



Gwynne Spencer
PO Box 525
103 Fleischman Lane
Monmouth, OR 97361
(503) 606 2696
gwynnespencer@aol.com
www.gwynnespencer.com

December 2007 Cosmic Raccoon (Now starting its 8th year)

I now know the price of living in 'Merika, Land of the Free and Home of the Sports Nuts. I was downtown in Salem one recent Saturday in my old raggedy University of Washington (pronounced "ewe-dub") sweatshirt when a woman grabbed me by the arm screaming at me, "You have a nerve wearing a shirt like that on a weekend like this!" Instead of smacking her seriously to the sidewalk, I asked, "Why?" She replied, " You shouldn't be allowed to walk the streets in that sweatshirt here on the streets of Corvallis. There's a game going on right now. " I was speechless. I stepped very close to her and said in my best psychiatric voice, "Honey buns, it's only **football**, and furthermore, this is Salem, not Corvallis. Get a grip." I think perhaps people take their sports and school spirit a little bit too seriously around here. Welcome to 'Merika?

Speaking of the nuts falling out of the trees, the sugar maples were still shamelessly flaunting their scarlet leaves when the eighty mile an hour winds hit the coast. The gale forces were only about 40 here, but the red leaves were ripped away. Now the trees are bare, for the most part. But guess what? Instead of having a dinky little Christmas tree in my slanty little house, I have the world's largest outdoor lighted live tree just 100 feet away on the campus. I thought it was terrifically thoughtful of them to put it up just for me. We went over to see the tree lighting in the pouring rain, watched the parade, watched Santa come in on the fire engine, listened to the Monmouth Elementary essayist (4th grader) read her winning entry as the ink ran down the page, so the last sentence was a bit muddled. Hundreds of people were there, rain notwithstanding.

Speaking of holiday spirit, green bean casserole is not something I've ever made. My childhood family never had it during the Thanksgiving feast, which we usually ate at my German grandmother's house, complete with Manischewitz wine and matzoh balls. Although I didn't know it at the time, we ate kosher there. Funny, how family secrets are. Don't talk about the family secrets. Don't talk about how Presbyterians do Passover. So the point is, I never ever knew about green bean casserole until recently. It's sort of like lime jello dessert with little marshmallows in it, which I never had either. I guess it's reserved for Lutherans and Mormons. I finally had some at the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii where we learned all about the

cultures that spanned the Pacific, but we ate tuna casserole with noodles and garlic bread instead of poi and pineapple. Food is so ethnocentric, I think I'll just live on vitamins and dog biscuits.

I went to more than my fair share of craft fairs this month. I am now in a position to judge items like dancing-ladies made of safety pins fashioned into the form of little dolls, towels that hang on your oven door having been crocheted by hand by nice ladies weighing ten stone, decorated potholders and felted hats of all kinds, and wine glasses painted with everything from pink flamingoes to grapevines.

Speaking of nothing, if you've become disenchanted with the Republicans and Democrats, the endless speeches and posturing (and you know they are all lies, like when they taught us to hide under our desks for safety during a nuclear attack) the totally nonproductive waste of unimaginable sums of campaign funds, we have found an alternative for you. Go to www.VOTE-DINOSAUR.COM and enjoy a refreshing new outlook on politics. Politics as it should be. Just like back in high school. May the best dinosaur win!

I've been reading a lot of armchair travel. I really enjoyed, WAY OFF THE ROAD which is a picaresque of small town 'Merica by CBS commontater (as opposed to being an aristocratic tater) Bill Geist. I keep thinking if I get wanderlust and an RV falls out of the sky for me, I might do the same thing...poke around with the weener dogs and write about stuff that happens. I feel like a magnet sometimes for stuff

that happens—like the time at the post office when a total stranger came up to me to ask if there was a pay phone nearby and I pointed her toward the center of town, two blocks away, and told her she could explore the quaint village while looking for Ma Bell. Her husband gruffly snarled at me, "There's nothing to see in this whole damn town!" which took me somewhat aback. But then, he put out his hand and took his wife's arm by the elbow as she guided him to the car...because he was BLIND. Now come on, folks. I can't make up stuff like this. And it happens to me all the time. I would bet you doughnuts to discourse that I could come up with a *Blue Highways For Weeners and Old Women* in just one short trip across this land.

Speaking of weird trips, a long time ago, years beyond counting, I had a friend who was teaching in a remote part of the reservation and who came to once a month to refresh her contact with civilization. On New Year's Eve she felt particularly stressed because she was not "going out and getting wild" so we trekked off to see B.B. King at the El Rey Theater but it was sold out. Somehow, we had gotten the phone number for a woman who did "psychic readings" and who was available on New Year's Eve.

So off we went to this woman's apartment which was in a semi-subterranean bunker which was so totally weird I almost went back to the car before we knocked on her door. In we went and plunked down \$75 which I thought was outrageous, but, hey, we would have spent that much at the B. B. King concert, so after watching this so-called

psychic smoke like a chimney for some minutes, this woman-psychic-medium invites us into her "reading room" where she asks us to focus on a question. So there we sat, my reservation friend and I, side by side, waiting for the delivery of a message from the other side as our New Year's present. The smoking psychic looked me right in the eye and pronounced with certainty that there was trauma around the neck of my father (who had died many years before this) and I said, "No way. He died on the floor of the den of a heart attack."

She insisted it was trauma about the neck, and went on with more details. None of it rang true. I said to my friend, "Let's go. What a waste of \$75." When we got back to my house, there was a rather urgent sounding message for my friend from her mother to call no matter what the time which at that point it was about two in the morning so she did. The news was that while we were at the psychic reading, her father had hung himself in the garage. Maybe we were sitting too close to each other during the reading and it was like mail being delivered to the wrong box. It just never ceases to amaze me how fast things can turn weird, especially in the dark of winter here in 'Merika

In every town, the decorations are up, and the Rickreall (pronounced RICK-ree-awl) pageant is in full swing with five planned performances. I hear it's like the Best Christmas Pageant Ever. I'll let you know next month assuming I survive the next round of wine tastings. I went to my fair share over the Thanksgiving weekend and am quite in love

with the local wines, which unlike the local wines in New Mexico and Colorado have lovely long grape growing seasons and moderate climates to age gracefully in. Hopefully, that holds true for me as well. Unrelated to totally everything, my landlord came to check the smoke alarms which are constantly going off whenever I cook a hamburger or pork chop. Turns out they are vegetarians.

For Christmas giving, books I will high recommend include a terrifically diverse collection ranging from speculative fiction to good old fashioned mystery and western, *Stories from Desert Bob's Reptile Ranch* by Bob Vardeman (Popcorn Press, ISBN 978-1-4276-1092-8). For holiday cheer wherever families eat together (and some with less panache than perfection) try Eileen Spinelli's *The Perfect Thanksgiving*. I'm quite taken with Donna Jo Napoli's work, and her latest, *Hush*, will pull you inexorably into the tale of a teenaged Irish princess captured by a ruthless pirate slaver and her survival in spite of the odds. Not full of holiday cheer, but a remarkable story. Also, for little guys, try Rosemary Well's *I Love You A Bushel and a Peck* and you'll find yourself singing this book over and over. For anyone who needs a book but which one to get them try ANY Robert Sabuda popup (check out his new Narnia volume which will take your breath away) and of course you can never go wrong with Tomie de Paola who has done so many wonderful books, but our family favorite is still *Bill and Pete*, about an Egyptian crocodile and his fearless toothbrush-bird as they outwit The Bad Guy who wants to turn Bill into a suitcase. For grownups, you might consider Robert Emmons' *Thanks* which I think would make a

fine gift for anyone who is struggling with being in the moment and appreciating what they have (I love that line of a song in Chicago, "You can love the life you're living or you can live the life you like.") Also, for any writers in your immediate circle who may have missed this when it first came out, try Pat Schneider's *Writing Alone, Writing With Others*. On my "to read" list is Jerry Spinelli's *Eggs* and some Mary Engelbreit cookbooks that I'm reviewing. And of course, I want you to consider *Cooking Up Mother Goose* and *Fairy Tale Feast* by our VERY good friends, Shirley Goodness and Mercy Will, \$5 each from www.cookingupreading.com.

Until next month, and next year, or the next life, whichever comes first, I wish you a fulfilling holiday with lots of time to write, cook, clean, knit, garden, dremel the dog's toenails, and otherwise be in the moment, wherever you are and whoever you are with.

gwynne