

NANCY WOODS

AUTHOR | WRITING COACH

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CATEGORY: WRITER'S RESOURCES

Help on writing and the writing life. Grammar, Inspiration, Marketing & Publishing, Prompts, Writing Tips

ANYTHING CAN BE USED IN A POEM

October 20, 2017 [Leave a comment](#)

Thought for the day:

“It took [Frank] Bidart years to understand that anything that went through him could be included in a poem. . . .” — From “Golden Boy,” an article by Hilton Als that appeared in the September 8, 2017 issue of the *New Yorker*.

PROCRASTINATE NO MORE

October 13, 2017 [Leave a comment](#)

Like anyone, writers occasionally suffer from procrastination. They want to write but don't.

This [Psychology Today](#) article offers some useful tips for preventing procrastination. And who knows, you may also find them helpful when it comes to making that dental appointment or cleaning out your closet.

THE 5 MOST COMMON REASONS WE PROCRASTINATE... AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM, STARTING TODAY

By **Shahram Heshmat Ph.D.** Science of Choice

Posted Jun 17, 2016

Procrastination refers to the voluntary postponement of an unpleasant task, often against one's better judgment (Steel, 2007). When a person procrastinates, they pass the buck to their future self. Although some procrastinators claim that they work best under pressure, perhaps they also need the rush of a last-minute deadline to get started.

The costs of procrastination are often considerable. Evidence suggests that the habit of leaving things until the last minute generally results in low-quality work performance and reduced well-being (Tice and Baumeister, 1997). For example, students who routinely procrastinate consistently get lower grades (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002). Procrastinators also tend to postpone getting appropriate medical treatments and diagnostic tests (Sirois and Pychyl, 2013).

Why, when so little good comes of procrastinating, do we do it so much? Here are five reasons:

1. **Absence of structure.**

The lack of imposed direction that's become common in the **workplace** might contribute to the increase in procrastination. The collapse of the delay between impulse and decision inevitably favors impulse (e.g., checking **Facebook** instead of doing work); our easy online access makes urges easy to gratify. One solution to this is to design your **environment** in a way that makes your desired goal more likely to happen. For example, if you tend to check your email or Facebook too often, make it difficult for yourself to connect to the Internet.

2. **Unpleasant tasks.**

The most significant predictor of procrastination is a task that's considered

unpleasant, boring, or uninteresting (e.g., Christmas shopping, laundry, or exercise). How can you complete your unpleasant tasks on time? One strategy is to divide and conquer. Shift your focus from the ultimate goal to a series of easy to complete, intermediate tasks (Andreou and White, 2010). Another strategy is to form an if-then plan to automate goal striving—e.g., if I turn on the computer, I will first work on my assignment for 45 minutes (Gollwitzer, 2004).

3. **Timing.**

Another important factor is the timing of the reward and **punishment**—meaning that the point of choice and the associated consequences are separated in time. A gap like this produces internal conflict between future and present interests. Procrastination occurs when present efforts are highly noticeable in comparison with future ones, leading individuals to postpone tasks without anticipating that when it comes time to do them, the required action will be delayed yet again (Ainslie, 2001). A smoker who wants to quit can spend many years having “one last cigarette.” The solution is to find a way to make long-term **goals** feel more like short-term rewards. For example, the painful moment of getting into a cold swimming pool can overpower the delayed benefits of doing morning laps. To overcome that resistance, you need to associate the activity with the positive mood effect of exercise.

4. **Anxiety.**

Avoidance is a well-known form of coping with anxiety. Procrastinators may postpone getting started because of a **fear** of failure. Evidence indicates that procrastination is associated with high levels of **stress** (Sirois, 2007). To relieve stress, procrastinators shift their focus away from the future toward more immediate rewards in order to avoid high-priority, yet challenging tasks. Finding ways to reduce stress can strengthen an individual’s capacity to reduce procrastination (Sirois and Pychyl, 2013).

5. **Self-confidence.**

When difficulties arise, people with weak self-confidence easily develop doubts about their ability to accomplish the task at hand, while those with strong beliefs

are more likely to continue their efforts. When low self-confidence causes people to avoid activities, they miss opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills (Ericsson, 2016). For example, a college student with a low sense of confidence for math may avoid enrollment in upper-level math courses. The decision not to enroll deprives the student of valuable skills development experiences. In contrast, goal attainment may raise feelings of self-confidence, which can result in a person setting even more challenging goals.

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SELF-PUBLISHING: FIRST THINGS FIRST

July 21, 2017 1 Comment



Jean Harkin

(A guest post by Jean Harkin, JPHARKIN@aol.com)

Oops! I may have put the cart before the horse. In August 2016 I published my short story collection, *Night in Alcatraz: and Other Uncanny Tales*. Not until April 2017 did I begin research for my blog series on self-publishing. Maybe I should have asked the questions before I published. I learned much about self-publishing by writing my blog series. Fortunately I did a few things right, but I also made some goofs in publishing my book.

For instance:

1) Just before I self-published my book, successful authors were advising other writers to establish a social networking presence. Dragging my feet, I joined Facebook. I also started an author page on [Goodreads](http://www.goodreads.com/jeanatwritersmill) (www.goodreads.com/jeanatwritersmill), where I post my blog and feature my books. Acquiring a blog site on Goodreads was easier for me than signing up on Blogger, WordPress, Weebly, GoDaddy or other popular web hosting sites.

2) I began organizing and revising my stories in March 2016. I did something right: I made sure all the stories were edited. But I did something wrong: I didn't state on the opening page (with copyright info, etc.) that the stories were edited and by whom, although I did note where many of the stories were previously published.

3) To print and publish my book, I used Createspace. That was a good decision in some ways, bad in others.

Good: Createspace offers user-friendly uploading and production; free ISBN number for print copy; e-book made available on Kindle; automatic exposure on Amazon and Amazon international; print copy available on demand to buyers through other online sellers; and the author can purchase their own copies direct from Createspace at a reduced price. An especially nice perk is the fast, friendly and professional help service Createspace provides by phone or online.

Bad: I recently discovered that independent booksellers will not stock books printed by Createspace or affiliated in any way with Amazon. Those booksellers see Amazon as a market bully. The indie sellers can't sell my print books as cheaply as Amazon can and still make a worthwhile profit. Either I or the store would be shorted. I haven't been able to determine, however, why the walk-in Amazon store at Washington Square in Portland, Oregon, won't stock my book and won't respond to my queries.

4) About marketing: While royalties on my book sales slowly accumulate, I haven't received one payment. Apparently I must wait until \$100 is reached; meanwhile Amazon makes money on each sale. (There may be a way to collect payments through direct bank deposit, but I haven't checked that out.)

What I did right (but not perfectly): I offered my book for sale at local venues, including the Oregon Historical Society's annual Christmas Cheer book festival. I've gotten the word out about my book—most recently to my high school alumni magazine and on the website of Northwest Independent Writers Association (NIWA). I recently joined that group—another smart move. Of course my book, *Night in Alcatraz; and Other Uncanny Tales* is featured on my Goodreads author page.

So far, so good as far as reviews on *Night in Alcatraz; and Other Uncanny Tales*. I'm grateful to readers for 5 stars on Amazon and 4.5 on Goodreads.

TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN

July 12, 2017 [Leave a comment](#)

By nature a planner, I'm the queen of bulleted checklists. I love calendars and spend a lot of time filling them out.

In many ways, planning can be helpful. Scheduling my time—deciding what writing project to focus on next and when and where I'm going to work on it—means when I sit down to write I'm ready and know what to do. I jump right in.

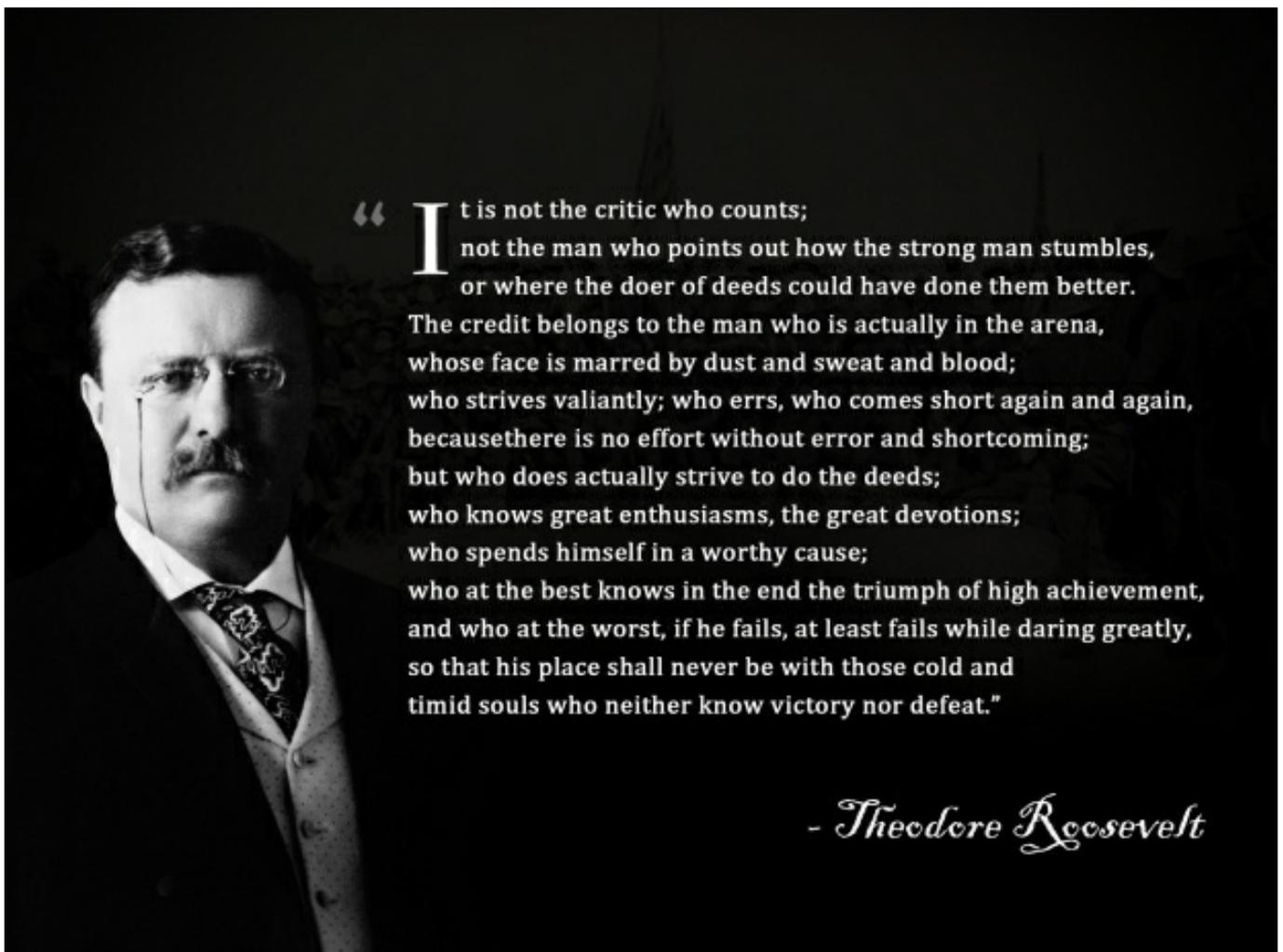
Planning also reduces stress because after I assign each project a spot on my calendar, I don't need to think about it, although I might. There are lots of useful, healthy reasons to plan. But it can also hold you back, pen you in and prevent you from reaching out. Which is why spontaneity also has its place, along with throwing caution to the wind and being less rigid.

So every once in a while I turn on my computer and open a random file. I did just that recently and came across a draft of the blog you're reading right now.

IT'S NOT THE CRITIC

June 26, 2017 [Leave a comment](#)

As writers, we have to deal with a certain amount of criticism of our work. On those days when it's hard to keep going in the face of harsh feedback, it might help to keep these words in mind:



“ It is not the critic who counts;
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;
who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions;
who spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,
and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those cold and
timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

- Theodore Roosevelt

For more information on this quote: [Mental Floss](#)

MY TINY TRIBE

November 18, 2016 1 Comment



*“Belonging,” Nancy Woods, acrylic, 9×12
inches*

With this blog post, I honor my students’ anthology, “[BeLonging](#),” because who

doesn't want to fit in?

In my imagination, I belong to a small group of people exactly like me—writers and artists who, according to at least one study, make up less than 2 percent of the U.S. workforce.* To make my group even more select, I belong to the chapter of right-handed, left-wing writers and artists—solitude-seeking people who long for country roads, blackberry bushes and crumbling fences.

The members of my tiny like-minded tribe—which exists only in my dreams— are known for being complacent. How complacent, you ask? We're so complacent we don't even decide which books we'll read. Instead, when we need some literary input, we walk into the nearest library, grab the first "staff pick" off the shelf and walk out, well, after checking the book out.

This make-believe army of mine and I are psychologically unable to experience the moment. Instead, we must write a poem about it, paint it or take a photo of it. Unwilling or incapable of simply living life, we document every exquisite event. To us, my herd of duplicators, life is so tender and vulnerable, so flimsy and fleeting, so painfully precious that we're forced to continually capture it with words, on film and on canvas.

Hear that bird? Quick. Write a song about it.

See that forest log smothered with ivy? Snap with your camera.

Fall in love? Turn it into flash fiction.

To us, the members of my clutch, life is so sweet, so fragile and irreplaceable, so diaphanous and dying, that just living it is never enough. We're compelled to gather it, hold it, harbor it, seize it, save it, so we can savor it over and over again. More than one of us has taken a photo of a painting of a photo of a painting. No distance from reality is too far to be traveled.

Highly excitable as children and proud of it, my people and I were the class clowns, the sit-down comics sent to the principal's office to calm down and shut up. At family dinners, we laughed at our own jokes while snorting milk out our

nose. Equal-opportunity insulters, we find humor in everything, including ourselves.

Diversity-relishing nap takers, my cohorts and I also are death-, dog- and phone-fearing note takers. We're tree-needy, coffee-slurping, near-sighted, frizzy-haired joke meisters. We're PC-using, Apple-wary goofballs. We're road-tripping, list-making, understated-English-drama-binging, out-the-window-staring caretakers of cats.

My miniscule group imposes no dues, performs no rituals. The only requirement for membership is that you must think, feel, act, look, taste and smell exactly like us. You must enjoy food but decline to cook. You must drive a car but wish you didn't. You must love everyone, if just in the abstract.

If the local chapter of my assemblage ever got together (which is doubtful because we hate meetings), the event could be held in my living room, which seats six. If you want, you can apply to become a member of my group. But I must warn you, we have a reputation for not getting back.

*<https://www.arts.gov/news/2011/nea-announces-new-research-note-artists-workforce>

WHY I READ THE OBITUARIES

August 18, 2016 [Leave a comment](#)



[In this post, Kickstart Your Writing student Michael Cannarella reveals his fondness for reading obituaries. He then takes his interest one step further and suggests that writing fictional obituaries gives writers an opportunity to hone

their craft, especially when it comes to character development and capturing a life in an anecdote, a few words.]

By Michael Cannarella

Many years ago I rented a room in Marquette, Michigan in a large house overlooking Lake Superior. The house originally belonged to a judge and his wife. Only the judge's old wife was left in the house. (I shoveled the drive as part of my room rent obligation). I usually saw her when the local newspaper was delivered in the evening. She picked it up and immediately turned to the obituaries in the newspaper.

At the time I thought her behavior was notable and strange. Now for me, many years later, I understand. I read the obituaries. Like listening to a good piece of music, they are something I can read more than once and enjoy. Here is a person's life encapsulated in a few paragraphs. I know these few paragraphs capturing a life have a tendency to "pretty things up" but heck they may be the last words written about a person. If we "pretty things up," it's like giving another human being the benefit of the doubt, no more than what we would wish for ourselves. So each obituary goes: Here lies a human, washed, dressed, hair combed, warts removed.

Obituaries also often display great economy by highlighting just a few events that illustrate a character's long life. Of course there is an art to good obituary writing. The writer must find a way to capture the character. Does the story tell more about the obituary writer than the departed? It's a fact, few people write their own obituary.

For me, reading obituaries is also like a correspondence course for mortality awareness. Like the stop sign at the end of a road. A mantra to mortality. It is no secret that often our grief at a loved one's death is a shared awareness of our own mortality. The obituary is a short, simple recognition, a notation on the terminal nature of life. It provides the end piece for a life. The obituary syllabus: No more enjoyable meals with friends, the limits of the body, memories of the departed, remembered deeds, a life has ended, show over, as it is for all of us.

Obituaries are concise encyclopedic entries for people that lived here, the great and famous and the neighbor down the street. Whether it is about the eye doctor you knew years ago and saw periodically or a composer you have admired for thirty or forty years but never met, the obituary is the short story of a life that yields for me, when well written, some intimacy with that person and the life lived. And of course with an obituary there is never, or almost never, a surprise ending. From the beginning we know what an obituary is about.

One thing I sometimes find irritating about obituaries is when the cause of death is not noted. This is particularly irritating when the obituary is about a younger person. Why? There should be some transparency about the cause of death when one dies young. Okay, I'm prepared to make an exception for rock stars until after the autopsy, but it is not morbid to want to know why or how a young person died. The cause of death should not be a secret.

And yes, I do notice the age of the person in the obituary. The scale for me: Are they older or younger than me? Different feelings run through me depending upon the age of the person in the obituary.

Passed away or dead? I prefer dead. Passed away seems to skirt the issue in a fundamental way. Dead carries the finality of the event so much better. We know from life experience what dead means. Passed away seems to subtly postpone the reckoning or breathes into it some little bit of life or hope. Passed away—it is what you might say to a child so as not to upset them. Passed away.

So I suppose you could write fictional obituaries, view it as a writer's exercise for character development, the challenge of capturing a life in an anecdote, a few words. Amazon offers books on writing nonfiction obituaries:

- *Obituary How to Write this Critical Document* by J. Lucy Boyd
- *How to Write an Obituary Workbook* by Janna Longfellow Hughes
- *How to Write an Obituary, A Step by Step Guide* by Christina Newberry
- *Obituary Writing, A guide to the Obituary, Template and Examples* by Sam Jackson

There are books extolling the idea of creative obituaries. That leads to the thought of creating an after-death memorial to oneself. Why not write your own obituary? Why not have the last word? You can take the lead on this. It presents the possibility for a whole new genre, the fictional obituary. The challenge for the writer would be to see how good, how creditable a character you can create via this genre.

Which brings me full circle because, of course, all obituaries are fiction, but fiction based upon a life, honoring a human being who lived and died. For me the obituary is a word sacrament, a ritual, a story of a life lived well or not. In that sense, the obituary honors all life.

OUR CHANGING LANGUAGE: SNAP. BAM. AWESOMESAUCE.

June 16, 2016 Leave a comment



I first noticed the communication problem when a woman told me she planned to “hook up”¹ with a man.

“What does ‘hook up’ mean?” I asked, confused while trying to be tactful. “To get

together for a cup of coffee, a drink or...?" *Does it mean "to date" or "have sex,"* I wondered.

The woman didn't answer, just got a blank look on her face.

Another day, another language barrier. One of the writers I work with turned in an article with the word "piehole"² in it. "Is that an obscene term?" I asked. The publication I edit is "family friendly," so no obscenities are allowed. The reporter looked at me as if I were crazy.

Around that same time, I sent out an email in which I used the word "cool." The recipient emailed me back: "I learned that word in 1967 from Donovan. Haha." So "cool" was no longer cool? Had I made a linguistic blunder?

Everywhere I looked, the English language was changing. I either didn't understand what was being said or I was being labeled outdated.

It wasn't just a case of my not being familiar with pop-culture references. True, I've been known to say "Star Wars" instead of "Star Trek," and I've confused a basketball team with one that plays football. But what I was experiencing wasn't just a case of not having watched "Game of Thrones" or of being unfamiliar with the new dance moves, Nae Nae³ and dabbing.⁴

No, the changes were in the language itself. I just didn't get it.

I signed up for an online class only to have the instructor explain she would be sending the "deets" to her "peeps." Huh? In the local newspaper, a concert was described as a "listening event." Online, people used "adorbs" instead of "adorable." Everywhere, "amazing" had morphed into "amazeballs" or "awesomesauce." "Maybe" and "perhaps" had collapsed into "mayhaps," "babe" had become "bae," "bam" was an expression of excitement and "snap" was an expression that meant expression. "Netflix and chill" was a euphemism for sex.

According to Jessica Weiss, author of the article "[The Secret Linguistic Life of Girls: Why Girl Speak Gibberish](#)," teenage girls are the source for much of the change in language. Girls create secret languages, Weiss believes, to create

social bonds with each other while excluding other people.

I used to do that. When I was a teen, my friends and I talked pig Latin, which involves taking the initial consonant or consonant group of each word and moving it to the end. That way we could talk in private. “School is boring” became “Oolskay is oringbay” and “dumb parents” became “umbday arentspay.”

Today, as a writer, I don’t have the luxury of ignoring changes in my language. English is my currency. It’s what I use to communicate. So I need to make sure my vocabulary is up-to-date.

Some words, however, do withstand the test of time.

“Is ‘cool’ still cool?” a writer friend recently asked me. Actually, it is. Young people still use the word to mean hip and current. How awesomesauce is that?

Note: Definitions listed below came from urbandictionary.com.

¹A purposely ambiguous, equivocal word to describe almost any sexual action.

²The human mouth.

³A dance from Atlanta where you dance in a way that resembles Sha-Nae-Nae (a character in the 1990s sitcom “Martin”). Typically males participate in this dance, which makes it funny.

⁴To give a sharp nod to your raised forearm. It looks like you are sneezing.

☒Details, usually details of gossip.

☒Short for “people.”

Author’s bio: Nancy Woods is an author and writing coach.

<https://nancy-woods.com/>

BORN FUNNY

May 11, 2016 [Leave a comment](#)

(What follows is an excerpt from *Under the Influence of Tall Trees: Humorous Tales From a Pacific Northwest Writer*.)

Some of us are born funny. Some of us aren't. I have a relative (Let's call her Ms. Grim) who once told me she'd lost her sense of humor *Where? Along the side of the road?* She was wrong. How can you lose something you never had?

My mother didn't have a sense of humor, either, bless her serious heart. Why? Because she was a genuinely nice person who always had a smile on her face. In contrast, humorists can be just a little bit mean, whether they're making fun of the government, a friend or themselves. Me, I'm an equal-opportunity insulter. I make fun of myself and everyone else.

When I was a kid, I was always cracking myself up. I'd make silly jokes at the dinner table until I snorted milk out my nose or I'd jump up and perform a silly sketch, then end up rolling on the floor. My mother, a gentile woman who deserved better, would look down at me with a *How-did-I-give-birth-to-this person?* look on her face.

I don't know where I got my sense of humor. Like I said, I don't come from particularly funny folks. My mom's side of the family is rife with responsible adults — highly paid professionals (accountants, attorneys and airline pilots). Not people you want to be cutting up.

My father's side of the family is a bit of a mystery, which gives me hope. Other people may dream about being rich and famous. I dream about being Jewish. Some of the best humorists are or were Jewish (Think Dorothy Parker and Jerry Seinfeld), although there are plenty of non-Jewish humorists, too (including Mark Twain and E. B. White).

All I know is that I enjoy being funny, whether I'm telling a ridiculous story or writing a silly rant. It just feels so good to let it all out, like a sneeze, only less wet. To me, being funny is part of being human, and telling jokes is a high art — one that deserves federal support.

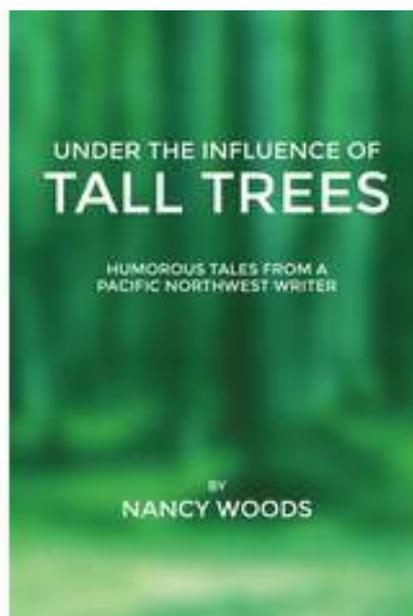
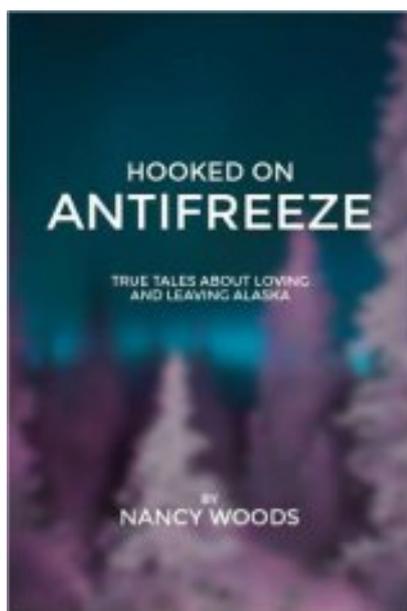
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<http://www.amazon.com/Under-Influence-Trees-Nancy-Woods/dp/1312256427>

<http://www.amazon.com/Hooked-Antifreeze-Nancy-Wilbur-Woods/dp/1304334708>



TALES FROM THE HALLMARK: IT'S NOT A

BRAIN TUMOR

April 13, 2016 *Leave a comment*



Hallmark Building

From what they tell me, most non-writers think writers spend their days sitting in a calm, quiet room where they twiddle their pen when they aren't tapping on their keyboard or staring thoughtfully into distant corners.

My reality isn't that calm or quiet. In fact, instead of writing the Great American Novel, I spend most of my time dealing with the blown fuses, nonfunctioning furnace and real-life stories of the other inhabitants of the 101-year-old office building in which I try to write.

The other renters of the Hallmark Building include Dani, owner of Black Sheep Salon; Matt, Christopher, Igor and their team of other artists at TigerLily Tattoo; and Katie, owner of Hollywood Lux Boutique, the downstairs shop that specializes in antique, used and vintage household items. Ron, the mild-mannered landlord, can usually be found a few blocks down the street at The Hobby Smith ("Your Source for Model Trains"), which he also owns.

Over the years, the Hallmark has housed everything from a jewelry store and insurance office to a medical marijuana distribution center and a one-room office where a woman sold baby portraits over the phone.

Anyway, one day last month, coffee cup in hand, I took the few steps from my office to Black Sheep across the hall so Dani could do her magic on my hair. When I walked in, Dani was sitting in the hair dryer chair, typing into her phone.

“Just a minute,” she said. “I have a long email to write and want to get it just right.”

I nodded, set my coffee cup on the counter and took a minute to look out the window with its view of the power station, also known as Poo Corner because that’s where dog owners takes their dogs to poop. After donning a black wrap, I took a seat in front of the mirror.

One thing I like about Dani’s salon, in addition to our talks about the latest events in the building, is that it’s a one-chair salon, which means when I get my hair done, Dani and I have the space to ourselves.

“I had to be careful,” Dani said that day, after setting down her phone and walking over to me.

Turns out, the email she was so carefully crafting was not only going to her mother-in-law, a ticklish-enough business, but addressed the topic of childcare. Dani is a multi-tasking mother with two jobs and a part-time nanny. She and her husband recently bought a discount grocery store, just about the time she gave birth to their daughter Sloane, now seven months old.

“I had to get the details and the tone of voice right,” Dani explained, while checking out my hair.

Even for non-writers, life involves writing, a search for the right word, a subtle touch or gentle approach. Over the next few minutes, Dani explained how her mother-in-law would offer to help with childcare, only to cancel at the last minute.

“Undependable childcare is worse than no childcare at all,” I said, remembering the days.

A month later, I was once again sitting inside Black Sheep when Dani said, “My nanny quit.”

“What!?” I said, giving Dani a poke.

When Dani was pregnant she’d planned months ahead to make sure she had a nanny. She eventually found a 48-year-old woman, with grown children of her own, who lived in nearby Vancouver, Washington. Things started out okay, but, as Dani explained while cutting my hair, the woman eventually revealed she was afraid of Portland and didn’t like Dani’s two dogs. Then the nanny’s excuses began. Her phone calls started with “I have a doctor’s appointment” and “I don’t feel well” and led up to “I’m getting migraines and can’t sleep” and “I have an appointment with a neurologist” before culminating with “I think I have a brain tumor.”

“Brain tumor?!” I shouted.

Dani and I looked at each other for a minute before bursting into laughter.

“She must have felt bad quitting, to come up with that,” I said.

“Yes,” Dani said. “She felt horrible. She felt like she let us down and she loves us.” Still, it was funny, so we laughed even more. At which point Dani said

“There’s another story,” Dani said. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Of course.”

Just the other day, Dani said, the nanny asked her “Do you want my 20-year-old daughter to fill in until she moves to Italy?”

“Italy?!” I asked.

We laughed even harder about the bizarre nature of her trying to find dependable daycare. At that very moment, Dani then said, the ex-nanny’s daughter was “sitting in my living room watching TV while pretending she’s taking care of my

child.”

So much for reasonable childcare. So much for the Hallmark being a place where I get away from everything in order to write. The next morning I checked my email and found that Dani had send me a link to a YouTube video called “It’s Not a Tumor.” <https://youtu.be/Tb5lZ8Mni3I>

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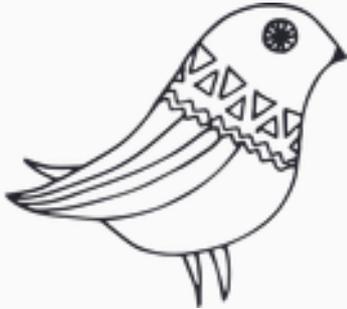


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