

## Field Notes - Volume 5, Number 2

### West Tennessee Writing Project Spring 1997

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## Field Notes - Volume 5, Number 2

### Let There Be Light

by Missy Owen

The summer of 1996 was a busy one. After spending three days of vacation time, I helped my school system revise portfolio guidelines for a week. Then I was off to UT-Martin for the West Tennessee Writing Project and four intense weeks of rethinking, refocusing, and rejuvenating. These activities were intellectually and emotionally stimulating, but my biggest challenge was to begin the Monday after WTWP ended.

That challenge came in the form of thirty troubled adolescents in a Shelby County School's summer program called Turning Point. These thirty students had both behavioral and academic problems and had either nearly failed or barely failed seventh or eighth grade. If these pupils successfully completed the three-week Turning Point program, they were allowed to advance to the next grade level. Turning Point met from 7:30 to 11:30 each day, and students had to score 80% or above on each assignment as well as attend each day in order to graduate on July 26. The daily schedule included a fifteen-minute large group meeting, a fifteen-minute break, and three one-hour-and-ten-minute rotating academic sessions. The thirty students were divided into three groups of ten for the rotating sessions. I was to teach Language Arts, and Reo Pruiett and Ruth Neal were both to teach mathematics because the system wanted the students to have extra math reinforcement due to TCAP scores.

At 7:00 a.m., Monday, July 8, I arrived at Millington Central High School, my Turning

Point site. The students arrived one by one, and the main thing I noticed about them all was that they were so hard and distant. The light I was accustomed to seeing in my regular school year students' eyes was conspicuously missing from theirs. I became a bit apprehensive about the three weeks at this point. It was both frightening and sad that students this young were already so worn out and disillusioned. How could I ever cut through the darkness and reach the minds and souls inside in only three weeks?

After the large group met and pre-testing was completed, we divided the students into groups of ten and each took a group to our respective classrooms. I wrote a journal topic on the board: Why are you in Turning Point? Before WTWP, I would merely have taken these entries up and read them. Instead, though, I told them we would share at least one sentence of our entries with the group. I wrote with them, and they wrote, too. I read my entry and asked each student to read part of his or hers, too. One student, Eric Ragland, wanted to read his whole entry instead of just one sentence. A flicker! I enthusiastically assured him that would be wonderful. He beamed and read. They all read?some hesitantly, some willingly. The students had not been promoted to eighth or ninth grade for various reasons: academic problems, multiple discipline suspensions, chronic absenteeism, bringing a hand grenade to school. . . yes, a hand grenade. It was going to be an interesting three weeks. After journal writing came TCAP Language Arts objectives practice sessions, which were to be the main mission of my daily hour and ten minutes with these students. The first day went rather quickly because the pre-tests had taken an hour and a half to complete.

The first week passed with its share of problems and successes. Most students were reading more and more of their journal entries aloud and were making 80% on their TCAP objective quizzes. These students were starting to soften just a little bit, and I saw a few more flickers in a few more eyes. Reo Pruiett, one of the math teachers, mentioned the first Friday that she had heard a lot of the kids talking about how much they were enjoying writing in journals and sharing them out loud. I was pleased and planned more of the same for the second week.

The second week began well, and despite some discipline problems during breaks and three students being kicked out for refusing to do work and picking on the smallest boy in the group, the students were following the rules fairly well and doing the required assignments for all of us. On Wednesday, however, the students in all three groups were hostile and uncooperative in my class. They were great during journal sharing but were awful during TCAP practice. Flickers were starting to dim, so I revamped my plans. We still did some isolated skill work for TCAP, but I started reading aloud to the students as a springboard for journaling. That renewed the flickers and got the kids going again. On Monday of the final week of the program, I read to them the nonfiction piece, "Mawmaw and Pawpaw" by Glennray Tutor, a Mississippi writer. It was to lead into a journal entry about the students' favorite relatives. While we wrote our journal entries that day, it hit me. Why didn't we take these journal entries and work them into nonfiction pieces of our own? Then we could type them up in the computer lab (if I could convince Mr. McVay and Dr. Eilert to trust me and those students in the lab) and make a book for the students to keep at the end of the three weeks just like we had done at WTWP. It was worth a try! I proposed the idea to the students, and I got a few sparks of interest in each group, so we began. They listed three specific memories they had of/with their selected relatives and did WTWP-er Debby Cox's sensory details chart for each of those memories. On Tuesday they took the memories and sensory detail charts and wove them into stories much like Glennray Tutor's. The pieces were far from perfect, but they were incredible compared to the quality of work I had received from them previously. They were to take their stories home that night and finish them, and on Wednesday we would go to the computer lab and begin typing our pieces. Mr. McVay and Dr. Eilert had kindly agreed to trust us in the

fairly new Millington Central computer lab.

The next morning, I checked to see that everyone had a rough draft. Even after the excited, beaming interest of the previous few days, nine or ten of the twenty-seven students still in the program did not have their drafts completed. Mrs. Pruiett and Mrs. Neal agreed to give those nine or ten extra math work while I took the other sixteen or seventeen students with me to type their stories in the lab. It was a slow process, but everyone had typed and printed by the end of the three-hour block. When we went downstairs with our masterpieces to leave for the day, I was shocked. All the other students but one had begged the other teachers to let them finish their stories for the book. Mrs. Pruiett and Mrs. Neal had allowed them to, so I had stories for twenty-six of twenty-seven kids! I was amazed. Their eyes lit up as I agreed to include their works (untyped, of course) in the book. I also announced that we would need to design a cover for our publication. Several students went home that night and designed possible covers for the anthology, and we voted the next day. Those students who had been so hard and distant were now interested and enthusiastic. Gareth Parham's design and title won. I compiled The Turning Point Book that afternoon and handed the volumes out on our last day, Friday, July 16. "Here's my story!" and "Where's yours?" echoed throughout the room, and eyes were glowing with pride. Those dark, troubled kids were closer to being the bright-eyed, eager children they had been before their desire to achieve and please was extinguished by problems in their families, schools, and world. This book was not the only reason for the change, of course. Reo Pruiett and Ruth Neal had worked and counseled long and hard throughout that three weeks to make a difference in those kids? and their efforts paid off, too.

The language arts post-test scores were promising: Of the twenty-four students who were present for both the pre-and post-tests, twelve of them had improved, and two of them made the same score both times. Of the ten who did worse on the post-test, four of them dropped only a point or two.

Reo Pruiett told me in September that Relzie Payton, the county director for Turning Point, is showing her copy of our book around, saying it is just the sort of thing she had hoped to see this program produce. Our site did produce that book?and so much more.

As of January 1997, most of our students who had completed the program were still in school, staying out of trouble, and making better grades than they ever had before. And all it took to rekindle these students' innate desire to please and be praised were three teachers, hard work, journaling and sharing, and a book of writing they could call their own.

Author's Note: Thanks to WTWP for giving me the tools to bring back the lights in the eyes of these wonderful kids and to Reo Pruiett for encouraging me through the tough parts of Turing Point '96. Love and thanks also go to the students who showed me that writing about themselves, sharing it, and publishing it can and does make a difference: Undre Newble, Brandon Cole, Nick Webb, Dino Nash, Gareth Parham, Brian Sanders, Robbie Peeler, Cliff Hardin, Brandy Smith, Anthony Rispoli, Jeremy Mallady, Ron Lomax, Erick Ragland, Joey Brown, Ernie Sapp, David Anderson, Barry Bufford, Shane Crider, Marcus Miller, Steven Rickard, Charles Woods, Camethia Smith, Cleo Jones, Mike Olson, Amos Black, Kelly Parham, and Paul Skinner.

Missy Owen teaches Spanish and AP 10th grade English at Bolton High School, Shelby County Schools.

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## We're published, we're honored

"Our Wal-Mart Is Bigger Than Our Mall': Writing That Matters," in *The Quarterly* of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Summer 1996, Suzanne Styron Edwards, English-journalism teacher, Dyersburg High School. Suzanne is a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project.

Ann Hatton, fifth-eighth grade reading and English teacher at Caywood City School in Lexington, has been named a teacher of the year by Wal-Mart. Ann is a teacher consultant of the West Tennessee Writing Project.

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## Looking ahead

August 9, 1997, annual workshop for English/language arts teachers sponsored by UT Martin Department of English in collaboration with the West Tennessee Writing Project, 9-3, University Center, UT Martin. Twenty-two school systems have approved the workshop as an optional day of in-service. Gabriele Rico, author of *Writing the Natural Way* and *Pain and Possibility*, is the opening presenter, followed by concurrent sessions led by teacher consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project. See complete program and registration form elsewhere in this issue of Field Notes.

October 3-4, 1997, Tennessee Council of Teachers of English, Marriott Hotel, Chattanooga. Watch for Tennessee Council of Teachers of English News for program and registration information.

October 10-12, 1997, Southern Festival of Books, Nashville.

November 20-25, 1997, National Council of Teachers of English, Detroit.

### Courses for Teachers and their Friends

This fall, UT-Martin English Department will offer three evening courses for either undergraduate or graduate credit on the UT-Martin campus.

"Women's Lives," English 495/695, taught by Polly Glover, will center on reading women's journals, memoirs, and autobiographies and on class participants writing their own autobiographical materials. "Women's Lives" meets once a week, Tuesday evenings, 5-7:45, beginning August 19.

In "Fiction Writing," English 310/510, taught by Margrethe Ahlschwede, class participants will read contemporary fiction by writers such as Ellen Gilchrist, Robert Owen Butler, and Toni Cade Bambara, and write their own short stories. "Fiction Writing" meets once a week, Monday evenings, 5-7:45, beginning August 18.

"The British Novel to Joyce," English 470/670, will be taught by Lynn Alexander. It meets once a week, Thursday evenings, 6-8:50, beginning August 21.

At either the undergraduate or graduate level, these courses may be used for teacher re-certification. At the graduate level, they may be used for the 30 hours above the Masters

degree, or as electives in the masters program through the School of Education.

For further information about registration for any of these courses, watch for the UT-M Evening School course descriptions in the mail, or call or write Sandy Belote, Department of Continuing Education, (901) 587-7080, 109B Gooch Hall, UT-Martin, 38238. For reading lists and more information about content of the courses, call either Polly Glover, Margrethe Ahlschwede, or Lynn Alexander, Department of English, UT-Martin, (901) 587-7300.

## CELEBRATING READING AND WRITING

Twenty-third Annual English Teachers' Workshop

Saturday, August 9, 1997, University Center, The University of Tennessee at Martin  
9:00-9:30 a.m. Registration, coffee and rolls--lobby of the University Center; UTM bookstore open

9:30-10:45 "Knowing and Doing: Improvising with Language," with Gabriele Rico, teacher, writer, and author of *Writing the Natural Way* and *Pain and Possibility*, opening session

10:45-11:00 Break

11:00-12:15 Concurrent Sessions --Teachers Teaching Teachers

"Bear-ly Writing," Phyllis Climer, WTWP teacher consultant and kindergarten, Dyer County Central Elementary, Dyersburg

"Authentic Writing and Real Language," Paula Cox, WTWP teacher consultant and grades 1-3, Camden Elementary

"Tales from the Tell-Tale Heart," Elizabeth Womack, WTWP teacher consultant and 8th grade English, Northeast Middle School, Jackson

"Student Spin Doctors: Propaganda and the Media," Missy Owen, WTWP teacher consultant and Spanish and 10th grade AP English, Bolton High School, Shelby County Schools

12:30-1:30 Luncheon

1:45-3:00 Concurrent Sessions --More Teachers Teaching Teachers

"First Authors--Novel Ideas," Donna Dabbs, WTWP teacher consultant and first grade, Halls Elementary

"Motivating the Reluctant Writer," Kathy Johnson, WTWP teacher consultant and 3rd grade, Shannon Elementary, Memphis City Schools

"On the World's Edge: Non-Fiction in the Classroom," Judy Russell, WTWP teacher consultant and 8th grade language arts, Page Middle School, Franklin

"Painless Prescription: Writing Real Poetry," Amelia Wilkes, WTWP teacher consultant and 9th, 10th, 12th grade English, Dyersburg High School

Approved for Optional Day of Inservice: This workshop has been approved by supervisors of instruction as an optional day of inservice in these school districts: Benton County; Bradford; Bruceton-Hollow Rock; Carroll Academy; Crockett County; Dyer County; Fayette County; Haywood County; Henry County; Humboldt City System; Huntingdon Special; Lake County; Lauderdale County; McKenzie Special; McNairy County; Obion County; South Carroll County Special; Tipton County; Trenton Special; Union City Schools; Weakley County; West Carroll Special.

This twenty-third annual workshop is sponsored by the UT Martin Department of English and Division of Continuing Education in collaboration with the West Tennessee Writing

Project, celebrating its fifth year as a site of the National Writing Project. It is funded in part by 1997 Dwight D. Eisenhower Professional Development Program funds administered by the State of Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

Registration cost: \$25. Watch for flyers with registration form, in the mail the end of March. Or call UTM Division of Continuing Education, (901) 587-7082, to register.

### About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is in its fifth year as an affiliate site of the National Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley. Located in the Department of English at UT-Martin, WTWP is supported by grants from NWP with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional funds come from Union City Schools, and to support the summer '97 WTWP institute, a 1996-97 Title II Eisenhower Professional Development Grant administered by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

The West Tennessee Writing Project seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools. It offers its annual summer writing institute for selected teachers where teachers work to become stronger writers themselves and to become more effective teachers of writing. It works with supervisors of instruction to increase professional development opportunities for teachers by helping to arrange and conduct inservice workshops and writing consultations.

The Director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, assistant professor of English at UT-M. Co-directors are Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Glenda Arant, 7th grade math and language arts teachers, Martin Junior High School. For more information contact:

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## Experiences as a Teacher of Writing

by Charlotte Zarecor

I have always found it difficult to teach writing and have not done as much teaching of it as I should. Therefore, last year I applied to participate in the West Tennessee Writing Project and was accepted. In addition, I enrolled in a Fiction Writing course in the fall semester at The University of Tennessee at Martin.

I feel that my teaching of writing has been much more successful and has been more effective for my students. The technique which I now use most often and in my opinion has provided several devices for my students as well as an alleviation of paper grading for me, is writing and reading orally.

The guidelines I have provided for my students are simple. Prior to writing, they are reminded that anything they write, they must be willing to read before the class. At first there were lots of moans and groans. However, most of them have come to accept the stipulation without complaint. Not only has this alleviated some of my paperwork which

has allowed me to give more writing assignments, the students have become more conscientious about their writing. They are more involved in proofing their own writing as well as having their classmates proof it for them. It has been rewarding for me also to see them striving to perfect their writing.

An example of another skill which they have perfected is writing descriptively. I teach seniors and was appalled the first time I assigned descriptive paragraphs at what I received. They had not described; they had merely told about the object they were describing. Using a practice from WTWP, I escorted my students outside and instructed them to select some object and, using their senses, jot down some notes about it. We returned to the classroom for them to write their paragraphs. The improvement was unbelievable. Not only had they used sensual descriptions, they had resorted to metaphors and similes to make their descriptions more vivid. Now whenever they are required to write, I remind them of this exercise and not only has it improved their writing, it has made reading their written work much more enjoyable. Sometimes they even got "carried away" and went a little too far in creativeness when they were going to read aloud. At least there was plenty of evidence that they were enjoying their creativity and the realization that they could write something that they were eager to share.

Charlotte Zarecor teaches at Trenton Peabody High School.

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## **Experimenting with Writing Styles and Places**

by Judy Russell

When the West Tennessee Writing Project Intensive Writing Institute '96 ended in July, I knew I would miss the people with whom I had spent some of what I thought was the most profitable time in my academic career. Well, I still visit with my friends/colleagues weekly as I use their fantastic writing ideas in my classes. I have adapted everything from first grade to high school in my middle school curriculum this year and it has worked. First, I led my students in search of writing topics by using a method similar to the literate life history demonstration that began the writing project. My students were amazed that they had so many ideas of things to write about when they finished their Writing Treasure Trove.

Kathy Johnson has visited my classroom when I worked with my inclusion group as they were reading *The Outsiders*. We used the process of webbing to find character traits and the students finally understood what a character trait was. "Oh, you mean it is how someone is."

Donna Dabbs was with me when some of my challenge students made a book from the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter." They thought this was a really neat idea to make a hard-cover book and then give it as a gift.

Billy Allison spent several days in my room when I led my students through writing about setting. It amazed me to see them use the same tactics that many of us used in the writing project. They loved to share what they wrote and listened as avidly as they shared.

*Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg has been used often with my classes.

Goldberg suggests that writers should experience writing in different places. With this in

mind, I took my class on an adventure with nature. After a discussion about designs in nature, we went outside on a cool, cloudy, fall day and observed a very specific part of nature such as a spider spinning a web or the inside of a honeysuckle. The students took notes using their senses. They then widened their horizons and looked at the larger setting of the specific part of nature, once again using their senses. The poetry resulting from this experience was rewarding. How did the students respond? They loved it and decided that poetry wasn't all that bad.

After reading Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* during the summer institute, I decided that I would attempt to set up a writing workshop. This has been the best part of the school year for me and I really believe, for my students. Each Friday is designated as Writing Workshop. I have really been amazed at the quality of work most of the students have turned in. They have been amazed that I have only wanted them to turn something in to me when they really feel comfortable with it. Would you believe that I have taken up only one story to grade with that red pen (I, of course, use purple!)? One student said, "Mrs. Russell, do you know that you have only made us turn in one story all semester?" I, in turn, asked her how many she had written and she said, "Lots."

The students like to read to me. They are interested in my questions and write them down. Students who have mechanics problems and learning problems are all becoming successful writers. No, they aren't going to be published authors anytime soon, but they are expressing themselves and feeling good about it. Expecting the very worst, I tried the literary response groups with the writing workshop. Was I ever blown away when the students accepted the task and responded to each other in a mature fashion. Most of all, I love hearing the students when I say that this is the day for writing workshop and they respond with, "YES!!"

Mary Lou Marks and Lisa Hurd have become residents in my classroom. As a review of expository writing styles in preparation for that dreaded TCAP writing assessment, I have used Mary Lou's skeleton approach to the writing. The students now understand what a five-paragraph paper looks like. (Isn't it sad that they have to do this in order to pass the test?) Lisa's demonstration in holistic grading has cut down on the time spent in evaluating these practice writing prompts. I have to admit that I am very anxious to get this assessment over with and get back to interesting writing.

As I look back in my journal, I find interesting tidbits to remember and incorporate in my classroom weekly. I stumbled across a note to myself in which I wrote, "I want to develop a method that will make writing less painful for my students by experimenting with varying writing styles, places to write, etc." I think maybe I am achieving this goal. My students don't groan any longer as they have in previous years when I say we are going to be writing. They actually get their folders without being pushed to do so and settle down to writing.

So, that's a review of the first five months of school. I still have four months to go and know that I have a very large notebook full of teaching ideas to incorporate in my writing curriculum. For once in my teaching career, I feel comfortable in teaching writing and really enjoy the time spent in class with the students and seeing their progress. When the writing institute ended last summer, I thought I probably had just experienced the best class of my life. I know now that I did.

Judy Russell teaches 8th grade at Page Middle School, Franklin.

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## Practicing Magic Realism in Class

by Angie Watson

Aliens are landing in my class! You won't believe it, but it's true. Not to mention all the unicorns and leprechauns coming out of the woodwork. Of course, we had a little trouble calming Bigfoot down, but we had fun, and we learned something.

This fall while taking a fiction workshop at The University of Tennessee, Martin, with Margrethe Ahlschwede, I was reintroduced to the term magic realism. I had heard it before, but after writing a story about a girl and her dreams, Margrethe said, "This is like magic realism." All of a sudden, all the stories I had written came flooding back to me, and I realized that I had several stories that could be classified magic realism.

"Hey, this is something I think I can improve on," I thought.

In the mean time, Margrethe required us to read several books. One of the books I chose was the Pulitzer Prize (or Pulitzer Surprise according to my students) winning book by Robert Olen Butler, *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*. I knew it was going to be about Vietnam, and, because I had never heard of anything but the Vietnam War from Vietnam, I assumed these would be war stories. To my happy surprise, magic realism appeared as if by MAGIC through several of the stories I read about ghosts, reincarnated parrots, and the sugar-covered spirit of Ho Chi Minh.

In October, I found myself in the capitol at Nashville listening to Robert Olen Butler read from his new book, *Tabloid Dreams*, a book written from headlines in tabloids. He read "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover." We laughed, but through it all saw the deep underlying theme of needing to be loved and loneliness that spans the universe. So I thought, "Hey, this is something my students would love." I bought the book and began to learn from some of the master wizards of magic realism how to teach our students this fascinating literary form.

I had been using parts of literature circles from Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman's *A Community of Writers*. I would have students write down excerpts or circle lines of stories where they liked the way it sounded or the image it created. I had gotten this from the Literary Luminary part of literature circles. I had also been stressing the importance of details using a text from the West Tennessee Writing Project and my Fiction Workshop class called *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. Throughout the year, we had been learning that through details in literature we learned about character, theme, and setting. Nearly every section a student found interesting as a Literary Luminary would deal with one of these devices.

The first story of magic realism we read was "Mr. Green" from *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. The narrator of this story tells about taking care of her grandfather's parrot. As we read, we learned that the grandfather followed the teachings of Confucius and believed one's children should pray for the spirits of his ancestors or they would be left to roam alone in the afterworld. His son had become a Catholic and would not look after the ancestors. The narrator, who is a little girl, volunteers, and the grandfather reveals to her that only the son can take on that responsibility. As the years go by and the grandfather dies, the narrator takes care of his parrot. Through details, we learn that the parrot might possess the soul of the grandfather.

My students underlined excerpts that revealed character, theme, setting, and also the technique of magic realism, such as, "My children even teach him English words. 'The parrot' says all these things, but without any feeling. The Vietnamese words of my

grandfather, however, come out powerfully, like someone very strong is inside him." Another section dealt with the fact that the bird began to cough like the grandfather did before he died, but the bird had no respiratory problems. Discussion of this story was very animated because of the female discrimination aspect of the story and also the violent end that comes to Mr. Green. In the end, the narrator did take care of her ancestors just as "there were women around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away."

Then we read one of the masters of magic realism, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This story was in our sophomore literature books. *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* deals with just that, a very old man with enormous wings falling out of the sky. He is sick and filthy but still people speculate if he is an angel, if he has a belly button, or if he might be some Gaelic man who grew wings. One of my students brought up the movie *Pulp Fiction* as we discussed the two types of people in the story, those who believe everything is a miracle and those who believe there is a logical explanation for everything. In *Pulp Fiction*, Samuel L. Jackson's character is shot, but the bullets seem to go right through him. He believes it is a miracle and decides to roam the earth looking for truth. His partner, played by John Travolta, believes it was just a freak accident and no meaning lies in the miracle. It seemed to me that my students were learning magic realism.

The last story we read was "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover." I bought several *Weekly World News* and laughed when one of the articles was called "Please Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover." We read some of the headlines and the story about the spaceman before we read Robert Olen Butler's piece. Butler's story is about a girl named Edna Bradshaw who meets an alien at 3:00 in the morning in a 24-hour Wal-Mart parking lot. He has been observing her for some time and wants to get to know her "as a male creature of a parallel species." They date, and she falls in love. He asks her to go with him to his planet, but she cannot leave her hometown. Most of my students especially loved the part about the Wal-Mart because it was so familiar to them.

After laying the foundation with examples from masters of magic realism, we again looked at our definition of magic realism from our literature book. "Magic realism is characterized by fantastic elements (often borrowed from mythology and religion) that are casually inserted into realistic settings." We made a list of elements from mythology and religion that fascinated us. Our list included angels, unicorns, leprechauns, Sasquatch, mermaids, ghosts, etc. Then, my students had to write a short story with a title like the headlines in *Weekly World News*. Some of the titles included "Man Witnesses Two Aliens Fight then Line Dance" by Adam Sprague, "Taxidermist Kills Family for Alien Lover" by Jessica Utley, "Woman Eats Nothing But Snow for 14 Years," by Sara Condeelis, and "Swarm of Fairies Rob Convenience Store" by Crissy Rilskie.

By the end of the unit, we were not quite master wizards but we did look at the world a little differently. Especially on a lonely road in the middle of the night and at our 24-hour Wal-Mart.

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London: Shambhala, 1986.

Angie Watson teaches at Big Sandy School.

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## Book Review

Fox, Mem. *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning, and Living*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993.

Mem Fox, a famous author of children's literature, wants us to look at this book as more than words. She considers this book to be ammunition. In eleven chapters that stand alone and can be read in any order, Mem Fox uses vivid language and anecdotes to discuss the issues of whole language, basal texts, the basalization of literature, the teaching of reading and language arts, the teaching of writing, writing for child readers, and the theories of Donald Graves.

"I'd be grateful if you'd think of yourself first as a writer and then as a teacher of writing and ask yourself when you or your students last ached with caring over what you were writing, or wrote because you had a huge investment in your writing."

Mem's answer to this perceived lack of caring in our writing classrooms is authentic activities or what she calls "real language." Every activity should matter, be done for real reasons, and directly contribute to the creation of what she calls "powerful writers for forever instead of just indifferent writers for school."

This book is for any teacher struggling to validate creative classroom practices to themselves, parents, or their administrations. Mem says it's for those who are "engaged in fighting against the still current skills-and-drills mentality in the teaching of language arts."

Review by Paula Cox who teaches grades 1-3 at Camden Elementary School.

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## Team Writing

by Elizabeth Womack

It's fourth and ten and we're on the thirty-yard line. Football fans might say that it's time to punt, but since this statement is not about football we can't. This analogy concerns the TCAP writing assessment--otherwise known as the "Superbowl" of writing in Tennessee. We have less than two weeks before the eighth-graders at my school (Northeast Middle), nay the eighth-graders in the Jackson-Madison County School System, will sit for this writing event.

One advantage that we have as teachers at Northeast is working in a team environment. The mighty TCAP has not broken our spirit or desire to teach as a team. Now we are team teaching "stress writing" (I borrowed that term). Betsy Favara, team leader-math, has set aside two thirty-five minute blocks of time per week to provide extra timed writing practice for our students. She comes to our team meetings bragging on her writing class. She's hooked but she's not the only one. Martha Mallady, science-former English teacher

(if there is such an animal), worried about practice time before the snow arrived and after the snow had melted. Then there's Don Williams, history and coach, who brings papers from his writing class to read to us. Shall I mention the writing of our art teacher, Royce Harris, or the inspirational posters from our technology teacher, Michele Sparks? Why not? They are part of the team.

Does "stress writing" work? Well, yes and no. It works if children are taught from pre-school that crayons can be used as writing instruments, and they are taught that they are writers at that early age. However, it does not work as a means of covering eight years of writing. "Stress writing" is just a mental exercise, a fine tuning, and a stress reliever.

"Stress writing" is actually an oxymoron for its purpose is to reduce stress not create it. So we say it's good to "stress write" as a team since we did not just begin the writing process. We are sending our students a message; a very positive message?we teach writing.

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Field Notes is  
a Publication  
of the West  
Tennessee  
Writing  
Project

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This project is funded by:



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*last updated 6/22/99*