Write On!: Reflections on the Writing Life
Lucy Brusic

Editor's Note: The Winter issue of The Forum is dedicated to independent scholar(ly) writers—or the author in each of us. Virtually every piece submitted concerned the art of writing as the voice of the independent scholar. Whether for communication, persuasion, or argumentation, writing and independent scholarship are inseparable. DJ

Tensions arise between audience and author when we confuse the writing with the writer herself. Most Americans romanticize art as magic. We perceive literature as the result of “creativity” rather than “creative labor,” forgetting that writers are workers.1 Valerie Miner

After the talk on “The Writer’s Life” by Howard Norman, it seemed as though one should take what Norman had to say about the writing life and hold it up to the work and thought of other authors. Somewhat at random, I have chosen to use the works of Sigurd F. Olson and Carol Bly in

Author...gripped by a subject...

the hope of making clearer the conclusions that Norman seemed to draw.

After reading about the working habits of these three authors, I draw two observations that illuminate the writing life. 1) The starting point of a work of writing is drawn from something in the author that he or she wants to express. For Norman, it is the exotic and mystical quality of the North; for Olson, it is the mystical oneness of the wilderness; for Bly it is deeply held values.

2) Each author also feels that the authenticity of a piece of writing really depends on the skill of the writer, and they offer different ways to achieve this authentic voice. It is to this point that Valerie Miner’s quotation speaks. The writing life is hard work.

Howard Norman has been a free lance writer for fourteen years. “Free lance means that you write many different things—from monographs to ethnographic works.” Much of Norman’s free lance work was writing documentary filmstrips about the Inuit (Eskimo) culture. “The legends, stories, and folk lore of the North get into your soul/blood. I spent 14 and a half years there, and it seeps in.”

This exotic culture, “where the dialect changes every few miles,” is the subject of Norman’s work. His first novel, The Northern Lights, was nominated for a National Book Award. His most recent work is Northern Tales; Traditional Stories of Eskimo and Indian Peoples, a translation of Inuit tales.

Sigurd Olson was a Minnesota naturalist who devoted his life to wilderness preservation. His works, such as Runes of the North and Of

Putting passion on paper is work.

Time and Place, describe his experiences in the Quetico-Superior forest. Olson’s quest in writing was “an attempt to catch the true meaning of primitive experience.”2

Mountain men, desert men, canoe men, they are the same the world over—only the land differs. They move easily and the difficult job of getting any outfit under way is accomplished with no apparent strain or effort. The country has done something to these men, given them calmness and imperturbability, the mark of the wilderness.3

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David Wiggins

The Distant Voice of Scholarship

I write this on SuperBowl Sunday. It is the weekend in-between the two sessions of the Forum's program, "Bringing Distant Voices into the Mainstream," and I can't help but reflect upon the dramatic contrast in scale and substance of these activities. The MISF programs are something for us to brag about: they have been sponsored by the National Book Foundation through funds provided by the Lila Wallace Readers' Digest Fund. Our grant was a "satellite" grant designed to sponsor a local writer to present a program that tied into the presentation sponsored by the Minnesota Center for the Book, a talk by writer Howard Norman, that took place January 13.

Forum member Daniel Gabriel was selected to lead the "Distant Voices" sessions. In all, about thirty-five people attended the public keynote address titled: "Bringing Distant Voices into the Mainstream: Do We Dam It, Divert It, or Drown in Its Current?" The talk and the thoughtful discussion that followed were inspiring and made me believe in both the power and importance of individual voices in relation to the mainstream world of mass media and a commercialized global culture. But I am brought back to reality by reading that one in every seven people worldwide will tune in to the SuperBowl. Even scholars will be watching. Any denominator lowered far enough can be common; any voice can cheer in the echo of the crowd.

Does it follow then that the unique voice, motivated by a special understanding born of research, reflection, insight, or ethnic identity is inevitably condemned to obscurity? The level of discussion about the Redskins' use of Indians as mascots illustrates about where we are in mass culture with that debate. I certainly support efforts to expand the public's understanding about other cultures, but I think that it is also important to include in the discussion the importance of hearing the minority views of individuals.

Few voices are more distant from the mainstream than those of independent scholars. The stereotype of a scholar working in isolation on some obscure bit of research is not that far from the truth. More importantly, however, independent scholars are finding, in their special studies, insights about the way the world is that only a few others have ever shared. But who, besides the scholar, will taste the fruit of such labors? What is the use of it? There is little hope that one in every seven, worldwide, is ever going to listen to what an independent scholar has to say, but that doesn't mean that the activity is useless or that the world would not be better off if at least a few others could hear their voice. In the diffusion of ideas, volume is not value; salience and truth are.

I think that independent scholars need to do two things to better connect their ideas to others. First, we need to value what it is that we know, credit the idea that we can communicate with others, and believe that it might do the world some good for us to do so. Secondly, to avoid frustration about ignorance, we need to cherish the value of the traffic in ideas that takes place off of the main "information highways" (or "streams," if we want to avoid mixing metaphors). The small press, the cable television show, the art exhibition, the computer bulletin board, the discussion group, and the simple dialogue with another person are small, but nonetheless valuable, ways to communicate with the world outside of our studies.

The MISF will grow again this year, in new directions. Members will find that the efforts of the board will focus on two general objectives that we hope will benefit them directly. First, we will try to find better ways to help independent scholars learn. This will include efforts to improve funding mechanisms for independent scholars, access to online research networks, and renewed support for study groups. Secondly, we will try to find better ways to help independent scholars teach. This will include work with a mentoring program, networking with other groups and individuals, better use of media outlets, and other initiatives. Stay tuned to this newsletter for more detailed information.

Correction: In the last issue (Fall, 1991) the sixth sentence in the Vice-President's column should have read "I'll admit now that I didn't realize you could enter a Ph.D program after earning a B.A."
The editors apologize for the error.

The Forum is a quarterly publication of the Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum

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The deadline for the next issue of The Forum is May 10.

Board of Directors:
Ramona Asher
Lucy Brusic
Jane Cunningham
Janis Does
Ginny Hansen

Archivist: Brian Mulhern
Giving Voice to the Speechless: Where is the Mainstream?

On January 18 and February 1, 1992, the Forum, together with the Minnesota Center for the Book, and Metronet, sponsored a cultural symposium called "The Writing Life: Distant Voices and the Mainstream." This event featured Daniel Gabriel of COMPAS, who delivered keynote speeches on each day. The first speech was titled "Bringing Distant Voices into the Mainstream: Do We Dam It, Divert It, or Drawn in Its Current?" and the second, "Throwing Our Voices: Wordsound is Power."

On each day, a part of the program was open to the public, while the remaining time was devoted to a private session among twenty-five participants who debated questions concerning the mainstream press and access to it by "distant voices:" those streams and rivulets who contribute to the mainstream but who are often denied the opportunity to express their views in the mainstream media.

Many of the participants gave presentations during the conference. Some read from their own works, others gave dramatic presentations and still others showed videos. Forum member Gabrielle Rose, a writer, delivered a speech, "Giving Voice to the Speechless," the text of which is presented below.

When I think of the American mainstream I think of an immense river made up of huge, white Euro-American talking heads—mostly male—whose incessant babbling gives the river its impetus and its direction—as if whatever topic streams from the flaccid lips on these bloated heads shaped the current of the river...

I envision myself in the tail end of this watery serpent, arms flailing, screaming but speechless as I gag on the garbage strewn in my path—the path I haplessly try to carve out in an effort to catch up to these relentless drivers of my destiny.

As I tried to identify my own voice, I thought locating my own identity in relation to this powerful mainstream should come first. As a Euro-American, am I a de facto member of the mainstream? As a woman, am I a possesision belonging to these Poseidons, or am I their emasculated voice, softening their impact while mimicking their values?

My mother, an East German immigrant to the U.S., arrived here in her mid-twenties. My sisters and I are first generation Americans who have spent much of our lives in a weird sort of Either/Or-ness: Either our family accepts America on its terms or we retreat to a Heimland that was never a mother to our own.

Yes, she did. And not only that—she made us wear stiff red felt houseshoes with black crepe soles she bought in a German store in north Chicago. She served Konsiberg Klopp and Brat Kartoffen when my American pals ate over. My mother had the true European's horror of most things American—including its children—and took it upon herself to educate my few friends in household etiquette and behavior.

All this fits fine with me now—I wouldn't change very much about my past. But during those not-so-wonder years, I spent a lot of time trying to socialize my mother, from pulling her aside on my first day at kindergarten, hissing "We speak English in this country, Mother," to plastering her orange VW Beetle with "Save the Whales" bumper stickers when I was 16. All my attempts to change my mother were really an effort—one which continues today—to define my own role in America.

Which brings me back to the the subject of voices and mainstream. My childhood place, my cultural heritage, my education all point to this mythical mainstream we are trying to understand. I took a long inner look at this image and found that my imagination is not so far off—my picture just needs a little fine tuning.

To begin with—those huge white gargoyles driving the river are not the mainstream. They are the powerful few—the one percent of our nation that has more money and more clout than any of us can dream of, much less hope to get. Many of these men have ruled us—the Roosevelts, Kennedys, Bushes, and even the Quayles. These men commit crimes, yet brook no judgement and render no recompense. They

(continued on page 6)
Forum Focus
Ginny Hansen

A Charter Member Reflects on Benefits

My first benefits from the Minnesota Forum were the suggestions that one should pursue knowledge—even contribute to it or examine what it is—independently of faculty agendas and institutional priorities, and that there can be forums for collegial exchange “outside of walls.” It is easy, once past a plotted course of study, to feel that only those “in departments” advance one’s field of study. In my field (English), such folks teach necessary courses, over and over, and research whatever topic gets sanctioned or funded by somebody—rarely can they explore what simply fires their curiosity.

These revolutionary thoughts were nurtured by MISF programs. Scholars of the Year validated a new vision not only in their addresses but by example—performance scholarship and community-based history, architecture, politics, even archeology (I had not known MN had either archeologists or sites!). Presenters told about ancient philosophers who were women; questioned the tenets of physics (holy cow!); showed how dance could embody a national approach to government; told how to connect with 300 small publishers, 130 libraries, book fairs, readings, and groups that regularly sponsor lectures. Rarely were the topics “in my field,” but that didn’t prevent their approaches and even much of the subject matter from striking sparks in my own mind and work.

Attends a study group

Somewhere along in here I was privileged to attend a study group. In the latter I found a changing mix of people in various fields, interested in a topic that might not be discussed in institutions but is much mulled over in private—in this case, the interplay of the sciences and the humanities. This group continues to modulate through ranks of people representing not only diverse formal trainings but deep private thinking in directions I would never have discovered alone. Discussion varies as each book attracts or fails to interest individuals, but constants have included (1) new vistas of bibliography previously unknown to me (with recommendations sometimes by the authors themselves); (2) feedback on how my reception of that book compares to its reception by readers in other fields; (3) discussion that often never gets to the book but explores the questions it suggests. This Sci/Hum study group once had an all-day retreat and STILL never got through all the tangential topics to explore.

Sci/Hum so stimulated my thinking that I thought I’d just sit in on another group as it formed, even though I knew zilch about the topic, and it wasn’t pertinent to anything I’d ever done—“just go and listen,” thought I; learn about chaos theory. I’m still in the Chaos group, too, regularly counting my blessings as I not only see computer screens full of new worlds of mathematical art and hear Nobel laureates and other pioneers, in person, but also converse with people who have become local experts called on by our Science Museum. Even I have published on this subject I intended to “audit.”

Joins the MISF Board

I next joined the MISF Board and became really active. There has been much hard-won progress in bylaws and 501 (c)3 registration and bulk-mailing and networking rosters, library privileges and interfaces, and co-sponsorship with many other groups to whom we are now a presence. Through it all, our newsletter has become quarterly and attracts hard work from editors, designers, and fundraisers. (I would love to see it become a full journal with original articles, but for now it would be great to get more submissions from members.) Our programs have sometimes managed to be monthly and are always fascinating and unique. (Where would Minnesota be, if no one presented these unique facets?) I learned that we are one of eight such organizations in the U.S. (the largest, most active, most diverse—arts, sciences, and social sciences—and most accessible; the only group between Yale and L.A.—and that a “national organization publishes a newsletter out of Berkeley.”) I learned that we have a dynamic and unique perspective on the definition of independent scholarship, one that differs from that in a published study of “independent scholars”; the latter would acknowledge few of our members and little of our broader implications for study itself.

But our work has just begun. We have a copy machine and a scanner; we borrow a phone and an address; but we have no space for members to use equipment, meet or study. Co-sponsors, grants, and friends have donated for our programs, our early awards, and our newsletters, but we have not yet mounted concerted financing efforts and are just beginning to explore possibilities for assiitng members to get research funds, exchange information (both in person and in print and on-line), and present their findings (so far, mostly in public programs.) Needs range from the simple (copy paper, volunteers to phone about upcoming programs scheduled) to the complex (fundraising, office and meeting spaces) and we need your input.

Call a board member—regularly.

* * *

With this article, we begin a new series on the meaning of MISF.
Ginny Hansen is self-employed as an editor and medical writer. —Editors

* * *
Annual Meeting: Committee Reports and Election of Board Members

President David Wiggins opened the annual meeting of MISF by welcoming the nearly forty members in attendance at the American Indian Center in Minneapolis on November 16, 1992. Wiggins reported that while the Forum has experienced some growing pains over the past year, he was happy to announce that, thanks to hard working board and committee members, MISF now has a Five Year Plan. Some of the highlights of the plan include seeking outside funding, finding office space and hiring a part-time staff employee.

Forum Treasurer David Megarry distributed the financial report. As of November 15, year-to-date membership revenue totaled $1174; donations $35. Total funds available as of November 15 were $2413.83; total expenses were $1927.48. Ending cash on November 15, 1991, was $486.35.

David Wiggins announced the retirement of board members John Carmichael and Jeffrey Hess. He then presented the nominee slate for 1992 board membership:

David Wiggins: President
Laura Weber: Vice President
David Megarry: Treasurer
Gabrielle Rose: Secretary
Ramona Asher
Lucy Brusic
Jane Cunningham
Janis Dees
Ginny Hansen
David Juncker
Jill Waterhouse

Susan Smith: Chair of the Board of Advisors

This slate was approved unanimously by the membership.

Each of the committees had an opportunity to address the membership. David Juncker and

Who's New on the MISF Board

Janis Dees of Minneapolis is an educator who creatively uses her expertise and skill as a pianist, a musician and a historian to reach diverse audiences with the message that music, history and story telling are not only compatible, but fun! Janis has designed her programs to appeal to musical novices and connoisseurs alike, as well as the young and restless, and the rapidly growing senior market. Janis Dees, pianist, historian, editor, writer, educator and new friend is a welcome addition to the MISF Board.

Jane Cunningham and her trusty dog moved to Minneapolis in 1987, following studies at Grinnell and George Washington University. Jane's research interests have been focused on a synthesis of American culture and the aged. After working freelance on educational programs for nursing homes and an oral history project, she has taken the position of grants administrator and projects manager with the Minnesota Humanities Commission. We welcome Jane to the Board.

Lucy Brusic delivered the newsletter report and called for members to send in articles and information about themselves and their achievements. Curt Hillstrom of the Fundraising and Membership Committee said that he would like to see this committee break into two committees and asked for volunteers to fill both groups. Laura Weber of the Program Committee also requested volunteers for her committee and invited members to present their research as program ideas. Speaking for the Grants Committee, Ramona Asher said the committee is investigating the possibility that the MISF could act as fiscal agent for members. She also stressed how important it is that members complete and return in-kind donation reports. These help the Forum in getting grants and matching funds, since funders look kindly on organizations that help themselves!

Susan Smith asked members to call her and let her know about their work in progress, so that she can tell potential Board of Advisor candidates about our organization and the accomplishments of our members.

Directory of MISF Study Groups

Active:

18th/19th Century S.G.
Joyce Fullard: 333-4605

Patterns in Women & Spirituality
Susan Smith: 871-1125

Chaos S.G.
Dave Megarry: 825-3992

Intercultural Diversity
Lucy Smith: 698-9671

Science & Humanities
Huldah Curl: 926-5988

Currently Inactive:

Art Historians—S.G.
International Feminism—S.G.
Philosophy and Cultural Criticism—S.G.
Social History—S.G.
Family History—S.G.
Writing Support for Women
Carol Bly, Minnesota story writer, in her recent work *The Passionate, Accurate Story,* lists two disciplines that every author must have—first, determination not to be embittered and second, use of language of consequence. To be passionate and accurate, a writer must hold onto deeply felt values without denying the existence of evil and anything else that may challenge those values. Bly advocates that the author make a conscious list of values that are passionately held to be referred to during the course of the story writing. These values can be expected to vary from story to story.

Each of these authors has been gripped by a subject, as any person has been at several points in life. What is different—what makes them writers—is that they have worked at describing, shaping, rendering their passions. HowardNorman says “A writer’s job is to write as well as he or she can.” His translations from the Inuit language were all checked by bilingual speakers, but “how good a writer you are in English is what counts.”

Bly describes many layers of revisions and drafts that a short story goes through to make it a finished work. In her description, it is as though the first draft is like brush that must be cleared away to make room for a more accurate, more precise use of language.

Olson does not discuss how to write. His work, however, was thoroughly and superbly edited by his wife, Elizabeth. Because of her attention, Olson's work rises above its context. The use of language and image could almost be described as “pointillist.”

*Trees of the forest have many strange associations. Cedars and birches grow together, and seem to have an affinity for each other with the same ecological requirements; no doubt born through the alchemy of fires which swept through the country during seasons of drought, their partnership is a unique one.*

In every case, the authors have been overtaken by something that they care about so deeply that everything else seems to stop. But putting passion on paper is work. I like Valerie Milner's description of writing as “creative labor,” for surely, writing as described by Howard Norm and Carol Bly and as practiced by Sigurd Olson (and by many MISF scholars) is indeed not magic, but hard work, albeit, in some cases, also “a labor of love.”

What makes them writers is that they have worked at describing, shaping...their passions.

And in the end, those of us who write for love rather than fame might draw gentle comfort from Howard Norm's story of a postage stamp artist he met in Saskatchewan. Although her work had never been used by the Canadian government, she could look at it and say “Obscurity is not necessarily failure.” It seems to me that every writer (we know who we are) can understand what she is saying.

Lucy Brusie

1 Valerie Miner, “Rumors from the Cauldron: Selected Essays, Reviews and Reportage” (Univ. of Michigan paper, quoted in NYT Book Review, 1/18/92, p. 31)
2 Sigurd F. Olson’s Wilderness Days, p. xv
3 Sigurd F. Olson, Of Time and Place, p. 15.
4 Ibid., p. 61

Speechless (continued from page 3)

have self-appointed apologists and sycophants, the William Safires and Ayn Rands, but to imagine these men as even remotely approachable is cruel illusion. And yet to grant them immutable power—to see them as omnipotent and permanent, is equally absurd. It is true that this elite is dynastic—one can only join by being born unto them—but why should we flatter them by trying to swell the ranks of these gross parodies of Olympian godheads? Personally, I have no desire, especially as a member of the Woman-race, to join these fatuous oppressors in the governing class...

I realize that I am defining my voice in terms of negatives—I am defining what I am not. Though of Euro-American descent, I am no standard bearer for the power elite nor am I ashamed of being an Irish-German-French intercontinental mutt. Yet when listening for my true voice, I found that I was so close to the mainstream that I was nearly drowned in its current...

At first I was afraid, until I realized that I am in the mainstream, as most of us are! The very metaphor implies that which is comprised of the vast collection of the many.

It is not a matter of joining the mainstream—we are the mainstream. Rather it is a matter of getting out of the mainstream—leaping like a salmon out of the water long enough to hear one’s own voice. One must hear and know oneself—delineate oneself from the teeming mass of people-fish all trying to scuttle to this nasty top. And this is my task now—to define myself in positive terms that reflect my identity and my background....

Gabrielle Rose

*We thank the author for giving us permission to edit this speech for publication. Editors’ Note*
Honors
Forum member Lucy Smith has been notified by the International Society for Intercultural Education, Training & Research that her proposal for a presentation on "Process of Cultural Transformation: How to Build Bridges over the Generation and Other Gaps" has been accepted for the 1992 conference. The conference will take place in Jamaica in May. Smith is now seeking funding to defray the cost of the airfare so that she can accept this prestigious invitation. If you can help, call her at 698-9671.

From the December 25 1991, Twin Cities Reader, "Best of Art in 1991" by J. Arginteanu: "Visual Art: Body/Language" at Intermedia Art Gallery in Minneapolis by sculptor by Jill Waterhouse and poet Morgan Grayce Willow (both MISF members) was described as "one of the best exhibitions in 1991." The project was the culmination of a three-year collaboration between Waterhouse and Willow.

Publications
A book by Ramona Asher, Women with Alcoholic Husbands, is scheduled for publication in April. Asher is a sociologist, an independent scholar, and a consultant. Her book is based on interviews with fifty women participating in family treatment programs.

Call for papers
The American Medical Writers Association has issued a call for papers for their annual conference in Houston, in November 1992. Papers might consider, but are not limited to: How can medical communicators educate themselves to best inform? What steps can ensure that information conveyed is accurate, not misleading? Abstracts must be submitted by Friday May 1, 1992. Previously published work is not acceptable. Forms available from Ginny Hansen, 374-5505.

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Mpls, MN, 55417

-7-
The Last Word

It was a cold and misty day...

Snoopy?
by: Dr. "J"

It's cold and dark outside, and as spring approaches, we must still pass through that additional, annual, DAMP stage. Spirits tend to sink and tempers often shorten... It's time to employ the MISF scholar's secret weapon. Get outside, and find a way to "Practice RANDOM Kindness and SENSELESS Acts of Beauty." This underground slogan is sweeping the continent. It deserves consideration—and, if you agree, action!

On a crisp winter day in San Francisco, a woman in a red Honda drives up to the Bay Bridge tollbooth. Handing over seven commuter tickets, she says with a smile, "I'm paying for myself, and for the six cars behind me." In Chicago, a teenage boy is shoveling his walk when the impulse strikes. What the hell, nobody's looking, he thinks, and shovels the neighbor's walk too.

Think of it—guerrilla goodness, positive anarchy, a timely application of Chaos theory!

In Atlanta, a man scrubs graffiti from a green park bench. In Minnesota, a woman is seen planting flowers along the highway. Senseless acts of beauty!

In the Chaos study group we've spent time trying to understand the "butterfly" effect, where the actions and movement of a single butterfly can change weather patterns over an entire continent.

Complex ends—from small, simple acts.

Look carefully. Practicing this new, yet ancient, slogan has exactly the same potential. As with chaos, guerrilla goodness and revolutions begin slowly, with single, seemingly random, acts. The resulting impact may reach far beyond our wildest dreams. The act may also go nowhere else but where we perform it—yet committing any act of random kindness leaves one with a bit of a smile and perhaps a slight lightening of personal troubles. Not bad odds for damp, cold and dark times.

The Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum
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