

## Field Notes - Volume 7, Number 2

### West Tennessee Writing Project Spring 1999

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### TWA Writers Workshop

Writing the Good Stuff

Saturday, March 13, 1999

Trinity Presbyterian Church, McFadden Hall

145 Hannings Lane, Martin, Tennessee

at the southeast corner of the University of Tennessee at Martin

9:00-9:30 AM Registration, coffee

9:30-10:15 AM Putting Words on the Page

a warm-up writing experience

Margrethe Ahlschwede, Director, West Tennessee

Writing Project

Department of English, University of

Tennessee at Martin

10:15-11:00 AM Things Held Dear Writing, publishing a first book

Senator Roy Herron, Dresden

11:00 AM-12:00 Writing for Life's Sake

Marilou Awiakta, Memphis, Tennessee

One of Tennessee's acclaimed writers,

Marilou Awiakta will read poems and prose, and

discuss the process of writing

12:00                    Lunch, followed by Reading  
                              Melissa France, UTM Student, Rives, Tennessee  
                              Roy Herron  
                              Marilou Awiakta  
                              Evaluation of Workshop

Sponsored by the Tennessee Writers Alliance, in cooperation with the Department of English and the West Tennessee Writing Project, University of Tennessee at Martin.

CEU's available upon request

Registration    \$25; TWA members, \$20; Students \$12.  
                              Registration includes morning coffee and lunch

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## **Thereby Hangs the Tale: Our Stories Through Poetry and Beyond**

A workshop for teachers, grades K-8  
Saturday, April 24, 1999  
8:30 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.  
Camden Elementary School  
Camden, Tennessee

Keynote presenter: Maggie Vaughn, poet laureate of Tennessee  
Followed by three sets of current sessions with teacher consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project:

"Writing from the Skeleton: The Terranova Connection," with Mary Lou Marks, Camden Central High School; "The Real Deal Between Jack and Jill and Others Like Them," with Terrance Beard, Jackson Northeast Middle School, "Hats off to Writing," with Betty Jordan, Camden Elementary.

"Lubbers and Friends: Science Fiction Write-around," Darryl Edmisson, Henry County School System; Kathy Johnson, elementary teacher, Memphis Public Schools; "Dear Diary: Writing Off The Diary of Anne Frank," Kay Griffen, Jackskon Middle School for the Arts and Humanities.

"The Globalearn Project," Marcia Coleman, West Carroll Elementary School; "How do You Spell Relief? J-O-U-R-N-A-L-S," Terrance Beard, Jackson Northeast Middle School; "Poetry as No Big Deal," Mary Lou Marks, Camden Central High School.

Support for this workshop comes from a Rural Sites Network grant of the National

Writing Project to the West Tennessee Writing Project, an affiliate site of NWP.

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## **Twenty-fifth Annual English/Language Arts Teachers' Workshop**

THE WRITING TEACHER, THE WRITING STUDENT

Saturday, August 7, 1999 University Center at UT Martin Registration \$25

9:00-9:30 Registration in the newly-renovated University Center, coffee, rolls, book display and sales by Literacy First and Book-signing with Author Ralph Fletcher

9:30-10:45 General Session

"FLYING SOLO: Creating character from the inside out," Ralph Fletcher, author of books for young readers and their teachers

10:45-11:00 Break--coffee, rolls, book display, and book signing

11:00-12:15 Concurrent Sessions Teacher Consultants of the West Tennessee Writing Project teaching teachers

"It all stacks up: paragraph building in the elementary grades," Martha Freeman, kindergarten, Martin Primary; and Tammy Alexander Gordon, 3rd grade, McKenzie Elementary.

"The road less traveled: Descriptive writing tools for the reticent writer," Betty Warren, developmental, honors, advanced placement English, Halls High School

"From artifact portfolio to writing portfolio to assessment," Glenda Arant, 8th grade reading, Martin Middle School

"'Why'd I get an 87.5 on my research paper and a check plus on creative writing?': Evaluating writing assignments," Jennifer Rawls, high school English, University School of Jackson.

12:30-1:15 Lunch, book display, and book signing with Ralph Fletcher

1:30-3:00 Panel Discussion "Teachers writing with their students"

"Keeping a writer's notebook," Ralph Fletcher.

"Who did what and why: Whatever you can talk about, you can write about," Margaret Parr, first grade, Dyersburg Elementary.

"From journal to lab," Tina Coleman, 6-8th science and math, Palmersville School

"We're in this together," Mary Lou Marks, librarian, Camden Central High School.

Optional Day of Inservice

This workshop has been approved by supervisors of instruction as an optional day of

inservice for teachers in these school districts: Benton County; Bradford City; Carroll Academy; Crockett County; Decatur County; Dyer County; Fayette County; Hardeman County; Hardin County; Haywood County; Henry County; Hollow Rock-Bruceton Special; Huntingdon Special; Lake County; Memphis City; McKenzie Special; McNairy County; Obion County; South Carroll County Special; Trenton Special; Union City; Weakley County K-5 teachers; West Carroll Special. Re-certification points: In your district, this workshop could count for points toward recertification. Check with your supervisor of instruction for further information.

About Ralph Fletcher: Ralph Fletcher's numerous books for young readers include *Flying Solo*, *Fig Pudding*, *Spider Boy*. And his books for teachers include *What a Writer Needs*, *Breathing in, Breathing out: Keeping a Writer's Notebook and Craft Lessons*, with JoAnn Portalupi. A special feature of this year's workshop will be the presence of Literacy First, the leading distributor of professional books in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Literacy first will have a book display along with sales of Fletcher's books and books from publishers such as Heinemann, NCTE, and Stenhouse.

To register for this workshop, call UTM's Office of Public Service, (901) 587-7104 or send \$25 registration and name, address, school system to: English/Language Arts Workshop, Department of Public Service, 110 Gooch Hall, UT-Martin, Martin, TN 38238.

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## **The Power of Notes or Why I Will Be Investing in Post-its**

By Mary Lou Marks

Two years ago I wrote a short essay called "A Writing Teacher Ain't Nothing But a Coach." I was thinking about submitting it to a professional magazine for publication and wanted to be sure that I had gotten the coaching part of the article right. I gave copies to two colleagues - one a coach and the other an ex-coach who is now supervisor of instruction. The coach sent it back with a note saying that he liked the comparison and he hoped he was the kind of coach I described. He assured me about some terminology and wished me good luck. The supervisor sent it back with a note that said "A+ Good work." Even now, two years later, that response rankles me. Honestly, I don't think he even read the piece and I sure didn't appreciate him "grading" it. I would be willing to admit that he never even thought about the implications, but I can't be sure because the only feedback I got was that silly grade. I thought of the times I had seen students take a carefully marked paper and wad it up immediately after noting the grade or thoughtlessly leave it on the floor under their desks. When I think of the weekend and vacation hours I spent grading student papers in the past, my knees get weak. I thought this would be the way to improve their writing, but I rarely saw the kind of improvement I hoped for. Surely there is a more effective way.

This school year I had several experiences that led me to believe that I could use my time

much more productively by writing notes to the student. If my goal was to keep the students motivated and involved enough to keep practicing writing, then notes might keep them going.

For the past two years the Benton County Reading Association has asked me to do the preliminary judging for the Celebrate Literacy book contest. Students write, illustrate, and bind their own books. Although any age may participate, our entries usually only go through grade 5. My task this year was to choose fourteen books out of the 140 or so that had been written to send on to the state competition. So much work and care went into these books that I decided they all deserved some feedback. The authors needed to know that someone had actually read their book. So I attached a post-it note to each book, writing a message as soon as I finished reading. "Dear Jennifer - Thank you for telling me about your dog. I laughed when you told about him eating pizza. Have you had other dogs? Mrs. Marks." Nothing elaborate. Just a comment and a question, and my name. For the rest of the school year teachers and parents of these children would stop me in the grocery store to tell me how important those notes were to those kids. They felt they had written for a real audience and not just for a judge. Those notes were well worth the time.

Earlier this summer I taught a week of summer school to a group of 21 ninth and tenth grade self-proclaimed outlaws who had managed to fail their English classes during the regular year. After a little bit of friendly discussion with the supervisor of instruction, I decided that if we only had a week I would prefer not to beat the dead horse of "grammar drill" that he suggested as an easy way out for me. I thought that we would have a week-long writing camp and publish a class book.

I provided each student with a brightly colored folding file to use as a portfolio, stocked it with Fat Boy notebook paper that I inherited when I took over the library 15 years ago, and made a tactical decision to loan a pen or pencil to anyone who needed one. When you only have a week, you pick your fights carefully. And then we started to write. The goal was to produce eight rough drafts and then pick two favorites for publication in the book. On Tuesday evening I took the portfolios home and read through the four drafts in each. On a neon colored index card I wrote a note to each student and dropped it in the folder. "Cody - I like your letter to Ozzie Smith, and I really like the way you wrote his reply, esp. when you talked about not getting much fan mail anymore. I felt sorry for him. Think about putting these letters in the class book. M.L.M."

Nothing elaborate here either. Just specific comments on specific pieces. I didn't tell these kids the cards were in their folders, but as they discovered them, word spread and they dove in to find them. Some of them kept the cards on the table all morning before putting them back in the portfolio. When they left there were no neon index cards lying around the room. Those notes were well worth the time.

Another experience with the power of notes is of longer duration. When Morgan Hardy started coming to creative writing club meetings three years ago, he specialized in that far out blood and guts cyber-illusion kind of writing that was long on \$100.00 words and short on characterization and plot. In this writing group we practice a system of double response. After people read, we write to them and then we talk about responses to the piece. We practice the golden rule and kids become skillful at knowing what is helpful and what is not. And while the conversation is not permanent, the notes are. Students save these carefully.

Over the three years that Morgan wrote with us he got some notes that he didn't like. They weren't mean-spirited. They just indicated that the piece had missed its mark. Sometimes it was a matter of taste, sometimes of craft. But for three years, Morgan developed a sense of audience. He kept writing, he kept growing. Nobody graded him. At the end of the school year he competed in the National Beta Club creative writing contest

in Nashville. For 45 minutes he wrote to the prompt, "Everything old is new again." He won first place. When he called me to tell me, I smiled. I thought of all the practice shots he had hit at those Wednesday afternoon meetings. And I thought of the wad of notes in his folder. Those notes were well worth the time.

I compare the power of these notes to the grades I put on papers. I'm not naive. I know that grades are the coinage of assessment, that they are expected and necessary. But I think that for many students they do not provide the impetus for growth. Notes do, and that is why I'll invest my time where it gets the best results.

Mary Lou Marks, the librarian at Camden Central High School, is a co-director of WTWP

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## Book Reviews

by Pat Johnson

Heard, Georgia. *Writing Toward Home: Tales and Lessons to Find Your Way*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.

Heard's book is a wonderful tool for improving one's writing. But it is also a valuable tool for teaching writing. Like Natalie Goldberg in *Writing down the Bones* and Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird*, Heard emphasizes a writer using his or her own voice and also the practice of sitting down to write every day. Another similarity among these three authors is the idea of keeping notes in some way of the things one sees and hears whether it is in a notebook or on notecards. But Heard's book goes beyond suggestions for how to improve writing and becomes a useful tool for a teacher of writing. Her chapters are short

and deal with a certain aspect of writing. Then at the end of every chapter is a writing exercise for practicing the skill presented. This format makes the book easily adaptable to the teaching situation. I have used several of her chapters as writing exercises for my Communication Arts class. These lessons have been rewarding both in the material the students produced and in the techniques taught. The possible lessons range from dealing with family and ancestors which would work well in history and English class to conversation in writing which Heard states should be the author's own voice.

Meier, Deborah. *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

As a private school teacher, I disagree with Meier's stand that public education is the only valid option for America. However, I found myself agreeing with many of the ideas she proposed for educating students for the real world they will face. Even though I teach in a private school, I do agree with Meier that strong public education is a vital part of democracy in our country. Her concept of the school becoming a community is a valid way to teach our children how to get along in the world in which they live. I agree strongly with Meier that as teachers we need to educate our students to take their respective places in society and that much of what we teach in schools has no real validity

in the real world. For me the most intriguing and useful concept in the book is the use of portfolios for graduation. Students have to prove what they have learned by a portfolio they have compiled and defended, not by just passing a "multiple guess" test designed by the teacher. Through what Meier calls "habits of mind," students can see why information is important and how it can relate to their own life. And isn't this what teaching is suppose to be all about?

Greene, Melissa Fay. *The Temple Bombing*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1996.

In her book *The Temple Bombing*, Greene weaves together the anti-Semitic and anti-Negro sentiments of the late 1940's through the 1960's. Though the central event of the book is the bombing of the Jewish temple in Atlanta in October of 1958, the history Greene spins far surpasses the scope of that one event. The meticulous research is astounding and admirable. As I was reading this book, I was also teaching about World War II in European history. The information from the book became a springboard for class discussions on whether the atrocities that occurred during World War II in Germany could happen in the United States. Through this I was able to help students make a connection between the underlying events in Germany with what has happened in their own country more recently. I was also surprised as a history teacher in reading this book to learn about the strong anti-Semitic movement that was prevalent in the South during this time. I have studied in history the Civil Rights Movement but nothing on the anti-Semitic movement that had such close ties to the Civil Rights Movement. Greene's book was not only superbly written, but was an eye opening experience of what life was like during this period of American history in the South from the view of the Jewish and Negro perspective. The potential of using this book to stimulate thought and discussion not only in history classes but also in English class along with the study of such classics as *The Dairy of Anne Frank* are varied.

Pat Johnson, a teacher consultant of WTWP, teaches history and communication arts at Trinity Christian Academy in Jackson, Tennessee.

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## **"I Don't Know Anything To Write!"**

by Ed Kent

That's usually the first response I get when I introduce my U.S. History classes to daily journal writing.

After I welcome the students, introduce myself and explain a few simple rules, I spring "the big one" on them.

"First, we'll have three minutes of silence. This is just to clear your mind and let you focus on the writing. We will write for ten minutes, within the context of the section we're studying today."

"Then I explain that we write, every day, to the question: "How did these events affect

me and/or my family?" Through writing to this questions, we hope to learn more about history, our family, and ourselves. My hope is that by reading history with this question in mind, the students will learn to examine everything around them for the effect it will have in their lives.

The first day of class we share our writing. All persons are asked to read two or three sentences and explain briefly why they wrote what they did. Quite frequently the sentences are the explanations, and nothing else is required. I make a brief, positive comment, thank the students for their contributions, and move on. I always start by being the first to share my writing, in its entirety.

After that first day, we don't share. It is, after all, a history class, and that is our primary focus.

I'm often asked if I wrote my students do. The answer is, no. I know that by all the rules of writing, I should, but routine and administrative tasks and the need to constantly monitor the class preclude it. I've learned the hard way that a small percentage of my students don't want to be in school at all, and a portion of those wouldn't write unless I monitor closely.

Wouldn't it be easier to let them write on a volunteer basis? No. Only about 20-25% say they would write if given the option.

In addition to daily monitoring, I collect the journals two or three times a semester and scan through them. I usually write a few comments in each. At the end of the semester, each journal gets a grade, which is averaged with others as a test grade.

What do the students thing about writing? At the end of the Fall 1998 semester, I prepared a questionnaire, which was included as part of the final exam. There were only two questions:

1. My opinion of the 10-minutes writing exercise is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. My favorite part of writing is \_\_\_\_\_.

The bottom of the page was a consent form giving me permission to use their comments, as long as no name was used.

Most comments were positive, but one student wrote: "I think it is a waist of time. It would be a good thing if we took it serious, but since we don't, I don't see no point."

The majority of the negative comment concerned time; students thought ten minutes was too long. Those few (14%) would have preferred to have written once or twice a week, or for a much shorter period each day. Only one would have preferred to have not written at all.

The positive comments generally centered around the quietness of the ten minutes, and time to express their thoughts. This group also thought that it would improve their writing skills, and three thought it was a chance to find about themselves.

I think, if I had only one objective for my writing program, that would be it.

Ed Kent is a teacher consultant of WTWP and teaches at Henry County High School.

## About WTWP

The West Tennessee Writing Project is a professional development program for K-12 teachers that seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools, K-12.

Located in the Department of English at UT-Martin, WTWP is an affiliate site of the National Writing Project and is supported by grants from NWP with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional funds come from a 1998-99 Title II Eisenhower Professional Development Grant administered by the Tennessee Higher Education and a National Writing Project Rural Sites Network grant.

The heart of the West Tennessee Writing Project is its annual summer writing institute for selected teachers where teachers work to become stronger writers themselves and to become more effective teachers of writing.

In addition, WTWP works with supervisors of instruction to increase professional development opportunities for teachers by helping to arrange and conduct inservice workshops and writing consultations.

WTWP also offers workshops to teachers, K-12, all subject-matter areas, on writing, reading, and teaching practice.

The Director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahlschwede, associate professor of English at UT-M. Co-directors are Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Glenda Arant, 8th grade math and language arts teachers, Martin Middle School.

Members of the WTWP Advisory Council, in addition to the project directors, are: Paula Cox, Camden Elementary; Pat Johnson, Jackson Trinity Christian Academy; Terrance Beard, Jackson Northeast Middle School; and Richard Mann, Jackson Southside High School.

For more information about WTWP see the WTWP homepage:  
<http://fmc.utm.edu/~mahlschw/wtwp.htm>

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## News of WTWP Teacher Consultants

Field Notes is  
a Publication  
of the West  
Tennessee  
Writing  
Project

Joanne Summers, WTWP teacher consultant and counselor at Camden Elementary, was named 1998 Teacher of the Year for Camden Elementary, Benton County, and the district, and was one of six finalists for 1999 Tennessee Teacher of the Year.

Linda Montgomery, WTWP teacher consultant and Henry County High School English teacher, received the 1998 High-Tech Teacher award at Henry County High and for the

county for doing the best job of incorporating technology into the curriculum.

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