Instructor's Manual

for

"Stepping On My Brother's Head" and Other Secrets Your English Professor Never Told You

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Contents

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Introduction

"Stepping On My Brother's Head" and Other Secrets Your English Professor Never Told You offers twelve essays by experienced teachers of college composition. Each essay reveals a truth never before told or explores a mystery that has intrigued the writer for most of his or her life. We think of these essays as offering models of fine prose style, and we hope they bring you and your students pleasure when reading them. Of course, as teachers of writing ourselves, we also hope they inspire your students to explore their pasts, their identities, and their untold stories in new and surprising ways. Reading nourishes writing, which invites more reading, which one hopes leads to more writing—the circle ever widens. Our hope in putting this book together was to provide essays that students would enjoy reading and which would motivate and encourage them to become writers themselves.

You can teach the essays in various ways and in various sequences. We have placed them in an order that makes sense to us, an order that we discussed for quite some time and successively tinkered with until we felt comfortable with how one essay followed another. Of course, you do not have to abide by our decision: the essays in this book can be read in any order you like as you pick and choose the styles, tones, and experiences that most speak to you or fit with your sense of your students and your purpose.

We decided to open the book with essays that had strong comic elements and a bit of the absurd. Both Charles Schuster and Lad Tobin are good at poking fun at themselves. We hope their contributions bring a welcoming energy to your writing class, especially in the beginning of the term, and that they make you and your students laugh out loud, as we did when reading them.

The next two essays by Mary Pinard and Lynn Bloom explore two different elements, air and water, elements that enter into how the authors think about themselves and their relationships. Both women write about taking risks as athletes, the dangers that lurk in seemingly safe places, and the pleasures they find in accomplishment.

Next are two different essays on schooling and the nature of intelligence. Both Jenny Spinner and Bruce Ballenger write of challenges they faced and doubts they had to confront because they did not feel smart enough and questioned their own ability to succeed at educational challenges. We think many students will relate to the doubts and honest self-appraisals that lie at the heart of these confessional works.

These six essays, taken together, focus on the individual experiences of the writers as they explore particular aspects of their lives. Although other people play important roles in their stories, the primary focus in each essay is on the writer's own actions, thoughts, perceptions, or feelings.

The next six essays move outward and become increasingly serious in tone. In these, the focus tends to be on the lives of others, the secrets revealed shedding as much light on family members and loved ones as on the writers themselves.

Harriet Malinowitz explores the journey she took to discover a loving relationship with another person; Janet Eldred explores the intricacies of parenting adopted sons and her own ambivalence about the meaning of heritage. Mimi Schwartz discovers she can understand her father's past by listening to the stories of a woman who grew up in the small town where he grew up; Mike Rose reaches back in time to understand his own past by revisiting his family's stories and the town in which he grew up. Rebecca Faery speculates on the mystery of her great-grandmother Ella and explores the legacy that is hers today; and Sondra Perl reveals family secrets that emerged in poems she wrote and kept hidden for many years.

Taken together, these six essays look at issues related to identity in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual preference. Many of these themes are skillfully woven into the narratives and serve as the backdrop for the revealing of secrets.

But we don't want our thinking to be the only one offered in this Instructor's Manual. Since our contributors are all wonderful teachers of writing, we asked them to write about how and why they composed their pieces, what decisions they made, how they solved composing dilemmas, and what advice they would give to faculty who would be teaching their essays.

What follows, then, are twelve short pieces by our contributors, each of which responds in different ways to the above invitation. Some talk about what writing means to them in their lives (Eldred, Schuster) or what writing this particular account means to them today (Faery, Rose). Some describe their search for the right topic and the composing decisions they made along the way concerning style and tone (Bloom, Pinard, Schuster, Tobin). Others concentrate more on specific issues regarding revision (Ballenger, Eldred). Several write about the need to include research to flesh out their stories (Ballenger, Pinard, Schuster, Tobin). Many write about the ethics of writing about others (Bloom, Eldred, Faery, Spinner). And others focus on suggestions for how teachers might use their essays in the classroom (Ballenger, Malinowitz, Perl, Rose, Schwartz, and Tobin).

In all, we think these pieces reveal another aspect of our contributors' voices as they reflect on what it was like for them to reveal their secrets. We hope you find them useful and enjoyable.

Bruce Ballenger
Theories of Intelligence

I imagine two kinds of writing that I am called upon to do as a writer: work where I pretty much know what I want to say before I say it and work that is largely motivated by the desire to figure something out. These "closed" or "open" forms sometimes merge with each other, often unexpectedly, but for the most part when I write, say, a memo to my colleagues about a new course we should add to the curriculum, I am writing down what I've already figured out. The essay, an "open" form, is different. When I sit down to write an essay, my motive is to attempt to clear up some confusion, to sort out some intellectual or personal mess. I write to find out what I think. And I am often surprised by what I say, and this, to me, is the best reward for the hard work of writing.

I could not have written "Theories of Intelligence" as anything but an essay. If I had to write an argument, I would have chosen a different subject. I began this topic with no idea what I wanted to say, no claims I wanted to make, no evidence I wanted to present. "Theories" began with a question, not an answer: Why have I struggled most of my life to feel smart despite the evidence that this is not something I should worry about? I teach the essay genre not because I'm an E. B. White or a Joan Didion fan but because it promotes a method of thinking that I think is valuable: inquiry.

Many writing assignments, while valuable, signal to student writers that the purposes of a piece are always predetermined, the thesis carved from stone, and unflinching certainty the highest value. I can think of situations in which this approach is very sensible, like essay exams or proposals. Yet if our goal is to teach writing as a mode of thinking, then we should make room for more open forms like the essay that are much more like the scholarship we do: We begin with questions or problems and in the process of working them out accept that ambiguity and uncertainty are not only normal but necessary conditions for discovery.

"Theories of Intelligence" was filled with discoveries for me, and some of these were not just the result of the writing—which began in the journal, then later became a collage sketch, and finally ended, four drafts later, when I was satisfied that I understood more about the topic than when I started. These discoveries, however, didn't just come from the writing. They came from research, too, and I would point out to students how, in some respects, "Theories of Intelligence" is a kind of research paper except it doesn't read like one. Essays like these can be useful arguments against the notion that a research paper is one thing only; more importantly, they demonstrate that research isn't a thing at all, but a source of information that helps writers explore questions that interest them.

The process of writing this essay (and any other) thrives on the tension between the sloppy, creative, and open-ended work I do in my journal and the more crafted work I do on the computer. It's a continual back and forth between the two. I'll write in the journal until I feel moved to work at the keyboard, and then return to the journal whenever I need to think some more about what to say next. The first draft of "Theories of Intelligence" I shared with my students was a sketch—a collage of three scenes that prefaced a series of writing prompts that I hoped would inspire my students to explore their own questions about the topic. This is what the collage looked like:

Theories of Intelligence

1. In 1965, I moved from green to orange in the SRA reading packet but never moved again. In those days, orangeness was a sign of mediocrity. The shame of never busting through orange to blue, the color Jeff Brickman, Mark Levy, and Betsy Cochran seemed to achieve with such ease quite naturally, made it easy to convince me that reading and writing were just not my thing. From then on, I hated English (a feeling I freely shared on the inside covers of my class yearbooks), except the time we studied the lyrics of Paul Simon's "Sounds of Silence." I was a high school sophomore, and while I would sometimes, in my own way, think deeply on things, I was attached more to *the idea* of thinking deeply on things, usually expressed in the ponderous and self-consciously deep lyrics of early Simon and Garfunkel. To think deeply, I thought, was to be deep.

2. My high school girlfriend, Jan, called one day after our first year at separate colleges to tell me that she could no longer see me because she met someone named Peter. Peter studied peregrine falcons. Jan studied genetics. I studied biology with the vague interest I see often in the college freshmen I teach. Several years ago, I heard from a mutual friend that Jan and Peter are divorced, and Jan is now a geneticist, running a nonprofit environmental group in Fairbanks, Alaska. Peregrine falcons are, apparently, on the rebound, and perhaps Peter had something to do with that. I sometimes wonder if I might have saved a bird from extinction, a redwood from the saw, a rare bog plant from the bulldozer had I somehow known as a college freshman what exactly I wanted to do, to be, to learn. Though I did, once, manage to save a marriage.

3. I went to a talk the other day by a woman who urged a room full of college professors to get their writing students to play with Legos. She also said students should "choreograph" their essays, and then she read aloud from a piece about meditation, taking several steps forward as the piece advanced a thought, and several steps to the side as the essay shifted to a new idea, and a step back as it offered up a contradiction. Some students, she said, learn best using "spatial kinesthetic intelligence"—touching things and walking and generally moving through space, dancing to the logic of their drafts. A colleague sitting next to me whispered that her son uses the technique. "Just the other day he was wandering around through the house waving a half-eaten pizza muttering to himself," she said. "We told him to go to his room and get to work on his research paper. He said he was working on it." I have never been a particularly good dancer, but I often hear music in words, and

> tonight I might see if I can find a waltz in E. B. White or a pas de deux in Didion. And perhaps I will feed a fantasy of dancing gracefully through the English classes in my past, braving a blizzard of shredded pages.

As you may see, the final version in *Stepping On My Brother's Head* incorporated two of the three segments, and each was buried deep in the essay, assuming much less importance. I'm a huge fan of the collage or segmented essay and mostly as a wonderful method of invention. Students often struggle in narrative to go beyond telling one story, even if the idea they're exploring is relevant to others in their lives. Ask students to take a theme, like intelligence, fear, or infatuation, and then prompt them to write three separate segments on the theme in one sitting. Tell them to tentatively title the work, "Intelligence: Three Examples," or "Fear: Three Examples." Each segment, while related thematically, will likely be very different, drawing from a range of times and places in the writer's life. Jammed together, this noncontinuous material often throws sparks that makes the theme come alive in fresh ways.

Should you teach this essay to encourage students to tackle the theme of intelligence, here are some of the prompts I've used to get them started, usually in their journals:

- Make a list of all the teachers you've known. Choose one and write about a moment, situation, scene, conversation, or time you associate with that teacher.
- Make a list of classes you remember most. Use that as a prompt for a fastwrite.
- Make a list of what you would consider "turning points" in your experience as a student or learner, or your attitudes toward school.
- Make a list of words you associate with "student." With "teacher." With "education." Choose a word and fastwrite about a moment, situation, or scene that you recall that attaches itself to that word in your mind.
- Brainstorm a list of moments that you associate with high school. Then a list of names. Choose one as a prompt and write your way back into that time in your life.
- Describe yourself as a student in the words of your father. Of your mother. Of one of your teachers. Then describe yourself.
- What period in your life were you the "best" student? The "worst" student? Write about one or both.
- What do you consider your greatest "failure" as a student? Your greatest "success"? Go back to that time and see what you find. Or, what was your "best" year as a student? Your "worst"? Describe that year by beginning with a moment you remember.
- Why are you in college?
- Describe in detail someone you went to school with at any point in your life who you considered a "model" student, or a student who modeled how *not* to be a student.
- Think about your own family's attitude toward learning and school. Fastwrite about a moment that seems telling about their attitude. Then write about another moment.
- Imagine your high school yearbook picture. Use it as a prompt to explore that time in your life.

Lynn Z. Bloom

Surfacing: Secrets of the Women's Locker Room

Suggestions for Teaching "Surfacing: Secrets of the Women's Locker Room," in the Form of a Self-Interview

As a textbook author myself, I'm modeling these ten questions and answers (ten is enough!) on the usual Instructor's Guide format. Thus the first four questions address the usual rhetorical concerns, and provide unusual answers to matters of the title and its tone; the topic(s), and nature of a thesis. The next five questions—several asked in my mother's voice, representing tradition and conventional mores—pertain to telling secrets as an author and as a teacher. The ethical considerations involved in teaching lead naturally to the last question, on the ethics of quoting one's own work.

Q: Explain the significance, meaning of the essay's title, "Surfacing: Secrets of the Women's Locker Room."

Lynn: I always try for titles with multiple meanings, and "Surfacing" strikes me as exactly right—both on the surface, and below the depths. The essay dives deep, then deeper, and still deeper, over and over again, and always brings new meanings to the surface. Yet I am a cheerful person with a positive view of life; no one will drown on my watch, including myself.

Q (an aside): How can you justify using a pun, especially in the title? Don't puns add an inappropriate note of frivolity to serious writing?

Lynn: Of course I like puns; what writer doesn't? It's only the bad puns that give puns a bad name ("I wanted to exercise last night but it just didn't work out"). Good puns are often the basis of profound understanding that combines the literal with the figurative; they enhance substance, style, and tone, as all great poets know. Think of the refrain in John Donne's famous "A Hymn to God the Father": "When thou hast done, thou has not done. . . ."

Q: What's the *topic* of this essay? What's its *focus*? Identify several of its major themes.

Lynn: I see the topic of this essay as the development of a community over time, a fluid (if the pun fits, use it!) group of women of all ages, sizes, shapes, ethnicities, backgrounds, brought together by a common value—the importance of exercise. These are the regulars, who include exercise in their daily lives—for pleasure, recreation, stress relief, physical conditioning. Some people are swimming for their very lives. Although marathoners and the

occasional Olympic aspirant show up, the atmosphere is friendly, supportive, not competitive except when the high school girls' swim team is primed for a meet. The locker room is the matrix where everyone meets; many, over time, become good friends, even though we don't see each other often outside the gym. (When we do, of course, the invariable greeting is, "What a surprise to see you with clothes on!") The primary focus is on the interaction among the people, made possible by the setting. Its subtext involves the importance of regular exercise, the maintenance of good health, and the energizing effect of the conversations. "Surfacing" also addresses the precariousness, as well as the pleasures, of life itself, through anatomizing (aha! another pun) our vulnerability to chance events. The essay illustrates the significance of telling secrets.

This essay took a long time to write, about ten years of adding bits and pieces in an organizational pattern intended to recreate the fluidity of the locker room ambience. The climax at the end came late in the writing process—a decision to disclose the biggest secret of all in a book about secrets. During this time, some of the regulars have become mortally ill, or disappeared without a trace—Did they move? Die? I don't know, but I have chosen to exclude some of this information in order to maintain the primary focus. This is a collective biography of a sort, and it's not necessary to keep all the details up-to-date.

Q: Most advice on writing tells students to have a clear thesis and to put it right upfront at the beginning of their essay. Yet "Surfacing" does not have an overt thesis; is one implied?

Lynn: Writings focusing on slice-of-life, capturing an experience, description, mood, atmosphere, don't necessarily have a thesis. Nor do most good novels, except in the most generic sense ("War is hell." "Love is grand."). In this kind of piece, as here in "Surfacing," a thesis would reduce the total experience to a banal statement, "There is a real, though fluid, community among the diverse women users of the locker room at the community center." Excuse me, I have to interrupt this to go to the gym. Stay tuned.

[OK, I'm back.] Q: Why don't you consider avoidance of rapists as either a thesis or a focal point?

Lynn: The attempted rape and escape provide a dramatic climax to the many stories nested within this essay, and a counterpoint in tone and orientation. The rape episode is but one aspect of the main topic, not its whole point.

Lynn's mother (though five years dead), interrupting: Have you no sense of shame? No pride? How can you discuss rape, the most secret situation of all?

Lynn: Well, Mom, it wasn't my fault. For a while I was embarrassed to acknowledge that this had happened, too defensive, too explanatory. But I got over it. I personally did not provoke this assault. Any other woman who happened to be in that place, vulnerable and alone, could have been attacked just as I was. In fact, I'm glad it was I who went into the locker room, and not the little girl across the hall in the Stockholm youth hostel where we were staying on that dark and stormy night.

Mom: You—and all those other people—actually appear naked throughout this essay. How dare you?

Lynn: Aw, Mom. . . . The readers can't see us. The descriptions are discreet, there's no salacious language. In locker rooms a variety of secrets are disclosed as well as revealed; some about bodies, many are not. I started to say, "If nakedness bothers the readers they should just turn off their imaginations," but I've changed my mind. Everyone needs to confront the possibility of all the phenomena raised here—cancer, disability, rape—in the open, unadorned. The nakedness of the issues, not of the bodies, should be what's unsettling.

Mom: Well, have it your way. . . . Your hair's still wet from the gym. I've told you and told you not to go out with a wet head, you'll catch your death of cold. [vanishes]

Q: Isn't telling secrets automatically and necessarily confessional writing?

Lynn: No, personal writing, even writing that tells secrets, is neither automatically nor necessarily confessional. I do not consider my writing confessional, since I maintain tight control of subject, style, interpretation. Enough time has elapsed since the events occurred so I can render them artistically rather than in an emotional gush. I'm not trying to evoke pity or even sympathy, though I do want to tell a human story.

Q: How, ethically, can you ask students to tell secrets? Won't they think you're grading their lives rather than their writing?

Lynn: I do not tell personal stories to students to elicit reciprocal stories from them, and I never require confessional writing from students. Although I often assign autobiographical papers (in order, for instance, to reinforce the point in a course in "Coming of Age in American Autobiography"—"Write about a significant event/person/understanding that helped you come of age"), I always allow the students to choose any topic they wish. They don't have to let anyone (except me) see their paper unless they want to. My students always experiment in all the literary genres they read, but I am ever mindful—and I make it clear to the students—that I am a writing teacher, not a therapist practicing without a license.

That said, I find that students, like all autobiographers, often write about subjects that don't make sense in order to understand the topic, and themselves, better. They have a powerful incentive to keep writing in order to do this.

Q: One last question. You have told the story of "escaping the rapist" before, as the climactic incident in "Teaching College English as a Woman" (*College English,* Nov. 1992, 824–25). Since it's already been published, what right do you have to tell it again here?

Lynn: It's my story and I can tell it anywhere I want to, the same as Bach, and Mozart, and Beethoven (to name only a few) could repeat motifs and sequences in their music—theme and infinite variations. In "Surfacing," although many (not all) of the words are different, the narrative is essentially the same as in the earlier version. That's the way the event happened. But

because I'm using it in a very different literary context from the *College English* essay, it has different overtones, different resonance than in its original context.

Twenty years ago my husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor, thought to be malignant. That the pathology report revealed it to be the most benign and most rare of all the possibilities changed our lives—and not incidentally, freed me up to write personal essays. With life and death in the balance, I had enough courage—finally—to speak in my own voice about subjects that really mattered. Martin says I have no scruples about killing him off to tell a good story. As long as I can, indeed, revive him, it's a story I'm delighted to tell.

Janet Eldred
The Time of Lies

For a long time, I resisted writing essays, or at least publishing them. I wrote them in my head all the time, but I felt queasy about putting them on paper. I felt somehow that they were a guilty pleasure, not quite real work, neither scholarly nor literary. Sure, an essay was more respectable than keeping a diary or journal, but just barely. It seemed an aspiration I didn't quite deserve. Montaigne wrote essays. E. B. White wrote essays. Famous people wrote essays. Someone who grew up in the San Joaquin Valley in California just didn't.

That attitude changed when I spent a year as a visiting professor at Berea College, a small, work-study school in Berea, Kentucky. Berea valued labor, it valued the first-generation college student, and it valued the lived experience of individuals and communities, no matter how small or insignificant they felt or had been made to feel. I joined a faculty writing group, and having actually written an essay, I grew bold enough to publish it in a small literary journal.

Now I alternate between writing essays and research articles. Sometimes I create hybrids, marrying the two forms. This is harder, both in terms of writing and publishing, but for me that form is the most rewarding. "The Time of Lies" in its current form is an essay, but I imagine someday it might grow into a hybrid, since it suggests several avenues of research: adoption research in psychology or in the social sciences, educational studies of adolescents, histories and cultural studies of place (far-northern Russia, the Azores).

In many ways, "The Time of Lies" reflects my customary writing process. I generally start off by writing the narrative section, and then my academic self kicks in and raises academic-type questions. Common pedagogical wisdom dictates that fictional stories depend on "showing" and "suggesting," rather than overt telling or arguing. By temperament, I'm generally not inclined to conventional wisdom. Illustrative example: I just turned fifty and pierced my nose to celebrate, an act my son William said "disgraded" me. Apparently, no single word exists in the English language to describe his feelings, so he had to conjoin two to convey his horror. But I digress, as essayists often do. We wander about without an outline, explore ideas, try out the sounds of words. That's one of the beauties of the form. Another is that the essay allows one to both subtly show and overtly tell. Once could even argue that a good essay makes a case for its relevance. This is not the same as saying that every essay has an explicit thesis statement. Many essays do not; instead, they rely on the strong inferential skills of readers. Take E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake." One time, a teacher was complaining that "students these days" couldn't locate the thesis statement in that classic essay. I couldn't restrain myself; I had to ask, "Where exactly is *the* thesis statement in that essay? And at what golden moment in history could students find it?"

He couldn't point to either. He could, however, muddle through the themes in the work, themes that make that essay something other than a "my summer vacation" piece. It's that "something else" that makes an essay. If "The Time of Lies" is no more than (a) a rant against teenagers these days, my son in particular, or (b) an account of adoption, or (c) a description of a conflict between a parent and a child, then it fails. I hope it suggests "something else," that it raises bigger questions, even if it can't answer them, even if I don't place a tidy thesis at the end of my first paragraph that spells out exactly what the argument is.

Sometimes, I rely on the kindness of friends to find that "something else." My working title for this piece was "Diasporic Orphans." Then it morphed into "Heritage 101." Once I had a draft of the essay, I showed it to one of my "first readers." In this case it was my friend Dee Snow, a scientist who does spinal cord and brain injury research, a professor, a mother, an avid reader, and a closet writer. She waded through the first draft, which was considerably different than the final version. I was unhappy with my introduction (it was, by the way, my third introduction—I had already scrapped the first two). Dee said something like, "I like the line about the 'time of lies.' That grabs me. Maybe that could be your introduction." I wasn't certain that could work, but I was willing to try and found that it worked better than the other three I had tried. Eventually, I decided to make it my title.

Once I had the introduction decided on, I went back and looked for sections, for logical movements in the piece. I draft without headings, but then I go back through and try to separate my ramblings into coherent chunks. In the discovery process, I want the piece to wander where it will, I want my thoughts to expand, I want to be surprised by them. But at some point, I have to offer for my readers a more organized pathway. I worry sometimes that this makes my essays "choppy" or "jumpy," but I accept that as part of my messy process.

None of the above concerns about technique, however, get to the nerve center of essay writing, particularly "personal" essay writing: When we write personal essays, they are rarely just about us. Our personalities and lives are shaped by living with, rubbing against others. So I worry about whether I'm ethical in my treatment of others. In "The Time of Lies," my son is a major character, so I had to worry about presenting his life. I had to ask the big question: to write or not to write? In this case, I asked his permission. He didn't particularly seem interested in the question. Clear sailing, right? Full speed ahead! But not so fast. Does his tacit permission really count as permission? Might he not, and with good cause, change his mind next year, or the year after? These are the same kinds of issues that come up when we research human subjects for medicine or psychology or social work or law. What gives us the right to tell someone else's story? And if we do assume the right, shouldn't there be safeguards?

Some creative writers feel that worrying too much about ethical treatments of subjects will stifle creativity. Journalists, who work by a well-defined professional code of ethics, feel a commitment to truth, even if at the expense of an individual who is, say, a cheat and a crook. Essay writers have to find their own ethical lines. I like to think about how I can use ethical quandaries to make a piece more creative. I find that it stretches my imagination to try to inhabit, generously, another person's point of view, to remind myself that there are different ways of viewing the same situation. At the very least, when representing a conflict, I try to make both parties seem wrongheaded, or to show that both have good intentions.

Still, even when I'm trying to be generous with another person's perspective, I don't want to present someone else's views as a given, like I'm some omniscient narrator who can see into someone else's mind and discern his or her true inner feelings. I simply can't, so I try to undercut my own viewpoint, a technique Philip Lopate suggests is crucial for an essayist. I also try to present dialogue without too much framing so that readers can hear both voices. I sometimes use imagined dialogue, offering that person/character the most generous interpretation possible. (For example, when I wrote about William's birth mother in another essay, I imagined her voice. I didn't do that here, but could have: "I imagine William saying . . .") Finally, I like to think that consideration of ethical responsibilities enhances rather than constrains creativity—that's a handy thesis statement, should you need one—that my essays are stronger when I take these ethical considerations seriously.

If I were to teach this essay, I would focus on the ethical implications of telling someone else's story, especially a child's story. Lynn Bloom, for example, feels comfortable writing about her husband and her parents, but judges her children "off-limits." Maybe that's the correct answer to this ethical quandary. At any rate, it's worth debate. Let's concede that any representation that falls into the category of "illegal" is wrong. Let's say, the writing is in legal territory: How might you react to having your life set on paper by someone else? Would you want the final edit? Should you have it? Do you owe others the same? If we allow such editing, can we get to the truth, the whole truth, the real truth, the unvarnished truth—pick your cliché—with this much authorial power handed over to the subject of a piece? Where's the line, or rather, where do you as a writer, decide to draw it? As essay writers, we have the obligation to think through these questions carefully. We must balance a trio of needs: the need of a writer to tell the truth as she or he sees it, the need of an audience to hear something thought-provoking and true, and the need of all-too-human subjects to have their lives represented fairly.

Rebecca Blevins Faery
Ella: Family Stories, Family Secrets

When I first thought of writing the story of Ella Seagroves Ragsdale, my great-grandmother, it was the early 1990s. My mother, who died in 2007 at age eighty-six, was then in her early seventies, still alert and interested enough to ask about and to read whatever I published. Though her grandfather, my great-grandfather, whom we all knew just as Grandpa, had never told her the story he had told me about his having found Ella in the "dowdy house," I had told her the story myself after Grandpa's death. I told her that I was thinking of including Ella's story in a book I was writing on captivities—Ella's story had always seemed to me to be one about a woman who kicked over the traces and escaped, though from what exactly I wasn't sure. I began to write the essay.

It has taken me many years to realize that my mother's driving force was to achieve respectability, in all the ways that term was defined in the small southwest Virginia town where I grew up. And given her family background, who could blame her? I should not have been surprised, and I am not exaggerating when I say, that my telling my mother I was going to write and publish Ella's story resulted in one of her fits—they happened rarely, making them all the more dramatic—and she hounded me relentlessly until I agreed that I would leave Ella out of the book. And I did.

About a year ago, the editors of this collection of essays invited me to submit a piece for the book. I had ideas for several possible pieces, but then Ella reasserted herself, and this time she wouldn't let go. I was finally going to tell her story. By then my mother had turned eighty-six, was living in an assisted living facility, and was beyond asking me what I was writing or being able to read anything I wrote. I felt safe in offering Ella's story for the book. Two months after I agreed to do so, my mother died.

I offer this background to illustrate the risks every writer takes in writing about family histories, family stories. Especially those of us who work in the genre of essay or creative nonfiction take a great risk. I read somewhere recently that Faulkner once said that all writers would rob their mothers for a good story. Maybe he was speaking for himself; certainly he had a lot of good stories, but I hope he didn't have to rob his mother for them. I certainly was not willing to betray my mother for the sake of the story, however insistent it was to be told. At least for as long as *my* doing so had the power to wound her. Now it no longer does, and I am free to tell it.

Writers of essays, creative nonfiction, learn quickly that their work must be wrought of the material of their lives. And stories are a vivid part of that material—true stories that are also histories and that become myths or icons of meaning for the writer and often for readers as well. We hunger for the stories of others' experiences, in part to find kinship with them, in part to learn about the experiences of people whose lives are radically different from our own.

Among the first questions likely to arise when "Ella: Family Stories, Family Secrets" is read and discussed is the inevitable breach of family confidentiality it represents. This is an issue that every writer of nonfiction faces. Most of us find most vivid and compelling the family stories that reveal conflicts, troubled relationships, violence, or shameful events. Even essays that are finally tributes, like Cynthia Ozick's tribute to her mother in "The Seam of the Snail" or Scott Russell Sanders' to his father in "The Inheritance of Tools," are complicated tributes to complex personalities. (How really complicated Sanders' father was we learn in another of his essays, "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze," an essay filled with shame and pity and rage in equal measures and published the same year as "The Inheritance of Tools.") What are our obligations to our families, to our various relatives—to keep secrets, or to reveal them in the service of telling the truth about things that matter to us and could matter to readers? Many times, over the years I've been teaching nonfiction writing, students have come to me struggling with that question. It's not an easy one to answer, and I won't offer an answer now, except to say that every writer must fashion an answer for herself or himself.

Another obvious question, and another possibility not only for class discussion but also for students to investigate in their own writing, is that of the situation of working-class women in the early twentieth century and the limitations on women's lives generally, then and now. I find that students mostly know little about the legal and social restrictions on women in the past and believe now that the issues that inspired the women's movement of the late 1960s and '70s are ancient history. Ella's story, and what I know of her experience, is a reminder of how little possibility for fulfillment existed in her lifetime for most women outside the domestic realm of marriage and children, and I hope my essay offers an occasion to reflect on how things have changed as well as how they have not.

Our choice to tell stories, or not to tell them, depends, it seems to me, on our reason for telling or not. In my case, excavating, even imaginatively, the possible explanations for Ella's leaving her child and husband very early in the twentieth century has a great deal of power to undo the myth of racial purity—specifically white racial purity—that has done so much damage, perpetrated so much violence, rent so terribly the social fabric of the nation throughout our history. "Protecting" the "chastity" of white women has been an alibi for violence against men of color since the beginnings of English colonization of North America in the seventeenth century. If a story that undermines the mythic unproblematic whiteness of my own family history can suggest to students that their own families could harbor similar stories and thus begin to challenge the complicated politics of racial identity in the United States, then it is worth telling. And for that reason I have chosen to tell it.

I like to think that teaching my family story might inspire teachers to encourage their students to do their own investigations into their families' racial histories and to tell the stories they

uncover, or at least to investigate the history as well as the contemporary realities of racial politics in the nation. Doing so will be further steps toward recognizing what we all have in common—our humanity—rather than the emphasis on racial categories and racial identities that has marred our history and brought so much shame on our country. Especially at this historical moment, when the nation has elected its first African American president—who is himself of mixed racial heritage—this issue seems not only relevant but essential to address.

E. B. White once wrote that "the one thing the essayist cannot do" is "indulge himself in deceit or concealment, for he will be found out in no time." While I think no practitioner of the essay genre would argue that our storytelling is limited to *fact*, it is equally the case that we must write in pursuit of *truth*. The distinction between fact and truth would be the subject of a longer conversation than is possible here. Perhaps that conversation might be provoked in the classroom by reading and talking about "Ella: Family Stories, Family Secrets."

Note: The essays referred to or quoted here are Cynthia Ozick, "The Seam of the Snail," from *Metaphor and Memory*, 1989; Scott Russell Sanders, "The Inheritance of Tools," from *The Paradise of Bombs*, 1987, and "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze," from *Harper's Magazine*, November 1987; E. B. White, "The Essayist and the Essay," from *Essays of E. B. White*, 1977.

Harriet Malinowitz

E-Love

This piece was originally written in 2002 for a conference on the teaching of writing whose theme was "Composing Identities." The essay was intended to be, therefore, not simply a girl-meets-girl story, but an examination of how one literally composes one's identity on email to a heretofore unmet "other" that matters. This is the abstract I submitted after being invited to speak on any relevant subject of my choice:

> Personal narrative and analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of falling in love, through words only, with someone you've never met. This particular story involves my eleven-year search for the pseudonymous author of an out-of-print Australian novel and what happened—personally, professionally, and literarily—when I finally found her.

I know that many in the audience, and many who read it later (an unpublished version was used in at least one college writing class, where the students subsequently discussed it online and I was invited to respond), were primarily drawn to the juiciness of the "story" itself and its relationship to an absorbing practice that became increasingly common in the years after I wrote it: online dating. For many, in fact, the opening section—before the "story" of encountering Kerryn's novel begins—did not appear to merit mention. (One pair of potential editors suggested I simply cut it and get straight to the point.)

However, for me, the *point* was nonexistent without the earlier material for context: Writers, like other artists, are often eccentric, unconventional, and/or socially maladapted. Until they find others like them, they are lonely. Everyone wants to be appreciated for who one is, to be able to "be oneself" in company. But people who are "different" (and I recognize that many people are "different" in many different ways) struggle more than others to negotiate the delicate balance between conformity for the sake of acceptance and contact, and the blissful relief that can come from accepting and inhabiting one's own skin. To have these goals coalesce in one happy result is something that can often be found only with a kindred spirit. Most people dream of finding a kindred spirit, a soul mate, but for some the odds of doing so are stiffer than for others. This is, I think, a common predicament to be found in any portrait of the artist as a young woman (or, perhaps, man).

I would hope, then, that a classroom discussion of "E-Love" would dwell on that key issue of the *identity* of the writer/artist that is the focus of the opening pages, in addition to the issues of Internet socializing that students are likely to focus on most energetically. In relation to this, the students could be asked whether they have ever met writers whose work they already liked,

and to what extent the writers did or didn't live up to their expectations. Do they *know* any writers? What are they like? Do they stand out in any way? Do the students in any ways *identify* with the psychological issues raised in the opening section? What does it mean to feel "different" from other people? Are some people more "different" from others, or is this "difference" just an awkward imagining almost everybody experiences?

The section about writing in autograph albums in the sixth grade and on the back of bulk-printed photographs in the ninth grade could lead to questions about the students' own experiences with these sorts of phenomena. Now, of course, students are used to writing to each other in online social networks, in emails, in instant messages, and in phone text messages. To what extent does one's individual personality come across in these sorts of messages? To what extent do these media invite or demand their own sorts of clichés? To what extent do students who use these media feel that they really present "themselves" in them, and to what extent do they feel that certain uses of language enable them to be social via these networks? Do graduating students still engage in the practices (that is, autograph albums, inscribed photos) described in "E-Love"—or some "new media" version of them? And to what extent *is* (or isn't) the narrator of "E-Love" like that "other" Harriet—that is, Harriet the Spy—who realized that her perceptions should be kept to herself if she wanted to have friends? (Many will have read this now-classic children's novel.)

What *is* the connection between writing and perceiving? (And the same for creating visual art, music, or other art forms.) Do people who work in the generative arts (e.g., writing, painting, musical composition, choreography) seem different from people who work in the interpretive arts (e.g., those who play instruments, act, dance—to scripts and scores that others have envisioned)? And are all of those people noticeably different in any ways from, say, engineers, accountants, and medical practitioners?

Some other questions that might emerge in a discussion of the essay:

- Why does the author fantasize about having conversations with Doris Lessing and Adrienne Rich? Is it true that what she seeks is not easily found in most communities? What does Malinowitz mean when she talks about the need to *be seen back or talked back to* as a writer? Why does Rich's remark at the literary benefit make the narrator feel, at long last, that she "exist[s]"?
- Have you ever felt a burning need to meet a writer whose work you've read? Or a movie star or sports or other "famous" figure whose persona you knew—or felt you knew—through their work rather than through direct interaction?
- Have you ever felt a desire to be famous? If so, what did you imagine fame would do for you? To what extent was what you sought from fame similar to, or different from, what Malinowitz sought?
- Kerryn's novel seemed destined for an illustrious public life until some key insiders found out that it was a *lesbian* novel (Australia's first). Would this turnaround happen now? Why or why not? Would any other subject matter make that happen now?
- As the correspondence between Harriet and Kerryn unfolds, what happens to Harriet's notion of Kerryn's "identity"—that is, as it veers (in Harriet's mind) between being Maureen

Craig and someone who *is not* a fictional character? How does Harriet attempt to clarify this notion through a close analysis of Kerryn's writing? Does this seem like a fruitful pursuit? To what extent is Harriet urging Kerryn to be who *she* wants her to be, rather than simply perceiving her as she is?

- How does Harriet present herself to Kerryn? Why does she make the choices she does in terms of the information she includes and excludes, and regarding the tone in which she presents that information? Do her choices seem reasonable? Fair? Do they seem familiar to you as someone who has corresponded online with people you didn't know? Have *you* ever "slanted" or "shaped" the truth about yourself online (or elsewhere) to impress someone?
- What is real about falling in love? Do you agree that the emotions produced by meeting someone online can be just as real *and* just as unreal as meeting someone in a face-to-face social situation—like a party or a bar?
- Why does Harriet bid farewell to her old concept of Kerryn as her plane arrives in Sydney?
- Were you surprised that the relationship actually worked out—at least, to the time the piece was written? Do you think it will continue to last?

Sondra Perl

Revealing Secrets, Writing Poems

I never thought of myself as someone who had a lot of secrets. In my own eyes, I was a person who welcomed friends and family into her life, someone who enjoyed telling stories and revealing truths, a person with very little to hide. When I first thought, then, about what I might write for this book, I assumed, in fact, I wouldn't have much to reveal. I think such a response is often the case when we—teachers and students alike—are asked to write. Isn't our first response often something along the lines of "I'm drawing a blank; I honestly don't have anything worthwhile to say on this topic"?

But then I paused and began to consider the question before me. I began to wonder about things that I don't reveal so readily. And I began to ask myself about aspects of my life I had preferred to ignore, had preferred not to talk about. Rather than dismiss the topic, I began to embrace it and to wait, patiently, to see what would emerge. Soon there were many options.

I thought about experiences that were hard for me as I was growing up; I thought about difficult times when I was a young adult, and then a wife and a mother. I recalled times I had been hurt or felt misunderstood, times I was angry or felt ashamed. And then it hit me that I had actually written about many of these experiences—and others—but had also kept the writing itself secret. Suddenly, my life was full of things I had never revealed to anyone. And so for this essay, I decided to focus on my secret pursuit of writing poems as much as the secrets I revealed in them.

I enjoyed searching through the files on my computer, reseeing my life through the various poems I had stored in a folder labeled, simply, "Poetry." But then another writing task emerged: putting the poems in some sort of order and trying to understand not only who I was at the time I wrote them but also who I am now, as an older person looking back at what those poems revealed. I wondered, often, as I was writing and assembling, if there would be any value for students in seeing my life unfold through a series of poems, whether they might learn something from the path I traveled. The poems were never meant to be didactic and I don't think they are. But taken together, they reveal the trajectory of a life and the way one woman coped with some of life's choices, those that were thrust upon her and others she embraced willingly. I hope that spending time reading and talking about them will enable young writers to take comfort in the fact that learning never really ends and that the possibilities for turning one's life into poetry and prose also remain endless.

If I were to teach this essay, I would do so in a number of ways. I would, first, ask students to consider if and when they write about their own lives. Do they keep private journals or

diaries? Do they write poems to themselves or to others? If so, for how long? Or at what junctures in their lives do they turn to writing? If they have stopped, how come? My impression is that private writing occurs far more often than we expect. Revealing this "secret" could lead to a class discussion that either gives students the courage to continue writing about their lives or to begin doing so.

But, mainly, I would focus on the poems included in the chapter and hope to use them as "ways in" for student writers to locate times in their lives when they might have felt a similar emotion or experienced a similar event. With "Nose Job," for example, I would ask them to consider times when they may have found it necessary to separate themselves from their families, to consider when they might have found their own values clashing with those of their parents. What worlds have they had to leave behind to come to college? What are they now outgrowing? Is there a struggle involved? I would ask them to jot down memories or images that help them capture such times in their lives and then to see if they could turn those images and details into a poem.

After reading "Bebe," I would ask the students to write a portrait of someone they know in poetic form. I would suggest that they list all of the details they can recall about this person, the way the person walks and talks, the things this person says and does, and then to use these details to shape a poem. After reading "Bebe Gun," I would ask them to see if they could come up with an object that is important to this person and to create a story about its importance in poetic form.

Since most of the students reading this essay will be young, I would not expect them to compose a poem about marriage or divorce. But all of our students have been in relationships of one sort or another; most know the pain of feeling betrayed or the shock of finding out that the person they love has become someone else. Once again, I would invite students to consider their own lives with these poems as frames for what they might examine. I would ask them to list the people who have been important to them and to focus in, once again, on the details of one of these relationships, the moments that told them things were working or about to end.

And finally, I would use the final poem in the series to elicit poetry that captures moments of joy and expansion in much the same way I used the others: by inviting students to recall times in their lives when they felt free or happy or liberated and then, once again, I would encourage them to begin composing their own "liberation poems" by listing details.

I mention lists and details because I believe that poetry comes from abundance and that the chiseled quality I mention in my essay comes from being able to cut away the excess. To do so, one must first, of course, have access to this excess or, in other words, one must have more words, ideas, and images at hand than one will eventually need. In my classroom, then, I do not merely send students off to write their own poems after some class discussion. Instead we do a fair amount of freewriting and drafting in class—to make sure the abundance is visible to them.

To be more specific, I normally guide students through twenty or thirty minutes of composing by asking open questions in a particular sequence that helps them discover details and telling moments. After each question, I might pause for a minute or two while they write (on paper or on laptops), and then I ask the next question. Here is the way I might do this when asking for the portrait poem.

To begin, I would say, "Who are the important people in your life? As people come into your mind, make a list." Then I would ask, "Of these people, which one stands out now? Whom might you write about now even if you're not sure where it will lead? Choose one person from the list and write down the name." "Now, what comes to mind about this person? What images, stories, lines, favorite sayings can you jot down? What does this person look like? What characteristics stand out for you today? Take some notes." Then after a few more minutes of writing, I would continue, "If this person were talking to you, what might they say? Jot down whatever comes to mind." Then, I'd say, "Now, set all of this aside, and ask a larger question: What makes this person important to you? What do you really want to say about him or her? Is there an image, a word, or a phrase that captures the essence or the whole of this person for you? If so, jot this down."

What I have just offered comes from a writing exercise I have designed and use in all of my writing classes whether we are creating poems, essays, or research papers. I invite teachers who want to know more about this approach to take a look at my book, *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body* (Heinemann, 2004) where these guidelines for composing are explained in much greater detail.

And in any writing class, I would also expect students to bring drafts of their poems to class to be read aloud in small writing groups. My emphasis is on listening, on pointing to what is strong in the draft, and on encouraging student writers to find precise and effective words and images. I invite teachers interested in reading about ways to set up writing groups with active listening as an important component to take a look at *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* (Cengage, 2007), coauthored with Mimi Schwartz.

Mainly, though, as in all my writing classes, I look to invite students to discover their voices (and perhaps, along the way, some secrets worth revealing) by finding pleasure in the explorations provided by composing.

Mary Pinard

"Hep"

When I first heard about the idea for this collection of essays, I knew right away that I wanted to write about my long-held secret to fly on a trapeze. While I was clear about my strong desire to fly in this way, I realized I wasn't at all sure *why* I wanted to do such a thing and from such an early age. The opportunity to explore and delve into family stories and half-formed memories as a way of understanding my secret was thus both compelling and a little scary. I also knew that this project would require some research into the history, language, and personalities associated with the art of the flying trapeze, as well as the circus, and I couldn't imagine any more dynamic research subjects than those. The balance of investigating personal stories and engaging in historical research was appealing to me.

I began the process by thinking about genre. Initially, I was pretty certain that I wanted to make a long poem: some kind of poetic sequence that would allow me to use vivid language, affect swift shifts in tempo and voice, and engage poetry's essential tools—economy, rhythm, sound patterns, line breaks, and the use of white space to enhance meaning and metaphor. I liked the idea that as a poet I am an architect of the page in ways that prose writers are not. Nonetheless, after several failed attempts at capturing my stories in free verse, followed by more failed attempts at using terza rima (after all, I reasoned, what other verse form, with its daring tercets interlinked with a rhyme scheme across and down the white space of a page, mirrors more accurately flying trapezists?), I rather reluctantly turned to prose. This decision made me feel a lot less stable, a lot less confident as a writer—and this, it turns out, was just what I needed since it put me in mind of the kind of the vulnerability, risk, and courage that are essential elements of flying on a trapeze.

I decided to begin with a pivotal story from when I was five years old: my first memory of seeing someone fly on a trapeze. After an introductory paragraph that set the scene in the den of my childhood home with my widowed father and me watching *The Ed Sullivan Show*, I knew that I needed to describe as vividly as possible that series of moments. I wondered if it would be possible to mirror the enrapturing and extended feeling of the experience as well as the arc of the trapezist's flight by writing it all in one long sentence. I worked on this sentence as if it were a poem, honing its diction, checking its tenses, worrying over its accuracy, and listening as I read it out loud many times for just the right cadences in sound and motion. When I felt I'd gotten it just right, I was energized by how I could bring poetic sensibilities to bear even while writing prose, and this gave me some permission to stay open to other opportunities where I could use poetry, or at least the poet's tools, in

other sections of my essay. Of course I realize that the poet's tools *are* the prose writer's tools, and vice versa; it's just easy to get used to working in one genre or another. Some of the most exciting and rewarding experiences I've ever had as a writer were those in which I discovered a kind of "hybrid" form or voice or structure that grew out of a search for the most organic, most precise approach to subject matter, technique, and expression.

One facet of my search for the structure of "Hep" involved the decision to write it in relatively short sections. Because I wasn't entirely sure where the essay would take me (and I suppose too because I come to writing prose as a poet and thus am prone to want to make stanzas, or typically small, tightly contained packages of story or imagery that dangle down the page), it felt right to start a new section for each strand or idea that emerged as I moved along my narrative. I ended up with nine sections that develop, through a variety of means, several separate but related essay threads, including my distant past, a brief history of the invention of the trapeze, an exploration of the nature of flyers, my recent past and the outing of my secret, my mother's death and the months shortly afterward, the linking of flying with writing, and finally, my own first flight and my resulting sense of kinship with other beings of the air. As I worked to determine how to sequence the introduction and subsequent intertwining of these threads, I understood that this organizational structure was, in fact, organic (though I hadn't really planned it that way) since its sequencing represented the direction in which my memory and my mind moved toward understanding the *why* of my essay.

This understanding came as a revelation to me in the midst of polishing the essay, and it informed not only the order of the sections, but also their tone and style. For example, for the section in which I explicitly link flying and writing, I knew I wanted my prose to be extremely lyrical: more like free verse than grammatically correct sentences, more vatic than narrative. I wanted a tone and style that drew attention to itself as poetic and that rather suddenly shifted away from the more rational tone of previous sections. So the first sentence in this section evokes the very long sentence from the first section where I push the limits of the sentence in order to suggest the unlimited sensation and spectacle of the beautiful raven-haired woman on the flying trapeze. But this time the small phrases that make up the very long sentence are more physical, more concrete; they are the words of someone who has actually had the experience of flying on a trapeze. I wanted to capture the breathlessness of flying as well as what the flyer feels and sees. This opening sentence leads into what for me was the riskiest but most profound realization of the entire essay: that the trapeze is as solid and transporting as an authentic and well-made line of poetry, and that as a flyer and a poet I must seek the thrill as well as the balance, the fierceness of true expression as well as the calm courage to jump and fall. The personal essay, it turns out, was for me the best fit for the explorations I wanted to invite about my passion for the flying trapeze: like the perfect leotard, it is flexible, supple, a most practical and elegant containment.

And yet, there was still one piece missing. I had no title. Sure, I had tried many, but they'd all sounded clunky or precious, pretentious or silly, too obvious or too coded. Nothing

appealed. But I think all the experimenting with titles got me to the place where I knew I wanted my title to have some immediacy and to be connected in the purest possible way to the world of the flyer. I decided to concentrate on the act of preparing to fly. I began to replay in my mind my climbing the ladder to the platform, chalking up my hands, taking my bar, lining up my toes with the edge, fixing my gaze ahead and toward the horizon, and then . . . and then, of course! The voice that urges the flyer to leap: the catcher calling "Hep." That was it, my title: that call from the air urging me to leap into change, that small word with all the power in the world to call me off the platform and the reader into my essay.

Mike Rose

The City in the Back of the Mind

For a long time I've been interested in my past: about Altoona, Pennsylvania, the city of my birth, about the characters in the stories I heard growing up, about my parents' past and what their lives were like. I was raised amid great storytellers, so I'll bet that contributes to my interest. And our family history is unusual in some ways—uprooting, violence, poverty—so that's an element of my curiosity as well.

When I was younger, this interest began to make its way into the poetry I was writing; I wrote a fair number of poems about Altoona. And later when my interests broadened beyond the personal, I read and read about immigration, the industrial northeast, working-class life and labor, and so on. And all that reading enhanced and explained so much of what I knew about Altoona and my family. Several books of mine (*Lives on the Boundary* [Penguin, 1990] and ***The Mind at Work*** [Viking, 2004]) draw on this storehouse of personal and scholarly knowledge.

I wrote "The City in the Back of the Mind" as part of a further, closer effort to understand and render my history, my family's history, and this town, Altoona—this classic rust-belt city. Hand in glove, I am growing more and more interested in the broader topics of place (a town's economic and social history), memory (studies of memory and cognition), and imagination—particularly how imagination can be so grounded in the particulars of place and memory. So the writing of "The City in the Back of the Mind" was a pretty intimate experience for me.

The bigger challenge I faced—that any writer of memoir faces—is how to make one's own story interesting to anyone else. Sometimes a story is just a good story, colorful or quirky or unusual enough to hold another's interest. But I also tried to connect the accounts in my essay to the broader themes mentioned above: the role place plays in our identity development, the vividness of memory, and so on. If a memoir works, it works because it connects to ideas and feelings held by others. But trying to make those connections is a challenge of its own. Could I do it in a way that seems natural, not forced, that is central to the material? I hope I did a decent job on this account. You and your students will be the judge of that.

Finally, this is an account of discovery, of realization. There is a realization of how much those early years in Altoona still affect my perception, what I'm drawn to, even what I chose to photograph. There is my ever-growing awareness of just how much I'm drawn to the old stories about my family and how much they mean to me as they and the tellers of them fade farther and farther back into history. And there is the revelation—this toward the end of the essay—of how brutal the life of my forbears was, a brutality masked by their humor in retelling the past. I think I am only now coming to realize how tough, day by day, their life was.

It feels presumptuous to me to make suggestions about how to teach "The City in the Back of the Mind," but let me offer a few thoughts. Since the essay is a memoir, you might ask students to use it as a stimulus to reflect on their own childhood, particularly the landscapes and stories that formed such an important part of their development. Once they make this personal connection to the essay, you might encourage them to think about the way those early landscapes and stories remain with them and how they affect them today—which could lead to a broader, more psychological or philosophical discussion about development, memory, and identity.

Such discussion could move toward a range of writing assignments:

- An essay in which students list and reflect on their own memories of the place where they spent their early years, and, if possible, to write about what it is like to revisit it. They could also—as I do—consider the ways that early landscape affects their perceptions and likes and dislikes now.
- An essay built from interviews with relatives about that place and the relatives' memories and stories about growing up there or settling there later.
- An essay on the stories we hear growing up, stories about people, events, and places—with some thought given to the way those stories affect the way we see ourselves and the world today. Students could also write about the characteristics of the stories (how they're structured, recurring themes, etc.) and what purposes they serve.
- Students could take any of the above and do some historical research—as I do—to try to fill in the larger context around their memories, family stories, and so on.

A different approach would be to examine the style and structure of the essay itself. It blends narrative, excerpts from a journal, a poem, and some analysis and history. I suspect the essay won't be an easy read for some students, so it might be useful to provide them with a bit of an overview and a little guidance.

But then it would be interesting to see what students make of that mix. Several assignments come to mind:

- A traditional critical essay in which students analyze the structure of "The City in the Back of the Mind" and the way the structure contributes to (or unnecessarily complicates) the themes of the piece.
- A writing assignment in which students mix genres themselves, combining interviews, portraits, analysis, poetry, graphics, and so on. As a second part of such an assignment, students could explain what they did and to what effect, getting them to reflect on genre and the blending of genres.

Charles Schuster
Stepping On My Brother's Head

I wrote this essay to explore an incident that happened in my childhood, an incident that I have repeatedly thought about and that I now am not sure really happened. I intended the essay to be both funny and serious, perhaps mostly humorous but as I wrote it, it began to take on some meaningful significance—about brothers, family, sibling rivalry, with a dose of nostalgia thrown in. The irony, which is laced through the essay, comes naturally to me, and I liked it here because it (I hope) destabilizes the reader: I wanted to push the readers a bit off-kilter as they worked their way through the text. But I mostly wanted it to be fun . . . and funny. Part of my inspiration was *The New Yorker*, with its long tradition of fine writing including fine humorous writing by the likes of Bruce McCall, Ian Frazier, James Thurber (reaching into the past), and others. Like almost everyone who majored in literature, I have read a rich array of light and humorous authors, both British and American; having enjoyed and admired those works, I wanted to write in the same tradition.

I tried to create this humorous, ironic flavor through specific word choice (allusions, puns, comic diction, hyperbole, etc.). Working at the level of diction, phrasing, the rhythms, and aurality of language matters a great deal to me, and much of my revising was reading passages out loud, making minute changes that necessitated other changes, going over it again, shifting a line here, a word there. As for my diction, here are some examples (I'm italicizing specific word choices that add to the irony and semantic ambiguity or that invoke humorous contexts):

> "Quite the contrary, stepping on someone's head, whether that head belongs to your brother, another family member, or even just a friend or stranger, is no *mean* event."
>
> "Thus it seems time, past time really, to shine a bright light on an act that can probably only be characterized as *callous and savage*, or, perhaps more to the point, *dumb and dumber.*"
>
> "I do not mean to suggest that the fascination of watching television, *eyes glazed forward*, explains or justifies what happened. Not at all. In *trodding* on my brother's *cranial extremity*, I wasn't attempting to be *Stanley Laurel* unknowingly humiliating *Oliver Hardy*, nor *an infuriated Mo acting out revenge on Curly or Larry*."
>
> "For God's sake, stepping on your brother's head could happen to anybody!
>
> "Actually, when examined in the cold light of adulthood, *not really*. . . . Maybe I wanted to do something *bold* that would get me in serious trouble from which *extrication* was impossible—and had decided that the best way to accomplish this would be to take a giant step for humankind right in front of both my parents. That's it—I must have needed to get myself in trouble and be punished, like any nine-year-old guilt-ridden *masochist*."

"Was I a working-class *citizen Cain* [invoking the movie, of course]?"

"If I could rise up, if I could get *a-head* of Marty, just once, my rightful place in the family would be secure."

"*Oh that short and useless rapier*!" [Here I intended to allude to my lack of masculinity as a young boy.]

"Now, months after this conversation, I continue to reflect about this *heady* event *shrouded* by the passage of time."

I wanted the essay to build up to the actual event. I could have described the actual stepping incident in just a page or so; instead, I used the incident as a springboard to explore my childhood, my experiences growing up in Cleveland in the 1950s. My organizational principle was first to describe the general setting (Cleveland in the 1950s), then move to my father, then my mother, family life, myself (done, I hope, in ways that are humorously self-effacing), and then my brother. I hope the organization is cumulative and slowly builds or concentrates focus where it belongs—on my brother and my relationship to him. After describing the "evil" deed, it seemed to me that the essay was begging for more, that it needed analysis. Just as importantly, I thought it would be good to demonstrate for students how some research can add meaning and resonance to an essay. That, at least, was my intent when I did some (admittedly quick) Internet research on sibling rivalry.

As I wrote about my personal history and ruminated about the stepping episode, I decided to explore the incident's implications, which led me to do some research on sibling rivalry and the psychological tensions that can exist within families. I wanted to do that for two reasons. First, I thought it would help anchor the essay and contribute some seriousness of purpose to it. Second, I thought it would exemplify the kind of research that most undergraduate students in writing classes are expected to do.

Although I embroidered a bit, the phone call with my brother actually happened. I thought I would use his response to the incident in my essay, which I guess I did. But that he remembers nothing and there are no longer any other witnesses alive leaves me extraordinarily uncertain whether this incident ever happened. It caused me, with some irony but also with some seriousness, to write the last paragraph that questions the reality of reality (at least of remembered reality).

Perhaps the best thing about writing this essay was sharing it with my brother. He read it, we talked about it, and he wrote a response to it, which I am including below. It touched me when I first read it, and it moves me each time I reread it. No matter whether this event happened or not, the great thing about writing it is that it brought my brother and me closer together. Ahhh, the power of memoir.

Marty's Response to "Stepping On My Brother's Head"

The impetus for this sudden burst of literary energy comes from my brother, Chuck. He wrote the essay titled "Stepping On My Brother's Head" for this collection. He said that he hoped it would inspire students to use the theme of telling secrets to encourage them to write. The use

of varied methods and schemes to inspire the production of well-written words has been a career-long quest of his. I sense that he's been successful and is respected in academic circles for his dedication and skill. Telling secrets is not the aim of my effort. I've lived long enough to have many secrets. Some relate to actions I am proud of and a lot more would cause pain or embarrassment for me or others that I love or have come into contact with along the way. No, this is to be a commentary and expansion on Chuck's confession and the details of our personal history that surrounds it. Some of this will serve to add information, make some small corrections, and provide self-defense.

The Smothers Brothers, a popular comedy team in the sixties and seventies, made a living on a routine based on "Mom always liked you best." My brother has based his opinion on Mom's oft-expressed comment on the difficulties surrounding his birth. I believe this is only part of the truth. Mom became pregnant with me only two months after her marriage. The timing, I believe, was related to our father's health issues to be discussed in more detail later. In a sense I think I spoiled her honeymoon and she resented it. Growing up in the economic depression '30s was very difficult for her and her family. It left her depressed and serious and resentful of people "with money." Mom lived with her parents until she married at age twenty-three. Wasn't she entitled to a few carefree years with her husband? She also always regretted not having a daughter. Even though my brother and I were quite different, we were male, played male games, and had male friends and interests. Mom believed that boys marry, move away and are closer to their wife's family. Girls look after their parents, even after marrying. What Mom didn't know was that some sons and their spouses can be caring too. Chuck and his wife Pat moved her to Milwaukee where they supervised her care for many years with love and compassion until her death. I think she liked him best because of his cheery ways and innate kindness.

Chuck did not mention what I believe was the one thing about our father that was the biggest determinant of our family life. Dad had rheumatic fever as a child. It left him with damaged heart valves. He took lots of medication. His family believed that he could never have a strenuous job so he learned shorthand and was a secretary in a manufacturing plant when he was married at age twenty-eight. It was a low-paying job, one most often done by women. He later had a job as a purchasing agent in another factory. The hardware store was the idea of his stubborn stepfather, a Russian immigrant who was trained as a civil engineer. The retail environment was physically challenging and like all small businesses, it dominated the life of our family.

The oldest child in a family often sees him- or herself as the hero. He takes on the task of protecting family interests without premeditation. It was not the love of window glass, plumbing, or nuts and bolts that led me to work in the store at age twelve for ten cents an hour. Knowledge of those things has been useful but learning was not my motivation. I was in that store to protect my father from hard physical work and the often difficult and frustrating task of dealing with the public. I wanted to shield him from the pressure of his relationship with my grandfather. We called it the "hard wear" business. Dad died of his heart disease when I was sixteen and Chuck had just turned fourteen. Open heart surgery was invented in

Cleveland a few years too late to save him. Our lives were forever changed. Mom went to work in the payroll office of the U.S. Navy. I exited the hardware business and worked in the library. Chuck bagged groceries. We all filled the financial void left by Dad's death. We supported each other emotionally to adapt to the new reality.

Chuck has been kind in his description of me. He has called me hardworking, intellectually capable, focused, and mature. The words also apply to him. We may have been different as children but as adults we have turned out quite the same. We have shown much devotion to our wives who came from difficult family situations. We are both deeply involved with our children. We find teaching and learning enjoyable. We like to travel. We start conversations with strangers. We have devoted our lives to our professions. We are both omnivores now. Still, there are differences. His sense of humor retains the spirit of "Mad Dog" Schuster, the author of many articles in *Sundial* magazine at Ohio State. In contrast, I wrote articles for the University of Toledo *Journal of Pharmacy*. He has developed many friendships. I enjoy being alone. He cheers the Milwaukee Brewers while I am still a fan of the Cleveland Indians.

Now for some minor corrections and additions:

- The '48 Buick was what Dad used to drive to work. It was built like a tank and once he drove it through the garage door. The car did not suffer even one scratch.
- The car we took on those family vacations was a 1952 Plymouth.
- The black plastic shoehorn was finally destroyed on my rear by our father who shared my laughter when it broke into two unusable parts.
- I never learned to play the violin. I couldn't read music and couldn't tune it.
- Mom's cooking specialty was desserts and when she didn't make them herself she bought them.
- Apple and cherry pies and apple cobbler were her specialty. We were taught that no meal, even breakfast, is complete without something sweet. I still believe this although it has made maintaining my health harder than it should be.

One final thought. We often imagine that we have caused irreparable harm by our actions or inactions. Such guilt, if carried to extremes, can lead to unnecessary grief and limitations. It can be long-lasting. I am amazed at the details of the past from years ago that I can recall. My mind is cluttered with details of no significance. I cannot, however, remember the time when Chuck stepped on my head. It did no lingering damage. It has not affected our relationship. In this life I have learned the power of forgiveness and thus I have forgiven him for this act whether it was intentional or accidental. I must admit that it is much easier to grant forgiveness when the offending event is not remembered by the alleged victim. I hope his load of guilt is lighter now. I thank him for the memories he has invoked and the inspiration to write these few words.

* * *

What a thoughtful, wonderful response, so rich in detail, including facts about his life and ours that I never knew or totally forgot. In homage to my brother, here is a recent photo of my brother's head, showing no ill effects (thankfully) from the incident:

One last thought: writing this piece makes me want to write more personal essays. It produced a lot of satisfaction, and it occupied me over many months and multiple drafts. Each time I returned to it, numbering each successive version "draft 5" or "draft 9," I did so with both pleasure and expectation. Granted, I'd begin the revision process in something of a neutral zone, but once I started I felt the energy start to build and I immersed myself in the ebbs and flows of the writing, composing while simultaneously standing back and watching where it was going, deciding if it was moving in the right direction not so much in terms of organization and plot but rather in terms of mood, suspense, playfulness, tone, humor. I'd look up at the clock, surprised that the hour hand had moved from three to five, that suddenly the room was growing dark because the sun was dipping below the spruce trees in my yard. If I could clear my daily calendar enough, I'd like to write more, in the vein of Bill Bryson and his Thunderbolt Kid. I hope our students feel the same, that they connect to essays, any essays, and their reading makes them want to be writers who write for the most intrinsic of reasons, because it gives them pleasure and satisfaction.

Mimi Schwartz
"It's Just Like Benheim"

The Back Story (Why and How I Wrote an Investigative Memoir)

When I first met Sophie Marx, I didn't know I was writing a book (twelve years later it would be called *Good Neighbors, Bad Times—Echoes of My Father's German Village* [University of Nebraska Press, 2008]). I was just trying to find out about my father's boyhood in a German village of Christians and Jews where "everyone got along before Hitler." Or so he said, as I was growing up in Queens, New York.

Back then I wasn't interested. My interest began with a story, heard forty years later, of a Torah that had been rescued on Kristallnacht in 1938—not by the Jews of this village, but by their Christian neighbors. I wondered who saved it and why, and was this village a special place?

My father was no longer alive to ask, so I ended up in Sophie's living room, asking for memories. And then I entered many other living rooms and kitchens: of both the Jews who fled the village and their Christian neighbors, still there today. Collectively, they helped me to understand the struggles of once-good neighbors to negotiate during and after Nazi times—and what that means for me and my neighbors today.

What was it about talking to Sophie that made me keep going? First, I loved her upbeat attitude, an old woman who kept finding things to like about life. Second, her memories echoed my father's stories of everyone getting along before Hitler. I had expected more bitterness, more anger from someone whose country betrayed her. Third, I loved how Sophie's memories connected past and present. The same neighborliness she remembered in childhood on the edge of the Black Forest was felt in her apartment house in Washington Heights, New York, filled with Hispanics who helped her, the last Jew still living in the building.

One line kept intriguing me: "It's just like Benheim!" Sophie liked repeating it, I realized as I wrote up a postinterview freewrite. When I transcribed the interview from my tape recorder and counted "It's just like Benheim" six times, I began to sense how key it was to her survival of spirit—and to what that spirit could teach me.

Every writer needs the hook to shape a mass of facts. Otherwise you get an "and-then-this-happened- and-then-that-happened" narrative that is deadly boring. "It's just like Benheim!" became my hook. It led me to a point of view about Sophie and why her story mattered. My visit was no longer just about *what happened* that day; it was about what that visit *meant* to me (and to my readers).

Another goal was to make Sophie come alive on the page: I didn't want only the "who, what, when, and where" facts of her life; I wanted readers to feel as if they knew her personally. That

meant using description and dialogue as one would do in fiction writing. The only difference was: Sophie was real, my visit was real, and I made nothing up. But I did select details and shape dialogue. Originally, I had whole chunks of transcript in my draft, but my readers said: "This may be interesting to you, but we feel overloaded." So I kept only the dialogue that best served the story and filled in the rest with summary. I wanted the spirit of Sophie, not every word that she said. Evidently, I succeeded, because when the book came out, those who knew Sophie since childhood told me, "Yes, that is Sophie. You got her right!" Those are the best words a writer can hear.

I learned a lot about the craft of interviewing from my visit to Sophie. First, it pays to do a freewrite before you go, writing down your expectations so you can compare them with what you actually find out. Second, it helps to write down some questions to ask, but avoid ones that produce a "Yes" or "No." Questions that begin "Tell me about. . . ." Or "What was [school, church, war] like?" are much better than, "Did you like school?" or "Were you afraid?" Third, don't be tied to your questions. It's better to listen to what someone is saying and let follow-up questions come from that. If your interviewee goes off on an interesting tangent, fine. You'll learn something you never dreamed of—and that's always good. Fourth, if it's is a psychologically loaded question, ask it more than once. What's avoided the first time may be answered forty minutes later. Or it may, as with Sophie, pop up as you are putting on your coat to leave. Be alert for surprises. Encourage them to happen. Fifth, when you go home, do another freewrite of all your impressions as soon as possible.

I found that this kind of freewriting was essential. I included lots of physical description not in the transcripts: the color of couches, the photos on top of the TV, the kinds of cookies I ate, where the crumbs fell. And in the transcripts, I found details not in my freewrite. Freewrites provide sensory detail; transcripts, facts of conversation. I needed both to really tell Sophie's story.

If I were teaching this essay, I would combine the reading with a writing assignment that shows how the interview is the building block for investigative reporting. That's true whether the "I" is part of the story as in my case (investigative memoir) or if the "I" is behind the scenes (traditional journalism). Depending on time and curriculum, I make this a single, double, or triple assignment.

> Part One: In class, have students interview each other in pairs. I allow five minutes, say "Switch," and allow another five minutes. Students are to take notes including at least two direct quotes. Then I give them ten minutes to write up a profile that is both factual *and* interesting. That is the challenge: to avoid a "shopping list" profile with no point of view. Instead they must find a hook that shapes and selects the facts—and captures the personality of the interviewee and uses at least one direct quote. The partners share their profiles, adjust the facts, and then we share as a class.
>
> Part Two: Invite someone into class for a class interview—a writer (read something they wrote), a school personality, and so on. Ask people to freewrite beforehand to capture their expectations—and bring in some questions. They take notes (some can record if they want), including descriptions, direct quotes, and so on. Everyone writes up a profile, and

we share in class to see who best combined facts and point of view. *Tip:* I ask people to write at least two titles for their essay before they start; that helps them get "the hook."

Part Three: Ask people to interview someone in their family (or someone they want to know more about). Following the same procedures—and my essay—make that person come alive on the page.

One final explanation: Many ask, "If this is nonfiction, why change the names of people and of the village?" My answer: to protect the privacy of people who were neither famous nor infamous. Since the village only had twelve hundred people, if I kept its real name, the villagers would lose their anonymity. There is, after all, only one barber's daughter; only one postman with a son. . . . Besides, I think it makes the story more universal.

Jenny Spinner

Leaving Home

My six-year-old son is into Star Wars right now, and he loves the part of *The Empire Strikes Back* where Yoda teaches Luke Skywalker how to use the force. Yoda tells Luke what a powerful ally the force can be but also cautions him about its dangers: "Anger, fear, aggression! The dark side of the Force are they. Easily *they* flow [. . .] Beware, beware, beware of them. A heavy price is paid for the power they bring." Yoda's advice reminds me of writing, another kind of powerful force, that can do both good and great harm. In revealing a secret in writing, I free myself of the burden of carrying it, but in the act of revelation, I also risk harming myself and others. Beware, beware, beware.

My first difficulty in choosing a secret to write about is that I wanted to select something that would not inadvertently harm somebody else in my life. I suppose that's one of the reasons we keep secrets in the first place. In addition to protecting ourselves, we're protecting other people. The secrets in which I play the lead role have a host of supporting characters as well. What secret could I tell that would not hurt me, or them? I knew what I wanted to write about: my twin sister Jackie, who suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of the months she spent as a war reporter in Iraq. Because of her terrible illness, the last three years of my life have been filled with devastations, and secrets. But my secrets are tied to hers, and I can't tell them without harming our fragile relationship, her recovery, or her job. So as much as I wanted to write about these events, as much as I needed to, I set them aside and settled on my aborted attempts at college when I was seventeen and eighteen years old.

Because so many years have passed since I first set off for college, because I now have a doctorate degree and a job and a writing career, because what I did then no longer matters, it is a safe secret to tell. Did I take a coward's approach? Perhaps. But in writing for an audience beyond yourself, you must always juggle responsibilities and consequences. As with many of life's complexities, there is no single answer to that juggle. But whatever you choose, you have to own your decision and be willing to accept the outcome. I think it's crucial to remind students about their responsibilities as writers, no matter what they are writing. Revealing secrets certainly puts the issue of responsibility front and center.

Yet, even in revealing a secret that had lost some of its punch over the years, I found myself struggling to find words for feelings I had long put aside. I had attempted to write about those feelings once, in an essay that became part of a collection for my undergraduate honors thesis. I was far too close to the moment, though, to effectively render the experience as art, and that essay is a confused jumble of emotion. Mindful of my own writing life, both the aborted

attempts and the successes, I often tell my students that if something matters to them, they will likely write many versions of it throughout their lives. "Leaving Home" is my first attempt to tell the story again in more than twenty years. Fragments have appeared in other essays or columns I have written over the years. For example, I previously wrote about a conversation with my grandmother for an essay about my adoption (huh? I left that detail out of this essay! Does it matter?). Part of that same conversation appears in "Leaving Home." My grandmother tells me that "It's a great life if you don't weaken," then warns me, "Don't weaken." In the earlier essay, I included the rest of the conversation, the part where she wonders if my inability to cope at Augustana has something to do with my biological roots that nobody knows. That was such a stinging hypothesis for me at the time, but I didn't know how to include it in this essay without delving into my adoption. And really, I don't think it matters. Do you?

I also struggled with trying to capture what it felt like to be so attached to my home and my family that I was terrified to leave them. I don't feel that way anymore. Don't get me wrong. I love my family and I am grateful to have grown up where I did—but I don't choose to live there anymore for many reasons. Does my emotional angst in this essay seem authentic? I really had to dig to remember what it was like to be me at the time. In writing about this secret, I also had to answer other questions for myself. Why was I so homesick? What was I so afraid of? Until I wrote this essay, I never thought about it much. I had long come to terms with the fact that I wasn't ready to leave home at seventeen, but I hadn't come to terms with why I wasn't ready, or why I was so blindsided by my inability to be away.

Good essays, unlike good arguments, don't tell readers exactly what to think, so I didn't want to carry my analysis too far. As I tell my students, holiday packages warrant beautiful bows; essays don't need such pretty conclusions. Not wanting to wrap up everything too neatly, I had to balance my adult wisdom and reflection with the confusion I felt at the time. The true-to-life ending—the messy one that I don't include in "Leaving Home"—is the strained relationship I now have with my sister as a result of her illness. In truth, at thirty-eight, she has fallen harder than I did at seventeen, and the destruction is far more severe, far more lasting, far more deadly. But I can't write about that, so instead, I wrote about my student Meg who reminds me of myself. Is the ending too packaged? Too pat? Or does it satisfy?

Sometimes interviewing other characters in an essay can help verify accounts or provide additional detail. While writing this essay, I asked my sister to tell me what she remembered about my two weeks at Augustana. Did she worry about me? Did she try to talk me into staying? As my confidant, surely she must have played some crucial part in my struggle. While I waited for her to find the diary she had kept during her first year in college, I wrote these lines: "When I talked to her about my unhappiness, she tried to console me, but I don't think she understood any better than I did what was happening to me. She sent letters and gifts to cheer me, but her words often seemed rushed and confused."

When my sister finally found her journal, the page she was looking for was missing.

"I believe I destroyed it at some point," she told me. "Probably thought I could revise history if I did. It's like I always thought you were the rock, the one who was going places—and you did—and this just confused me, confounded the worldview I had always clung to about you

being the more stable, successful twin. I wasn't mad at you. I was just sad, for both of us, because it felt like it had happened to both of us, it had happened to the Spinner twins.

"As much as I tried, I could not make myself understand why you would do something like that, what pain could have led to such turmoil. I felt in some ways that as different as we were, we shared the same mind. And my mind didn't get it, not at all."

I sent her my completed essay.

"Do you understand now?" I asked.

"Yes," she eventually wrote back. "But I think I knew it in my heart all along."

Maybe I did, too.

What do the best essays accomplish?

For me, as both a writer and a reader, they speak familiar truths.

Lad Tobin
Sneaking into the Movies

How I Wrote It

Like most writing teachers, I often give my students assignments in which I specify the goal, genre, page length, and due date. And, like most writing teachers, I often give myself the luxury of writing whatever I want, whenever I want. Of course, I have to do a fair amount of writing on demand—letters of recommendation, reviews of journal articles, marginal comments on student papers—but it's been years, maybe decades, since I've done any creative writing on demand. In fact, that was one of the reasons that I decided to submit an essay to this collection; I figured that writing an essay in response to a particular prompt, a specific audience, and a firm deadline would help me remember—and better empathize with—what it feels like to be a student in a writing class.

Here was the assignment the editors gave me:

> What we are after is your telling a secret, in print—a secret that can be read by students and written in such a way that it can be usefully taught by writing instructors. The secret can be revealed in prose, as an essay, a poem, a semifictionalized account, whatever works best.

So right away I was faced with that same maddening "freedom" that my students complain about: Assignments that force a writer to choose his or her own form and focus can be more daunting and difficult than assignments that prescribe each aspect of the finished product. The problem in this case was not a lack of available material; the problem was that the first secrets that occurred to me were secrets precisely because I lacked the desire or courage to go public with them. They were just too raw or fragile for me to take on in this form and forum. This, too, made me feel sorry for my students: Although I've always told them that a successful personal narrative doesn't need to be radically or transgressively confessional, that it could as easily focus on a small insight as a huge revelation. "Contrary to what you might fear," I always tell them before they get started, "you do not have to reveal your darkest, deepest secrets to do well on this assignment; there is no topic that is off-limits because it is too personal but at the same time there is no requirement that you write about trauma or loss or humiliation."

In other words, I tell them that there is no pecking order that places risky, juicy secrets above smaller, less shocking ones. And yet here I was thinking to myself: An editor who asks for secrets expects something more than the story of that time when I was seven and I stole a Chunky

candy bar from the checkout line at Sunset Groceries. I also couldn't help but think about the readers—writing teachers and writing students—who might come across my nonsensational secret in the midst of so many others and think "who cares?" or "so what?"

It was this anxiety about finding a secret that was neither too explosive nor too trivial that drove me to construct a new secret. I don't mean that I fictionalized the experience of sneaking into the movies; I mean that I decided to sneak into the movies precisely because I wanted something to write about. And so the first key step in my writing process became the process of research: From the minute I decided on this topic, I began to record what I was thinking and feeling at each stage of the caper. But, of course, since I was both the researcher and the researched subject, the relationship between what I was doing and what I was writing wasn't as simple as just recording each action: Knowing that I was writing about the experience made me behave and think differently than I otherwise would have.

It's funny: Memoirists often get accused of exaggerating or embellishing their actions for dramatic effect. Since those actions often occurred many years before the writing, the authors can blame the passage of time or the fallibility of memory for any inaccuracies. In my case, though, the exaggerating and embellishing actually occurred as I was performing the actions: My decision to sneak into four movies rather than into just one grew out of my sense that seeing just two movies back-to-back was too modest a secret to warrant a whole essay or a reader's attention, while seeing five movies back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back seemed unusual and wacky enough to arouse anyone's curiosity.

What I Hoped to Achieve

No matter what I'm writing or writing about, I always aim for Aristotle's harder-than-it-sounds directive: A writer should aim to delight and instruct. In this essay, I hoped to accomplish the delight part by telling a story that combined some drama (Would I get away with it? Would I get caught?) with some self-deprecating humor (Would I actually and ridiculously begin to believe that I turned myself into an action hero simply because I was sneaking into an unguarded theater?). As for the instruction part of the essay, I hoped the story would offer some reflections on the relationship between aging and risk-taking. That is, I was aiming to illustrate how and why a seemingly settled-down, middle-aged man, motivated by a midlife angst, if not a crisis, would be drawn, not in spite of the risk and absurdity bur rather *because* of the risk and absurdity, into acting like a rebellious teenager. I also wanted to make the related point that every excessive and risky attempt to defy boundaries of convention, propriety, *and* time can be seen simultaneously as courageous and absurd, as heroic *and* mock-heroic.

Two Suggestions for Using This Essay in the Classroom

First, I think that a writing class could have some useful conversations about whether, given my goals, I've constructed an effective ethos. Is my narrative persona flawed and neurotic enough to be amusing as a comic character but still trustworthy and "likeable enough" (to borrow Barack

Obama's damning-with-faint-praise description of then-rival Hillary Clinton) to be taken seriously as I reflect in the expository sections on the more serious implications of my actions?

Second—and here is where I'd spend most of the time—I'd ask students to think about the essay's form. Since this essay includes thoughts about aging, it makes sense to examine the way that time is represented. My strategy was to play two different time schemes off against each other—the eleven hours of "external" or clock time that I spent in the theater against the forty-some years of internal time or memory that runs from my actual adolescence to my current adolescent-acting self. Or another way to describe this structure is that I am playing off a straight chronological narrative of the sneaking-into-the-movies caper against a more wide-ranging narrative of my thoughts and reflections on what I was doing.

Of course, this is not a new structure. In fact, students are familiar with the common version of it from all of the Hollywood movies that move back and forth between a character reading or telling a story and flashbacks of that story. John McPhee, who often uses a structure that employs two different time schemes or points of view in his essays and books, refers to this as "contrapunctual time." The advantages of moving back and forth between a present, dramatic action and an accompanying narrative that provides context or contrast or reflection of some sort can be obvious but dramatic: The external, chronological narrative gives the essay an identifiable and accessible order and focus and makes it relatively easy for readers to follow, thereby freeing up the essayist to occasionally move away from the chronology in order to offer thoughts and experiences and comparisons that are more digressive or abstract.

My experience teaching essays with this kind of segmented or episodic form has been that students are immediately drawn to them because they build on their experience and expertise as TV and movie watchers. That is, they are comfortable with cinematic jump cuts between different scenes or times or perspectives. But my experience has also taught me that I need to warn students against lazy or sloppy versions of this structure: Moving back and forth randomly between different time schemes or perspectives can be disorienting and disjointed unless the writer pays careful attention to thematic connections between sections. Here, too, McPhee is a good model since he often avoids explicit transitions but is always careful to connect each new section to the previous one through a shared idea, a sharply contrasting image, or a creative use of language.