Flights: Past, Present, and Future
by Mary Lou Marks

Ten years ago a student library assistant asked me to read a short story he had written. I still remember it. It was called “Mudcat” and dealt with a boy’s coming to terms with the drowning death of his father. Robert told me he had other things he had written, and mentioned that in his old school there had been a literary magazine. I told him that I had always wanted to do a magazine but had not found time when I was in the classroom and hadn’t really thought about it after making the switch to the library. Well, one thing led to another and that year we put out a small edition that contained the work of about six students. We had no art instruction at that time and had to beat the bushes to find people we had seen creating awesome doodles on their notebooks and other inappropriate surfaces around school to do our illustrating. We typed the first edition on an old Apple 2 computer with a really funky dot matrix printer. It did something odd with the tails of letters like “p” but I can’t remember exactly what. And it seems like we printed up about a hundred copies and sold them for a quarter.

The next year there were about a half dozen people who expressed an interest in putting out the magazine. We tried to do two issues that year but found that we did not have enough material to support the extra volume. So, the next year we dropped back to one issue. That year we also started meeting on a regular basis to share writing and work on revising. We essentially formed a writing response group. We’d always start with five to ten minutes of free writing and then we’d read. Sometimes we found that we wanted to write during this time as well. I had developed a file of writing activities during my stint as an English teacher so we’d occasionally do one of those. In February we’d start asking English teachers to be on the lookout for anything they got in response to an assignment that they thought was particularly good. In
addition I would go to the English classes and solicit material.

Slowly the magazine grew. When art was added to the curriculum we were able to tap that source of illustrations. Our computer capabilities have been vastly improved so that after a couple of years of having Flights printed by the local newspaper, we brought it back in-house. We purchased a binding machine and put together 200 issues each spring. The timing is a little tricky—we try to hit in between the annual and the final edition of the school paper. Now between the writing and the art it is not unusual to have the work of 50 students included.

Ten years of sponsoring this group of young people in a creative writing project has taught me many lessons. For example:

1. Don’t expect a crowd. Each year we start out with twelve to fifteen people but it always works its way down to a core of about five or six.

2. Include as many students as possible in the anthology. This is good for morale and circulation.

3. Charge a reasonable price for your publication. $1.00 is good. You will have expenses and students don’t mind paying if they or their friends are published.

4. Don’t print too many copies. Better to be a few short than to have 75 spare magazines lying around to remind you that you’ll never sell as many copies as the newspaper. Remember—they have Snooper.

5. Recognize that students who do not participate in the writing group may or may not be used to the idea of rewriting and may be sensitive about their work. In the early days I talked several people away from ever submitting anything again with criticism and advice that was more than they could deal with.

6. Be prepared to deal with the fact that your students have a million other extra-curricular commitments and writing will often take a back seat to more pressing concerns. You will often feel like they are not writing enough. You will be right, but there is little you can do other than offer opportunities. Something is better than nothing.

7. It’s a great thing not to have to grade the work of students but it still has to be evaluated and deserves thoughtful response.

8. Students will take great pride in producing a magazine and will work hard to make it the best they can.

9. No matter how many times you and your editor proofread the originals, you will overlook at least one mistake. It will be an obvious typo, but someone in your school with typo-radar will find it in under five seconds and will be happy to point it out to you. This will usually be the senior person in the English department.

As I approach my thirteenth year at CHS and my eleventh year as Flights sponsor, there are several things I would like to do this year to strengthen the organization:

1. Recruit club members early in the year through writing activities in the classroom.

2. Use the English classes to generate more material for the magazine. This may mean visiting the English classes more and offering my services as a roving writing resource person to interested faculty members.

3. Try some of the ideas in Peter Elbow’s Writing with Power and Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones with the Flights group.
4. Continue the slow withdrawal of my editor's pen. I'm better at this than I used to be. I used to want to practically do the rewrites. I'm learning to ask more questions and leave the responsibility to the writer.
5. Get other teachers to try these writing activities so I can get back to the SACS report and automating the library.

P.S. Robert is now editor-in-chief of "The General," the magazine of the Avalon Hill Game Company. He was recruited for this position after letters he wrote critiquing directions for their role-playing games had netted him an editing job in that capacity.

Mary Lou Marks is the librarian at Camden High School.

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My Philosophy of Teaching by Amelia Wilkes

I BELIEVE THAT

* teaching needs to be more student-centered and less textbook-centered.
* the best teachers do not teach the curriculum; they help students learn
* the best teachers cannot really teach writing; they enable students to write
* students need to understand the importance of being lifetime learners because education is never finished
* students need encouragement to become productive citizens in the home, the community, the state, nation, and world
* more than being merely human, we all must become more humane

Amelia Wilkes teaches tenth and twelfth grade English at Dyersburg High School.
West Tennessee Writing Project at The University of Tennessee at Martin

"I have done some forty hours of graduate work at five different institutions; but I have never worked harder, complained less, and learned more than I have at the West Tennessee Writing Project." Faye Hardin, English, Northside High School, Jackson

"The most important thing I have learned at WTWP is to value writing. I have important things to say and so do my students." Marjorie Sowder, 3rd grade West Carroll Elementary

"If I could tell someone one thing about WTWP I would say . . . it is the best teaching course I have ever had." Suzanne Edwards, senior English and journalism, Dyersburg High

"My personal writing has blossomed. What began with only a few sentences now has pages." Labrenda Coleman, Weakley County schools substitute, UTM math

The goals of the West Tennessee Writing Project are to improve writing and writing instruction in West Tennessee schools, K-12. WTWP operates on the principles that the best teacher of a teacher is another teacher; teachers who teach writing must be writers themselves; writing improves as writing instruction improves.

The heart of WTWP is the annual intensive summer writing institute for the best of the best west Tennessee teachers, all subject matter areas, K-12, held on the UTM campus and offered as English 700-701 for six hours of graduate credit.

If you would like to apply to be part of the 1996 intensive summer institute June 10-July 3, 1996, Complete the form on the back and mail to WTWP. Also look for the brochure about the ‘96 summer institute after the first of the year. WTWP teacher-consultants also are available to provide in-service for schools and school systems.

The West Tennessee Writing Project is funded by a grant from the National Writing Project, the University of California, Berkeley; and The University of Tennessee at Martin; with additional grants from Union City Schools, Weakley County Schools, and the Tennessee Collaborative for Excellence in Education.

To learn more about the annual summer writing institute and in-services by teachers, call or write:

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A Philosophy of Writing
by Suzanne Powers

I believe that:

1) Writing has more meaning if it has purpose—whether directed to a particular audience or just as self-expression, getting rid of emotion through the printed word.

2) Writing becomes easier when encouragement is plentiful and frequent. Teachers can supply this through instruction and monitoring the process, but most effectively through modeling positive behavior.

3) Writing improves through practice. Just as unused muscles atrophy through lack of exercise, writing skills can become dormant from lack of practice.

4) Becoming successful at writing involves learning to think like a writer, stretching the mind with imagination and paying attention to detail.

5) Reading aloud a piece of writing gives one ownership of his/her writing. The words become more powerful when given voice.

Suzanne Powers is librarian and computer teacher at East Side Elementary in Union City.
West Tennessee Writing Project
Summer Institute 1995 Participants and Guests

Amelia Wilkes, Dyersburg High School, 10th, 12th grade English
Angie Watson, Big Sandy School, 7-12th grade English and drama
Ann Hatton, Caywood City School, Lexington, 5-8th grade reading and English
Carolyn Doss, Martin Primary School, music
Diane Shaw, Jackson State, Dyersburg State Community Colleges, art
Faye Hardin, Jackson North Side High School, 12th grade English
Glenda Arant, Martin Junior High School, 6th grade language arts and math
Glenda Cozart, Union City Middle School, 8th grade
Jacquelyn H. Bowman, Fayette-Ware Comprehensive High School, 9th grade English

Meredith Schultz, Newbern Elementary, 6th grade English, social studies
Kay Smith, Union City East Side Elementary, 5th grade
Labrenda Coleman Weakley County Schools, substitute, UTM math
Marilyn Etheredge, Trenton Elementary, 4th grade
Marjorie Sowder, West Carroll Primary, McLemoresville, 3rd grade
Martha Freeman, Martin Primary, kindergarten
Mary Lou Marks, Camden Central High School, library
Suzanne Edwards, Dyersburg High School, senior English and journalism
Suzanne Powers, Union City East Side Elementary, library, computer
Tammy Alexander, Martin Primary, kindergarten
Tiffany Jackson, Humboldt East End Elementary, kindergarten

Guests to the ’95 Summer Institute:

Trent Evans, 5th grade, Canterbury School, Greensboro, NC
Joy Ritchie, director of composition, Department of English, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE
Kerstin Van Dervoort, senior English, Lincoln Southeast High School, Lincoln, NE
Beth Jones, College of Education, Murray State University, Murray, KY
Number 68
by Martha Freeman

'A 68,' I read. I remember thinking, 'A 68? How come?' I'd have to look at his form and see why. When I get my new Kindergarten students each year, what I first see is a big yellow envelope—the sacred cumulative record. It contains a student information sheet, filled out by the parents, a Special Services card, always blank, and a Preschool screening form. This form tests children on a zero to one-hundred-point scale. It is my first look at my new students. And now I had a child who was a 68 according to this measurement.

I looked at Number 68's form and pondered. Well, he missed a few Visual Discrimination, but so do I without my glasses. He didn't know the color grey or his address and phone number, but his family had moved to Martin only the week before his screening. He hadn't written his name very well or drawn the four shapes neatly enough to pass, but some four-and-a-half and five-year-olds can't control a pencil very well yet.

Oh, yes, here was his biggest problem. He had failed every one of his gross motor skills! He couldn't walk forward heel to toe, much less backwards; he couldn't hop on one, two, or the recommended three times on one foot; he couldn't balance on one foot, eyes closed or opened.

'What will I do,' I thought. I knew I could teach him his address and phone number and the color grey, but if he couldn't even walk correctly, oh dear, what would I do then?

The day dawned dreary and rainy. At 10:30 I would drive to G unit of University Courts and meet Number 68, a trip I dreaded. As I filled a backpack with the items each child would need to bring for Kindergarten I rehearsed my home-visit speech. I tried to sound chipper and excited to have Number 68 in my class, but I wasn't too convincing. As the appointed hour neared, my dread increased. What could I do? How could I not convey in my voice or manner that this child was a 68—and I already knew it?

As I approached the door I paused, took a deep breath, painted on my best smile and knocked. A pleasant face greeted me and the door was opened wide.

"Pardon our mess," said Mom, "but we've just moved in and I started classes, and...."

'Yes, yes,' I thought, 'We're all busy. Let's just get this over with.'

"Honey," mom called, "come and meet your teacher."

"No!" came a sullen reply.

'Great!' I thought, 'a 68 and stubborn too!' I felt my smile wearing thin.

"Oh, come on, you'll like her," mom pleaded.

From around the door facing he peered—bright blue-green eyes, a tousled mop of shaggy brown hair, and a pout on his freckled face.

"Hello there," I said. "I've got some things in my backpack you might like to see. Do you want to take a look?"

Number 68 glared at me for a while, then came into the room.

At that moment my perception of many things changed. My use of standardized scores as measures for rating children left my brain, never to return. The value I had placed on stanines, percentiles, modes, and medians evaporated. My use of I.Q. and T-CAP scores for viewing, ranking, and judging children withered and dried.

Number 68 was in a wheelchair. He had been born with Spina Bifida and would never walk heel to toe, forward or backward. He would never hop on one foot.
two, or the recommended three times. He would never balance on one foot, eyes closed or opened.

But what Number 68 could do was sing and play and read and write and give rides to his buddies in his wheelchair. He could play ball, play tag and dig in the dirt on the playground. He could have friends whom he loved and who would love him right back. He struggled with his address and phone number, but eventually mastered them, along with the color grey. When he got new glasses, he could visually discriminate with the best of them. He was stubborn sometimes, but usually he laughed and lived and learned just like the rest of his classmates.

More importantly however, he taught his teacher a very valuable lesson. He may have been only a 68 on a form but scored a perfect 100% in her heart.

Martha Freeman teaches Kindergarten students at Martin Primary School.

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**Teachers Wear Many Hats**

by Gloria Howell

There are many duties of teaching that the textbooks in college don’t cover. I have found in my twenty-one years of teaching that teachers wear many hats. I have been called upon to minister to my students in many ways. I am a doctor (skinned knees are my specialty). I am a judge (playground duty is very similar to night court). I am a counselor (look out Dr. Ruth). I am a janitor (just call me Ms. Clean). I am a banker (lunch money, candy sales, pictures, etc.). Among my other duties I also teach. I teach science, math, English, social studies, history, reading, writing, art, music, computer, gymastics, and library science under one job description: elementary teacher.

There is one other hat that I wear that needs to be added to the list. That hat is the all encompassing hat of social director. It includes all class trips, and fund raising efforts, and seasonal parties which brings me to the present duty of Halloween party.

I loved the Halloween parties as a child when I bobbed for apples, had costume contests, ate popcorn balls, and listened to scary stories in the dark. Now Halloween parties have a different connotation for me. The scary stories that I was once entertained with are now coming true in the form of my classroom Halloween parties. For instance, gone is the docile bobbing for apples. Instead, my class turns into a free-for-all while playing drop-the-clothespin in a basket. When playing a game, naturally everyone wants to be first. When one of my room mothers tried to form an organized line, the fight was on. One boy declared he was going to be first because he was leader for the
day. A little girl said she was first because girls are supposed to be first and another little girl said she was first because her mother brought the clothes' pins!

That's when the shoving match began. The children were all squeezed into the line like sardines in a can, and when one little girl pushed the other one, the whole line went down like dominoes. The quiet little boy who always waits his turn and never makes a fuss happened, unfortunately, to be at the end of the pile. He got squashed when the biggest boy in the class landed on him. Doctor teacher had to put ice in a Ziploc bag and put it on his head where he had made a close encounter with the concrete floor. Thank goodness we didn't bob for apples. I would have probably had to administer mouth-to-mouth to the child at the bottom of that stack.

Then there was the cupcake episode. Everyone knows that kids don't actually eat cupcakes. They just lick the icing off and leave the rest. That's fine if they'd just leave the cupcake remnants on the table. I heard a voice shout, "Hey! That's my cupcake, don't step on it!" I heard another voice reply, "No it isn't, yours is on Cameron's shoe." I was stirred into immediate action, but, unfortunately I got there too late. The good side to it was that I could track the culprit by his chocolate footprints. You haven't lived until you've had the privilege of digging chocolate cupcake out of the grooves of a high topped tennis shoe. At least I hope it was chocolate cupcake.

Somehow, the fondness I once held for Halloween parties is beginning to fade. In the middle of the party, I start to wonder if Halloween parties in general have gotten louder or if my hearing is more sensitive. Funny, I don't remember parties being this loud twenty years ago. In the midst of the pandemonium, one of my room mothers came up to me and said, "You are so lucky to get to have fun like this every day." Yeah—right! Just as I was about to tell her clearly that this was not—nor will it ever be—my idea of fun, two little arms stole around my knees and squeezed me in a tight hug. I looked down into the biggest, happiest, smiling brown eyes and she said, "This is the best Halloween party I ever had."

Suddenly, the party didn't seem as loud. I'm sure that twenty years from now, no one will remember the noise, the pushing and shoving, or the cupcakes on the floor, but they will remember the fun. That was what the party was all about in the first place. Yes, teachers wear many hats. No, college doesn't prepare you for all of them. Don't worry. The children will teach you whatever else you need to know.

Gloria Howell teaches fifth grade at Hillcrest Elementary in Troy.

Sense of Place
by John Egerton

When I took up the freelance trade back in 1971, the least of my worries was a workspace. All I needed—or so I thought—was daytime rights to the guest bedroom. My desk and typewriter and a bookcase would fit nicely into one corner. Four of us had lived rather peacefully in that house for a number of years; I saw no reason why my working there should change that.

But it did. I soon found that I was on other people's turf, or they were on mine. Our basic needs—for access to the telephone, for visitors, for quiet time—were frequently in conflict.

The coexistence lasted
through one winter of discontent. As soon as spring came, my friend the carpenter and I set about to transform half of the two-car carport and the tool shed into a new room. The other half of the carport became the family buffer zone, a sort of transition space between home and office and peace was thereby maintained.

My new hideaway was as spare, as utilitarian, as basic as a monk’s cell. It also had a few design flaws, among them a leaky roof, a too-low ceiling, inadequate heating and cooling, not enough bookshelves, and water pipes that seemed to freeze with the first cold snap. But it wore well with time, and I was pleased to discover that it seemed to stretch to fit me as comfortably as my favorite old moth-eaten sweater.

I spent the next fifteen years happily ensconced in that scrivener’s cloister, and throughout that time, whenever I heard others refer to the mystical and celebrated Southern sense of place, I associated the phrase with that arena where I struggled daily to coax immortal words out of my old Royal manual. (I was to learn that only the Royal was immortal—the words were all too fleeting—but that was later, long after I had become a permanent resident.)

For most people, job satisfaction is tied in some measure to working conditions and surroundings. That is certainly true for me; where and how I work are almost as important as productivity in my index of occupational well-being. My back yard office kept me off the streets and out of the institutions, where collective mischief reigns. It gave me solitude and quietude I craved, and left me free to talk to myself without being overheard and thought unstable.

The room was 15 feet square, with one-fourth of the floor space given to a small bathroom, an even smaller closet, and two 6-foot lengths of floor-to-ceiling bookcases. That left about 170 square feet for the rest of my needs. Into that tight little island I compactly shoe-horned the following:

A 2 1/2-by-8-foot desk top supported by a pair of two-drawer filing cabinets; an attached 1 1/2-by-4-foot typing table; a 2-by-6-foot day bed/couch; a 2-by-3-foot work table; a large tin-sided cabinet known in these parts as a pie safe; a small redwood coffee table; a nail-keg end table; a desk chair; a rocking chair; three lamps; a telephone; a radio; an air conditioner and a space heater, both mounted in the wall. That’s a fairly modest inventory for an office—but considerably more than I could have squeezed into a corner of the guest bedroom.

The floor was a carpeted concrete slab. A large double window faced east into the back-yard trees that separated me from my neighbors. Most of the available wall space was filled with pictures, a bulletin board, a calendar, a coat rack, and a framed needlepoint banner that read: GOD IS A YANKEE! (There’s not enough space here to explain that.)

I never got around to putting a shower in the bathroom because the hot water line froze and broke under the concrete slab and I had to shut it off at the source and be content with only cold running water. But what the bathroom lacked in creature comforts was almost overshadowed by what it gained as an interesting and amusing place, a Southern menagerie.

For there, in addition to the unexceptional plumbing, were an ox-yoke towel rack; my great-grandfather’s surgical saw; a souvenir from the last passenger train to run through Nashville; the front page of a 19th century Tennessee socialist newspaper; a two-year-old country ham; likenesses of Andrew Jackson, Julius Augustus Wayland, Earl Scruggs, Tootsie Bess, and the Southern Turf, a turn-of-the-century Nashville saloon; a photocopy of Richard M. Nixon’s letter of resignation; autographed favors from J. Edgar Hoover, Colonel Louis “Hawk” Rogers, and two chanteuses of my acquaintance, ticket stubs from a benefit concert for NOW; and the menu for a Kentucky Derby breakfast at the governor’s mansion. The bone-dry shower stall was covered with 16-page press sheets from a book I once wrote.

But my favorite attraction in the tiny bathroom/museum was what I called the Wailing Wall, a 3-by-7 foot panel completely covered with letters. “I could paper an entire wall with my rejection slips,” I used to complain, echoing other rejected scribblers before me—and
then one day I just decided to quit boasting and do it.

They were all there—Harper's, The Atlantic, Playboy, Esquire, Time, Newsweek, Saturday Review, National Geographic, you name it. "We think the piece too thin, unhappily," began one judgment. "We had hoped to use your article," explained another, "but as it turned out were unable to do so." And for straight-to-the-point brevity, this note from a Washington Post editor took the prize: "No, I'm afraid not. Thanks for sending it, though."

Ah, those were the days, and that office was the place. I might have gone on to penurious old age there, as happy as a hog in slop, had it not been for the leaking roof and the distracting fact that a nest of voracious termites decided one year to eat the south wall. The structure was adjudged to be too extensively damaged to repair; rather than a new roof and wall, we decided to give it a whole new body from the slab up.

The trauma of lugging my tools to temporary exile in the house and watching the workmen tear my little den asunder was far greater than I had imagined. In a corner of the exposed room I found initials and date etched in the concrete--B.E. 8/72--and I thought of the 13-year-old boy who had put them there. Elsewhere, two more sets of initials turned up--M.E. and D.E.--and with them, signatures of the owners: a sneaker print and a dog's paw print. Gazing at these exposed artifacts, I felt as if we had forced open a time capsule prematurely, or uncorked a fine wine before its time.

In the house, I faced and even more unsettling task: sifting through years of papers, files, letters, notebooks, magazines, and manuscripts, trying to decide what to keep and what to throw away. I thought I had been making those choices right along, but I was mistaken. Every shelf presented a wave of old memories, a retrospective of crusades won and lost, promises kept and broken, dreams realized and deferred and discarded in the shuffle of time. I found photographs from some of my assignments in the 'sixties and 'seventies, and the images seemed distant, almost antique. I found maps of places I had been and places I failed to reach. I found tapes that resonated with old voices since stilled. For days, weeks, the past filled up my present.

Finally, after too much time and too much money had been spent, I moved into my new office. It is a clean, well-lighted place with a high ceiling and plenty of insulation and plumbing that works. The walls are fresh and uncluttered, and the bookcases are bigger and better than before. My desk is back where it was, and so is the old Royal, and next to it is a brand new computer/word processor which I have thus far learned how to turn on and off, and not much else.

I have every intention of mastering this high-tech machine--not with any illusion that it will make my words immortal, but simply with the hope that it will make typing and editing less laborious. I ought to be more efficient in this new place with all its attractiveness and comfort, and with the tools at hand to write, edit, file, and even transmit words faster and more accurately than ever before.

But it's going to take some time to get it all together. The walls are still bare and plain, the carpet smell newly unrolled, the windows are clean. The atmosphere is antiseptic and sterile, like an operating room. I've got to get pictures back on the walls, and some new maps, and the GOD IS A YANKEE! banner. I might even put up another Wailing Wall, grander than before, showing the art of rejection raised to height heretofore unimagined.

What this place lacks is character—a little dirt, a few tears, some bloodstains. As I think back on it, the first office needed 15 years to ripen and almost rot. Maybe in a decade or so I can get this one in shape.

This essay is used with the permission of the author. It was part of Egerton's presentation, "The Importance of Place," at the Jesse Stuart Writing Symposium, April 8, 1995, at Murray State University. Egerton, who lives and works in Nashville, is the author of over a dozen books, including Southern Food, newly published in paperback by the University of North Carolina Press, and Speak Now Against the Day: the generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South, published in 1994.
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