Slate and Style: The Magazine of the NFB Writers' Division

Spring, 2020

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Editor's Musings

by Shelley J. Alongi

I'm going to make a concerted effort not to mention Kovid19. I only did that to tell you what I wasn't going to mention. In your isolation, more leisurely hours, and sleeping in moments, take time to enjoy our spring issue. Some of us are thawing out, some of us entering warm temperate climates a little early, or maybe just in time? I suppose that depends on how you feel about winter. Me, I like snow and cold weather even though I don't always like to get out of bed on a cold morning. We have had plenty of cold mornings around here, 23 at 5:00 AM and 48 by noon with lots of sunshine or howling north winds. The cat decides he wants in and out and then doesn't remember he didn't like it the first time out there. Well, maybe he's just looking for someone? Crossing the quiet street he looks furtively for his girlfriend or a male to wangle out of territory and I put together the latest issue of Slate and Style. He comes in and says hello, eats, naps on a fleece blanket, or jumps on a chair by the heater and then goes outside again. Now that spring is starting to arrive in earnest he's on the hunt for birds. My house has resembled a crime scene with the telltale feathers spread from the livingroom to the bedroom. Luckily I've kept the bodies out of the house. The only bodies I want in the house are his or mine.

 While he indulges his feline pleasures, I order the articles and offerings for this issue. Two board profiles grace these pages, poetry about blindness or life, plans for our meeting in Houston, a book review. We hasten toward spring and I put in the news about members and writing podcasts and reminders of the contest. Enjoy this issue with a hot or cool beverage of your choice, just don't drink the hand sanatizer. Kick off your house slippers or pumps or sneakers after a brisk online shopping or workout session, or simply a lazy day of reading. Wherever this issue finds you, enjoy. Keep writing and keep dreaming!

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Presidential Bell Notes

by Shelley J. Alongi

 Planning is underway for the national convention meeting in Houston, Texas July 14 through 19. At this writing there are no plans to cancel convention due to the Coronavirus pandemic though the latest Presidential NOtebook from HQ says there is an alternate plan if it comes to that. The Writers' Division board will continue to plan an exciting program for you and anyone who joins our meetings. We will want member participation and we will also want you to contribute your work, showcase yourself, help others and learn about where we are and where we're going. We are most interested in where you as division members will take this division in the future. I hope in 2021 that I will leave this division in competent capable hands. To that end we'll need officers and board members to steer this ship from 2021 to 2023 and beyond.

 The Writers' Division has given me plenty of encouragement on my own writing journey and because of resources picked up from members past and present I can now hold several of my own books in my hand or bring them up on a computer screen or iPhone.

 It is the mission of this division to help encourage you to your own writing goals. Help develop your own skills by submitting articles and works for publication here, or for critique through our newly resurrected critiquing service. We know that the improvement of writing skills can be a daunting journey. We're here to help. You can learn and help along the way. We look forward to your work. See you in Houston!

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Join us in Houston for National Convention

by Shelley J. Alongi

I have officially made my reservation at the Hilton Americas for the July 14-19 convention. The division will meet on Tuesday July 14 for a two-part seminar: the first part will be on self publishing and the second part will be a critique of your own work. It is our plan to put an article in the Braille Monitor as the time approaches soliciting works in poetry, short stories, a single chapter from a novel or book in progress and essays that you would like to have us critique. A $10 registration fee will cover the critiques and carries with it the added benefit of membership in the Writers' Division till July of 2021. Thursday July 16 is division day. Join us for an informational meeting on the division past and present. Then, stay for poetry readings. If you haven't paid dues or registered for the seminar you will be able to join the division at that time. Pay $10 for a membership extending from July 2020 to July of 2021. If you registered for the seminar and decide to attend our division meeting you will not need to pay a second fee. However, if you did not attend the seminar and you want to join the division you can pay $10 and join on Thursday at the division meeting. This might sound a little redundant but I want to make it clear that you don't need to pay for both meetings. Come join us and join the division and help lead it into its bright future.

The convention will be held this year in Houston at the Hilton Americas-Houston

1600 Lamar Street

Houston, TX 77010

Room reservations at the Hilton Americas-Houston can be made by calling The nightly rate is $105 for singles, doubles, triples, and quads. In addition, the sales tax rate is 8.25 percent, and the hotel occupancy tax rate is 17 percent. To book your room for the 2020 convention, call 1-800-236-2905. For each room, the hotel will take a deposit of the first night’s room rate and taxes, and will require a credit card or a personal check. If you use a credit card, the deposit will be charged against your card immediately. If a reservation is cancelled before Monday, June 1, 2020, half of the deposit will be returned. Otherwise refunds will not be made.

We have also secured overflow space at the Marriott Marquis Houston. The Marriott is only a three-block walk directly across Discovery Green, or attendees can walk entirely indoors through the George R. Brown convention center, connecting both hotels on the second level. You will find many of the same amenities at the Marriott as well as a Texas-shaped lazy river pool. The room rate at the Marriott Marquis is a slightly higher $119 per night for singles, doubles, triples, and quads. To book a room, call 1-877-688-4323 after January 1. The same deposit and cancellation policies apply.

Stay tuned for more details by email or posted on our Stylist listserv. We'll have more information available for you after the close of our 2020 writing contest.

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Writing Flashbacks

by Mindy Hood

[This is taken from Inkitt: The Writers' Blog August 18, 2018]

 Are you writing about time travel or do you just want to use powerful flash backs? The important factor is to know how to use it, what the purpose is, and what to never do.

 They say the way back is often the way forward, but only if you stick to the path. Flashbacks have a bad reputation in fiction as lazy plot devices and a substitute for engaging character development. They don’t have to be, though. A flashback may be the most memorable part of your story, but only if you understand what it is, what it does, and what it should never do.

What Is a Flash Back

 It sounds like an obvious question, but the answer is a little more nuanced than you might expect. A flashback may only take a single sentence. Many of the best actually do. Whenever you see a sentence starting with “She remembered” or “He recalled” or any similar phrases that lead into a brief description of past events, you’ve entered the Flashback Zone.

 Of course, flashbacks don’t necessarily have to be short. Some books are almost entirely composed of flashbacks, and many rely on these jumps in time to effectively reveal the story. The Old Man and the Sea does this brilliantly. That said, keep in mind that flashbacks are easy to abuse, and shorter jaunts through time are safer than extended adventures through old history.

It Needs to Serve a Purpose

 If you want a flashback in your story, or you find yourself writing one, stop and consider what the device actually achieves. Like any other part of your prose, it needs to serve a purpose. Ask yourself: “What does this scene accomplish?”

How does it move the story forward? Does it interrupt the action or propel it? If you removed the flashback, would it mangle the story? Make sure the audience cares about what’s happening and that the sentence, scene, or chapter that makes up your flashback pulls them along as relentlessly as the rest of the narrative.

This is not Your B-Roll

 Here’s the thing: flashbacks should never be scenes you left on the cutting room floor. Flashbacks are so often abused by writers because they give us the illusion that self-indulgence is suddenly permitted. You can start your story in the middle of the action (where you almost always should) and still jump back in time for those heartwarming character details and funny scenes you love so dearly.

Conversely, flashbacks shouldn’t be used as lazy editing tricks. Don’t use them to explain details you forgot to flesh out in your first draft. This kind of shortcut leaves readers frustrated and impatient to continue with the story.

Don't Spell Out Character Development

 Do not stop in the middle of an action sequence to remind the audience of how much your character hates spiders. Rising action isn’t the time for flashbacks to throw in extensive, over-stated character development. Character development should weave into the story, not bring it to a screeching halt. Sometimes a little mystery is good. When someone says they don’t like pineapple on their pizza, they don’t stop to tell you the details of their family trip to Hawaii. No one cares. If your character needs fleshing out, challenge yourself to avoid flashbacks altogether.

 A great flashback incorporates memory into immediate concerns. It isn’t a shortcut to great character development, a way to revive the darlings you killed off, or a clever exposition trick. While a flashback may (should) involve character development, exposition, and engaging content, it must do so in the confines of the story you’re telling right now, not the story that happened before your tale began.

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80 and Young at Heart

by Marilyn Brandt Smith

Hi. I'm Marilyn Brandt Smith. Brandt was my maiden name, and I use it as my pen name because some of my friends in Texas might find me if they went web searching, and after all, I want to be found.

My parents were teachers, and they believed I was smart and cute, and oh yeah, blind too, but that I could still do anything I set my mind to do. So as I grew up, I climbed trees with my cousins; learned to walk on old discarded barrels; barreled around the house on stilts; and got into just as much trouble as they did.

I had twelve great years at the Texas School for the Blind, public school wasn't an option for someone born in 1939. My third grade teacher taught us to write limericks. I was already writing and loving everyone's song parodies. Who else remembers Homer and Jethro and Allan Sherman?

Rehab centers were just coming in style when I finished high school, and I didn't know much about what a cane could do for me, so I chose to attend probably the hilliest campus in Texas. I had to have help getting to all the buildings "on the hill," which is where most of the classes were held through my years at Southwest Texas State Teachers' College. I was a double major double minor—English and education, Spanish and social studies. Much to my surprise, the president of the college, in his infinite wisdom, decided at the beginning of my senior year that he was afraid to have me student teach in the town where the college was located. I threw a wall-eyed fit, and one of my sorority sisters made good on her promise that her former school superintendant in Rockdale, Texas, would let me teach there.

Hallelujah! I have a teaching certificate. You guessed it—I couldn't get a job. I was either too small in stature—five feet, one inch; a girl; a blind girl; etc, etc. In desperation I entered graduate school wanting to do something productive. I'd heard about this new brainchild of President Kennedy's creation, the Peace Corps. I'd applied everywhere else, so why not? Toward the end of October I received a call from the Peace Corps director in the Dominican Republic. The school for the blind down there wanted someone to help them organize their program; go purchase some merchandise with the school's money; and teach a little. That sounded great to me. Goodbye graduate school!

The Peace Corps experience gave me insights into cultural differences in third-world economies which I'd never imagined, even though I lived about 150 miles from the Mexican border. I taught geography and math using materials I bought from the American Foundation for the Blind. When the second blind Peace Corps volunteer came down, we got canes, and he taught mobility. It's grown since then. They loved learning English and singing all the top rock hits. I introduced them to Peter, Paul, and Mary—Pedro, Pablo, y Maria. Y means "and." It's pronounced E.

Somehow while down there maturity and awareness, and probably some good advice, convinced me that there were lots of English teachers waiting for jobs who wouldn't have trouble selling themselves to school boards and superintendants. There was a need for blind people in the field of rehabilitation for the blind. That's where I could best serve. I received a scholarship to do a Master of Arts in rehab counseling at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Right before entering graduate school I was one of the speakers at the 1964 NFB convention in Phoenix. It was hot as blue blazes out there, but I got good exposure to the organized consumer movement among blind and visually impaired people.

The rehab counseling program was challenging, with lots of library research required. I had taken time to learn mobility skills along the way, so walking between my apartment and campus was no problem. During that time I worked a Summer camp in Casper, Wyoming, and almost chose to work in Wyoming because of it. When it came time to choose an internship, I waffled between offers from the Columbia Lighthouse in Washington D.C., and AEB in Arkansas—now known as Lions World, as far as I know. D.C. won because I had girlfriends there who I'd known in high school.

I started there as an intern, and was hired as soon as the semester was over. I was a counselor, individual and group, and a trainer in sensory development which I learned from the director. After his death I became director of the rehab program. In addition to students from D.C., Maryland, and Virginia during the school year, I set up Summer workshops for high school students regarding their future education and employment options.

My mother back in Texas contracted a life-threatening disease and I felt the need to be closer to home. I took a position in the primary rehab center in Texas at that time, Texas Lions Camp. I worked there for two years as a counselor and supervisor. The state of Texas was building a rehab center in Austin, and I was good friends with the director. He wanted to hire me for group therapy, but couldn't steal an employee from the competing rehab center in Texas. My only alternative was to move in order to be available.

Hello Utah. I'd made friends with some Utah rehab people when I worked in Wyoming. I was glad to serve as a counselor teacher in their program for a little over a year so I could take advantage of the offer to work at Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center back in Austin. I worked there until I got married about a year later.

I've been married to Roger for forty-eight years. We have two adult children, a girl from Korea, and a son, Jayson, who is my computer guru, my techie savior, and much much more.

Now, about the writing. I was first published in 1960 when a poem from a creative writing class was accepted for an anthology of work by Texas college students. Next came all the hoopla about my Peace Corps service, "First blind Peace Corps volunteer," etc, etc. I wrote so many articles about what I was doing for newspapers and magazines—even some in Spanish for the Caribbean area. All through the 60's and part of the 70's I wrote poetry when I was lovesick, and how-to articles when the mood struck me. The novel bug bit me in the mid 70's, and for about ten years I wrote what might be graciously labeled "soap opera fiction." I couldn't afford to have it retyped, copyedited, or to pay a reader's fee in order to submit it to an important publisher. Self publishing was a big no-no back then. Thank goodness that's changed! I experimented with typing my work, trying to record it on cassette, and writing in Braille. Braille won out. I still use the old Perkins. By the way, I'm not a techie, although I know I cheated myself by not learning it back then.

I have to confess taking a virtual break from doing much writing while I was doing a lot of the research for my husband's classes when he decided to become a Master's level teacher of the visually impaired. That was also true through the child rearing experience which I found very stimulating. Both my children are blind, and believe it or not, both are musicians with perfect pitch. How did that happen?

My husband and I love music, but neither of us has perfect pitch. We've both sung in groups throughout our lives. One of our favorite pastimes used to be sitting around the fourth of July pool party in southern Kentucky singing southern gospel with his sisters and their kids. It's a family blessing.

We moved to Kentucky after my parents' death. Our children finished school at the Kentucky School for the Blind. We worked lots of public school experience into their education—a year now and then, and a summer school now and then. I believe in a mix if it's practical and realistic. Many of the schools for the blind programs aren't geared the same way they used to be, and I'm not sure I'd make that choice again, but back then it was right. With both of them being musical and my daughter being athletic and my son loving computers, it worked out well.

Around 2000 one of my friends from Texas who was a writer and an English teacher put me in touch with Nancy Scott. Some of you guys may not remember her, but Nancy was very active in the NFB Writers Division for many years, at one point editing Slate and Style. Nancy brought me up to date on new trends in poetry, the change in attitudes toward self publishing, opportunities for publishing, and much more. I was back in the playground.

In terms of disability writing and resources, I've reached in many directions: Dialogue, Matilda Ziegler, Our Special, Breath and Shadow, Wordgathering, Kaleidoscope, and probably more I can't think of. I also explored—and almost had a piece in–Chicken Soup, contract signed and all, then they had a last-minute change. I started writing flash fiction, and had a regular monthly appearance on an online site.

Then in 2006, Behind Our Eyes was founded for writers with disabilities. I served as vice president until 2014, and have floated around in different positions. I was president from 2016 to 2018, and now wear two or three hats: Web Liaison (my son manages our online presence) and list guidelines coordinator. I served as editor on our first anthology and founded our magazine, Magnets and Ladders. Many of my edited pieces from the magazine were part of our second anthology, and I am one of three editors on our third anthology.

In 2012 the book bug bit me. I pulled together my work over the decades and lots of new material including some short stories, poetry, and memoir for my own anthology called Chasing the Green Sun. The title has to do with the way the moon and fluorescent lights appear to my son, and used to appear to me when I had partial vision. You'll have to read it to get it. Go to marilynspages.com for a free audio download read by one of my friends. I'm still writing. Contests, deadlines, and prompts are what really get me going. I enjoy judging contests and being judged. I became active in the Writers Division in the early 2000's, once again thanks to Nancy Scott's encouragement.

I live in a 109-year-old house in Louisville. I read an outrageous amount of books and magazines because reading is my primary hobby. I just listened to a barbershop music convention, and I always catch the bluegrass music convention in October. Family, food, and friends are big deals in my life, and I can't leave out Hank, my husband's sixth guide dog from California, who wants to be fed right now. So do I.

Take care,

Marilyn

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KLAASSEN TO HAMMEL KHRONOLOGY

 by Barbara Hammel

The writing bug bit me when I was eleven years old. In my stash of old stuff I have those stories. Writing them was how my friends and I passed some evenings my fifth-grade year. I was mostly a romance writer even way back then and I loved giving the characters large families. Back then I said I wanted to have a hundred children and, considering all those little ones I've watched through the years, I could probably multiply that times ten.

In sixth-grade the class had to write a poem about winter. I presume it was a Language Arts group assignment. My memory does does not recall. What I do remember is that I pretty much composed the whole thing for the class and my version was longer than theirs. I count it as the first poem I wrote, which planted the poetry seed in me.

Seventh-grade brought into Junior High, but it moved me to a different dorm where I was now the "baby". That seed germinated while I listened to a few of the girls talk about writing their own poetry and others discussing the various stories and books they had to read. It finally began to grow my Sophomore year, when I started writing at first because I was the best with words of my peers and we needed or wanted them for things, and then I discovered it really was fun and cathartic.

In college, poetry writing became my lifeline. While my dorm mates were bustling hither and thither on Friday nights, my Braillewriter and I had a standing date at various meeting places where I people watched and pondered life and wrote. B.J. the Brailler was the best friend I had my Freshman year.

I did make friends in other years, one of them being a journalism major who also loved writing stories. I wrote a novel-length romance story and started on the two sequels of it.

When I was in high school I often pondered on what knowledge I would gain when the world opened up to me.

I learned some friends will always be there, some will come and go, and some will leave forever. College isn't the carefree days and you may not be cut to do what you planned on for your career. The twenties are tougher than the teens. It's a great feeling to earn a paycheck and scary when your job is going away. I learned about heartbreak and finding love that lasts. I experienced the joy of being pregnant but I learned that some babies aren't ours to keep. I learned how the adoption process works and got twins! I've needed to delve into the depths of autism and sensory integration and challenging behavior and feeding strategies and how to survive on little sleep for many years. I've learned about babies -- in my sphere of the world I'm known as the Baby Whisperer. Saltwater pools are easier to keep and gentler on the skin than chlorine and sand filters are amazing. Zambian October smells like Iowa in October. Not everyone's number 7 is green or Wednesday is blue and the rest have no idea what you mean. I've been on the Great Wall of China and a snow- capped mountain in the tropics. ... And all that has happened in this country -- and the world -- andd all the technological advances that have come along.

Now, I ponder on that child I used to be.

I live in a suburb of Des Moines, Iowa with my husband, and cat, Gandalf -- he's all grey. My twins are seveteen. They live in a group home about twenty minutes from us and we visit them twice a week.

I've had a couple of poems published in "Magnets And Ladders". I've also made a chapbook and sold it for an alumni fund-raiser.

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Member Profile: Wesley Sims

Wesley Sims is one of our newest members. You may know him from taking first place in the NFB Writers' Division 2019 poetry contest with his poem "Elogy for my Hands." In addition to taking first place in our poetry contest last year, he has published two chapbooks of poetry, When Night Comes, Finishing Line Press, Georgetown, Kentucky, 2013, and Taste of Change, Iris Press, Oak Ridge, TN, 2019. He has a third chapbook, A Pocketful of Little Poems, forthcoming and will be available on Amazon via print and E-book in a few weeks.

His work has appeared in Artemis Journal, Breath & Shadow, Connecticut Review, G.W. Review, Liquid Imagination, Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, Plum Tree Tavern, Nature Writing, American Diversity Report, Novelty Magazine, Poem, Poetry Quarterly, The South Carolina Review, Poem, Time of Singing, Bewildering Stories, The Tennessee Magazine, and others. He has won several poetry contests, with either first or second place or Editor’s Choice/ Honorable Mention.

Besides reading (poetry, fiction and nonfiction) and writing poetry, he enjoys camping, photography and playing with his grandchildren.

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SYMPHONY IN SENSES

 by Barbara Hammel

Trees put out their warning scent --

Pungent, unpleasant.

Wind foretells of rain or snow,

Water-scent is in its blow.

See the puffy cottonballs

Turn to anvils, cloud-banks, walls.

From cloud to cloud flares abound

Then lightning arcs to ground.

Drops plip, bap, clop, denk, lub, ting,

Start slow, then pour like everything!

Thunder rumbles and echoes back,

Then an earth-splitting crack!

Nature's weather-changing treat,

Taste pure water, earthy-sweet.

Fear stamps metal bite on tongue,

Electric zip exits lung.

Warm wind washes over skin,

Cold breeze pricks spirit within.

Tickle, trickle, drops -- wet, cool --

Tingle, prickle, veins of jet fuel!

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Writers Resource: Podcasts

by Shelley J. Alongi

In the overabundance of resources out there to assist writers, don't forget about the lowly podcast. Writing authorities have entered the arena, putting out their own discussions and how-to journeys. Three podcasts I'd like to focus on in this column are "Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips for writing", "rite-minded Podcast" and Miriam Webster's Word of the Day".

 Grant Faulkner and She Writes Press is the force behind rite-minded podcast. Many of you may have sprung to the challenge of writing a fifty thousand word novel each November from 1999 to the present. National Novel Writing Month has produced several of my completed works and some that have not yet seen the light of the publishing day. Grant and his co-host produces a podcast that runs about an hour in length each week. The podcast features authors and their publishing journeys, how-tos, and the rewards of persistence. One such question on a recent podcast was "How do you construct your memoirs?" Memoirs are a big seller these days and there are whole schools of thought on how to construct them and what their purposes serve. Tune in each week to hear what Grant and his co-host have to say on writing trends of the day.

Mignon Fogarty, known as The Grammar Girl, puts out a podcast each week featureing words and their pronunciations, origins and differing spellings. Did you know that "celtic" comes from a Greek word? And how on earth do you say it anyway? Did you know that the original word from which "whisky" is derived can be translated as "water of life?" Sit and ponder those connotations for a while. How many ways can you spell "whisky?" Take a listen to Grammar Girl and find out. And what about the origins of Daylight Saving Time? Don't we debate that every year? Why would a writer want to know any of this? Well, it makes good filler and explanation material for a book.

And last but certainly not least, Miriam Webster puts out a two or three minute podcast each day called "word of the day" which features both common and uncommon words. Its focus is on usage, spelling, origins and even derivitives of the chosen word of the day.

All of these podcasts can help enrich your own writer's vocabulary along with a writer's need for trivial trivia. These are just a sampling of the resources out there on your smart device that can help you write the next great American novel. Go to your source for podcasts and type in "writing" or any word related and you will find a wide assortment of podcasts to meet your writing needs. Good luck to you! Carry on Writer!

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 YOU SHOULDN'T TEACH THE BLIND

 by Barbara Hammel

If you think audio is good enough,

If you think Braille is too hard,

If you think "cane" means giving up,

If you think decreased assignments are fine,

If you think exemption from classes works,

If you think foreign tongues too difficult,

If you think geometry impossible,

If you think handwriting isn't needed,

If you think independence has conditions,

If you think just you can teach blind skills,

If you think knives are too dangerous,

If you think low expectations are ok,

If you think music is too complicated,

If you think no print size is too large,

If you think orientation means planned routes,

If you think peers will make great helpers,

If you think questions can only be yours,

If you think reading slow is acceptable,

If you think sighted guide is adequate,

If you think tapping is too much trouble,

If you think unwilling means unable,

If you think vision impaired better than blind,

If you think walking should replace running,

If you think "it" fails for x in this poem,

If you think you are the only expert,

If you think Zambia is too hard to find,

Then you definitely shouldn't teach the blind.

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Home Was The Shade of a Big Oak Tree

by Wesley Sims

Sultry July lumbers toward dog days but honeysuckle sweetens the air. Orange marigolds and multicolored zinnias light up the yard and side of the house. Family gathers under the shade of a giant oak tree, its large limbs stretching outward have spanned generations, a pair of initials carved on the south side, J S + G B. A gentle breeze stirs the fanning green leaves, cools sweat-drenched brows. They settle in a rough-mapped circle of faded-brown wood, and rusty, red-metal lawn chairs. It’s picnic time—children, grandchildren, cousins, aunts and uncles, gathered round. When the table is full and mother says, Let’s eat, everyone pops up to fill their plates. Yeast rolls, potato salad, Grandma’s special crispy fried chicken (Could I get a copy of that chicken recipe?), scrumptious banana pudding, just-sweet-enough lemonade, sweet tea, all served up with Good to see you greetings. Plates filled, talk starts on how fast the little kids are growing up. While the good southern food is digesting, they catch up on all the news: Bad about Uncle Joe’s recent passing. Aunt Ophelia had a stroke last week, she’s 85 now. Cousin Sue has a new baby girl, spittin’ image of her grandma. That makes six for her. Lord, what was she thinking? Did you hear the recent talk of new tensions in Asia. God forbid we get in another war. Billy Joe said goodbye last week, headed overseas in the Army. His granddaddy died in the war and his older brother went missing in action in the last one, never came home. Uncle Jack sold out last week moving to Arkansas, can’t make enough here with cotton to feed a family of eight. Two hours in, conversation moves to memories and stories of Grandma and Grandpa who started this bunch. More stitching added to family ties on days like this, in places like this.

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Reading Room: Finn: A Novel by John Clinch

February, 2007

Kindle: $7.95 to $16.95

Audible: $27.99

Hard Cover: $32.00

Also available on BARD, narrated by Ray Jiles.

byShelley J Alongi

Would you have ever thought about writing a novel based on a famous character in literature? How famous? How about Huckleberry Finn's father? Is that famous enough for you? Or me?

John Clinch in his author's note tells us that Finn deserves his own book. He endeavors to tell us the story of Huckleberry's alcoholic father, who turns up dead in chapter nine of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain.

John Clinch takes his character and gives him a most disreputable backstory, sandwiching it in between the few appearances he makes in Mark Twain's story. Huck finds the boots that Finn wears have made tracks on various paths he travels in the town where he lives with the widow Douglass. the telltale sign is the cross on the bottom of the boot, which seems to take on ominous meanings even if we don't understand those meanings. Clinch expands on dialog between Huckleberry Finn and his father, reminding the reader that he is opposed to his son's participation in school. In the Mark Twain book Huck seems to like school and in the Clinch novel his father's opposition to school is made more prominent.

The main thing that happens to Finn in his own novel is that he turns out to be quite a murderer. This is part of Finn's life that Mark twain did not wish to tell us about. Perhaps Mark Twain like a good author wanted to leave his readers to imagine why Huck Finn's father was so undesirable.

The story outlines several of Finn's relationships bringing out their weak and strong points. Characters that are barely touched upon in Mark Twain's telling: his father the judge, Mary, Huck's mother have more prominent appearances. There are a host of unforgettable characters: Bliss the blind bootlegger hidden in the woods who is quite delightful, a brother who tries to help Finn and reconcile him to the father and does not succeed in either, various merchants with whom he conducts his trade, and another woman who has no made yet figures prominently in finn's eventual downfall.

Clinch's book is at best a convoluted interweaving of thought and action, surrounding whisky, cat fish and his cohabitation with more than one black woman. Living on the river, Finn catches catfish for his livelyhood and trades with local merchants from whom he discovers that Mary has run up a series of debts in her efforts to raise her child. Somehow Mary's attempts to raise Huckleberry on her own rubs against Finn's attempts to raise the boy his way. and so he spends most of his gotten gain paying back the merchants for both her's and his own mounting debt for cheap whisky, in the process fuelling his own anger and desire to be free from responsibilities he hardly takes seriously in the first place. Through a series of events, he manages to make enemies with his own father, commit several more murders, and then end up dead (as we find him in the Huckleberry Finn book). I will leave you, the reader, to discover the lurid details of Finn's demise. Instead, I will state categorically that this is one book I could have lived without reading. Nevertheless, it is a well constructed story. He does manage to weave events from the original book into his own making it necessary to read both books in order to completely understand what is being explained in the Clinch novel. Yet I must end by saying that even after complimenting Clinch's masterful weaving, I still maintain that Finn, in the pages of Mark Twain's telling, is completely disreputable without being a sleezy murderer.

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Submission GUIDELINES for SLATE AND STYLE

Here are the guidelines for Slate and Style

They include submission deadlines, contact information, requirements for your bio and cover letter, general information and word counts for genres. Enjoy.

Submission Dates

Spring Issue: March 21st---Submissions close February 28th

Summer issue: June 21st---Submissions close May 31st

Fall issue: September 23rd----Submissions close September 2nd

Winter issue: December 21st---Submissions close November30th

Please read through all the guidelines carefully. Submissions that do not follow these guidelines may not be considered for Slate & Style.

Submission guidelines are as follows:

Length requirements are: articles, 1500 words or less, fiction and memoir/personal essay, 4000 words or less, book reviews, 1000 words or less, poetry, 36 lines or less.

Again, send ALL submissions as email attachments no matter the genre. Include a cover letter along with your submissions with author's name, title of piece(s) and contact info-phone, email and address included. Also include a bio with your submission(s). Your bio should be no more than 150 words. Do not send an entire history, just include key items you feel are important for readers to know. Send as an attachment as well. More than one submission is allowed per email but do list all submissions in the required cover letter.

Send submissions to s-and-s@nfbnet.org

In the subject line of your email, write: Slate & Style submission, your name, and number of submissions. Example: “Slate & Style submission, Myrna Badgerow, 3 submissions”.

Use Microsoft Word or create an RTF document for all submissions. No other formats are accepted, and therefore will not be considered.

Proofread and check your grammar and formatting before submitting.

Slate & Style will consider all submissions for publication. However, please be careful with graphic sexual and violent content as well as language and -religious, anti-gender, anti-racial and anti-homosexual orientation content. Characterization and plot often require this type of material, but it must serve a purpose. Gratuitous material with no purpose or meant only for derogatory reasons, will not be considered. Material will be published according to the discretion of the editing staff.

Please direct questions and comments to the email address listed above for submissions, in your subject line, please include your name and simply write: “QUESTION”. Then write your question in the body of the email.

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The End.