

## Cosmic Raccoon September 2008

In the old days, when fall came, the most daunting commitment I had to face was the "What I Did Last Summer" essay which was always mostly fiction anyway. I wrote fantasy travels about how we went to the Grand Canyon, the jungles of Amazonia, and the dark side of the moon. As long as it filled the two sides of the white sulfide paper with robin's egg blue lines, and I put my name on top of that red line at the next-to-the-top position it was okey dokey. I always looked forward to those essays. Perhaps that was the true beginnings of my life as a writer--lying for a living. If I had to sit in a little desk today and write what I really did this summer, in truth I'd have to say all I did was read and read and read. Here are some of the favorites from this past month.

Bringing the Story Home: The Complete Guide to Storytelling for Parents by Lisa Lipkin (W.W.Norton) actually ought to be titled The Complete Guide to Storytelling. Period. It's full of great ideas for jumpstarting stories, whether you are going to tell them or write them to use them to finagle a free beer out of somebody. It's also a great way to get the family stories started if you're working on a memoir or a life book.

I Am A Pencil: A Teacher, His kids, and Their World of Stories by Sam Swope. I swear I know this guy but for the life of me I cannot dredge up the six degrees of separation. It's a great book full of tales told in school by the kids he worked with in a school in Queens trying to pry words out of them and get them to be writers. I guess my own experiences were easier, with kids who wanted to write, clamored to read what they had written, and gleefully did their edits (because it meant they got to read it to the group all over again). If you've thought of volunteering for reading or writing in your local school, you might read this to get some ideas. He uses good writing prompts that are way above the kids' heads and that's why they work. None of the usual insipid story-writing sparkers that you find in a classroom guide to getting kids to write. Of course, my own trick is that you read to them first, and fill up the well, and then dip down for the water. With the recent acceptance of portfolios as writing assessment tools, kids can afford to dabble and write a wide variety of material and explore the possibilities.

Storycatcher by Christina Baldwin is still my favorite. She calls us to the task of telling and listening and gathering stories of our own, from other people, even from total strangers. Because the world is getting extremely weird (at least where I live) stories must be gathered like eggs, held safely through the storms, and then shared. This is a fabulously inspiring book that I encourage everyone to read. And use.

What Storycatchers did for me was jump start a book of family stories, *Down the Shore 1956* which went to my family reunion in Lobster Cove. After everyone had time to read it, lots of corrections and additions and clarifications were offered up and a new revised version is in the works, perhaps even for publication. But the basic inspiration for the structure of the book and the myriad of details came from Christina Baldwin and her *Storycatchers* book. (I am also reading another book on memoirs, *Shimmering Images* by Lisa Dale Norton (St. Martins) which ought to really help me on the next volume, *My Life In Dog Years*, the story of growing up, dog by dog. I was encouraged to write it by one of my writing mentors— thanks, Joanne!)

This summer I also read *Nancy Drew and the Clue of the Leaning Chimney*. Doesn't everyone remember *ONE Nancy Drew* or *Hardy Boys*? They were formula written, and quite fantastical when you look back on them. It was a hoot to recall the feeling of first reading it at ten. I also read a bunch of other kid books but was most ecstatically thrilled to find that Zilpha Keatley Snyder's *Below the Root* is back in print and the whole *Green-Sky* trilogy is available! Wow. If you liked *Narnia* or *The Hobbit*, you'll love these fantasies too. Zilpha Keatley Snyder won all kinds of awards for *The Egypt Game* which became a hit when Commodore 64s were the cutting edge for computers. She's a fantastically wonderful writer who was one of my favorites at the bookstore, where I had developed the theory that if you had a weird name, you were destined to be a great kid's author. Thank you Zilpha Keatley Snyder!

Since I don't knit or crochet, and can't draw or paint, and I sew very badly, alternating with reading, I've been watching a lot of really bad movies, the latest being *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. I am still in search of one specimen from the earliest days after we moved to Mancos (1973) when the snow was up to the windows, the plumbing was frozen solid so we had a lot of yellow snow drifts, and Corky the Plumber said, "I'll put you on the list". So we huddled in front of the pathetic Franklin stove watching wretched movies on the TV because video tapes hadn't been invented yet. (Remember: I am old as dirt).

One particularly awful movie that lives in legend but which I cannot remember the name of was about aliens taking over earth using some sort of extraterrestrial boogers and the mad scientists' defensive answer was to engineer a virus to kill the aliens. The definitive line in the movie was uttered by the hero (Michael Rennie?) pleading for the army not to incinerate the aliens with flamethrowers, but instead to "Give my virus a chance." This was of course long before *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Boy do I miss that one and its running commentary on stupid movies. If anybody out there know what this movie was, please let me know.

Of course September also is for remembering the old 'back to school' days when we went shopping for little plaid pleated skirts and white cable knit knee socks to go with the black and white saddle shoes. Nobody was allowed to wear blue jeans to school. The girls were not allowed to wear pants of any kind except under their skirts. Aren't we glad that fashion statement has come back into style?

You will also recall the old Big Chief Tablets with the big chunks of wood still in the paper and the pencils about as big around as a carrot. You most likely had a lunch box with your sammich wrapped in wax paper, and your potato chips wrapped in a little homemade wax paper bag as well because zip lock baggies had not yet been invented. I had a lunchbox thermos which specialized in exploding all over me when I opened it. I always had to make sure my reading material was safe around that little plaid killer thermos because in those days, real books only came in hardback (except for the sleazy titles on spinner racks in the back of the drugstore) and so if you ruined one, it cost a fortune. Of course there were also Little Golden Books which were a quarter and which were available at department stores (there were no malwarts back then, kids).

I wrote my weekly compositions in a black-and-white book with a yellow Eberhard Faber No. 2 pencil, or if I was extraordinarily lucky, with a Papermate ballpoint pen. And I never talked back to the teacher. There was respect for authority, with some serious consequences behind it. For starters, they could flunk you. One kid I knew was thirteen and still in the fifth grade in September 1956. Which meant of course that he'd graduate from high school when he could vote.

Speaking of voting. The world has changed a little, but unfortunately the elective process has not. I think we need a better system. Like high school student council elections. Candidates made their own signs by hand and hung them up in the cafeteria and locker room promising integrity and fiscal responsibility and honesty. Wouldn't it be refreshing to have no election commercials? Let's outlaw them! I don't know anybody who votes for someone because of a television ad, do you? Then again, I suppose there are people out there who really believe it is the weather man who makes the weather.

The summer weather here is perfect. It never rains and the sky is bright blue, just like New Mexico, at least here in the Willamette Valley where the river runs north and the wheat is tall. We have a skunk or a fox that's sneaking into the lane from the farm about ten blocks away; I can smell it at night when it skulks under the window and I nervously call in the cat and check on the dogs. The cat has taken to sleeping in my car since the day she got locked in the neighbor's garden shed for a day. She's getting old, like me and like the dogs. But because I'm officially

Old, I guess it's okay. If you remember, I discovered I was officially Old when I started feeding the birds and counting on them coming to the feeders.

I still haven't gotten used to the lack of birds here. There are crows, ravens, raucous bluebirds, but hardly anything else. I put out thistle birdseed feeders to no avail. Even the hummingbirds didn't come. Not quite sure what that means, but I'm sure it means something. My herbs in the front yard (quite a change from acres and acres in Mancos that shriveled up and dried to dust) are absolutely enormous and abundant. They grew all through the winter and just took over this summer, so I'm cutting and harvesting and grateful for the greenery.

Now that it's September, writing workshops are bursting up out of the soil too. The suspended animation of summer yields to some slow rusty movement with plots trickling forth, scenes popping out wanting to be written, details of characters standing up like that one irredeemable weed in the garden like a chin hair.

In addition to my Dog by Dog memoirs, the next thing I hope to pour blood into is an outline, more or less autobiographical, of how a kid from Abington, Pennsylvania (pronounced pen-sah-VAYN-ya) learns about the mysterious vanished cultures of the Anasazi of the Colorado Plateau and gets enticed into adventures in the desert wastes of northwestern New Mexico.

While I write, I am reminded every 90 minutes or so that life is too short not to take lots of walkies, and Emily is like clockwork at 1:30 every afternoon wanting to go over to the university where she chases the little foam ball (it doesn't hurt her old teeth) 50 times, roll in the grass upside down to fight off gravity, and then trot home for a nice cold drink of water. Henry of course is rip tide ready to go any time, hoping to encounter that boogery squirrel that runs along the telephone wires. He also was tormented by a squirrel—I am not kidding—that runs along the top of the wooden fence right outside the living room window, as if to say, "Neener, neener, neener." It's a scene worthy of cinema.

I've talked the food coop into bringing in frozen Bueno green chile, and found Taylor's Ham in Portland at a small chain of grocery stores. The only thing missing is TastyKakes and I'll weigh nine hundred pounds before Christmas.

Meantime, I hope your world is filled with luck and magic and wonder.

Gwynne