, and cars, and I suppose, people. Where I am going is to a place in writing where I have learned to include specifics, as all the books advise.

**When will I know I have got there?**

When my job was defined as being a full-time mother and provider, where I was going was built into the definition. Now the family is grown and gone and I am here at the university, a lone, somewhat exotic species, due to my ancient age. But, what a wonderful place to be! Now I know why they say that education is wasted on the young. They are too busy getting ready to earn a living. I’ve been there, done that—have finally earned some time off to relax and think.

**Why am I here now?**

To enjoy—to have R & R for as long as possible. I have pulled a heavy load like the tug coming along now, pulling a very large boom. It must be two or three city blocks long. There are two other tugs behind keeping the boom on track, I guess, and another busy little putter dashing around picking up the strays. He may be in business for himself. I understand that the mill pays a hefty buck for each recovered log.

Maybe I could start a little business for myself—something on-line maybe. It would be nice to stay put; work from home; stop driving at night. I’m so blind I’ve been
scaring the heck out of classmates when I drive them home down the dark side of the university to Blanca and over to 8th, all a new thing to me, as I usually take well-lit Marine Drive home. I need streets with lights on them now.

**How am I doing so far?**

I found the poem by Tennyson called *The Brook* and I must have learned it as a child—so much of it is familiar, especially the first lines which are:

I come from haunts of coot and hern,  
I make a sudden sally,  
And sparkle out among the fern,  
To bicker down a valley.

It is a very long poem—Then the brook joins a river. And every third verse after that ends with the two lines:

For men may come and men may go,  
But I go on forever.

In his memoirs, Graham Greene calls it a second-rate poem but that’s ok. I still like the idea of it and the repetition of those lines. As a matter of fact, I am doing so well in developing my critical faculties that I no longer care what Graham Greene or any other critic thinks. I can see their point and disagree simply because the poem appeals to me.

That’s how I’m doing.

**Back at the river**

Across the river, the airport is so quiet that it reminds me of 9/11. Going to school that day was eerie... it felt like after a nuclear attack... not a sound from the airport, right across the road ... the noise only remarkable for its absence.
Now that they’re opposite me I can see those tugs further down the boom are attached to it and doing their job of work pulling it along. Now comes a fishing boat in from the sea on the far side of the boom, and a fellow is kayaking along on this side. But a very fancy yacht has just passed everything else as though he were in a hurry to get somewhere.

Once I saw an ocean-going yacht meet a tiny little skiff in mid-river and something was passed up and down by way of a sort of pulley, in very short order. Drugs, I suppose. Once in a while I notice the police boat, which races up-river after something or other.

People bring their dogs here and they’re supposed to clean up after them. Most do, I think. But I’m glad not to own one anymore although I did love Charlie. Other people’s pets are a pain... simply annoying... and sometimes enraging. I saw a large, black-faced brute attack a tiny little furry thing ... someone suggested a Chihuahua or a Japanese chin... and I think it killed it. The boy whose dog was attacked was kneeling beside the still creature keening and wailing... it was horrible.
The two tugs from behind the boom are scouting around doing a fine job of collecting the strays. Good grief! Here comes another boom, only smaller than the first. It’s time for my walk if I want to get any work done tonight.

The wood smells good. There’s a couple cuddling a few yards from me, down the bank a bit, so the first thing I did was to turn the table around so that I have my back to them. A willow and a couple of smaller trees have almost blocked my river view, unless I crouch a little. Then I can see the three water skidoos crashing along and a family of geese or ducks silently gliding out from shore under the path of a jumbo jet, which is roaring down to land. I love this place.

I don’t have to see everything around me. I feel it and smell it and it is always in my mind’s eye. What do I think when I stop to catch the thought that I’m thinking? I think that one can intellectualize too much about everything and right here, outside, by this wonderful working river with all its traffic, one can tell what’s going on by simply breathing.

A girl just rode by on her bike with a large white bird on her shoulder. It might have been the biggest parrot I’ve ever seen. A beautiful yacht-large, large and full, just went by with someone cackling loudly—you could hear her long before they got close; a rather boozy laugh. Lucky her, and I’m not jealous. The interesting thing about this place is that in an attempt to recreate a kind of Walden Pond atmosphere I am made aware of
the span of more than a century of *time* difference here, by the juxtaposition of a silent flight of geese flying upstream in formation, curving en masse to right or left with such splendid grace, and the roar of the tons of steel of a DC10 coming in for a landing, spewing oil fumes in its wake, and also by the generations-old picture of the little tugs pulling and nosing the centuries old log booms down this working river alongside those magnificent money-smelling yachts.

In Clark (1984) we read: “Among the features of this movement that distinguish self from other is the way that self and other are characterized by a different space and a different time. The self’s time is open, ‘unfinished’, whereas the other we conceive as ‘completed’ insofar as we see him as what he is.” (p. 79)

**Working by the River**

I walk beside the river over a small bridge and see that the tide is out today. This means that my favourite log will be available, smelling newly of river things, and tasting rather salty, as this arm of the Fraser meets the ocean. There are often boys fishing off the dock but I’m not sure if what they catch is really edible. I asked one once and he said “sure”, but he looked doubtfully at the small specimen in his pail.
(Salmon, perch, catfish?—he couldn’t name it either). I love to watch the families of ducks in their perfect rows and hear the far-away honk of Canada Geese, increasing as they come closer, flying upstream under a 747, which is about to land, drowning out their call. The odd time a heron stands stately on one foot at the water’s edge, and one rainy day I saw a long-tailed river rat scramble up a tree. There are diverse colours here at any time of year—spring isn’t the only spectacular month. Now, in November, I’m overwhelmed by the variety of shades of green, rain-glistening in the wind, and by the reds and oranges and whites of the berry bushes, probably as inedible as the fish, but looking alluringly acceptable.

So I come here to read, to write and to listen to my tape as I walk. Today it’s Robert Fulford talking about narrative, just as though I were sitting there at the Massey Lectures in Toronto, listening to him.

But I’m not. I’m breathing in misty air from the almost rain and sitting at my picnic table making notes. I look up when tugs with large booms approach or when the waves from a luxurious yacht hit the shore, making me aware that something is passing that is large, important. And the only thing I know for sure is that my place by the river where I do my work, is, in my world, the only thing important. Or as Bakhtin sees it:
The way in which I create myself is by means of a quest: I go out to the other in order to come back with a self. I ‘live into’ an other’s consciousness; I see the world through that other’s eyes. But I must never completely meld with that version of things, for the more successfully I do so, the more I will fall prey to the limitations of the other’s horizon (Clark, 1984, p. 78)

The kids sent me this picture. There was a superb group among them who made a remarkable video for their presentation at the end of semester, in which they interviewed people strolling the dyke about their position on water divining versus more modern methods of finding water. This was motivated by a story by Roch Carrier called *A Secret Lost in the Water*, which fascinated them.

So I spend time dreaming of the day when I will have time to write and I don’t know really whether I can do fiction. What I can do—love to do—is teach—English Lit—lucky me! And I still am doing it.

So all is well and all will be well says St. Julian of Norwich, and I am contented.
References


