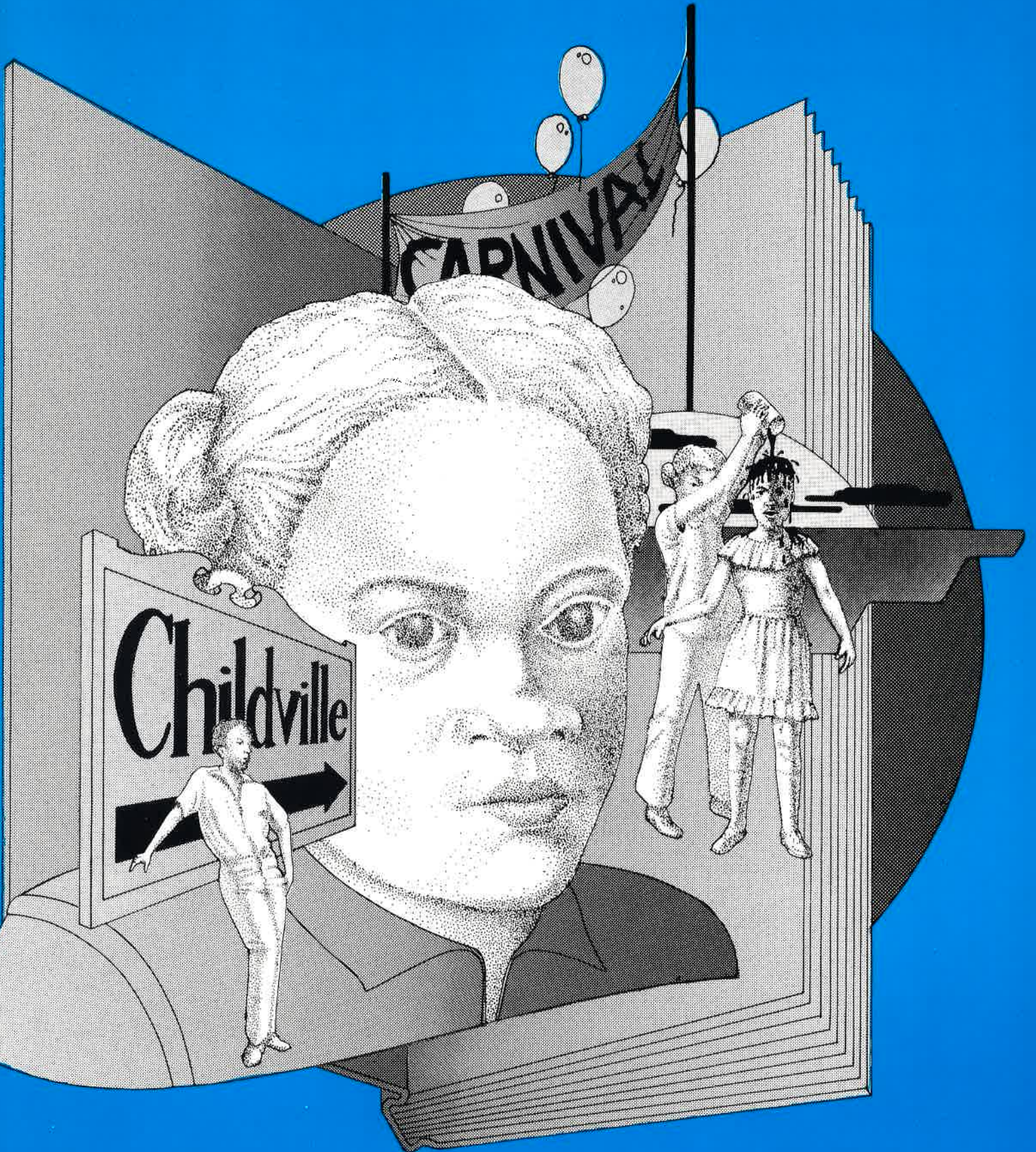


# Teachers & Writers

Magazine / Volume 11, No. 3



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# The Case of "The Scarlet Ibis": Making the Best of Jury Duty

*Being away from her class for two weeks on jury duty creates conflicts for Karen Shawn, but everything works out in the end when the classroom turns into a courtroom.*

"YOU ARE HEREBY summoned to appear at the Supreme Court...."

Jury Duty! How exciting—and ironic. For years I had wanted to serve on a jury, just for the experience. Sometimes, depending on my classes, I had envied other teachers who served because it meant "freedom"—two weeks away from the kids. I had often wished that my turn would come, and now that it was here, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to take it.

I had been called for the first weeks in November; that was much too soon to interfere with a routine that was going so well. So I took my first day off and went to the courthouse to request a postponement until, I hazarded, mid-January. Traditionally, students and teachers both experienced a slump then anyway; perhaps my absence would allow us all to feel revitalized when I returned. If I felt at that time that my leaving would jeopardize our work, I still had the option of postponing one more time.

When I returned to class the next day, I was shocked to find the following note from my substitute:

Dear Karen,

I tried to follow your plans, but got nowhere. The kids in all your classes were noisy, obnoxious, impossible to teach. They seem totally unstructured. I would not want to take these classes again.

Barbara

It seemed like an omen. My kids? Noisy, yes, but obnoxious? Impossi-



by Karen Shawn

ble to teach? What had happened? More to the point, what would happen when they had two weeks with a substitute?

I spoke to each class, expressing my surprise and disappointment; there had never been a "discipline" problem with them; why had they behaved in such a provocative manner?

"She was too mean!"

"Yeah, she came in yelling, 'Sit down right now!'"

"She kept saying, 'I'm serious. I

KAREN SHAWN has been teaching English for thirteen years. Her work has appeared in *The English Journal*, *Arizona English Bulletin*, *Classroom Practices*, *Catalyst*, *Mati*, *Alaska Women*, *Essence*, and the *Chelsea-Clinton News*. She is studying for her doctorate at New York University.

mean business! We have assigned work to do and we're going to do it!"

I listened to what they were saying, but I wasn't convinced that her strictness was the cause of their unacceptable behavior. They were too glib about it; yet they could see I was distressed. It wasn't until someone called out, "We don't like it when you don't come!" that the class admitted their part in the disruptions, and apologized, agreeing it wouldn't happen again. We went on to other work, but part of me stayed with the issue of a ten-day separation.

At the end of November came an opportunity for me to attend a Thursday-Friday Conference on alternative systems of grading. I left Wednesday afternoon without telling the kids; I think I felt guilty about going. On Saturday I caught a cold (punishment? I wondered, when my fever peaked) and didn't return to school until Tuesday, happy to be back until I saw two separate notes vying for my attention:

Dear Ms. Shawn:

Your classes were totally uncooperative. I tried to give them a spelling bee on Thursday, but they were so noisy the teacher from next door stopped in to see what the trouble was. I began a spelling test, but they all cheated. On Friday I asked them to take out their grammar books; they said they had none! They insisted that they had independent study on Friday, so I agreed, but they still didn't behave.

Below is a list of the good ones. I suggest detention for the rest!

Mrs. M.

The "good" list numbered sixteen—out of five classes.

The other note, from a different substitute, focused on only one student:

Monday

Dear Ms. Shawn,

I told Richard that I was leaving this report on his behavior. He disturbed the room. He has done little or no work. He has not obeyed (when told to stop talking in a loud voice) and he has not followed instructions. He has been talking continually. He has been fresh and has talked back. He has sung in a loud voice *She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain*.

Mrs. G.

I had to laugh. Nevertheless, I was concerned with the problem of discipline when I was not there. Were they that way because of my looseness? Because they did not fear my reprimands when I returned? Was I responsible for their behavior even when I wasn't with them? Some teachers thought so; when kids behaved well in the auditorium or with another teacher, it was assumed to be because that teacher had "control." Conversely, when a substitute reported a bad class, there were whispers of, "Doesn't she have any control? Her sub had a terrible time!" A third way of assessing the situation was to assume that you had simply drawn a bad lot; in these cases, pity was expressed: "You must have some bunch! Mr. S. said he'd never go back to your room again!"

But I didn't have "some bunch." My kids were basically well-behaved, cooperative, pleasant, eager to learn, even lovable—how could 109 of them have earned detention in one day?

The bell rang for first period, and the kids streamed in. I wasn't prepared for the first sarcastic remark directed to me by none other than Richard, the singer.

"Well, well, well! Look who's here! Glad you could make it!"

I heard again that voice from the back of the room a month ago: "We don't like it when you don't come!" My God, were they *angry* with me? It was almost the same attitude my own daughter exhibited when I stayed out too late, or wasn't home when she expected me to be. . . .

"Hi, how do you feel?" Robin was always concerned about my health; we had the same allergies.

"I'm fine now," I answered. "I was sick only yesterday; last week I went to a conference—"

"We know, we know, the sub told us—Robin must've been absent then," interrupted Danny, a 16-year-old who threatened to quit school at least once a week. "How come you didn't tell us?"

"Would it have made a difference?" I countered, feeling guilty, and feeling absurd for feeling guilty.

"Well. . ." he took a deep breath, "we'd just like to know these things, you know what I mean? I mean, ya get up, get dressed, come ta school, expectin' things to be the same as they was yestaday, but instead ya got a substitute here, a room changed there, a surprise someplace else. . . it's too much change, ya know what I mean? For me, anyway—I like to know these things, just so I'll *know*. I don't know about anyone else, but me, I like to *know*."

It was the longest speech Danny had ever made. The other kids stood quietly, listening; I think we were all surprised by his openness. More importantly, though, we recognized the accuracy of his perception. In adolescence, a time of enormous inner change and turmoil, outside constants and stability are of utmost importance. If change is inevitable, the youngster needs to share in it as much as possible, just, as Danny put it, "to *know*." It wasn't that I had been absent, it seemed, but that I did not tell them even though I knew well in advance. I'd given them no outlet for their feelings of dependency; they'd been abandoned with the explanation for it coming from a stranger. It was no wonder they felt hostile!

We'd had a close, constant relationship, and had spoken of trust and openness since September, yet I hadn't trusted them to understand (or forgive?) my leaving for two days. How much of this mistrust was a projection from my own life, I'd need to think more about later; for now, I'd learned my lesson well. Despite an unwritten school policy of "Don't tell the kids anything in advance, ever" (based, I assume, on the policy of "Don't give secrets to the enemy"), my students would share fully in my preparations for jury duty. Hope-

fully, we could, together, discuss the resentment they might feel about my leaving, and thus lessen the hostilities they might direct first toward the substitute, later at me upon my return, and worst, at themselves, insidiously, by failing to work, for example, during my absence.

So, the first week in January, during a discussion about the difficulties of making decisions (an outgrowth of Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken"), I told them about a difficult decision I'd made: to leave school for two weeks to serve on jury duty.

"It's something I always wanted to do," I explained. "When I was notified, I was excited, but I also hated the idea of leaving you for two weeks—that's a long time to be away. I thought about it for two months, and I finally decided that I wanted the experience.

"But I also want our relationship to continue as it has been. I won't be leaving for almost three weeks, so we have plenty of time to talk about your feelings about it, or ask any questions."

"I don't think you should go," stated Michael, a bespectacled, quiet kid.

"I understand how you would feel that way, Michael," I responded.

There was silence for a moment, and then some tentative questions began:

"Who will our sub be?"

"What work will you leave for us?"

"Why can't you go during the summer?"

"What if it takes longer than two weeks?"

I answered everything as completely as I could; feeling as I did so some of the tension in the room dissolve. The pattern of the questions changed; as they were reassured of some stability in their lives, they moved on to question mine.

"Are you excited?"

"Will you stay in a hotel?"

"Who'll take care of your daughter if you get on a murder case and have to stay there every night?"

"Do you think you'll be fair?"

"What happens if you're not picked for a jury?"

"Will you tell us all about it when you get back?"

We spent close to a half-hour on the subject; time well spent. I asked

them to continue their weekly letters to me; I'd read them all and respond as usual when I returned. I assured them that I would try to plan interesting work for them while I was away, and that when I returned I'd share my experiences with them. My assumption that separation anxiety was a problem that should be freely discussed would, I hoped, ease the burden for them, and decrease their need to act out with another teacher. Almost all of the letters I received in the next two weeks mentioned my leaving; one letter echoed Danny's feelings:

Dear Ms. Shawn:

You're the third teacher I had this year who went on jury duty. Most kids think I'm lucky, but I don't. I don't like having substitutes. We never learn anything. I like to know that my regular teachers will be here every day. But even though I don't want to have a substitute, I hope you have fun on jury duty.

Love,  
Angela

The weeks remaining flew by. On Friday we wished each other well, and I left, feeling not very glad to be "free" for two weeks.

I awoke slowly, but startled myself into an alert panic when I looked at the clock. 7:30! My train had already left—

And then I remembered. Jury Duty! I snuggled back, relieved, feeling guilty because I felt so good. I had slept an extra hour and a half, and faced only a ten-minute bus ride this morning, a break from my usual hour's travel time. And this luxury every day for two weeks! Was it just last Friday I hadn't been sure I wanted to leave my kids? Really! Dedication was admirable, but there were limits... and I guess I'd reached mine.

I got up, showered leisurely, and treated myself to breakfast. Before leaving the house, I rummaged through a stack of books I'd planned to get to, and selected Elizabeth Goudge's *Child from the Sea*. It was close to 1000 pages; I probably wouldn't even finish it.

By Thursday I had reached the last chapter.

Almost a whole week—and all I had done was sit and read!

Where were the exciting scenes of courtroom drama I had anticipated?

What tales of justice triumphant would I bring back to my kids?

My kids. I sighed, mid-yawn. How were they doing? Had Danny adjusted to still more changes? Was Richard singing, "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain," or had he changed his tune?

I thought about them all, and realized again how much I cared about them, how much I enjoyed being with them, how fortunate I felt, having a job that I loved to go to, even if I did have to get up at 6:00 A.M. I looked forward to reading their letters, hoping they'd write them in my absence—and suddenly wondered: what if I wrote to them? Nothing elaborate, just a short note to each class, describing my experiences, limited though they had been.

I hesitated. Was it appropriate? Well, why not? Letter writing was a part of my life; since September I had encouraged it to be part of theirs. And I missed them; why not let them know? Besides, there was a strange woman there in the corner who sat and knit, day after day; surely my kids, having spent a month on *A Tale of Two Cities*, could appreciate the suspiciousness of that... Stretching out on the long, hard wooden bench, I began to write.

On Friday, some excitement: I was chosen for a jury! On Monday I was back on the hard wooden bench: the case had been dismissed.

But Fate was kind. On Tuesday I was deemed suitable for another trial, which proceeded routinely but interestingly for the rest of the week. I kept mental notes of every detail, ready to share the whole procedure with my kids.

By Friday we were deliberating; at 3:00 P.M. we reached a verdict: guilty.

The defendant was detained, but I was free—free and eager to return to work.

No sooner had I signed in than Mr. Lewis, a young and dedicated substitute, rushed up to me.

"Hi! I had your kids, you know. They were great. Really! I loved them. We had a terrific time."

I regarded him with mixed feelings. Had he really enjoyed them, or had he just read his Substitute's Etiquette Handbook?

"Oh?" I responded brightly. "I'm so glad! I was worried, especially after the reports I've gotten from

other subs. Even seventh period was good?"

"Seventh period? Oh. Well, they were okay. Yeah, they were—well, actually, I did have to have a few kids leave the room, but otherwise they were fine."

"And did they work?"

"Oh, yes. I did grammar with them all week—you can see my plans, so you'll know where I left off. In fact, here are the dittos I used—I use them for all the English classes."

I looked at his work: seven ditto sheets of single-spaced rules of grammar, examples illustrating each rule. Definitions for each part of speech; sentences illustrating each part. Rules for spelling, rules for punctuation, rules for paragraphs...etc. I could have saved him the trouble; I had similar sheets somewhere in my files.

But I respected his concern and effort and was relieved, I realized, that he had done this. Some students wanted this kind of lesson, and would feel secure about the final exams with these rules in their notebooks. Also, I was still conflicted about the best way to deal with parents who insisted on a general drill in the principles of grammar; Rob Lewis had made it possible for me to avoid the conflict for now. When parents wanted to see basics, the kids could show them basics.

"Thanks, Rob. That's an enormous help. I appreciate all your work."

"Hey, it's okay. Listen, I really want a job here—you know that. So I love to do all this stuff—all the teachers appreciate it and that doesn't hurt my chances. Besides, it makes me feel like a real teacher, lecturing like that in front of the class!"

I recognized that pleasure.

"One more thing—" he added. "In one class we started a really good story from their literature books—'The Scarlet Ibis'—but we didn't finish it. Some kids wanted to, so you might do it with them."

"Yes, 9th graders always like that story. Wasn't there time for it?"

"Well, we got interrupted by a fire drill, and when we came back upstairs, someone had hidden all of the books. Then Donna told me where they were, and the kid who hid them—Mitchell?—punched her. Anyway, by the time that got settled, the period was over, so..." he shrugged and grinned.

I nodded, returning the grin. "I'll see if they want to continue it. Listen, Rob, I'm glad you enjoyed the classes. And thanks again for everything."

"Sure—anytime. See you later."

I watched him walk down the hall, and became aware of some old concerns nagging at me. Did my students think they had learned more from him? There had been some disruptions, true, but he had apparently handled them well enough. What about the work he had done? Would the kids say, "Now *that* was *English!*" Would they wish they had him for their regular teacher?

Had the understudy outshone the star?

But wait. I wasn't Bette Davis anymore. Nor did I want to be.

I had spent the past five months as a contributor, a facilitator, not, as Rob had said, "lecturing in front of the class." The *kids* had made the classroom the stimulating, positive place I knew it was. "Good" days and "bad" days were no longer my sole responsibility, and that was a relief. I was delighted to be an addition to the classroom, rather than single-handedly the creator of it.

So why these fears? I did a little positive evaluating. My students and I worked well together; we enjoyed each other's company. I was a useful and up-to-date resource person to whom they had immediate and daily access.

Furthermore, because of the very nature of that relationship, I couldn't be "replaced." I had my own special gifts and contributions, as did all the other members of my classes. I was not "The Teacher"—I was who I was. Thus Rob Lewis, or anyone else, could join us, could give what he had to give, could only add to the whole, not subtract from me.

Struck by the irony of that realization, I walked slowly to my room. For years I had, it seemed to me now, hoped for, sought security and appreciation by being "on," by giving a good performance. But performing is a risky business. At any time, someone could have come along with a better act and taken away my audience.

Many teachers must feel this way. Why else is teaching such a solitary profession? No one shares ideas, no one says, "Come in and see what

we're doing today." How could anyone risk that? Competition is fierce: adolescents are a tough audience. Suppose someone uses my motivations, my sleights-of-hand? I wouldn't be able to use them next year!

So we all close our doors, do our shows, and talk at lunch to our colleagues about this kid or that administrator, but never about what's most important to us all—our teaching.

I finally understood that the insecurity that had gripped me earlier was a response to another time—appropriate then, perhaps, but no longer. For this year I wasn't acting. No gimmicks, just me. And no one can steal me, or replace me, or do "me" better than I can. And that, I realized as the first bell rang, is the ultimate security.

"Hey, how ya doin'?"

"Hi, how are you?"

"Hi, Ms. Shawn, we missed you!"

"I missed you, too!"

We greeted each other warmly. As they took their seats, the kids began asking about my experience.

"Was it fun?"

"Did you get picked for a jury?"

"Was he guilty?"

I'd thought about telling them everything that had happened—maybe adding a few embellishments to liven it up—but then it would be my show, not theirs. Somehow, I wanted my experience to have meaning to them.

"Later," I promised, "we'll talk about that later. I was on a jury and it was really interesting. But what about you? What's been going on?"

From the babble that finally subsided, I gathered that emotions were about evenly divided: they hated the sub; they thought he was terrific. They did work; they did no work at all. They gave him a hard time; they were very well-behaved.

Generally, they fared better than I (and, I think, they themselves) expected. I was glad.

After our catching-up talk, I asked them where they had left off in "The Scarlet Ibis."

"I'd like to get started with the story Mr. Lewis said you began—"

"What about your trial?" A protest from the front row.

"You'll hear about it soon. It's just that I need to get settled first into a routine, okay? Besides, this story,

come to think of it, relates more or less to the whole idea of a trial. It's about responsibility for someone's life, and guilt about someone's death. James Hurst is the author; he doesn't give us any answers, but he does raise some provocative questions."

Amy raised her hand.

"I have a question about that. I read this short story about a girl who finds her boyfriend with another woman. She's so upset that she runs out of his apartment, doesn't look where she's going, and gets hit by a car. Is that his fault?"

"I've seen that same plot on television. Do you think it's his fault?"

"Not legally, but I bet he'd feel guilty about it!" she answered.

"You can feel guilty about a lot of things that aren't your fault," Angela responded. "How about the woman he was with? Why isn't it her fault, too? Why shouldn't she feel guilty?"

"It depends on what you mean by *fault*," Dean said. "Legal fault is different from whether you know in your heart you really did cause it."

"Have you read any stories with that plot, Dean?" I asked.

"Not a story, but it happened sort of like that with me and my brother. I was teasing him, and bugging him, and daring him to catch me, and finally he started to chase me, and he slipped and fell. I didn't *push* him, or make him trip, but I guess it was my fault for starting the whole thing." He thought for a second. "But I don't know—my brother's really clumsy. . . ."

The class laughed.

"I know what you mean, though," Natalie turned to Dean. "You feel guilty, and maybe he would've tripped anyway, but who knows?"

Ricky added a new thought.

"Look," he said, "it's like this. When your time's up, it's up. It's a question of Fate, not fault. And that chick would've gotten hit by that car even if she hadn't seen that dude with another chick!"

The talk continued unabated, and a plan presented itself to me.

They were raising questions that could be discussed after they read the story, but why not air them through the vehicle of a trial? I could share my recently acquired "expertise" on courtroom procedure—they wanted to hear that anyway—and this was just the opportunity I wanted to per-

sonalize the experience for them. The defendant would be the narrator, witnesses would be the characters in the story, we'd select a jury and other members of the courtroom—why not? I didn't have time to plan anything through, but I felt this was a good time anyway to share my idea with the kids.

"I think he'd be guilty!" Michael was saying.

"You sound as though you're deliberating on a case," I cut in. "Can you reach a verdict?"

"No," Michael shook his head. "This is more like an argument. We'd need to know the whole story, not just what one person says she heard."

"How'd you like to have the opportunity to reach a verdict about a person's guilt or innocence—to be on a jury?"

Everyone looked interested, expectant, as I'd hoped.

"Aren't we too young?" asked Marcia.

"For a real jury, yes," I agreed, "but we could have a trial right here in this room! I know how to do it now, and in 'The Scarlet Ibis' there's enough material for a trial. You'll have to read it carefully, of course, tonight, and think about it; if you all agree, we'll start tomorrow!"

"I wanna be the judge!" announced Ricky.

"No, I'm going to be the judge," affirmed Mitchell. "No, I changed my mind, I want to be on trial."

"Good," said Donna. "I hope they hang you."

The class ended.

The next day we didn't discuss the story; the kids said that this case was not supposed to be discussed with anyone. Instead we made a list of everyone we'd need for the trial.

From the story we had James, the defendant, charged with manslaughter in the death of his young, crippled brother. James' mother, father, and aunt were witnesses, as would be the doctor who had attended the boy's birth, and the medical examiner who certified his death.

We would need a judge, a bailiff, a court stenographer, two lawyers and their assistants, twelve jurors and two alternates.

This accounted for 27 parts in our drama. We needed four more, and the entire class would be involved!

"Let them be character witnesses,"

someone suggested, and it was done.

Since every student was to have a role, no one hassled over any special one. A surprise volunteer was Danny, the boy who wanted to quit school, the boy who hated changes, who rarely spoke in class. He wanted to be the defense attorney, promising to win the case for Mitchell, the defendant, and grudgingly agreeing to take on David as his assistant. I had doubts as to his ability to carry out his promise. He'd have to read the story carefully, selecting facts pertinent to the case; he'd have to write his own questions and weigh the answers of the witnesses; he'd have to make quick decisions and pay careful attention to the prosecuting attorneys. I kept my doubts to myself.

Jeff and Matthew were the attorneys hoping for a conviction. Angela was the judge, Donna the bailiff, and Michael the court stenographer.

"Who wants to be on the jury?" I asked, underestimating the kids' mania for realism.

"Wait a minute," Danny spoke out indignantly. "Is that how it works? 'Who wants to be on the jury?' No! You told us you were asked questions—each lawyer asked you questions to see if you were right for the case, right?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Well, that's the way we should select this jury here. I don't want no prejudiced person on my jury!"

"What questions will you ask?" My doubts about Danny's abilities were diminishing.

"I'll have to think about them. Look, tonight, me and David'll get together and make a list of—what do you call that word—*relevant*?—questions. Okay? And Jeff and Matthew can ask questions they think are *relevant*."

"*Relevant*." A good time to introduce the spellings and definitions of all the new words they'd be using and hearing, I thought.

"Danny, that's a terrific idea. But I'd like to broaden it to include everyone. The more questions we get, the more interesting the selection process will be. If you reread the story tonight, you'll get a good idea of what lawyers would need to know to determine a juror's suitability."

"Could you give us an example?" requested Bruce. "I'm confused."

"Well, in one case I was on, for ex-

ample, the defendant was accused of stabbing a man who cut him off while he was driving. So the lawyers asked us whether we had a license, for how long we had driven, had we ever been angered by other drivers; questions dealing with the facts of the case. Of course, they ask everyone their name and occupation. If someone had been a taxi driver, for example, one lawyer might feel s/he'd be on one side or the other, and would want that person excused."

"Can we make up occupations?"

"Sure! It'll make things more interesting."

No one had any more questions, so I continued. "Danny used the word '*relevant*'. What does it mean?"

"Having to do with the issue," Jeff responded.

"Good. I thought you'd know that. But there'll be many more words whose meanings and spellings might be unfamiliar to you; you'll need to know them well for the trial. Let's write them down. You can get their definitions for homework."

The list grew as students recalled TV courtroom scenes. David Berkowitz's case was described daily in the papers during this time; someone had a morning edition and added "change of venue" to the other words.

The next class began with Danny and Jeff collecting the questions everyone had written. While they discussed them, other students finished their definitions; still others moved the desks around to resemble a courtroom.

Soon we were ready. The bailiff instructed, "All rise!" The judge entered and took her place at my desk. She banged her gavel; everyone laughed. She banged it again, looking stern.

"Order in the court! This court is now in session! Judge Angela Wearing presiding. No laughing!"

The lawyers began. Their questions were better than I had hoped.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Have you ever resented their tagging along with you?"

"Are you afraid of lightning?"

"Would you stop to help someone even if it put your own life in jeopardy?"

Twenty-three prospective jurors were examined; fourteen were finally selected. The remaining nine snapped

up the witness parts with no hard feelings.

At that point, Michael, our court stenographer, resigned, saying the task was overwhelming. He volunteered to be a court-appointed psychiatrist instead. I agreed, seeing an opportunity to get the entire class involved in writing.

"Keep a journal of the daily happenings," I said. "Write down what witnesses were called, what questions they asked—everything. Get old newspapers and read the accounts of the Patty Hearst trial, if you need an example of what to do. It'll be interesting to compare your perceptions of the trial when it's over."

I realized it was unrealistic to expect everyone to sit quietly and listen to the testimony all of the time. This would give the jurors and others a chance to occupy their hands and decrease their possible restlessness.

One day was allowed to prepare witnesses; the jury did library work.

The trial began.

Danny's opening statements were forceful and convincing. My doubts were completely gone now.

Jeff countered with an equally effective speech, and James Hurst's moving little story came alive for us as it couldn't have before.

"Doodle" was born a hopeless cripple, doomed to die. His older brother, James, once tried to speed his death by attempting to smother him. But Doodle grew stronger, and James recognized his chance for a real brother, like the other boys had. Through a combination of love, infinite patience, and harassment

James taught his younger brother to walk.

But he didn't stop there. He pushed him without mercy to run, to swim, to climb; Doodle's handicaps embarrassed James.

One day, after a grueling workout, a violent thunderstorm caught the exhausted boys unaware. James ran for shelter, ignoring? or not hearing? Doodle's cries to wait. Doodle, pushed beyond endurance, collapsed and died.

Danny contended that James had given Doodle a richer, fuller life than he would otherwise have had. He was fated to die, according to medical testimony, and James, who clearly loved his brother, could not be held responsible.

Jeff, on the other hand, contended that James was directly responsible for Doodle's death at that time. His selfishness, not his love, caused him to push Doodle far beyond anything his frail body could withstand.

Witnesses were called; prior testimony, in the form of the literature book, was read and reread. Objections were sustained and overruled. Recesses were called occasionally so lawyers could confer. Witnesses were recalled.

Finally, it was over. The jury filed out into the hall to deliberate. We busied ourselves while we waited.

Ten minutes later, a verdict.

"We find the defendant Not Guilty."

Everyone talked at once. Congratulations, hugs for Danny—it was almost as if he had been on trial. (And I think, in my mind, he was. . . .) The prosecuting attorneys wanted to ap-

peal, blaming their witnesses for not being prepared well enough to withstand Danny. The bell rang during the clamor, Angela banged her gavel, and Court was adjourned.

We reviewed the procedure the next day, and questioned the jury on their verdict.

"It was Danny who convinced me," said Amy. "He was so well prepared, he sounded so convincing, I had to let Mitchell off." The others agreed. "But also, the plot wasn't so realistic. He really didn't *kill* him. I think we should have had a different story," suggested Beth.

"Perhaps so," I agreed. "I also wondered how different it would've been if you jurors hadn't read the story first, but had to learn the facts just from the testimony."

"That's a better idea," several students agreed. "Only the lawyers should know the whole story beforehand. Can we do it again?"

I laughed. "Next year. For now, let's exchange journals. I'd like to see some, and I want you to see if your friends saw and heard the same things you did."

The kids pulled their chairs next to their friends, and I took a few minutes to go through the letters that had been accumulating all week. Danny's was on top:

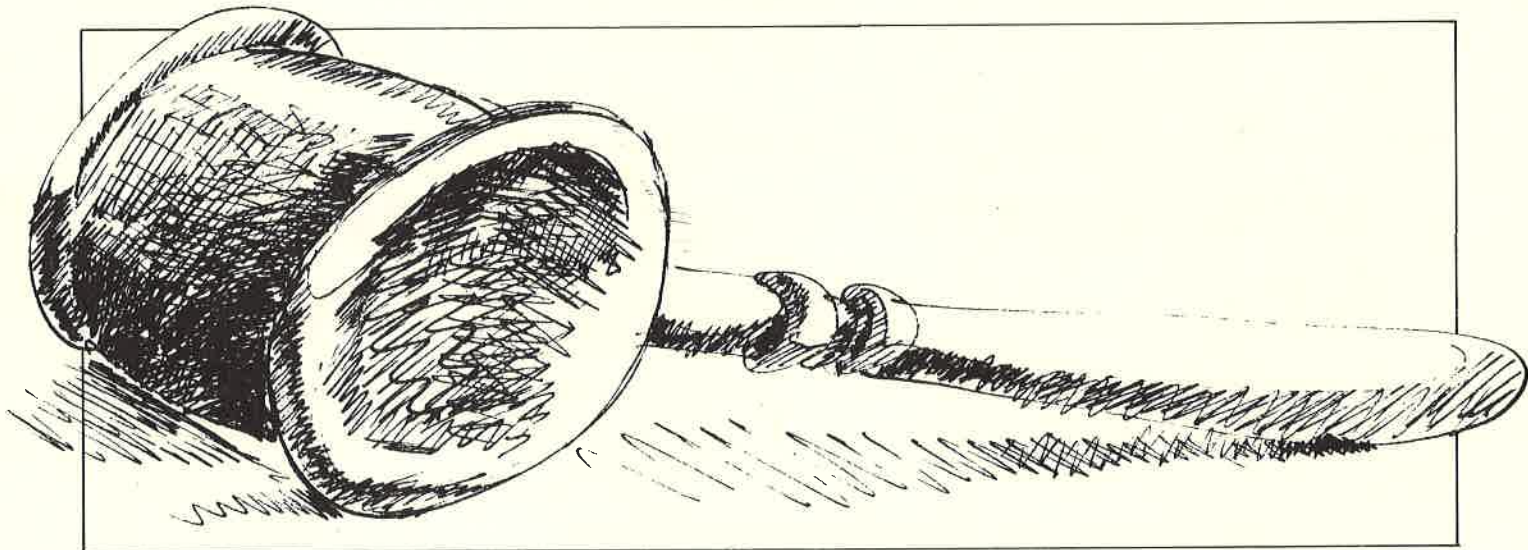
"This last week of the trial was really the best out of the whole year. I guess it was the change of ways of doing things."

I looked up and caught his eye.

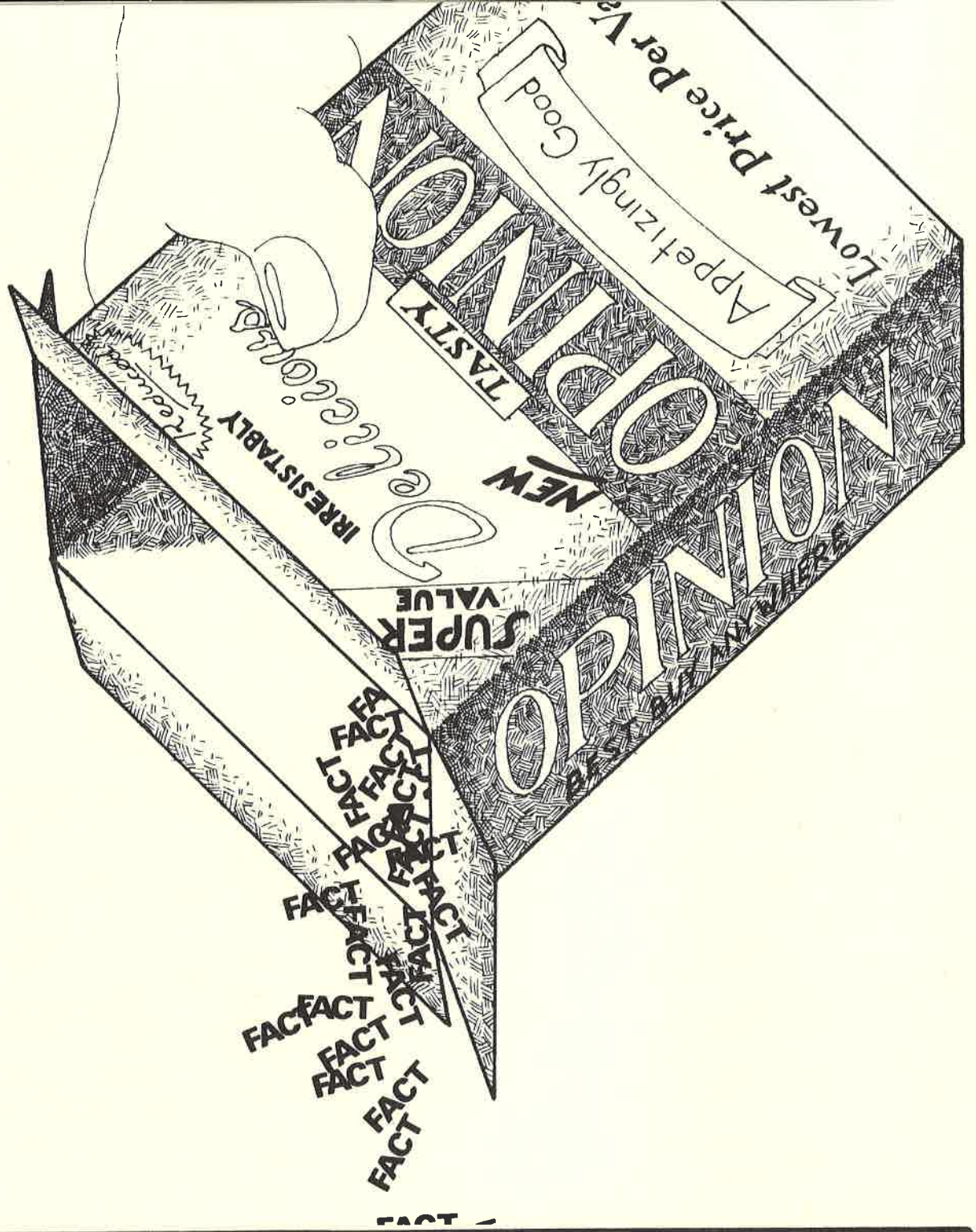
"Didn't I tell ya I could do it?" he asked.

"You certainly did," I nodded.

"I rest my case," said Danny. ●







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# Incorporating Thinking Skills and Writing Skills

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*Some ways to work on writing logically and coherently.*

by Brian R. Bechtold

**S**TUDENTS IN JUNIOR HIGH and high school learn to write through different approaches. One example is based on the belief that the student's personal experiences are the best source of writing material. Since the student knows more about himself than anyone else, he should write about himself. Furthermore, in the act of writing about himself, he learns something new that he didn't know before the writing activity. Another widely used approach, which is in many ways contrary to the first, uses literature as a stimulus for student writing. One of the assumptions is that students have had very few meaningful experiences in life and, therefore, must write about others—such as characters found in novels, short stories, and plays—who are more mature and have had a wide range of experiences. Like the personal experience writing approach, the goals are the same: new insights and self-awareness.

Included in the different approaches and combinations of approaches are different modes of writing. Descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative are well-known and found in almost every composition textbook. They provide the student with a variety of forms fundamental to a well-rounded writer.

However, no matter what approach to writing or what mode is used, a student, to be a good writer, should know something about critical thinking. Whether the student is writing a simple short story or a highly complex argument, it is essential that he be able to think logically and coherently so that when he expresses his ideas on paper they are clear in the reader's mind.

For the student writer to do this, teachers of writing must incorporate into their programs techniques and strategies which focus directly on thinking skills such as the ability to discriminate between fact and opinion. If these skills are developed, they will give the student some tools with which to better analyze and evaluate the written language. The student will be able to apply his knowledge to practically any situation in which writing is used, in the classroom

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BRIAN BECHTOLD is a consultant for the Montana Writing Project, which endeavors to increase the effectiveness of the teaching of writing at all levels of education, kindergarten through college. He is presently teaching composition at Darby High School in Darby, Montana.

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or in the real world.

The benefits for using specific techniques and activities are twofold: one, they improve the student's writing and understanding of it; and two, they provide a good stimulus for writing. Thus, writing and thinking skills are interdependent.

The following are some activities which concentrate on a specific area of critical thinking, the discrimination between fact and opinion. The first is an exercise that involves the use of dialogue.

To begin, a working definition of each of the two elements is offered. A *fact* is an event that can be observed through the five senses either by you personally, or by someone who has reported it to you; the fact must be something that can be verified empirically, or by inference from information so strong that it allows no other explanation. An example of a fact that may be verified empirically is "the baseball has a circumference of nine inches." An example of a fact made by inference is "there are seeds in the apple."

An *opinion* is a personal judgment about something you or someone else believes to be true, but which has not yet been verified. The opinion may eventually be proven true or it may be proven false. Two examples of opinions are: "An excellent kind of education for girls is home economics," and "Woody Allen is the funniest writer this country has ever produced."

The first example of an activity that will develop critical thinking involves a mock courtroom situation. From the information given, a dialogue is written by the student concerning the hearing of the case.

Directions: Assume that you are a member of the Student Council and must sit in on a special committee. The purpose of the committee is to investigate the damage to the boys' locker room. The damage occurred sometime after school while the A-squad was practicing. The list below is the information furnished concerning the damages:

1. Moderate damages to two lockers. Replacement cost \$200.
2. Severe damage to the door leading to the coach's office. Replacement cost \$500.
3. Broken laundry dryer door. Replacement cost \$75.
4. Shower drain plugged with Cre-

mergesics. Repair cost \$50.

Make up names for each member of the committee and for each of the students who may be involved in the vandalism, and write the dialogue that took place at the first hearing.

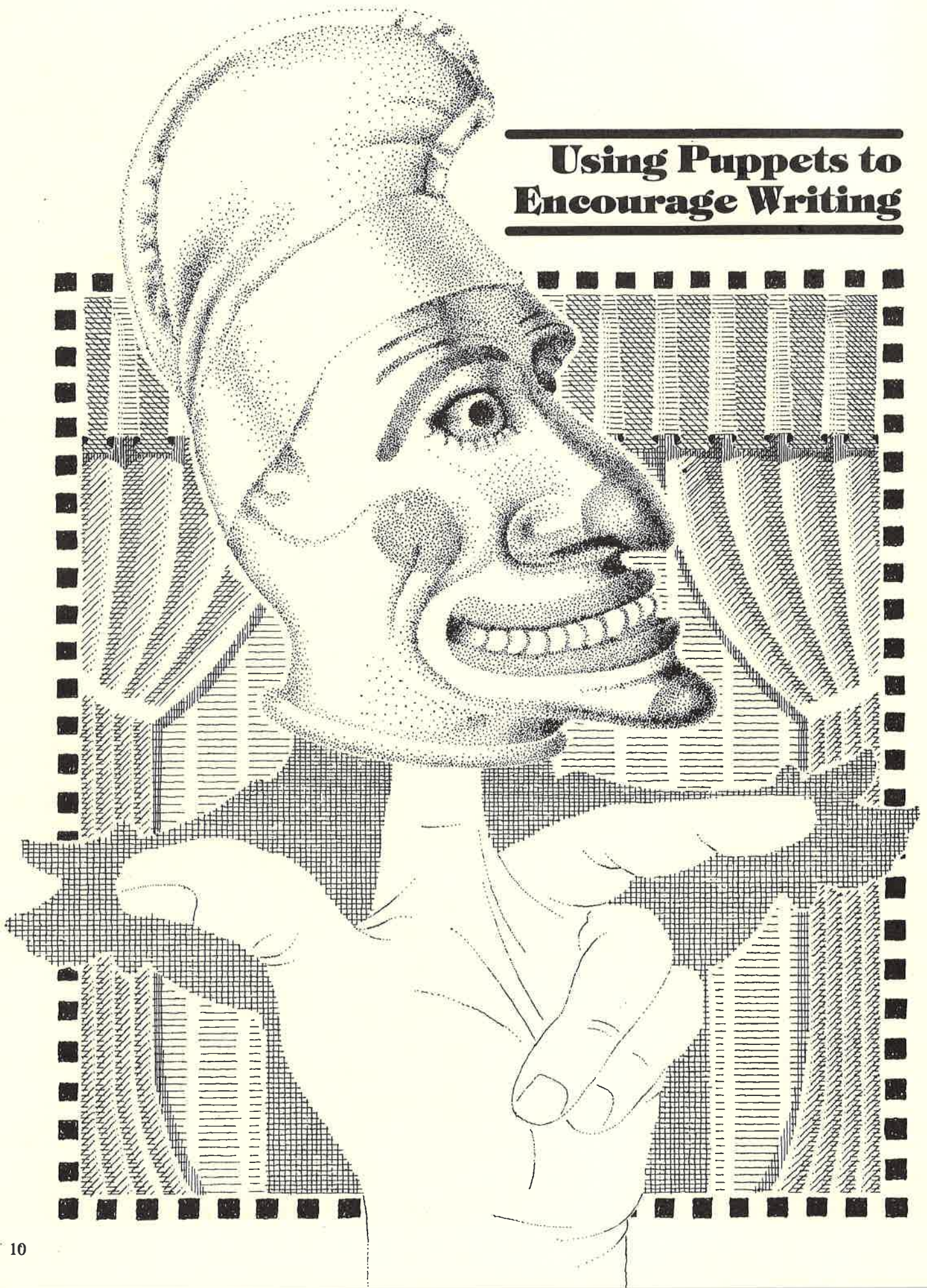
When the dialogue is complete, move into pairs and exchange papers, marking each statement made as either fact or opinion. The final step is to discuss with your partner the decisions you made. Which statements appear to be fact that are really opinion?

Another activity in fact and opinion discrimination involves the use of magazines and newspaper advertisements. Working in groups of twos, the students cut out advertisements and make two separate collages from the pictures, words, and phrases. One collage is made strictly of factual material, and the other strictly of material which is opinion. Both members should agree on each word, phrase, or picture before adding it to the collage. The students should be warned ahead of time that many ads contain both facts and opinions. In this case the ad can be cut, placing the factual material on the factual collage and the opinions on the opinion collage. When the collages are complete they are presented to the class for discussion concerning propaganda and fallacies in advertisements.

Once the students have a basic understanding about how facts and opinions are used in advertising, they are ready for the written assignment. Each student is to make up a new product and write a thirty to sixty second radio commercial. One commercial will contain as much factual information as possible, a second as much opinion as possible, and the third will be a composite of opinion based on facts. Groups may then discuss which is the most effective type and which is the most appealing.

The above activities are only two exercises that promote critical thinking in a particular area. If young writers are to reach their full potential, a good writing program must also contain activities which develop other types of critical thinking such as cause and effect relationships and comparison-contrast skills. Once the composition teacher has incorporated these thinking skills and writing skills into the classroom, the greatest satisfaction will come when the student applies what he has learned to the real world. ●

## Using Puppets to Encourage Writing



by Dolores M. Kent

ONE DAY SLOWLY FADES into another. The children don't seem to be excited about anything and you're faced with the task of igniting their interest in writing. Give puppetry a try. I've found this to be a surefire way to motivate my most reluctant students to create stories, write dialogue, and act out their original plays. You needn't be an expert puppeteer to insure a successful experience for your students. Just allow the children to fly free with their imaginations; provide materials and time for the kids to create their plays. Show your enthusiasm. The children will capture some of yours to release their own. Watch their excitement mount as they prepare to perform their play for an audience whose applause will be the final reward for their hard work.

The puppet books available at your school (or town) library will help you get started. *Hand Puppets—How to Make and Use Them*, by Laura Ross, will give you many helpful hints in making simple puppets with a minimum supply of materials. Students do not have to make elaborate puppets to enjoy the rewarding experience of creating, writing, and performing. My students need no prodding to create dragons, fairy queens, magic carpets, and wandering boys out of small paper sacks and magic markers. Children can supply other materials they might use to make puppets. A note sent home to the children's parents several weeks before you begin, explaining the puppet project and asking for scrap material, yarn, and ribbon, along with newspapers and small boxes, will make your job of scrounging for supplies easier. The more your students can bring in, the more they will be involved in making the puppets and the greater their motivation.

One of my puppet projects developed from student enthusiasm generated by a puppeteer who gave a work-

DOLORES KENT began her teaching career seven years ago in a small rural town in western Massachusetts. For the past five years she has been teaching at Frenchtown Elementary School in Montana. She is a teacher consultant to the Montana Writing Project and has given several workshops on using puppetry with writing.

shop at our school. She showed us many types of puppets and put on several original plays leaving the final play unfinished. She encouraged the children to write a closing scene. This was the spark that ignited the class into a puppet play production. Once the children were involved with making the puppets and creating the dialogue, keeping them motivated was far from a problem. On the contrary, some were reluctant to go out for recess, but smiles brightened when I suggested they take their puppets outside and practice their plays. A few children didn't want to stop writing and also continued their plays outside. It was refreshing to see the children's work carry over into recess and have them return wanting to continue their plays.

If you're unable to solicit the services of a visiting puppeteer, select a story involving a lot of action and well defined characters. Fairy tales work well with third and fourth graders because the children are familiar with the characters and can easily identify with one. This factor helps a child develop dialogue. Even though children are familiar with a story, they will put the sparkle of their imagination into the writing so that new tales invariably occur. I've used the story *Pinocchio* with success. The children can think of numerous situations in which to put Pinocchio and clever ways to rescue him. Before the children start to make their puppets, we discuss possible adventures and characters the little wooden puppet might encounter. This is an important pre-writing step to get the children thinking imaginatively and to involve the reticent students. Show them some simple ways of making puppets. Many students won't know where to begin without a model. Don't worry! You won't have twenty-six duplicate puppets. Because each child is unique, he or she will incorporate that uniqueness into making a special puppet unlike any other.

Instruct the children to join in groups of two or three. (This number works well with fourth graders. Though older children can work in larger groups, the back stage area usually will accommodate no more than four.) The children should decide on an adventure and the character each person will portray. In the following two to three days, the children will make their puppets. As the puppets take shape, the children will use them to converse with

each other, inventing dialogue as they proceed. Some students will see a need to write down dialogue the moment it is spoken without giving it a chance to change. When this occurs, let it happen but don't encourage the entire class to write when they first start inventing dialogue. The children must first improvise and feel comfortable with the play they've created. They can then write down the dialogue and scene cues so as not to forget them. The children find that it is very natural to go from talking through their ideas to writing them down.

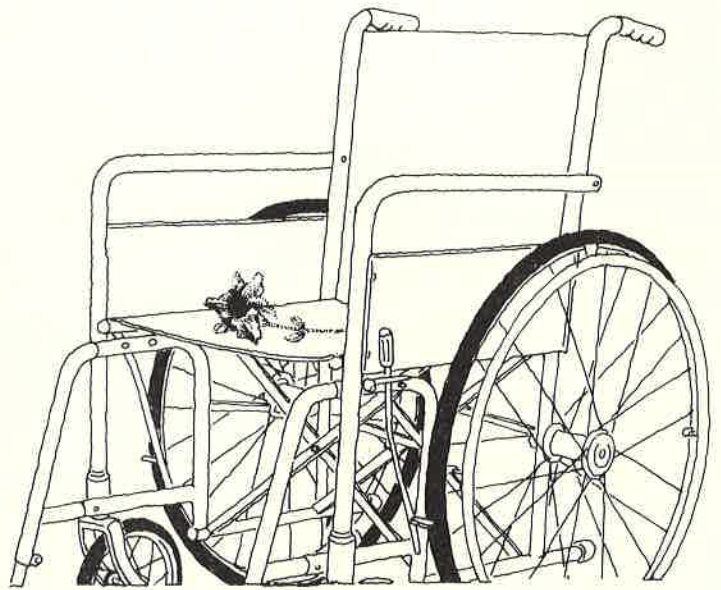
When a group of children is ready to write their dialogue, give each member a piece of different colored paper. Each child then writes his or her dialogue on colored paper and cuts apart the sections spoken at one time. All the children paste their sections of dialogue in sequence on one piece of construction paper. If their play takes up more than one piece of construction paper, extra pieces are used. As the children read their play from one script, the different colored paper offers visual clues to speak.

As performance day draws near, the children will need to write and send invitations to their guests from other classes. The puppet theatre will need finishing touches. Your theatre could be any size or shape that suits your needs. A good puppet resource book, such as Judy Sim's *Puppets for Dreaming and Scheming—A Puppet Source Book*, will give you many suggestions for simple to complex theatres.

Performance day has arrived. As the audience claps enthusiastically and each child beams as he or she holds his or her puppet and bows, you wonder what ever happened to those dreary days that slowly faded into one another. ●

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## Heal, Body, Heal: Invocations to Hope and Health

by Rochelle Ratner

### 1. Working With Convalescents

#### BURKE REHABILITATION CENTER\*

An island in an oasis  
An oasis in the desert  
Burke is one of the finest places I've heard of  
Burke is a temple realizing the original Burke's concept  
toward humanity  
A Viennese father figure set somewhere in the woods of  
Salzburg  
Burke is like a big plate of chicken soup with matzoh  
balls  
We have a patient on our floor who's always dreaming of  
cream cheese and bagels  
My children come to see me almost every day  
They find it very calm, a soothing motel after a long  
day of hard driving  
A sanctuary that takes people from the outside world and  
prepares them to go back into it  
Burke is like my electric wheelchair—it gets me all over.

—Group Poem

**WE PUSHED TWO ROUND TABLES TOGETHER** in the small second floor library. The recreation therapists went off to help bring in the participants, most of whom were in wheelchairs and needed assistance. I sat at the table and felt sort of helpless. I was used to working with people of this age in senior centers, but I sensed that these people were different. In a senior center I've heard women complain that

\*Burke Rehabilitation Center in White Plains, N.Y. is "a transitional place for an acute care patient out of the hospital who needs rehabilitation to gain mobility and independence." All the poems quoted here were originally published in *Transitions*, the Burke Rehabilitation Center patient newspaper. The workshops were conducted during 1978 and 1979, through grants from Poets & Writers, Inc.

ROCHELLE RATNER's most recent book of poetry is entitled *Combing The Waves* (Hanging Loose Press). She is the editor of *Hand Book*, a poetry, fiction, art magazine. She is also assistant editor of *The American Book Review*.

they find it difficult to walk far; the woman pulling up close to the table did not have to complain, it was obvious that she needed help getting out of her wheelchair. I understood that we were going to be dealing here with feelings that were still raw. Most of the participants had never written before, and were not accustomed to using literary form as a mask for what they found difficult to say directly. I recognized that these workshops would play a crucial part in the lives that some of the participants would lead from here on out.

At this first session there was one participant, Jeff, who seemed barely able to move, let alone write. When we passed out paper, I simply worked around him. Then one of the recreation therapists saw him scribbling at a piece of tape on the arm of his chair, and shoved paper in front of him. He wrote something like "I am Jeff," and even this was received with encouragement. The patients and staff were teaching me the way things were done at Burke.

I tried several different writing ideas, and over the various workshops developed four lessons which seemed to follow a definite progression yet were basic enough for new participants at any session to follow. During the first series of workshops, I spent the fourth session focusing on "prayers." We spoke of prayer as a form of direct address, an asking, which could be directed at anyone. We discussed the difference between "prayer" and "blessing." Yet the majority of poems dealt with sickness, the need to be healed. They asked for healing.

I should have known. In the month since I had begun teaching there, I had found my own poems moving toward a definition of sickness and health. These workshops would be of value only if they could help the participants to come to terms with their illness, and the health that still remained.

I began to see growth in people from week to week. At the third session we had confronted illness directly in "talking to a part of the body"; at the fourth and final session, one of the women picked up on that theme, and described what the experience of attending these workshops had meant for all of us:

HEAL, BODY, HEAL

What have I done to you to justify what you  
have done to me, all unknowingly?  
Tell me, can you heal as well as destroy?  
If so, how?

If so, tell me—I shall do  
as you say.

—Florence O'Brien

## 2. The Workshops

The workshops would begin around 7:30 in the evening, but we seldom started writing before 8:00. I made sure that paper and pencils were available, but they were not passed out until it came time to write. I stressed that no one had to write if he or she did not want to; they were welcome to join in anyway and listen, participate in the conversation. And many participants did just that. Others, who insisted they couldn't write, would begin to scribble once they saw other people working. Some patients would get visitors and leave in the middle of the session; other times the visitors joined in; other patients got tired and decided to leave. We tried to keep things as loose and relaxed as possible. In general, the workshops were over by 9:00, though sometimes conversations continued.

At the first workshop we went around the table and introduced ourselves. Going around again, I asked each person to "tap out the rhythm of your first name on the table, emphasizing the number of syllables, which syllable is accented, whether the rhythm is slow or fast." If there was a patient who did not seem able to move his or her arms, I adapted the exercise by asking everyone either to tap out the rhythm or hum it, which added still another dimension. Someone challenged me: "What does all this have to do with writing?" The answer came before I could fully think it out: "Poetry is rhythm, and concentrating on our names, the most personal part of ourselves, is directly related to what the poem should do." I read some poems in which poets had dealt with the meaning and sound of their names:

RACHEL

(Rachel—rā 'chel—an ewe)

We named you  
for the sake  
of the syllables  
and for the small boat  
that followed the *Pequod*,  
gathering lost children  
of the sea.

We named you  
for the dark-eyed girl  
who waited at the well  
while her lover  
worked seven years  
and again  
seven.

We named you  
for the small daughters  
of the Holocaust  
who followed their six-pointed stars  
to death  
and were all of them  
known as  
Rachel.

—Linda Pastan

ROSEMARY

Rosemary.

Rosemary Hughes.

Rosemary Hughes Ramos

Rosemary Hughes Ramos Daniell

Rosemary Hughes Ramos Daniell Coppelman.

Rosemary Hughes Ramos Daniell

Rosemary Hughes Ramos

Rosemary Hughes

Rosemary who's?

Rosemary's.

—Rosemary Daniell

We talked about the importance of names in the Old Testament. In *Genesis* 17, for example, God says: "No longer shall your name be Abram (that is, *exalted father*), but your name shall henceforth be Abraham (*father of a multitude*), for I have made you father of a multitude of nations." Or, in *Genesis* 25, it describes Rebekah giving birth to twins: "Afterward his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob (that is, *He takes by the heel* or *He supplants*)."

We discussed superstitions and religious traditions regarding naming, such as the Jewish belief that the soul of a dead person does not come to rest until its name has been given to an infant, or the custom of changing the name of a sick child: thus was the Angel of Death confused when he came for Jacob and found Seth. I brought in a dictionary of names and read the meaning of each person's name. This, in itself, was instrumental in sparking off images for some participants:

Matthew

What God gave him.

God gave me a good life. In all my  
troubles he was there to help me. Even  
in my trouble now: I am an old man  
and he helped me to recuperate fast from  
my heart operation.

—Matthew Kaftan

Barbara—the stranger.

Strange to me or strange to others?

Am I strange to myself?

Do I know me?

What is my rhythm

Or do I mean my bio-rhythm?

Does he know me—the stranger?

Does he understand the stranger in me?

I have often wondered to myself

Do I know me—do you know me?

Are we strangers to each other?

Are we now less strange as the years flow by?

Has life brought us closer?

I wonder—more and more as I think of us—  
of you, of me.

—Barbara Willing

For other participants, thinking of their names sparked off childhood memories. Billie, who wrote the following poem, mentioned that she had not thought about this situation since she was a young child.

*Libby*, they say she called me,

Libelleh, my Mom.

I don't remember ever being  
called Libelleh, you see I was only two  
and she had already left us.

She was thirty four and her name was Sara.

No one ever called me Libelleh after  
she was gone.

Now I am "Billie"—I sure

would like to hear the name Libelleh.

Now I am Billie, full grown, and

never to hear the name Libelleh again.

I came away from that first workshop with a feeling that

I had succeeded in giving each person his or her own name back. And along with that went the strong affirmation of individuality: many people were looking at themselves as if for the first time.

Barbara Willing, who'd written the "stranger" poem earlier that evening, was able to take the theme of "name as identity" one step further. This time she was able to make the name into an image:

Super giant—I was always big.  
At least I always felt so big:  
Big hands, big feet.  
I always envied my little friends.  
It was not until I grew up a bit  
I could stand tall and not feel so big.  
I learned words like regal and Junoesque.  
They made me feel more desirable.  
They gave me a new self image.  
I was no longer a super-giant,  
Perhaps only a giant—but a nice one.

"Super Giant" was actually the name of a flower. Over the summer, I'd been glancing at a Burpee Seed Catalogue, and was fascinated by some of the names for different flowers. Without telling people what the flower was, I read some of the names: Summer Sun, Plum Pudding, Major-ette, Christmas Pepper, Blue Fairy Tale, Organ Pipe, Native's Comb. I asked them to write about the flower, what it looked like, how it got its name, or whatever else one of the names called to mind. We talked about how people in a hospital are always receiving gifts of flowers and discussed ways they could relate the names to themselves.

Barbara's two poems had revealed an openness about herself which fascinated me. I was anxious to find out more about her, and wheeled her back to her room that night so we would have a chance to talk. She told me she had always promised herself that she would someday find the time to write, but had continually put it off. I pointed out that she had the time now. During the next three sessions I was continually encouraging her to try some writing on her own during the day, but she kept insisting she didn't feel well enough, she wanted to be at home before she really started writing on her own. After leaving Burke, Barbara joined a writing workshop at a senior center near her home.

At the second session, I wanted to give participants a form which would allow them to write about their concerns without being "personal." The key seemed to be in the use of images. I asked them to "write about yourself as if you were an animal or an object." I took care to make sure that the examples I read had a happy, playful feeling, such as David Ignatow's "The Bagel":

I stopped to pick up the bagel  
rolling away in the wind  
annoyed with myself  
for having dropped it  
as if it were a portent.  
Faster and faster it rolled,  
with me running after it  
bent low, gritting my teeth,  
and I found myself doubled over  
and rolling down the street  
head over heels, one complete somersault  
after another like a bagel  
and strangely happy with myself.

Whatever animal or object they chose to be, I wanted them actually to *become* it. "If you're a floor, is it because people walk all over you? What does it feel like? Are you wood, linoleum, or is there a carpet over you? Do children run barefoot across you? This poem by John Haines does an excellent job of imagining precisely what it feels like to be a cauliflower":

#### THE CAULIFLOWER

I want to be a cauliflower,  
all brain and ears,  
meditating on the origin of gardens  
and the divinity of Him  
who carefully binds my leaves.  
With my blind roots touched  
by the songs of the worms  
and my rough throat throbbing  
with strange vegetable sounds,  
perhaps I'd feel the parting stroke  
of a butterfly's wing . . .  
Not like those cousins the cabbages,  
whose heads, tightly folded,  
see and hear nothing of this world,  
dreaming only of the yellow  
and green magnificence  
that is hardening within them.

We spoke of how poetry permits you to become any animal or object you want to be, simply by imagining yourself as that. No one could criticize your fantasies. And yet my reaction to Max Kornweitz's poem was to want to cry out, "You've got more than this!" He had seemed calm and quiet. The poem shows his acceptance of illness as just one more thing he was fated to endure:

I think of myself as a small horse,  
Hard-working, always sleepy,  
Who looks like he's carrying all the hardship of  
life on his back  
And never gets a break to enjoy a better life,  
Who is always tired, and looks for a place to relax.

I sensed that Charlotte Stern had begun writing her poem from much the same point of view that we saw in Max's poem. The first two lines lead us to believe she will go on to talk about things that happened to her which she would have liked to forget. But perhaps writing those lines acted as a catharsis for her—she saw them written there and realized that no, she didn't want to forget, she just wanted to remember the happier times:

I am an elephant.  
I wish I could not have a memory, and forget.  
However it has sometimes been a good point,  
Because I don't forget nice things I experienced.  
So I try to concentrate on positive things  
To make life easier for me and those around me.

Charlotte understood that during this period of illness she would need people around to help her and care for her; Doris Silverstein took that one step further. Her poem is ambivalent: she sees friends and the care they offer as a threat as well as a comfort. Like Max Kornweitz, she was coming to an acceptance of her life. Illness was forcing her to look at everything around her in much more personal terms; she watched the flowers wilt in her room and realized it would be possible for her to wilt as well. As she watched the flowers struggling to survive, the struggle her own body was going through became that much clearer to

her. The line between sickness and health is a very precarious one:

I feel like a bunch of flowers.  
I like being flowers and yet I am afraid  
Of all the people who will come and pick me—  
Petal by petal.  
I want to stay whole and yet I know that someone,  
Many people, will want to take part of me with them.  
My petals are getting less and less.  
The water that is nurturing me is evaporating.  
I would like at this moment to be in a florists's case—  
Cool, well cared for—  
And to stay fresh and lovely and alive for longer  
Than is possible for a flower's lifetime.

There were other people who already had a strong sense of who they were, and for them the use of images seemed too much of a bother. Anna Weintraub wanted to be precisely what she was, and her poem is a beautiful affirmation of that. It becomes almost an ode to the recuperative powers of the body:

I am 82  
Still going strong  
Broke my hip  
Still going strong  
Had it mended  
And still going strong  
You can't keep a woman like me down.

Anna's poem led us directly into the third session: an affirmation that the body *can* recuperate. I had found that people seemed to ignore the injured parts of their bodies, rather than really work on them. I told them that "the body *can* recuperate, but you have to *tell it what you want*. People talk to plants and we're told they grow better. Why shouldn't the body, or one part of the body, react the same way?"

The workshop happened to coincide with Valentine's Day, so naturally discussion centered on the heart. Someone pointed out that the physical therapist was constantly reminding her that "the heart is a muscle" and must be used to produce movement. We wrote the following group poem, passing around a sheet of paper with each person writing, then folding it over so the next person couldn't see what had already been written:

#### THE HEART

The heart is a muscle  
The heart has become a geographical designation:  
Heart of the nation, tobacco country, etc.  
The heart beats and is measured by machines  
But not when we use the word to mean "feelings"  
The heart is a pump sending blood through our veins  
The heart reflects the glory of the sun  
Hearts made of chocolate and other goodies  
Hearts made of muscle and blood  
Chocolate hearts are good to eat  
Muscle and blood hearts are hard to treat  
The heart is the symbol of love and  
The maintainer of life  
The heart beats the rhythm of living and loving  
The heart is a very delicate organ, so please do not  
break mine.

This poem has a marked tendency toward cliché and abstraction. I saw that writing *about* a part of the body could easily lead to sentimentality, which was one of the reasons I wanted people to *address* the body. I told them to "be as

specific as possible. Don't try to talk to your entire body, but choose one part and tell it precisely what you want from it. If you can give the reader a clear picture of that one part, he will have no trouble imagining the rest of your body. It's like a moment caught in a snapshot." We made a few small mirrors available, in case they wanted to write about a part of the body they couldn't see otherwise, but no one bothered to use them. Perhaps they were all too aware of their physical conditions; they wanted to use the poem to lift them above everyday reality:

My forehead is wrinkled.  
I would like it to be smooth.  
Someday I will plant  
something there...

(anonymous)

It took me a long time to find a poem I could use as an example which would force participants into a direct encounter with their bodies and handicaps, yet at the same time would not present a completely negative focus. The poem I finally selected is by Robert Winner, himself a paraplegic:

#### TO MY FACE, AFTER ILLNESS

From your bones on out  
you give the lie to suffering.  
You ought to be more lined with pain.  
You should give a stronger impression  
in photographs  
of the heartbreak caged in your fat.  
Mess of tissues!  
Maybe I should be grateful to you  
for remembering,  
for leaving printed on this flesh—  
its sun-tanned jowls—  
these inescapable paragraphs  
which tell the original story.

After hearing this, David Gordon dictated to me the following poem:

My left hand and arm,  
like a lover,  
always beside me,  
always to help me—  
you burn me up  
because my right  
is not as strong as my left.  
But then the one time you disappoint me  
and become numb to my flesh,  
I don't even know you're there.  
Then I look down  
and I expect to see  
a bare stomach  
but instead I see you.  
It comes to mind  
how I have no fury  
like a woman scorned.  
The swan has turned into an ugly duckling  
for what once was really beautiful  
to me  
has become an appendage,  
like a lobster claw:  
red, raw, and mean-looking,  
with no help  
but just ugliness.  
To see and to feel  
and not to see and not to feel...  
a paradox.



To think I always took care of you,  
but when I really needed you  
you were never there,  
and you never took care of me.

David insisted he'd never written before, yet everything he dictated, and the speed at which he was able to progress from image to image, belied that assertion. While writing this, he had trouble remembering the word "paradox," and made me look in two dictionaries and a thesaurus in order to find it.

David himself was a paradox; nothing else he said gave any hint of the anger he expressed in this poem. He contributed a lot to every conversation, and showed an interest in everyone who spoke. I remember one night the recreation therapists were discussing a trip with patients to a local movie theatre, and he mentioned that he would not want to go with them: "People around here know me, and I'd rather they didn't see me yet."

Kathleen Cudney, like David, was angry at her body. She had every right to be. She was in her early twenties; arthritis was slowly crippling her completely.\* At the first session, Kathi seemed to be angry at the world, but as the sessions progressed she gradually opened up. The first poem she wrote she refused to share with the group. I read it, and immediately perceived that she'd been writing before. The hospital staff told me they were anxious to find activities that could interest her now that her physical capacity was more limited, and writing seemed an important step in developing other interests.

At the third session she brought in some of her old poems, many of which she was now revising. During this workshop she wrote an angry poem to her body, and she read it. David's poem had already been read, and perhaps that influenced her. But she heard other participants read more encouraging poems, thanking injured parts of their bodies for the good times they had shared and promising that those times would come again. While we were sitting around talking, after reading the poems, she began to write again, re-writing the same poem with an entirely different emphasis:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1.<br>My right hand<br>serves me no more—<br>now to write<br>I must use both.<br>Time consuming.<br>My legs serve me poorly<br>or not at all;<br>muscle strength<br>is gone.<br>My head<br>serves me no more—<br>Jumbled thoughts,<br>mixed-up feelings,<br>confusion. | 2.<br>Right hand<br>why do you fail me?<br>I always took good care<br>of you,<br>kept you as warm<br>as I could in winter,<br>even if<br>I had to sit on you.<br>Sorry if it hurt,<br>but it hurt more<br>when you were cold.<br>At least I tried.<br>Why don't you<br>try harder?<br>You can do it,<br>I know you can,<br>so let's keep going, trying,<br>together. |
|--|--|

\*The younger patients were in a different unit of the hospital, and many of their activities were separated from those of the older patients, but I wanted the workshops open to everyone (and found it easier to relate at first to the two patients closer to my own age).

In the first poem, Kathi dealt with three separate parts of her body: her right hand, her legs, and her head. The second poem proved that, with a little effort, she *did* have the ability to concentrate and focus on only one part, as if at the same time she was healing the "jumbled thoughts" of the first poem.

Kristin Maher was a lot like Kathi. She was also an arthritic patient, and she was younger than most of the others—I'd say probably in her mid- to late thirties. She was able to begin writing at each session without any prompting, but aside from that she was fairly quiet. But here the resemblances stopped. Everything she wrote was from a very positive point of view, and it was usually focused more on other people than herself. In speaking to her body, she dealt with the part that she felt put her in the closest touch with others.

Ears,  
Thank you for bringing me music  
Which, depending on which type,  
Brings peace or a livelier gaiety.  
And ears, through you come  
Voices of friends or birds,  
My cats,  
Kind people, brusque voices  
And then music  
Which closes the circle of love.

Kristin's poem started me thinking. It now struck me that when you talk to someone this directly, you expect an answer. What would happen if we took the theme of sickness and health, and started to look at it as a dialogue between the body and the mind? "If we can talk this directly to a part of the body, it's only right for it to be able to give its version." When I first suggested that people now write an answer to their first poem, I was expecting something more or less humorous. Yet the only people who wrote humorous answers were the two recreation therapists and myself. Kristin's second poem is remarkable in its ability to endow her ears with as much kindness for "her" as she originally felt for "them":

Yes, we heard you.  
What we have given  
Is safely in storage,  
So that even if we stopped hearing  
You wouldn't.  
The music will still be there  
Even when we and the rest of you  
Aren't.

Later, when I typed Kristin's poem, I realized that she used these words to assuage her fear of death. And certainly death was an imminent presence for all the people in these workshops. Yet I kept pushing it from my mind. The prospect of my own death was something I did not want to face, and I felt it was necessary to continue the workshops as if others had not faced it either. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that no one would destroy my illusions. Everyone listened politely to my suggestions for assignments, then they went ahead and wrote the poems they felt they had to write. In having a part of the body "answer" the poem addressed to it, they had turned an exercise I had seen as playful into a profoundly significant dialogue. Not one poem consciously fought the assignment I had given; the participants simply added their own content to the form I provided.

There were similar results with an exercise triggered by Denise Levertov's marvelous poem, "The Wings":

Something hangs in back of me,  
I can't see it, can't move it.

I know it's black,  
a hump on my back.

It's heavy. You  
can't see it.

What's in it? Don't tell me  
*you* don't know. It's

what you told me about—  
black

inimical power, cold  
whirling out of it and

around me and  
sweeping you flat.

But what if,  
like a camel, it's

pure energy I store,  
and carry humped and heavy?

Not black, not  
that terror, stupidity

of cold rage; or black  
only for being pent there?

What if released in air  
it became a white

source of light, a fountain  
of light? Could all that weight

be the power of flight?  
Look inward: see me

with embryo wings, one  
feathered in soot, the other

blazing ciliations of ember, pale  
flare-pinions. Well—

could I go  
on one wing,

the white one?

I thought it would be interesting if people could "invent a new part of their bodies." We talked about science fiction and the way it makes use of this device. If we were to invent a new part, then it would most likely be a natural extension of the parts we already have. And certainly we had a lot of fun talking about the possibilities. But the poems were once again down-to-earth and practical. Several people, many of whom were stroke patients, wrote about inventing new brains.

I would like to invent a brain  
That healthily lasts 80 years  
and then immediately stops with no pain.  
This would alleviate much

unnecessary suffering and heartbreak.  
White as an angel  
And just as trusting.

—Mr. S.

When he wrote this poem, Mr. S. was an active participant in all the workshops. He was able to get around without much trouble, but was constantly complaining that his mind would not let him pronounce the word he wanted. He seemed to be continually reaching for something, and then giving up. When my eyes caught his for a moment, I had the feeling that he knew something I didn't know. It didn't matter that outwardly he seemed to be getting better, inwardly he was dying, and he knew it. When I came back to Burke for another series of workshops, two or three months later, he had returned as a patient. He did not come to the workshops this time. The recreation therapists told me they were no longer able to get him to participate in anything, and after a few weeks he was transferred to a nursing home.

It was out in the open now; we talked about the fact that he was dying. Once I accepted that, the poem he had written about "inventing a new part of the body" took on deeper meaning. And looking again over the poems he wrote, another one, written earlier that same evening, captures that same sense of finality. He was not able to focus on any one part of his body, and he was not able to talk to it either. He stated simply what he felt; actuality became a dream of the future without his being aware of it:

What have I done to my body?  
Abused it,  
Amused it,  
Busted it many times.  
This is a never-ending game.  
And then when the ball game is over  
It stops abruptly,  
And peace will be eternal.

In the first three sessions, I had guided the participants through an assertion of individuality, the transferring of their feelings onto an object, and a direct encounter with their illness. Now I wanted them to write a *healing poem*, and I read some primitive healing poems as examples:

#### PRAYER TO HEAL A SICK CHILD

O white chicken, good chicken,  
chicken that is just a chick, crying peep-peep,  
Throw off, shed away Bale Oke, spirit of sores,  
Bale Pali, spirit of sudden bad changes.  
Release sickness from the body, from inside the body  
where it has gone deep, deaf to our call—  
O white chicken, good chicken,  
chicken that is just a chick, crying peep-peep.  
Sickness, follow the pig, the male pig  
to the end of the mountain,  
to the end of the valley, to the end of the mountainslope,  
to the end of the steep slope on the mountain.  
Beat the air from out of, get rid of, release—  
you rhinoceros hornbill—  
beat the air from out of, get rid of  
the sickness from the body;  
break its hold on this life.

(from the Sarawak Museum Journal,  
translation by Carol Rubenstein)

People seemed confused by the poem. I stopped and just asked them directly: "If I told you to write a *healing poem*, what would you think of?" Talk led to prayer, to doctors,

operations and the simple kindness of nurses. We even somehow got talking about levitation. We spoke of the psychological elements involved in the healing process, how the "laying-on of hands" could be related to the touch of any doctor. We talked about exorcism, where the sickness is ordered out of the body and into some object or animal. I related this to the Old Testament understanding of the scapegoat. I said that people unable to understand what an illness actually is frequently personified it and prayed to it, such as prayers to "Verminus" for the relief from worms. One poem by a contemporary American poet, Rose Drachler, seemed to illustrate my point perfectly—and it was a poem they had no trouble understanding.

#### AMULET AGAINST CANCER

Big Black dog  
who lives away from masters

I growl back at you  
Wild dog with no master

I advance slowly  
One step at a time

I hit you between the ears  
On top of the head

With a wooden spoon  
I spit in your face

Then feed you  
You must learn to live in my house

In a corner. You must learn  
How to live in my house  
With me

Florence O'Brien's poem, "Heal, Body, Heal" was written at this session.

Not every participant was able to write, or even talk, directly from their feelings. Intelligence, and the exalted sense of poetic language, often got in the way, as in this poem:

Heal, heal, oh heal  
You vast and shapeless depths  
Of universal night—  
You starry nebulae—  
And O, you infinitely small,  
You corpuscles of nerve and blood,  
You atoms of uranium,  
Mercury and sulphur,  
And O, you in-between,  
You powers of man  
By this incantation  
Heal, heal, Oh heal!

—Mr. D.

Mr. D. was a stroke patient, and at the previous sessions was wheeled in on a stretcher. It was hard for him to see other people and thus get the general mood of the group, so he would talk on endlessly and expect others to listen. At the second session, when we wrote about being an object or an animal, he began with: "It would be nice to be God." This healing poem, for all its faults, was the first poem he had written rather than dictated. He was sitting at the table; for the first time he was joining the group.

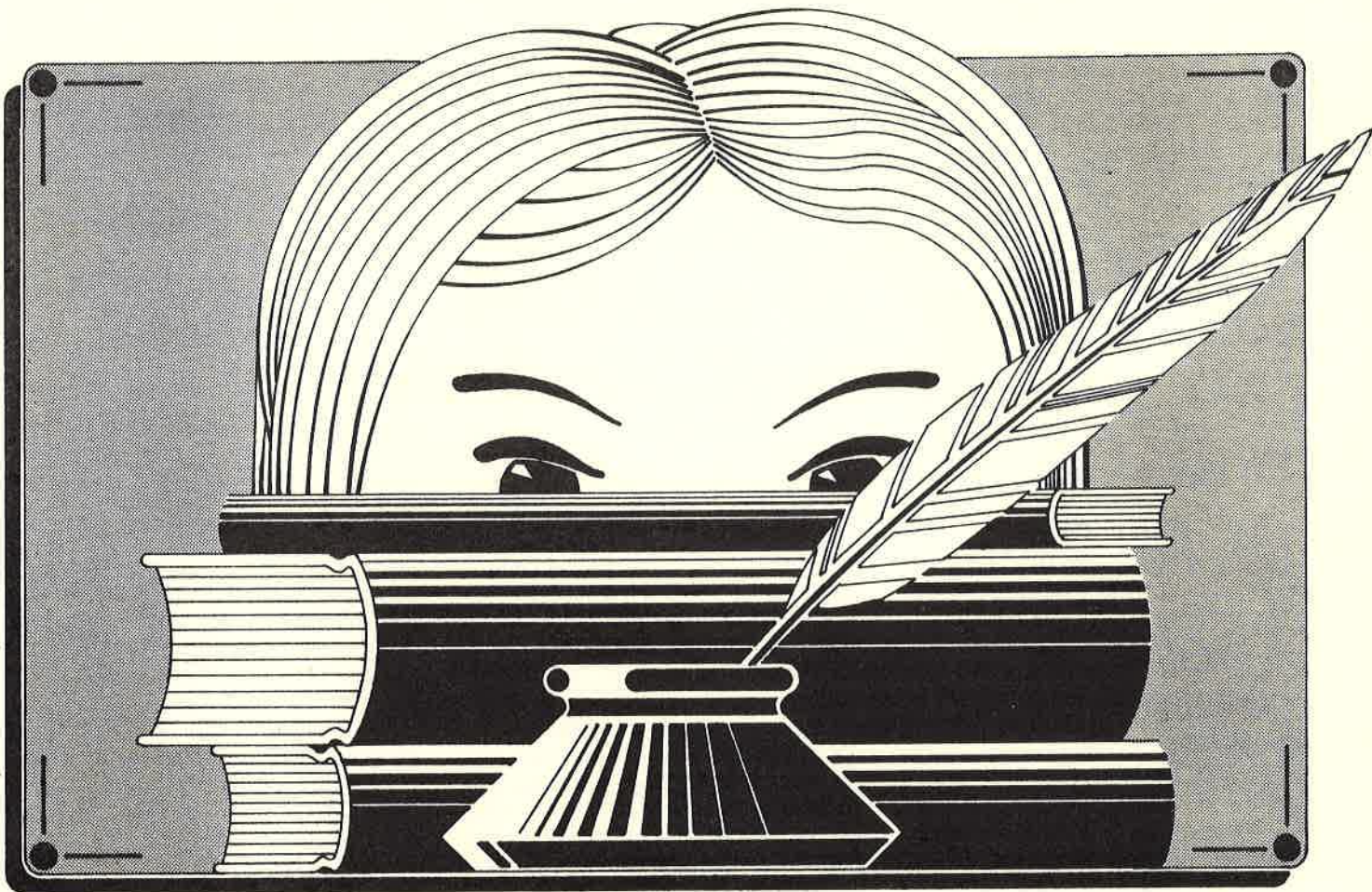
When I look back on these workshops, Socrates Vavoudis is one of the people I think about with affection. His father was a Greek poet. In his late fifties, Socrates was still working as a computer engineer, but he had taken writing courses in college, and had grown up with literature. I met him standing outside the library door before the second session, and we started talking. There was a calmness and certainty in his presence that made me think he was one of the staff. No, he had had heart surgery.

At the workshop sessions he began writing immediately, but at the final session he was having trouble. At one point I whispered: "If you're stuck, try starting with nonsense syllables and see where that leads you." Though he didn't take my advice, he began writing just after that. He was the last person in the room to begin, but he finished ahead of most of the others.

As soon as he finished writing, he got up and walked around the room for a few minutes. He stepped out into the hall, came back to the table. We were going around the table and reading our poems, and came to where he was sitting. He asked us to continue reading and come back to his poem later. He said he was feeling pain. He told us the assignment had upset him by forcing him to focus on his sickness. When he first came back into the room his hand had been lightly resting on his chest, a gesture familiar to anyone with a heart condition. The next poem we heard had an incantational quality to it, and Socrates commented on how soothing our voices were. He sat down, relaxed now. Though I had used this "healing poem" assignment with other groups, this was the first time that everyone seemed to take the word "healing" as synonymous with "comfort." Socrates' poem expresses that most directly, and he was feeling well enough to read it now:

#### HEALING SENSES

Take me oh mother of my senses  
and warm me and soothe me.  
Absorb all the pain bolts  
which must run their course.  
Leave me limp with comfort and sleep  
to rest in a void of blank security  
and warmth.  
Let me stay in this posture  
at least till I've healed  
without new wounds and lightning  
bolts of shrieking pain,  
and warm me and soothe me.



# Novel Writing in High School

*The author guides the students in her class through the experience of writing the first chapter of a novel.*

**S**OME OF THE STUDENTS WHO come to my writing workshops in high school have never read a novel. Yet each of them, as the final project in this course, writes the opening twenty to thirty pages of his/her own novel. These pieces are focused, articulate, and often moving. Each of these writers seems to genuinely enjoy the three weeks of steady writing that produces this work.

Many novels deal with the early life of the writer. Dickens (*David Copperfield*), Joyce (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), McCullers (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*), Green (*I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*), and innumerable other writers use this material. Many critical life-shaping events take place before a student leaves high school. At the age of seventeen or eighteen the student is already delineated as

by Kathleen Kranidas

the human being that he/she is becoming. That person will make many choices and be changed in many ways by relationships and experience, but that person will not alter past recognition with the coming years.

Furthermore, the last year in high school is a critical year in terms of

KATHLEEN KRANIDAS has been teaching for the past eight years in the English Dept. of Northport High School. She has taught writing workshops at State University of New York, Stony Brook, in adult ed., for senior citizens, and in-service courses for teachers K-12. She is the author of a novel, *One Year in Autumn* (Lippincott), and a collection of stories, *The Mountain, the Stone* (Puckerbrush).

choice making. Everything seems to swirl together for the student who knows that he/she will now increasingly shape his/her own course (college? work? the service? marriage?) The high school in our time and place is unique in that all the citizens of a certain age in the community are assembled there. In most schools they proceed through a prescribed day divided into prescribed time slots. Some work hard and achieve well, some "manage," and others feel captive. All seniors feel considerable tension.

In this time of choice and conflict, expectations are colliding with individual possibilities. It is a time of intensity and vacillation and of sharply increasing awareness. It is a time of ambivalence toward family and friends. It is an ideal time in which to begin to write a novel.

First, each student must accept the revelation that he/she has the life material out of which to make a novel. Each quickly recognizes that he/she is at a point in time of pressure and of choice. They also recognize that their origins and the people and places and events in their lives have affected them profoundly. I suggest to them that each is the world's authority on the subject he/she is writing about.

Second, no one should be intimidated by the writing task. Each will begin a novel. No one will write a whole novel. Some students need to be persuaded that it is acceptable to think about the dimensions of a novel, to explore the freedom of a large canvas, and to "only" begin the work itself. For some, "I can't finish it," looms. They must understand the venture is exploratory.

When a practicing novelist begins work on a novel, he/she begins to circle something, begins to sneak up on something, begins to articulate something not yet understood. Techniques vary but most writers would agree that "to begin a novel" means walking on the beach or lying awake at night or scribbling in a notebook or writing eight variant openings or looking at old snapshots, etc. It does not mean to number "page 1" and proceed to "finis" in an even way. Everyone involved must accept that this twenty to thirty pages may be a motley collection of fragments or may be a chronological account of an important weekend.

What it cannot be is a five hundred page well assembled novel. What it can be, whatever form it takes, is the beginning of that novel.

I tell my students that most people at some time in their lives wish they could write a novel. Having learned to start one, each of these students will know how to proceed should that moment arrive. Every year one or two go on during the summer to try to complete a novel, but at this age most are not ready to complete, but all are ready to begin, a novel.

The first ten weeks of this twenty week course were spent on fragments and then a collection of fragments (my version of the short story.)<sup>1</sup> Then we spend several weeks (more in the

<sup>1</sup>See "The Fragment Approach to Short Story Writing" *Teachers and Writers*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall '79.

fall, fewer in the spring because of the academic calendar, regents, etc.) getting ready to begin the novels. Preparation has two parts: 1) some exposure to possible formats and techniques; 2) suggestions as to how to find a starting point in their own lives.

We begin by looking at the easiest and most reassuring format: diary entries or a chronological approach to a simple series of events. I read to them from *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and, if the class is up to it, *To the Lighthouse*. We discuss the possibility of using one day or one trip as the basis for this twenty to thirty pages. They think about the kind of days that would be important enough to write a detailed account of. Every student recognizes that he/she could do the assignment in this way. This frees each to entertain the idea of more ambitious formats.

They have learned earlier in the course how to write a flashback and how to use stream of consciousness (associative) writing. I remind them that straightforward narrative (event/event/event) is enriched by interjecting a flashback whenever an event triggers one for the writer. Bad writing is avoided by asking them to "skip a line and be there" in the flashback, re-experiencing the scene as they write it, rather than to attempt to write a transition. I remind them that certain experiences lend themselves to stream of consciousness writing, *i.e.* moments of distorted sensory perception (going under anaesthetic, drinking alcohol, etc.) or of emotional intensity (fear, rage, love, etc.)

They have already learned about selectivity. We have talked about the difference between taping a day and writing a selective version of that same day. We have talked about the difference between taping a dialogue and selecting bits of dialogue to represent the whole exchange. They have thought earlier about all the different ways in which they are experiencing at any given moment (sensory, intellectual, emotional, day dream, memory, anticipation, etc.) I remind them as they confront the expanse of their own lives (usually fifteen years that they can remember) that they are actually being highly selective to write only twenty to thirty pages.

We take one day to think about

their town, their school, the surrounding beaches, woods. We think of all the ways there are to arrive at this town: by car, hitching, motorcycle, walking, by train; by plane followed by limosine or car or hitching; by helicopter; by ferry, yacht, fishing boat; from the east or north or west or south. We talk about the difference in effect between opening a novel with the character hitching into town or coming in by yacht. We look at the opening of *Grapes of Wrath* or something else in which place plays an important role. I ask them to locate themselves in space beginning with their desk, the room, school, neighborhood, town, etc. until they get to galaxy. I ask them to write a piece about a place they care about, trying to catch the feeling of that place—not a description in the traditional sense, but a description in the sense of the way the place feels to them, how it was at one particular moment in time, or what it was that it possessed for them after much time there, *i.e.* the smell in the hall of their grandmother's apartment in the city, or the gum-covered seat with the smoke-soaked cover in the third row of the balcony at the local movie theater. . . any place that has had a meaning in their lives.

We talk about alternating dream/reality. The student who likes to write dreams may wish to do nothing but dreams. I tell them that the reader will not respond to this kind of extended dream piece; the reader needs to be grounded in reality. I ask the dream-oriented student to anchor the reader by providing alternating scenes (even if brief) that are "real"—shifting from the dream to algebra class, from the dream to pumping gas. We look at the opening of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and we notice how Green reverses outside reality and inside reality. What is "real" is to her, unreal, shadowy; and what is in her mind only is, to her, most real.

We talk, as we have often in this course, about daydreaming, about sorts of daydreams—fantasy escape, rewriting the scene you just lived through, having it go a different way, anxiety day dreams, exuberant day dreams, etc. I urge them to vary the tone of their novel with dreams and/or daydreams.

Sometimes with a sophisticated group we look at *As I Lay Dying* or

some other book in which there is variety in the point of view, but usually this is too difficult for high school. I advise them to stick to one point of view, preferably their own, whether done via first person (most students' choice) or third person.

We take one day to reminisce. I read them some excerpts from *U.S.A.*, showing them how Dos Passos varies the format with portraits of public figures, camera eye, stream of consciousness, newsreels and more traditional character centered chapters. I ask them to think back to their earlier years and to share with one another whatever songs, TV shows, political events, news stories, public events of any sort, sports heroes, singers, actors, actresses they remember. They begin to remember those events they shared and to distinguish between private events and public events such as blackouts, assassinations, rock festivals, elections, wars, inflations. If the class has more sophisticated members I also show them parts of the *Golden Notebook* and we notice how Lessing uses news events as they intersect with her characters' lives. I help them understand that to be of use to a novelist a public event must have intersected meaningfully the life of the character. For example, a Three Mile Island in and of itself is useless, but if the child watched it with fear and confusion because it was on TV and the family was distressed, it is important. It is the intersection point that interests the writer of fiction, not the public significance of the event.

As these stylistic approaches are presented in class, each student privately searches for a way to begin his/her own novel. We have discussed family crises as good starting points and have looked at the opening scene of *Anna Karenina* or some other intense family scene. We have talked about various family events that are important: weddings, the birth of siblings, funerals, family dinners, holidays, divorces, moving to new places, getting a room of your own for the first time, an older sibling leaving for college, army, work, or marriage. They have by now learned to write what is important to them. They have learned that any moment of tension (fear, loneliness, love, anger, confusion, etc.) is a good starting point in writing. They have learned to "put it

on stage," i.e. to write scenes rather than to "talk about" the event.

The best instigator of good novel writing that I know is saved for last. It is "expectations." I usually read them the opening of *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown, and we talk about what the narrator's father has expected of him, namely that he will always be in trouble, and what the narrator has expected of his friend, namely caring, and how all he gets is his friend's expectation that he not tell on him. "You gonna tell the cops who was with you?"

Then I read them the opening of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* by James Baldwin. This deals with two major expectations: 1) the protagonist will grow up to be a preacher; and 2) he will be good. Students can immediately identify with both expectations. We talk about how some fathers paint the "and son" on the truck the day the boy is born, how some mothers expect the girl to grow up and marry and have three children the way she did. We talk about roles in the family, about being youngest or oldest or in between, about being expected to be adaptable or intractable, to be comic or tragic, to be always in trouble or never in trouble. We talk about the phrase used by parents, teachers, etc., "I never would have expected this of you," or "I always knew you'd do something like this." We talk about the expectations connected with being a son as opposed to those of being a daughter.

I ask them to make lists of expectations: what their parents expect of them (put out the garbage, be in on time, keep out of trouble with the law, don't get pregnant, stay off drugs, don't drink, pay for your own clothes, talk a certain way in the house, be respectful, go to church or synagogue, visit relatives, be self-supporting at age eighteen, go to college, be a carpenter or doctor or whatever, get married, live at home until you marry, move out at age eighteen). I ask them to list their expectations of their parents or of their friends, and their friends' of them. These lists are not collected. Some students center on one person's expectations: parent or boy- or girlfriend. Others make lengthy and varied lists. It is provocative for all.

If expectations are happily met, there is nothing of interest for the

writer. Any time someone has an expectation of another person and the expectation is not met, there is a collision point. Any time an expectation is met at a heavy cost there is tension. Either produces a scene. I ask them to write one such scene.

This requires some discussion before it is clear to everyone. If your parents, I suggest to them, expect you to go to college and have always said they will pay for it and you choose to go to college and they pay for it, then everyone is happy and you have nothing to write about that. But if they have always expected you to go to college and you announce you've bought a van and are driving to California to be a beach bum, then there is a collision point. Write it. Or if you have always expected them to pay for your college and they suddenly announce that there is no money and you're on your own, then there is a collision point. Write it. If you are going steady with someone and that person thinks that that means you see only him/her and you think it means you see lots of other people and your steady finds out, that's a collision point. If your boss tells you to work late and you expect to be paid overtime and he doesn't pay you extra at all, that's a collision point. If your parents expect you in at one o'clock and you come in at four a.m., that's a collision point. This is fertile soil and is well worth several days' exploration. Many students will begin their novels with an expectation collision point scene.

The idea of expectations met at heavy cost is more sophisticated but those students who recognize it find it most productive. If a student stays in a love relationship because he/she is expected to, although he/she really wants it to end, there is tension. The student who is expected to be good and not use pot or alcohol and doesn't but finds him/herself therefore excluded from the group he/she wants to be part of, pays. The student who does not want to use drugs but whose friends expect him/her to use them and who does to please them, pays. The student who does not want to train to enter a certain trade but has always been expected to and so does so, pays.

They are now ready to start to write on their own. I allot three weeks of class time, which means fifteen consecutive class periods of 45 minutes

each, to their novel writing. That is, as any teacher knows, an extraordinarily long time for a student to maintain a commitment to a piece of writing. Most also work on it at home (their choice) during this time. Among students with average class attendance, I have never had a failure. Many students who ordinarily cut out learn early in this course they can turn their failings to their own advantage. I tell them this is a course in which their anger at school, their lives outside of school, even their encounters with the law, can serve their own interests. Once they discover that I mean it—that anything of consequence to them is appropriate material and that language appropriate to the scene is appropriate language, they stay, first in disbelief, and then to write. This is not an elitist course. In my school we often have two to three hundred students heterogeneously grouped in classes of twenty-five to thirty taking this elective during the year. We establish in the beginning that we will not be concerned with spelling, grammar, penmanship, or neatness, but rather with “good writing.” This is identified as writing that moves the reader. They are encouraged to write accurately from their own experience without exaggeration or distortion. “What is important to you will matter to us,” I tell them, “because we care.” Given these rules, often the most interesting pieces come from students who do not usually succeed in an academic setting. Their classmates listen most attentively and it becomes clear to everyone as the course proceeds that the criteria for writing good stories and novels differ from the usual school criteria for success.

These three weeks of writing time must be scheduled as carefully as possible so as not to conflict with final exams and other necessary activities. The writers must be able to give their full attention to their novels; no student can study for finals at the same time he/she is thinking about the complexities of a novel. No teacher can read a class set of novel openings (30 pp. each) overnight. The very last weeks of class are spent reading one another’s novels out loud—a most enjoyable and appropriate way to end a writing workshop.

They turn to their novel writing with high seriousness. If some are

nervous on the first day I remind them that this is nothing really new; they can use fragments of the sort they have been writing all semester. I may even remind them of a particular fragment they wrote before with which to begin, or send them to their folders to find one. I repeat what I said weeks before about thinking about a big canvas, lots of space, lots of time—but that all that is asked now is to make a beginning, not to write that whole novel. To some writers, I suggest starting with a stream of consciousness piece; afterward, the writer or I can circle references to moments that would make good scenes, and he/she can go to one of those for his/her first section.

These three weeks are the culmination of this workshop. To the extent that it has worked, the students do not feel that they are being “tested” but rather that they have a chance to do a special thing. If a student asks, “Is this okay?” I invariably answer, “It’s *your* novel.” I tell them not to rush, to sink into their own awareness and write what naturally surfaces. I help them individually.

And then English—the class where if you want, you can sit and think about whatever you want. A very quiet place—I like it. It makes it easy to let yourself go and just wander in your mind—relax—like a break in life in which you have a chance to catch up and regroup before you go on.

This writer often stayed after class to complete something he wanted to say. Even though he was unusually limited in terms of skills, he wrote many strong pieces, including a fine opening of a novel. Even those students who enter this class unable to sustain a paragraph end up able to write twenty pages of their novel. Because the emphasis in this course is on allowing the student to write what he/she wants, each moves on a continuum in his/her own way, and inarticulate students often become very articulate.

I use “beginnings” because it is the most freeing approach to writing that I know. Models intimidate students. If whole books or even whole stories are used as examples, students tend to freeze up or to try to emulate what they read and so do imitative, derivative writing. On the other hand, unlimited “free writing” becomes tedious or repetitious or unsatisfying. How to focus their own material into

structured scenes, rather than into commentary, can be taught. Technique (dialogue, conflict on stage, stream of consciousness, flashbacks, etc.) can be taught. The real discipline of the writer, however, comes from the writer’s own wish to translate his/her experiences into prose that catches with emotional accuracy those life experiences that he/ she has found to be compelling. Choosing what to write, and making the best beginning that they can eliminates padding, contrived length, and imitative writing. It keeps the focus where it must be kept—on an important private moment of experience.

What is being taught in this class is process. Each student is entitled in a writing workshop to learn how to write. Each student should no longer be afraid to write. Each student leaves this workshop with a collection of fragments, a short story, and the beginning of a novel. The novels deal with a range of subject matter appropriate to the life experience of the writers. For high school writers these students use a startling range of techniques. But what is delightful is that each student works strenuously on what he/she wants to write—in the way, exactly the way, he/she wants to write it. Each young writer has experienced the discipline of the practicing writer, the commitment to communicate the right thing the right way—“right thing” because chosen by him/ herself; “right way” because it catches what he/she has in mind and “it works” for the reader. Each has learned to write: the process belongs to each.

The student on the threshold of the outside world then is at an ideal moment for the conception of a novel. Everything in his/her past life at this moment comes together, then springs apart again as new directions emerge, new relationships, new modes of being. Standing there, remembering, considering, choosing, the student is doing in life what the novelist does in writing: trying to understand what gave rise to the character, what matters to the character, what choices the character will make, with what results, at what cost, with what joy. The high school senior need only focus in writing on that which obsesses him/her that year, and a novel will be begun as surely as, no matter what, an adult life will be begun. It is a natural match. And it works. ●



## A Group Residence Called Childville

*A teacher's search for an effective language arts program.*

THE WORDS "CREATIVE writing" on my lesson plan always scared me to death. I had bought books that tell you how—books that reduce the entire activity to a formula. "Let every line ask a question. Let every line name an animal." It looks like a wonderful idea, but the results from my class were written, slick, boring to read. I had bought packets of posters with writing ideas and worksheets included. The kids' reactions were rude, unprintable. Once a girl objected so vehemently, with such abusive language, to writing about a poster showing football players, that I left the room close to tears.

by Kay Alderdice

These children live in a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children. They attend the Board of Education school on the second floor of the same building. The classes are small, six or seven, usually. I have taught there for nine

KAY ALDERDICE has taught at Childville School for ten years. She likes to write about the children and has had articles in *Mathematics Teaching* and the *British Journal*.

years—at first with the younger children and, for the past six years, in the oldest and most able class.

Over the years we have gotten to know each other well. I often have the same children for two or three years. I never get driven from the class any more. Yet I still dread writing and find excuses to postpone it.

Almost without realizing it, I had developed an integrated language arts program. I read to the kids frequently: Greek myths, C.S. Lewis, fairy tales, somebody's mother's favorite kid novel. Sometimes I would add an introduction or an aside. Sometimes the kids would have comments.

We went to the library every other



week. Our librarian has open house on Wednesday afternoons. You just come in and look for books. There is no story hour. In the earlier years the kids looked for science books, sex books, monster books, sometimes sports books. Recently, they have let themselves be steered to books written by authors they have enjoyed either in their readers or from my reading aloud or from the movies we show weekly. We have had a big run on Beverly Cleary, C. S. Lewis, Judy Blume, Carolyn Haywood and Encyclopedia Brown, among others. Often they also choose easy-reading books or picture books, which is fine with me.

The morning after the library, each person's books are piled on his desk. We have silent reading, including me, for an hour and a half. This used to be for half an hour, but we have gradually built up endurance to the longer time. One boy used to get fidgety, so we made a collection of tapes so that he could listen as he looked. We have cassette players and earphones from the Library for the Blind.

After exercises, snack and break, we regroup for book reports. I had tried many formulas for these—making book covers or dioramas, devising a form which asked the child to fill in blanks, asking questions as the child reported. Two good methods for us emerged: sitting around in a circle talking about the books, maybe showing a picture or two, asking each other questions; and the Bernie Feinerman Analysis.

Bernie Feinerman is the teacher of the other older class at Childville and we do a lot of projects together. He does an analytic activity with the kids which one of his own teachers in Brooklyn used to do when he was in school. First, he reads a story to his class. Then he invites each child to propose a title for the story. The titles are listed on the board and the children vote for the one they consider most apt. Then they jointly compose four sentences, based on the following outline:

- I. Where and when the story takes place; the main characters
- II. The problem
- III. How the problem is solved
- IV. How the story ends

The beauty of this outline is that it helps the kids to focus on the essentials of the story without getting

bogged down in the extraneous details. Choosing a title helps them think about the main idea. Stating the problem and how it is solved helps them focus on the sequence. Using the outline as a class lesson permits the kids to help each other and learn from each other. One child always acts as the group recorder. Next year I want to see whether the children could possibly follow this outline working alone. If they could, I would think they could be "mainstreamed" anywhere.

So we had this much of a language arts program and we had Robert, who really wanted to write and would nag me about it. A year ago he appeared one day with a completed play script, a fantasy based on the song "The Marvelous Toy." We put it on and it was a huge success. It was also very funny. This year he and Julie wrote a Christmas play which we did for an assembly. This was another success.

I finally began to set aside a regular time for writing and I would make such suggestions as: "Write a myth. Write a modern fairy tale." These suggestions were not greeted warmly.

One day I drew a deep breath and said, "I want you to try to write a novel. Pretend you are Judy Blume and write about life in Childville. You have to make up names for your characters, but otherwise you can make it real."

I had my typewriter there that day and I worked with three children who have a lot of trouble with the physical act of writing. Jointly they made up and dictated a long story about "Kiki the Dog Comes to Childville." In this fantasy a dog is smuggled into the living area in a girl's coat sleeve and has many adventures. Many subsequent installments were written.

A big girl began writing a long romantic story about a girl who goes to California on a plane and meets a wonderful boy. They eat a lot of luscious meals, stay together in a hotel, and finally make plans to marry. Eventually, this girl wrote a very poignant story about a girl who is informed by her parents that they have a lot of problems and that she will have to go and live at Childville for a while. Her last story this year was called "The Happy Family." She thought at the time she was writing it that she was going home this summer.

A very lively, elusive boy, who had seemed sloppy and unfocused in his work all year, began writing hilarious street-comedies. He became much in demand to go read his stories to the other classes.

One girl spent her time copying over a paperback made from the movie "Grease." I would have liked it if she could have been creative like the others, but she was having lots of problems and this was very likely the best she could do just then. One interesting thing that she did was to teach herself to type by hunt and peck well enough to copy out her story.

Robert was the one who took my suggestion to heart. He began turning out the chapters of "A Group Residence Called Childville." He made the protagonist an eight-year-old girl named Vanessa. She experienced all the parts of institutional life, just as Robert himself had. The story is a very detailed, very positive account of his life here. It ran to thirty five pages of his rather baroque handwriting. I undertook to type it on stencils for him, feeling that his enormous effort deserved publication. It took a long time to type. In running it off, I used the entire remaining supply of reograph paper in the school, which didn't increase my popularity with the staff. The effort was well worth it. There may be other fourteen-year-olds writing novels, but they could hardly be truer or more deeply felt than Robert's.

It was so well received that he wrote a sequel, tracing Vanessa's life with her adoptive family. His social worker was kind enough to type that one.

My point is that once we were established as readers, the writing came fairly easily. It turned out that not only did we not need formulas or gimmicks for the writing, but that the most casual suggestion was self-perpetuating. For the entire spring semester we worked regularly on these personal stories. Occasionally someone would hit a snag or run out of ideas and we would discuss the problem and try to come up with an idea jointly. If the person just wasn't in the mood that day, he would sometimes work with someone who needed a recorder or a speller or an idea man (or just an audience). Once I stopped worrying about providing a "writing lesson" we all just did it. ●

# A Group Residence Called Childville

*A Student Novel*

by Robert Edward Spiegel

*This book is dedicated to my teacher, Mrs. Kay Alderdice. Without her idea, this story would not have been told.*

*I would also like to thank all my classmates for their ideas, comments and criticism. Without their help, this story wouldn't sound like a true one.*

## FOREWORD

*Group residences have been in service for quite a while for handicapped people: children and teenagers with problems who are emotionally disturbed and whose parents cannot take them because of financial situations, etc. A long chain of these group homes are part of the Jewish Child Care Association. These group homes are in Manhattan and upstate. Their headquarters is at a big building on Madison Ave. in Manhattan. One of these group residences is Childville, which has been very successful in helping many children. Childville was once in Brooklyn, but then the group residence moved to Manhattan.*

*This book tells of a girl's experience in Childville. I once lived in this institution three years and my first few weeks were dreadful. So is the girl's in this book. This isn't very unusual. Most children aren't delighted to come to a place they aren't familiar with. Some are a combination of happy and excited.*

*This book will help a child going into a group home overcome his fear and help him to enjoy his experience there.*

Robert Edward Spiegel  
January, 1979

## VANESSA

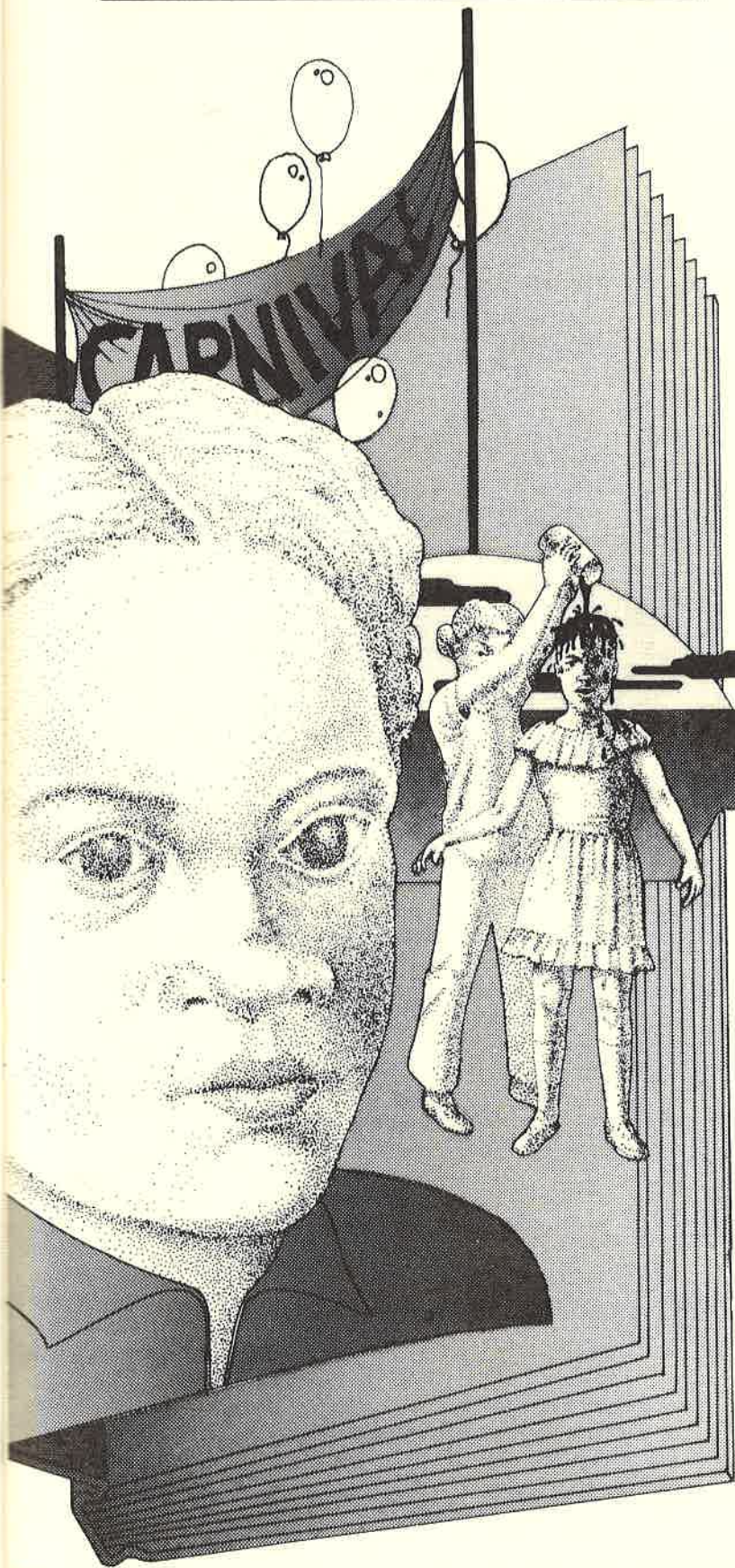
*Vanessa was scared. She clung to her counselor's coat. She didn't like it here. Why did she have to come??*

*Vanessa Collins was a black girl. She was eight years old. She had been living at Pleasantville Cottage School for one year. When Vanessa was six years old her parents had gone out for dinner and had a car accident. They were both dead. Vanessa's babysitter was able to keep her for one year, but it became inconvenient for her to take Vanessa on all her other babysitting jobs. The babysitter's name was Miss Ann Rowe. She had a friend named Miss Betty Rodriguez who worked for Pleasantville Cottage School. That's how she came there.*

*Now she was at Childville. A new, strange, unfamiliar place. A kind caseworker named Miss Barbara Green came up to her and said, "Hello Vanessa. My name is Miss Green. I will be your social worker."*

*Vanessa nodded. She didn't have to be told what a social worker was. She had one in Pleasantville and she liked Miss Green right away.*

ROBERT SPIEGEL has been writing since he was eight years old. He is also interested in photography and hopes to combine the two arts in a book someday. He is now a student at John Brown High School in Queens, New York.



"It's time to go," Vanessa's former counselor whispered. Vanessa sadly kissed her goodbye. Now she and Miss Green were alone in the unfamiliar building.

### VANESSA'S FIRST DAY

Everybody on the third floor was very excited. A new girl had not come to the third floor in almost a year. All fourteen girls and the counselor, Miss Jane Levine, had a big meeting to be as kind as possible to the new girl. They all knew that she had no parents and she was lonely. Jessica Jones, who always had good ideas, took \$3.00 out of her allowance to make a party for Vanessa. The third floor was now busily putting up decorations for the party, while Jessica and one of the other counselors were setting the table for the party.

After Miss Green showed Vanessa around the building, she took Vanessa to her office for session. Vanessa loved session at Pleasantville Cottage School. There was always a treat from her social worker. "But now things are different," Vanessa thought.

Miss Green talked to Vanessa about the third floor routines and that there were two boys' floors she could visit if she wanted to get acquainted with them. "Now," Miss Green replied, "I have a surprise for you." Here Miss Green took out a brown package. "Open it," she encouraged Vanessa. Quickly she tore open the package. Inside there was a make-up set with real nail polish and mascara. There was also a package of M & M's and there were also some homemade cookies baked by Miss Green. Vanessa was very happy, except for one thing. Vanessa was very fussy about keeping her teeth clean and she did not eat sweets often.

"Well," Vanessa thought, "this is an occasion." And she popped a homemade cookie in her mouth.

The third floor was very dark and quiet. Everybody was hiding in the bathrooms and closets near the kitchen. The party was supposed to be a surprise. Now Miss Green and Vanessa were entering the third floor.

"My, it's so quiet," Vanessa said.

"Maybe everybody's out at the park," Miss Green said.

"Let's go see my room," Vanessa said, walking to the kitchen. She flicked on the light switch.

"SURPRISE!!!"

### VANESSA SETTLES IN

Vanessa quietly lay in bed. It was only 9:00, but it had been a big day. Vanessa was quite overwhelmed by the surprise party, and there had been a big argument between all fourteen girls about who was to be her roommate (which was Jessica Jones and Lillian Brown).

Even the dinner of corned beef hash was appetizing to her. After dinner there was a lively game of Musical Chairs. Lillian Brown was in charge of working the record player, and of course, Vanessa won the game. Then they played Duck Duck Goose and had a snack of cookies and milk (which Vanessa skipped).

Her bedtime was at 8:30, but, worn out by the day's events, Vanessa went at 8:00. Made happy by her new surroundings and friends, Vanessa fell asleep.

Vanessa awoke to a gray and dismal world. However, the world wasn't gray and dismal in Childville. Vanessa stayed in all day. She went to the basement and played in

the gym. Vanessa had gone to gymnastic classes when she was four, but stopped after her parents' death. However, she was still very good at it. She took gymnastics at Pleasantville.

After lunch, Vanessa shyly went up to the boys' floor. A few boys whistled at her and one went so far as to kiss her.

Then one of the counselors suggested a dance contest. Philip Hall and Vanessa came in a tie. Luckily, Vanessa also learned a few disco dances in Pleasantville.

Philip was nine years old and asked Vanessa for a date. Vanessa's face grew hot. Everyone was looking at her. What should she do? Should she answer Philip yes or no or should she slap him?? Angry, humiliated, and terror-stricken, Vanessa ran off the boys' floor.

She ran straight to her room without a glance at anybody. She lay on her bed and cried. Jessica and Lillian ran in the room and calmed Vanessa down and asked her what happened.

Lillian was very angry to hear what Philip did. "I was stupid enough to accept when I first came here. Three weeks later he didn't want to go with me. Don't you dare say yes."

"I won't," Vanessa sputtered. "And I'm not visiting the boys' floor again."

By around 4:00 that afternoon Vanessa had overcome her shocking experience of what happened to her and decided to write her counselor and friends at Pleasantville. And here is what the letter said:

July 18, 1978

Dear Miss Rodriguez and Cottage 9,

I am doing fine in my new group residence. My social worker's name is Miss Green and I have six counselors. They are all very nice to me. They threw a surprise party for me. There are two boys' floors and there are fifteen kids on each floor. I hope everybody is fine. I miss you all and hope to hear from you.

Love and kisses,  
Vanessa Collins

July 24, 1978

Dear Vanessa,

I was so happy to hear that you are doing well in Childville. We are planning to visit Amy at camp and we will say "Hello" for you. Cottage 9 isn't the same without you.

Love and kisses,  
Miss Berry Rodriguez  
Pleasantville Cottage  
School

### VANESSA'S FIRST FIGHT

The next two weeks went by so quickly, Vanessa hardly realized it. There had been beach trips, a trip to Mohansic State Park, a trip on the Staten Island Ferry, and a trip to Great Adventure. Vanessa enjoyed the night rides and stayed there until 11:00. By the time they got back it was a little past midnight. Vanessa never had so much fun.

Everything was normal for another week. Vanessa was as happy as a bird. She wrote frequently to Miss Rodriguez

and Miss Rowe. Jessica even took pictures of Vanessa with her camera so she could show Miss Rodriguez and Miss Rowe what a good time she was having at Childville.

Then one day it happened. Catherine McGuire was painting a beautiful picture of a summer sunset. It looked exactly like the real thing. She had been working on it for almost the whole summer. Vanessa had been walking with a jar of black paint and a jar of water, when all of a sudden somebody pushed her into Katie. "Eek."

"Look out."

"Get out of the way, Cathy," were shouted across the room.

Splat! The beautiful summer sunset was now one sloppy mess. Poor Catherine! Her lovely picture was ruined. Of course, being an excellent artist she could always make another one just like it, but it just wasn't fair!! She had been working on it for a big carnival Childville was having less than two weeks away. If she wanted the picture to be exactly the same, she would have to work at least two hours a day until the day before the carnival.

"I could be doing other things during those two hours," Catherine thought. She now finally looked up from her ruined painting. A crowd of faces stood above her. Vanessa's was crying.

"Your beautiful painting—Oh, Cathy, I'm so sorry."

But Catherine did not want to accept her apology. Instead, she answered sarcastically, "But of course, Vanessa dear. After all, a girl who has had no parents for two years doesn't know better."

Vanessa felt the same feeling as when Philip Hall asked her for a date. Only this time Cathy was getting her where it hurts. This time, Vanessa did not run out of the room. Instead, she took the black paint and jar of water she held in her hand, and poured it over Catherine's head. There was a scream, thirteen gasps, and a satisfying crash as the glass jar fell to the floor. There was no counselor in the room at the time and since Jessica was the oldest, she felt it her responsibility to calm everybody down and get Catherine and the mess cleaned up. While she was doing this, Vanessa quietly slipped out of the art room and up to Miss Green (who was busy at the time, but managed to see Vanessa).

Miss Green suggested they call the floor supervisor, Miss Rita Golub, to come up to her office and find a solution to this problem. Miss Golub said that Catherine was very upset and she thought Vanessa had better stay on one of the boys' floors for the rest of the day.

"Just my luck" Vanessa thought. She had managed to avoid Philip Hall since he asked her out and now she would have to see him.

Philip grinned in her direction when she came on the floor. Vanessa ignored him. However, Vanessa managed to sit at the dinner table with him. After dinner, Vanessa sat quietly watching television, away from the other boys. However, before the evening was over, Philip managed to apologize to Vanessa. Vanessa accepted and said not to feel too bad, because she was not planning to date anybody in Childville. Vanessa had to stay up on the boys' floor until 9:30, to make sure Catherine was asleep and they wouldn't start another fight.

When Vanessa woke the next morning, she apologized to Catherine. She accepted her apology and Vanessa accepted Catherine's apology.

Good old Jessica fixed everything up. She took a picture of a sunset at Great Adventure. It looked quite similar to Catherine's painting—maybe better. The three girls promised to keep secret that Catherine's painting was really a photograph. It would definitely be first prize in the art contest at the carnival.

## THE CARNIVAL

Three days before the carnival, Childville was a hustle and bustle. Everybody was excited and wanted to get Childville's second annual carnival on the go.

Finally the thirtieth of August came. At approximately a quarter to two, the third floor was all ready to go. Catherine had her photographic painting in her hand. Vanessa had a sculpture of a ferris wheel all ready for the carnival. All the other girls were all ready with various art projects done over the summer for the art contest. The third floor was competing against the fifth floor. The fourth floor was taking charge of all the games and treats for the carnival. It was time to begin.

Never had Vanessa seen in her past eight years a room like this. There were two big tables filled with games. There was another table with a jar of beans. You were supposed to guess the number inside the jar. There were many other things for Vanessa to see and do, but right now she and the other girls and boys from the fifth floor had to set up for the art contest. They only had ten minutes to go.

At 2:00 PM, the third floor and front group of the fifth floor went up to the terrace on the sixth floor to play some games set up there for everybody to enjoy.

Vanessa tried all the games, and she won the game called "Knock Over Cans." There were a few cans piled on top of each other and you had to knock them over with a tennis ball. Vanessa succeeded in doing it.

Vanessa was having so much fun, she hardly realized the time. It was 2:45 and now the girls had to go downstairs (with the fifth floor front) and now the fourth floor and the fifth floor back unit had to come up.

Downstairs, Vanessa guessed the number of beans in the jar. She guessed 867 and she didn't see Miss Levine smile.

Then Vanessa played the "Penny Drop" game. There were pennies in a jar (actually a goldfish bowl) and there was a little eyecup in the bowl. You had to raise at least four or five pennies in the eyecup without getting your hand wet or dropping the eyecup. If you managed to do it, you would get a prize.

Then Vanessa ate a few cookies and a cupcake. By that time it was 4:00 and it was time for everybody to gather in the livingroom for announcing the winners of the art contest, the guessing of the beans, and the penny drop game.

Miss Levine announced the first prize winner of the art contest.

"The prize for the most beautiful painting goes to twelve year old Katherine McGuire for A Summer Sunset."

Everybody clapped and Jessica and Vanessa started laughing. The counselors who judged couldn't tell the difference.

Catherine, however, did not laugh. Her face was very solemn as she went to get her prize, which was a paint set.

"Thank you," she said, "but there is something I must confess."

"Oh no," Vanessa thought, "she's going to tell the truth."



And the truth was told. Jessica and Vanessa turned red with embarrassment. They were sure every eye in the room was on them.

"But," Kathy said with a smile, "I have original work to hand in." Here she held up a crayoned drawing of a summer sunset with a ferris wheel in the foreground. It was not as good as her ruined painting or the photograph, but just the same it was a summer sunset. Everybody clapped again, and Catherine was allowed to keep her prize.

Everybody in Childville got a coloring book with crayons, just as a reward for all the good work they did. Nobody won from the fifth floor for the art contest, but Philip Hall won the penny drop game.

Then Miss Levine said, "Now I will announce the Bean Guessing Game winner." Here Miss Levine paused as if she were enjoying the suspense. "The winner is Vanessa Collins. She guessed the exact number of beans." There were cheers and applause for Vanessa as she went to get her prize. There were a few "boos" from a few of the boys because Philip Hall was the only boy who won a prize.

"Your prize is a very grand one," Miss Levine said, but couldn't help laughing as she got ready to announce the prize. "You, Vanessa Collins, of the third floor back unit, have won the jar of beans."

Vanessa felt embarrassed, but she was enjoying it. She managed to get back to her spot in the audience despite the laughter and shouts of "Vanessa, are they waxed, kidney, or baked?"

Vanessa didn't mind at all. She was quite glad that she

was able to guess the exact number of beans. She would have to remember to write Miss Rodriguez and Miss Rowe about this.

Now Miss Levine was getting ready to speak. "The first part of the carnival is over. You will now go upstairs and have dinner and take your baths and at 7:00 you will all come back down to the lounge and there will be movies shown of what some of the floors did in the summer."

Vanessa smiled to herself as she scrambled to get in line. Vanessa didn't care if she did not win the art contest and only one person was eligible. All Vanessa could think was, "Childville is getting better every day."

## VANESSA GOES TO SCHOOL

The day after the carnival and within the next two weeks, the counselors and kids were going shopping for new shoes and new dresses, notebooks, pads, and pencils. It was time to get ready for school.

Vanessa was a little nervous about meeting her new teacher, but finally the day came. When Vanessa reached her classroom, she stood bravely in the doorway and waited for her new teacher. Vanessa was surprised to find it was someone she met in the summer. She was a tall, thin, blonde lady. Her name was Miss Alice Jenkins. She was at Childville to teach summer school. Once in the summer she had to test Vanessa, to see what grade level she was up to. Now all the fear had gone out of Vanessa. She went straight to her desk and waited for what to do next.

Philip Hall, Jason Sanders, Marion Thomas, Kenneth Scott, Patricia Howard and John Pollard were in Miss Jenkins' class.

Since it was the first day of school, they didn't do any work. Instead they went over the routine. The next day they all worked hard in their textbooks. Nobody fooled around. For a third grade class they did exceptionally well, and hardly had any trouble at all.

Once in a while trouble arose in the classroom. One time, when Miss Jenkins went out of the room, Philip Hall took a heart shaped valentine out of his desk and flew it around the room. He purposely aimed it for Vanessa's desk, and that's where it landed. Vanessa had been out of the room at the time for session with Miss Green, but when she got back, she saw it on her desk. And this is what it said:

You are very nice and kind  
Honey is sweet  
And you are mine.

Now Vanessa was very angry. She wondered if Philip had shown this to anybody in the class. She wanted to slap him in the face, but she remembered to use her self control and calmly went up to Miss Jenkins and showed her what Philip wrote. Miss Jenkins smiled at Vanessa and said, "He seems to like you, but it is not going to be Valentine's Day for another four months. I suggest you ignore him. He just wants attention."

Then she went over to Philip's desk and said, "You should save your rhymes for poetry class and stop teasing Vanessa."

## VANESSA'S HALLOWE'EN

Vanessa's feathers on her turkey suit were fluffed out just right. Tina Packer's Pilgrim suit fit perfectly, and Frieda Ross' Indian suit was a pretty sight. Vanessa

chuckled cheerfully to herself as the Jack o'lantern grinning in the window sill gave the floor a pleasant, spooky appearance for the time of the year.

All of Childville was getting ready for their Hallowe'en party. Last touches of make-up and wigs were done before 45 eager kids turned Childville into a haunted mansion. Paper bags were distributed and the girls went round the building. Soon all the girls' bags grew fat with candy (well, almost all. As usual on these occasions, Vanessa's bag held ten times less as anybody else's.)

Then they entered the lounge on the first floor. Witches, goblins, bums and skeletons looked at the girls with laughing eyes. Vanessa had to be very careful that nobody ripped off her feathers or they got stuck in a door. Then everybody marched around the room so the judges could make the decision of who was the best, prettiest, ugliest, funniest, most unusual, and most original costume.

Vanessa smiled when she saw the big Mayflower boat sitting in a corner of the room. Miss Levine worked on it all by herself for the Hallowe'en party. Frieda and Tina were not going home for Thanksgiving because their parents were away on business trips. "If there are enough kids in the building they could perform the story of Thanksgiving," Vanessa thought. They weren't able to do it for the Hallowe'en party, but for the last part of the contest, they would all sit in the Mayflower boat. "It might impress the judges and improve your chances of winning," Jessica said. And she was usually right.

Vanessa played Pin the Tail on the Cat and Bobbing for Apples and lost, but she didn't care. She had a feeling she was going to win the contest.

After a spooky Hallowe'en story, Miss Levine was ready to announce the winners. "The prettiest at our Hallowe'en party today was Catherine McGuire as a Dutch Girl." Everybody clapped as Cathy went to get her prize, which was a Bingo game.

"The ugliest was Jason Sanders as a wart." Jason got a car model for his prize.

"The funniest was Mickey Thompson as a chef in a pizza parlor." Mickey got a play-doh set for his prize. Jessica got a prize for the most unusual. She was a man with sunglasses. She even got a man's haircut for the occasion.

Philip Hall came in second for the most unusual. He was a flashlight. Joseph Byrnes came in third for the most unusual. He was a girl. The most original was Kenneth Scott. He was a skeleton. Marion Thomas and Joan Pollard came in second and third for original. Marion was a witch and Joan was her cat.

Vanessa's heart sank. They didn't win. "But wait," Vanessa thought. "They have not announced the best yet. Maybe we're the best," Vanessa thought hopefully, as all the children voted as original and unusual slipped back into the audience with their paint sets.

"And now," Miss Levine said, "we have three winners to take the title of best costume."

Vanessa's heart jumped. It was them. It had to be. "The three winners are The Thanksgiving Crew and Their Mayflower Boat."

Vanessa squealed happily. Quickly she ran up and got her prize, along with Tina and Frieda. Vanessa got Childville's old record player. Tina got a lamp for her room and Frieda got a view-master set.

Vanessa could scarcely eat, and when she got in bed that

night she thought happily, "Wait till Miss Rowe and Miss Rodriguez hear this news."

## VANESSA'S BIRTHDAY

All was going well in Vanessa's world. Once in a while Vanessa got into an argument with one of the girls or a classmate, but otherwise nothing went wrong.

Everything was good in school, too (except for the time when Jason Sanders put a pin in Joan Pollard's chair).

November 12 was a very special day in Vanessa's life. It was the day of her ninth birthday. Since the class was behaving so well and Vanessa's was the first birthday in the class, Miss Jenkins decided to take the class to Central Park.

Everything went well as usual. Miss Jenkins took the class to the park on the 10th, because Vanessa's birthday was on a Sunday. They also had a surprise party for her in the park, but they had to eat most of the cake in Childville because it was cold outside.

Vanessa had a nice party on the floor. Jessica gave Vanessa her old earrings. The floor and Childville gave her a colorforms set. Miss Green gave her a card and some records for her record player. Miss Rodriguez sent her a card and a check for \$5.00.

Vanessa also got a check from Mrs. Rowe for \$20.00. Vanessa thought for a moment. She had \$6.87 in her allowance and \$18.14 in the bank. Also Vanessa's allowance would be raised 10- and she would get about half of it each week. It really was a hard decision to make. . . . Vanessa's thoughts were interrupted about where she should deposit her money. Miss Green was here to take her to session. "Oh, well," Vanessa thought. She could think about these things later. Today was supposed to be fun. And it was!!

## VANESSA'S THANKSGIVING

In two weeks it was Thanksgiving. Twelve eager kids packed their bags and got prepared to go home for a five-day vacation. Frieda and Tina looked on sadly. Vanessa wasn't used to going home so she really didn't care. "Aw, cheer up, Tina and Frieda," she said. "Thanksgiving will probably be fun here."

"Sure it will," Jessica said. "There are only going to be three of you here. Maybe you'll get special privileges, like making something to eat, getting more allowance, staying up later. . . ."

"Or maybe our play for Thanksgiving," Vanessa broke in, suddenly remembering what she had thought of on Hallowe'en.

"What play?" Frieda asked.

"Oh, no," Vanessa groaned. "I should have told you two sooner. On Hallowe'en I was thinking with a few more people and our Hallowe'en costumes, we could perform 'The Story of Thanksgiving' for the counselors that are here on Thanksgiving Day."

"That sounds like a great idea," said Jessica, who was now folding her last pair of dungarees in her knapsack.

"I think it is, too," Tina said, "but where are we going to get the rest of the costumes?"

Vanessa sighed. She hadn't thought of that.

"Wait a minute," Frieda said. "Miss Levine told me she had quite a few Pilgrim and Indian costumes that she had when she was little. She said that on Thanksgiving Day back in the 1940's, there was a play that some of her

friends put on of "The Story of Thanksgiving."

"After the play (which Miss Levine said was very hectic), they decided not to go through that experience again. And Miss Levine said if the performers didn't want them, she could find future use for the costumes. And they gladly gave them to her."

"Well, she's going to have future use for them now. Let's ask her," Tina said.

Miss Levine said she would bring them in "but you have to be very careful. These are old costumes and they can rip easily," she said.

The next day at 2:30, phones started ringing on all the floors: "Henry's mother is here. . . Marie's father is downstairs to pick her up." Secretaries were saying this whenever somebody's parents arrived. As soon as the counselor on one floor put down the phone receiver, it seemed another one would be ringing on another floor. The intercom telephone system in Childville was tied up until about 4:30. Then things quieted down a bit.

Before Jessica left, she said she would have a surprise for Vanessa. That would be one thing that would leave Vanessa wondering for the weekend.

Vanessa found out there would be six boys in the building. That would be just enough for the play. Dinner was a very quiet meal. As Jessica predicted, they got to stay up an hour later and Vanessa went to bed feeling everything was going to be right tomorrow.

Vanessa woke up about 8:00 the next morning. She jumped out of bed and after she washed up, she ate a hurried breakfast and then got into her costume. There would be two dress rehearsals starting at 9:30. The play would be at 11:00, and then they would eat a delicious lunch, and then they would go downtown to an arcade amusement center to play \$5.00 worth of games each.

The dress rehearsal and play itself was excellent. Nobody fooled around or messed up on the play. Every line was said perfectly clearly and with proper expression. After a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner, they went down to the arcade which was located on 52nd St. and Broadway.

Vanessa played her \$5.00 worth of games and won almost all of them. Then they all went to have some ice cream, and took the two city buses back to Childville. They got back at 5:30 and Vanessa took a nice hot bath and finished up her evening in front of the TV. It was really a wonderful Thanksgiving.

### **SURPRISE PARTY ON THANKSGIVING WEEKEND**

The day after Thanksgiving was a lazy day for Vanessa. She woke up at 8:30, instead of 8:00, and she was almost late for breakfast. Then she plopped on the sofa and watched TV. Then she heard the counselor calling her for lunch. Vanessa must have fallen asleep while watching TV. She slowly dragged herself off the sofa and turned off the TV and came to the table.

Tina and Frieda giggled when Vanessa came in the dining room. "What's so funny?" Vanessa asked sleepily.

They stopped laughing and Tina said, "Vanessa, go wash your face." And they started laughing again.

Vanessa looked in the mirror of the bathroom. She did look funny. Both her eyes looked half closed and puffy. "This sure is turning out to be a queer day," Vanessa thought as she washed her face, but she felt more refreshed when she got back to the table.

"Now you look much better," Mr. Harris said, as Vanessa got back to the table. Tina and Frieda thought so, too.

After they finished their lunch of spaghetti and meatballs, Mr. Harris said to them, "Girls, do you know somebody's birthday is tomorrow?" All the girls thought hard. Who's birthday was on November 25? None of the girls, they knew. None of the boys. They gave up and said, "Yours, Mr. Harris."

"No," Mr. Harris said. "It's Miss Levine's."

All the girls gasped. "Tina and Frieda, I'm surprised you forgot."

"She deserves a party," Vanessa said.

She really did, too. Miss Levine, who was only a regular full time counselor, had volunteered to take charge of the Carnival and the Hallowe'en party only because the recreation worker was on a leave of absence. She also worked on holidays she could be spending with her family. She worked last Christmas and no doubt she'd be working this one, too. Miss Levine had only come last summer.

"Vanessa's right," Mr. Harris said. "She does deserve a party."

"Maybe we could give her one," Frieda said.

"Oh, no," Tina said. "We can't. We spent all our money at the arcade yesterday."

"I know," Mr. Harris said. "Tell you what I'll do. Cake mix costs about a dollar. I'll pay a quarter and I'll take a quarter out of each your allowances."

"That sounds fine with us," Tina said, after the three girls talked it over with each other for a minute.

"But what about all the other ingredients?" Frieda asked.

"We can get eggs, milk and butter from the kitchen," Tina said.

"And we have chocolate frosting and a cake decorator in the cabinet," Vanessa reminded them.

"Good, then it's all settled," said Mr. Harris.

The girls got their coats and just as they were leaving, Vanessa thought of something. "Does Miss Levine come in today?"

"No, I'm working for her today," Mr. Harris said.

"Good. She deserves at least one day off," Vanessa said, smiling as she left.

When the girls got back they baked the cake according to the directions on the box. The only problem was Frieda accidentally let the shell drop in the batter when she cracked her egg, but Tina quickly retrieved it. Mr. Harris didn't help them bake the cake. They did it all by themselves and it turned out well, except for one thing that scared them greatly.

After the batter was all mixed, they put the cake in two flat pans, because all the batter couldn't fit in one. They also planned to make a double layer cake by putting one on top of the other. Then they turned the oven to 350° for 35 minutes and they went in the room to make cards for Miss Levine. When the 35 minutes were up, the three came back and what in horrors did they see but smoke coming out of the oven. "Our cake," Vanessa screamed.

"It's ruined!" Frieda wailed.

Tina was the only one who kept calm. She told Vanessa to run and turn on the air conditioner. Tina got a pot holder and opened the oven and turned it off. They waited for the room to cool. Vanessa and Frieda began to cry.

Mr. Harris came running to the back to see what the commotion was all about. All of a sudden Tina started laughing. "You sillies. Stop crying. Come and look." Now it was Tina and Frieda who started laughing. And this was what was so funny:

Someone had left frozen turkey from Thanksgiving in the bottom of the oven. The girls were so anxious to get the cake in the oven they didn't look to see if anything was in it. The cake had turned out just right but the turkey was coal black.

The girls were so happy that nothing had happened to their cake they cleaned out the oven and the mess of burned turkey. They wrapped the two cake pans in tin foil and put it in the refrigerator with a piece of paper saying "Supervisor's Food. Do not touch."

For some reason the girls thought that three girls and two adults was not very much of a party. They decided to invite the six boys in the building. "Don't tell them who the party is for," Frieda said.

"That's right," Vanessa said. "You know how boys are. They might tell Miss Levine."

Fortunately they did not tell the boys anything. Their counselor said all six were sick with the flu. They all agreed to have the party at 3:00 tomorrow afternoon and they had a plan set up to surprise Miss Levine.

The next day Miss Levine came in at 12:00. She didn't say anything about it being her birthday, but she said she was going to take the three girls to a movie after dinner for a treat.

The girls occasionally looked in the refrigerator to see if their secret had been discovered.

At 2:30 PM Frieda and Vanessa asked Miss Levine to take them to the game room. Tina said she would join them later. After they went downstairs, Tina and Mr. Harris got the things for the party and went down by the back door that led to the dining room on the first floor. They set everything up very quietly so that Miss Levine wouldn't hear them. Then they frosted the cake and wrote "Happy Birthday, Miss Levine," with the cake decorator.

At ten minutes of 3, Tina went through the hallway that led to the outside lounge and knocked on the door. Miss Levine opened it and unlocked the door. Then they played a game of Bumper Pool, while Vanessa and Frieda quietly went into the dining room.

At five of 3, Vanessa screamed very loud. Tina ran to the dining room. "Good," she whispered to Vanessa. "Do it again!"

Tina saw Mr. Harris crouched behind a chair near the door. Vanessa screamed again. "Quick Miss Levine," Tina yelled. "Vanessa and Frieda are fighting."

Miss Levine ran into the dining room. Instead of Vanessa screaming she was singing "Happy Birthday."

Miss Levine was very happy with the party and the three girls saved the other cake for the twelve girls who went home.

#### A NEW NAME FOR A NEW LIFE

When Jessica got back from her home visit she had wonderful news for Vanessa. Jessica had told her mother all about Vanessa and her mother said she would like to adopt Vanessa. Remember the surprise for Vanessa? The adoption would take place on December 18, 1978. Over Thanksgiving weekend, Jessica's mother arranged everything with

Miss Green. Vanessa would be leaving Childville right after the school term was over, to go to Jessica's house to live. Jessica would be going home after the summer was over.

Everything changed for Vanessa after she heard that announcement. She seemed to be acting more bossy now, and if anybody teased her, she threatened to get her "big sister" Jessica after them.

On the weekend of December 15, 1978, Vanessa went to visit Jessica's house for an overnight. The weekend seemed to go well for Vanessa. Vanessa seemed to get along well with Jessica's mother and father, although she was afraid of them when she first met them. The night seemed strange for Vanessa. She was not used to sleeping at "home."

Jessica's parents had a cat named Princess and Vanessa loved to play with him. On Saturday Vanessa's "father" took her to the movies and bought her some popcorn. "Just like my real father used to do," Vanessa thought.

There was a crowd when the movie let out, so Vanessa's new "father" picked her up and carried her on his shoulders so nobody would push her. Vanessa thought, "These are the most wonderful parents I'm going to have." Vanessa's new parents took her back in the black shiny Datsun they owned. When Jessica and many other kids asked her how her weekend was all Vanessa had to say was, "Wonderful."

Two days later there was no school for Vanessa and Jessica. Their parents did not go to work. Miss Green did not work in her office. They were all going down to court to verify Vanessa's adoption.

Everything looked strange when she got there. There were large seats and the room was very large. Vanessa all of a sudden felt very small. Then the session got started. Vanessa didn't understand a lot of things, but they all had to sign lots of papers and swore they wanted Vanessa in the family forever.

After the session they all had a big celebration at MacDonalds. It was a happy day in Vanessa's life.

Miss Jenkins and the class had been working on carols for the Christmas assembly three days away. When the day came they were performed well. Other classes gave performances and one play even had a Santa Claus in it.

The same day Vanessa's parents picked her up for her visit with them. Vanessa looked out the window and saw a light snow falling on the black Datsun. "It's going to be a white Christmas," Vanessa said to herself as she picked up her suitcase and ran downstairs.

#### IS THIS BOOK TRUE?

The things that go on in this book are non-fiction. However, there are some things that I stretched the truth on. There are carnivals and Hallowe'en parties, but there are not such big prizes. Usually kids do not get special treats from their social worker when they first come to Childville. Usually, teachers do not take the class to Central Park when it's somebody's birthday. There will not be (or will there be?) a surprise party for your child when they come to a group residence. Of course an adoption doesn't happen so fast and there is always a counselor watching your child so the incident in "Vanessa's First Fight" shouldn't happen to your child. Everything else in this book is kept reasonably the truth.

R.E.S. 2/12/79





# Teachers & Writers Publications

**THE WHOLE WORD CATALOGUE** (72 pages) is a practical collection of assignments for stimulating student writing, designed for both elementary and secondary students. Activities designed as catalysts for classroom exercises include: personal writing, collective novels, diagram stories, fables, spoofs and parodies, and language games. It also contains an annotated bibliography.

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**IMAGINARY WORLDS** (110 pages) originated from Richard Murphy's desire to find themes of sufficient breadth and interest to allow sustained, independent writing by students. Children invented their own Utopias of time and place, invented their own religions, new ways of fighting wars, different schools. They produced a great deal of extraordinary writing, much of it reprinted in this book.

**A DAY DREAM I HAD AT NIGHT** (120 pages) is a collection of oral literature from children who were not learning to read well or write competently or feel any real sense of satisfaction in school. The author, Roger Landrum, working in collaboration with two elementary school teachers, made class readers out of the children's own work.

**FIVE TALES OF ADVENTURE** (119 pages) is a new collection of short novels written by children at a Manhattan elementary school. The stories cover a wide range of styles and interests—a family mystery, an urban satire, a Himalayan adventure, a sci-fi spoof, and a tale of murder and retribution.

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**JUST WRITING** by Bill Bernhardt (104 pages). A book of exercises designed to make the reader aware of all the necessary steps in the writing process. This book can be used as a do-it-yourself writing course. It is also an invaluable resource for writing teachers.

**TO DEFEND A FORM** by Ardis Kimzey (211 pages). Tells the inside story of administering a poets-in-the-schools program. It is full of helpful procedures that will insure a smoothly running program. The book also contains many classroom tested ideas to launch kids into poetry writing and an extensive bibliography of poetry anthologies and related material indispensable to anyone who teaches poetry.

**JOURNAL OF A LIVING EXPERIMENT: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF TEACHERS AND WRITERS COLLABORATIVE** edited by Phillip Lopate (358 pages). This new book traces the development of T&W from the turbulent Sixties into the Seventies with humor and poignancy. Herb Kohn, Anne Sexton, June Jordan, Kenneth Koch, and Muriel Rukeyser are only some of the people who talk about their dual identities as artists and teachers. This is a book about activists—then and now.

**BEING WITH CHILDREN**, a book by Phillip Lopate, whose articles have appeared regularly in our magazine, is based on his work as project coordinator for Teachers & Writers Collaborative at P.S. 75 in Manhattan. Herb Kohl writes: "There is no other book that I know that combines the personal and the practical so well..." *Being With Children* is published by Doubleday at \$7.95. It is available through Teachers & Writers Collaborative for \$4.00.

**VERMONT DIARY** (180 pages) by Marvin Hoffman. A description of an attempt to set up a writing center within a rural elementary school. The book covers a two year period during which the author and several other teachers endeavor to build a unified curriculum based on a language arts approach.

**THE POETRY CONNECTION** by Nina Nyhart and Kinereth Gensler (216 pages). This is a collection of adult and children's poetry with strategies to get students writing, an invaluable aid in the planning and execution of any poetry lesson.

**TEACHERS & WRITERS Magazine**, issued three times a year, draws together the experience and ideas of the writers and other artists who conduct T & W workshops in schools and community groups. A typical issue contains excerpts from the detailed work diaries and articles of the artists, along with the works of the students and outside contributions.

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# LISTINGS

Robert Hershon has two new books: *A Blue Shovel*, Hanging Loose Press; and *The Public Hug: New and Selected Poems*, Louisiana State University Press.

Jeff Wright's new book of poetry is entitled *Charges*, Remember I Did It for You Press.

## PLUGS

The Video Rainbow/Center for Children's Video invites videoartists to apply to have their videotapes included in the new video catalogue, THE CHILDREN'S VIDEO SET. The objective of THE CHILDREN'S VIDEO SET is to make quality video easily accessible for broadcast, distribution and museum installation. Please contact the Video Rainbow if you have or know of any videotapes that you feel are appropriate for children. Include the name of the videomaker, the title, length, format, color/b&w and brief description of the videotape. Do not send tape until requested. Contact: Pam Berger or Julie Gamtcher, 72 Mercer Avenue, Hartsdale, N.Y. 10530.

An award-winning documentary on the life and works of the late Muriel Rukeyser is available through New Day Films, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey 07417.

**CRITICAL TEACHING AND EVERYDAY LIFE** by Ira Shor. *Critical Teaching* is a unique education book. It develops pedagogical theory side by side with a political economy of schooling. A product of seven years of Open Admissions teaching, *Critical Teaching* poses alienation and mass culture as the key learning problems of today's youth and develops critical literacy as the foundation for

studying any discipline. This book presents teaching modes which challenge the social limits of thought and action. \$5.50 paper, \$12.50 cloth. Available from South End Press, Box 68, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02132.

**GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING.** A bi-monthly magazine, edited by John Holt. An exchange between people who have taken or would like to take their kids out of school. What to do instead; shared ideas and experiences; legal information; a directory (by state) of "unschoolers"; many other helpful ideas and resources. All subscriptions begin with Issue #1 unless you indicate otherwise. Issues 1-11 are already in print. Price of a single issue is \$2.00. Subscription: \$10 for 6 issues, \$18 for 12 issues, or \$24 for 18 issues. Write to: Holt Associates, Inc., 308 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116.

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