

Volume 4 - Issue 3
Summer 2010

From our Writers

Christa Red Crow, student writer from Polson High School

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Journal
Montana
Writing
Project

Writing for Social Justice

Submission Deadline: September 1, 2010

Publication Date: Fall 2010

Upcoming Themes

Winter 2010: Effective Practices in the Teaching of Writing

Submission Deadline: December 1, 2010

Spring 2011: Telling Our Local Stories

Submission Deadline: February 1, 2010

And as always, the Montana Writing Project Journal welcomes submissions for any of the following areas. There is always room for quality work that does not fit the categories or the current thematic issue.

The Practice of Teaching: As you work to teach writing, what methods get results? You might build an article from a demonstration lesson or a successful classroom unit. Reflect on what pedagogical practices have proven effective and share some ideas or strategies that we can put into play in our own classrooms. The length of the submissions for this section could vary wildly. They might be brief pieces of no more than a paragraph or two that outline a successful lesson, but they might also materialize as lengthier pieces that explain a whole unit and give some theoretical background or support for your work.

Fresh Insight: What is happening in education that you feel you must say something about? Use this as a forum to share your views on writing education. There are many things going on at the classroom level up to the national level that we as teachers are thinking about, wanting to change, or are hopeful or angry about. This is a platform to expand and articulate some of those ideas. What important issues are those around us (or are we ourselves) not thinking enough about?

Teachers as Writers: Amid the daily chaos of teaching, what personal writing have you been able to do? What are you ready to publish? What better way to encourage all of us to continue to be writers than to offer one another some of the work we are doing. Submissions of any genre are welcome.

Book reviews: What titles have you found useful when working on writing? Consider reviewing one of your favorite texts to give others an idea of the content and approach that they can expect from the author. We would be especially interested in fairly new releases with which others may not yet be familiar.

Original Photography: Share images from your classroom, professional development, or photos that complement any of your writing submissions. Images should be sent as jpeg image files with a resolution of at least 1200 by 1800 pixels. Anyone who appears in the photo should be identified, along with any other relevant caption information such as a brief explanation of what is depicted, the photographer's name, and an approximate date the photo was taken.

Announcements/ Upcoming Events: Please pass on any information about upcoming events, opportunities, or any other information that would be of interest and use to the Montana Writing Project Community.

Submission Guidelines:

- Send any submissions to montana.writing.project@gmail.com.
- Manuscripts are only accepted in digital form saved as an RTF, Mac Pages, or Microsoft Word file.
- Do not embed image files or diagrams in your text files. Please send them as separate attachments.
- In general, manuscripts should not exceed 2,500 words.
- Please list your name, address, academic affiliation, and e-mail address on your manuscript.

Life in Four Directions Wendy Warren

The low angled sun
Speaks its genesis over Lion Mountain,
Glancing the surface of black water.
Tamarack needles gather on one shore
Glint gold for just a moment,
Circle
As they rise, then fall,
With each breath.

The lake transforms to mercury,
Viscous, thickening,
Anticipating
The difficult season to come.
I stare into its hematite depths
Hoping, perhaps, to find my future.
Instead, I am distracted.
Images dance on the surface.
Dried reeds echo the water's rhythm.
Golden Eyes fish in a rippling, iridescent forest
Of white-barked birch,
Golden Larch,
Ponderosa jade.
Rings created by thirsty dogs
Circle outward,
Fracture branches,
Ducks scramble and soar

Away---

The sun's filtered light diffuses, diminishes
Continuing its climb toward noon.
My body holds
Its vague memory as
Something I once knew,
But now recognize only as
Glittering light
Dancing through frozen air.

The once roiling hematite stills
As I watch,
Each wave
A gentle drumbeat,
Laps over the one before,
And remains,
Silenced.

I create a trail from shore to shore,
On this land, newly created,
Providing a fresh view.
But this path is not mine alone,
Others have come before,
Their presence recorded here.
As I notice,
I begin to learn the world.
Tiny tracks of voles cross,
Circling, perhaps playing
As they make their long journey,
Sometimes safely.
Sharp, thin hooves of deer
Mark the surface.

Occasionally,
A conquest is recorded--



Wendy (pictured here with her cat Moxie) is a teacher and writer who works with middle school students in Columbia Falls. She teaches language arts and co-directs the MWP Summer Institute in Browning.

Feathers of fur encased in ice,
A clean rib cage,
A jaw bone,
Wing beats of eagle and raven,
Splashes of blood,
Scattered tracks, wolf or coyote.
Celebration of
This hard-won moment

Reverberates--

Warm light
Glances below thick clouds
Just before it sets,
A time for walking.
The drumbeat returns,
A steady drip, drip, drip.
Snow fleas dance in my footprints,
Spirals of snow rest at the base of each hill,
Revealing their journey.

The occasional field,
Recent passage to other shores,
Thins, withers, begins to buckle.
Adjusting course,
My feet touch earth once more,

Brittle beat of each step
Muted now by soft soil.

Gold flashes
Before green settles in to stay,
Birthplace of
Glacier Lilies, Spring Beauties, Calypso Orchids.
Rich, moist, earth scents fill the air,
Fill me.

I notice the silence
Only as it ends,
Replaced by nesting calls of grey jays, nuthatches,
bald eagles.
Eggs laid in tree trunks, branches, fields,
Bask in body warmth.
Soon mountain grouse will drum
Mating songs on hollow logs,
And robins will sing each evening
Their honor song to the sun

Until darkness descends.
The day's heat dissipates.
A fire glows
At lake's edge..

I stare into flames
Track a spark
Leaping into the dark, Rising far above our heads
Transforming—

A meteorite
Soars,
One of the million stars
Lighting a sky trail,
Pulsing a steady beat--
The rhythm of the earth,
The rhythm of my heart
And I sleep.

Territory Casey Olsen

The dark blue silhouette, mysterious and foreboding in the moonlight, towered above the valley floor, trapped between moonbeam and headlight. As the shadowy head turned, I noticed the boxy nature of a profile, before the crunch of gravel sent him to leave the post I'd set at the end of my lane.

It had been almost a week since I'd toiled beneath the sun, laboring to breathe, setting that post to mark a corner of my land, my territory. Shoveling, tamping, dampening the soil with my sweat, all to make that post firm, permanent. There's just something about a good post, railroad cross-tie, solid and square to the world. The entire enterprise of post-setting makes a man feel rooted, connected to the land. I had placed with care a green numbered sign, an address placard, to consummate the event.

But the visitor had taken a liking to this post, just as he probably had with the thin metal post I'd replaced. This new hunting platform, broad and stout, seemed to suit him, tall in the saddle.

Always he retreated when the pickup tires tread too near, taking flight away—never parallel nor perpendicular, but always directly away, showing only the magnificent wingspread fringed with moon-glow on top, white feathers at the rear edges. In his wake, then absence, rested the rattlesnake the telephone man had killed two days previous, minus head and rattles.

My wife thought it was disgusting to leave the rattler there in the middle of the lane, reminding me daily as she arrived home. "Get rid of it," she'd say.

But I'd noticed that afternoon that something had gone to work on the snake's meaty midsection, pecking at its inspiration in the absence of its malice, and since I hadn't seen anything venture near at noon, the encounter must have occurred at midnight.

And so began this awkward moonlit dance three nights running between myself and this strangely lanky owl, resting on what I thought was mine, but now was most definitely his. And truthfully, it had always been.

Tiffany Kathy Kipp

Soon, my girl, Tiffany, was going to have her first born. It would be my first grandchild. I didn't care if it would be a boy or a girl. I just hoped the birthing process would go smoothly and prayed for a healthy newborn.

Tiffany's stomach was extended and swollen. She looked like a balloon ready to burst. Her appetite had dropped off. She just wanted to be lazy and rest. I guess she was saving her energy. She was going to need it.

The time was March, spring time, when new growth begins on Mother Earth. Spring seems like a natural time for offspring to come into the world. It wouldn't be long before the green grass pops up and crocuses emerge on the prairie. The days get longer. The sun warms the earth with the promise of sunny summer days.

Tiffany had a quiet, calm personality. So far, her only signs of discomfort were some sighs. I suppose she was tired of being as big as a barrel around her middle, waddling here and there. She was uncomfortable with her huge gut. It was making her restless.

My husband, Joe, wasn't as nervous as I was. He was matter of fact. "It will get here when it's ready," he said.

I could hardly be still and wait for the new one. I decided to share the news with my sister, Mags. I grabbed the phone and dialed her number. Mags answered the phone, "what's up?"

I explained about how I was anxiously waiting for my first grandchild to be born. Mags asked, "Is Tiffany very close?" I said, "I think so. She hasn't really given any big pushes though. I better get off the phone and go check on Tiffany again." It was more hurry up and wait for another half hour. Then Tiffany began to push.

While I waited, my mind wandered back to how we got Tiffany. My dad would trail his five hundred plus cattle herd about eighteen miles. We rode horse back, pushing the cow calf pairs about half way. We would leave them overnight to rest, and then continue on the next day. Inadvertently one calf was left sleeping in a gully.

Five days later my Dad told us we could take the calf if we wanted to raise it. Joe and I got our ropes and caught the spunky little calf. It was a heifer. She had a shiny black coat of fur with a colorful face of black and white mixed hairs. We call them brockle face. She weighed about eighty pounds. We hogtied her and took her home.

I raised Tiffany in our yard. She had never seen another cow until about four months later when we brought her to a babysitter (calf sitter), where there were a couple of bum calves. When Tiffany first saw the other bums; she ran straight back to me, frightened.

Originally, I had planned to name my daughter, Kristen, Tiffany; but my family did not like the name. I said, okay, I'll name my next female pet, Tiffany.

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Kathy teaches and writes in Browning, Montana. She also co-directs the Browning MWP Summer Institute. At right, she's pictured driving her team of Fjord horses with her daughter, Kristen and grandsons Leo, Brett and Ryan.

Tractor Talk

Casey Olsen

The John Deere motor was sputtering, but powerful. I'd lost count of how many circles I'd made through this hay meadow harrowing. I was racing the sun in an unfair contest. He had me beat before I started as he blazed toward the western rim of the valley.

Realizing this, I kicked the throttle up a bit and noticed the sudden, frightened movement about forty yards ahead of me. A small group of deer, four young males out fending for themselves, cleared the barbed wire fence to my left and bolted in front of the tractor at a safe distance. It was then that I noticed a whitetail bouncing prominently erect in the middle of the bunch. One little Montana whitetail running with three dark mule deer. In all my time outdoors, I'd never seen that.

I watched him, quick and flighty, amongst the muleys' smooth and calm stride. The words, "Like a sore thumb..." came to mind, but the voice in my head quickly corrected itself. "No, like a white thumb...or tail...I guess...He stuck out like a whitetail in with a bunch of muleys."

I guess simile wasn't going to be my thing that night. I continued in circles around the field, but my eyes followed them across the new spring green on the ground, over the dry ditch to the alfalfa field below where they merged with a larger herd of forty or so in the frosty cool of an April evening.

I couldn't make up my mind how I wanted to cover this field. The guy I'd replaced had been taking straight, parallel lines, back-and-forth, east and west. It gave the field a striped appearance, and I knew if the track was light-colored that it was made heading the same direction I was; if it was dark, it was headed opposite of me. But it seemed too neat for me, uninventive. Every evening I'd come to find this tractor where he left it from his day shift. Though we never met or spoke, we clashed often. He, persistent with his short parallels; me, free form with long broad strokes, circles, ovals, squares, figure eights. He was painting an image of neat order, while I showed up every night to draw unpredictable patterns with a John Deere tractor in stark contrast.

I kept thinking, "This guy needs to lighten up—we're just raking manure after all."

This was my second year on the ranch, over 20,000 acres and no hunting allowed. It had turned into a game reserve of sorts. It seemed like every deer in the Stillwater valley lived there, in the trees by day, spread out amongst the hayfields at night. I laughed to myself beneath the roar of the exhaust stack when I realized that the cows were in fact not the largest herd the ranch now raised.

These last two years had been good though, I was thinking, although I wasn't a farmer by any means. The farm guys and mechanic would rattle off something about tilling or the drill or seeding, and I'd just nod my head—but raking manure, I guess I knew something about that. So they put me on this green beast that didn't have fourth, seventh or eighth gear anymore, not even park, and sent me out here in the evenings to ponder the civil humanity of deer who would allow one of a different appearance, mannerisms, and culture to travel, dwell and graze amongst them.



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I heard a groan and quickly came back to reality. Tiffany was getting serious about pushing that calf out.

Well, Tiffany did need a little help. She pushed so long, then quit. Joe and I assisted by pulling the calf's front legs. A couple little tugs and bellows from Tiffany and her calf was born. It was a heifer. Tiffany's first and last calves were heifers and all the others were bull calves. We never had to help her deliver a calf again.

One fall, nineteen years later, Tiffany was twenty-one years old. She came up dry. Our practice is to sell cows that didn't breed back. Joe attempted to put Tiffany in the stock trailer. Tiffany would stop by the trailer entrance and wouldn't budge. Joe pushed on her hip. She just wouldn't step into the trailer. I wouldn't help him. Tiffany turned her head and looked back at Joe as tears fell from her eyes. Disgusted with himself for being kindhearted, Joe said, "Okay old girl, you can stay and retire here on the ranch."

Tiffany lived a couple more years. She always would come to the yard and moo to me until I brought her an apple. The kids could jump up on her back and she'd take them for short rides.

On a windy day, near the end of winter Tiffany lay down for the last time, right below the grove of quaking aspen trees at the edge of the meadow where the sweet grass grows and went to sleep with a pleasant expression on her face.

Years later Mags and I would recall the time I called her while I impatiently waited for Tiffany to deliver her first born. Her husband had asked, "what's going on with Kathy?" Mags told him about how we were waiting for Tiffany's baby to be born and how I would soon be a grandmother. Her husband replied, "Kathy's too young to be a grandmother and I didn't know she had a daughter named Tiffany."

Mags laughed and laughed, then told her husband how Tiffany was my orphan cow that I had raised on a bottle and she was going to "calve out."

My Worst Writing Experience?

Derk K. Schmidt

If you are assigned to write a poem that is modeled after another poem that happens to be “The Emperor of Ice Cream” by Wallace Stevens, I would seriously think twice about writing and voluntarily reading aloud your half-hearted nonsense poem you thought was pretty good right there in the middle of class titled:

The Duke of Cheez-Whiz

Summon the worthiest of adolescents
Dust the crystal chandelier, ‘haps the women
Fall short drowsing in such delinquency.
Let the motorcoach pass and glide
With comfortable sleeping passengers,
Yes, the one that ‘haps thinks perchance
Yes is, perhaps yes it is.
The only duke is the duke of Cheez-Whiz.

Fill the tanks with gallons of diesel.
Keep watch, the portly fellow, the one
Drowsing in back with promiscuous women,
And cover the blanket o’er his head.
If his promontory reposition, shift the vehement
Back to standard straight and upright arrangement.
Tell the driver head for Ole Mizz.
The only duke is the duke of Cheez-Whiz.

Chances are your professor is actually quite fond of the Emperor of Ice Cream. Perhaps she has met him. I’m not certain. But you will know it was a mistake when she looks at you with such a stare of disgust that you begin to melt like a giant triple scoop right there in the center of the classroom, red as a strawberry: a batch in which the mixer accidentally substituted salt for sugar. Around the room: the faces plain as vanilla as you drip onto the floor.

But maybe as you’re walking home from this great debacle, cursing Wallace Stevens and so on, you see a blackbird—or was it a crow? I don’t know—up on a power line, staring at you. You are reminded of Stevens’ famous poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and you think to yourself, That poem is stupid. I can only look at this bird one way: I want to shoot it. Perhaps next you think of Stevens’ contemporaries, William Carlos Williams in particular, and you wonder how many ways WCW would look at a blackbird. You think of the red wheelbarrow, and you wish more than ever that the blackbird staring you down from the power line was in that wheelbarrow with the dead chickens. During your entire walk home you ponder. You get home, grab a Guinness and write the best poem you’ve ever written. The following week, bring that poem in for group discussion. Results may vary. Mine made me believe that even I was a poet, too.

The poem:

a pint: williams on wallace

the woman from where and i don’t know
and what’s this epidemic?
oh, she knows i’m here all right,
she left only an hour ago.
a pint good sir! which pint?
guinness for strength!
dark as a blackbird—just one and i’ll go—
why only yesterday, walking home,
a crow—no, not a blackbird—
a crow branch-walking a tightrope
with eyes of her color green



Derk Schmidt is a writer and aspiring educator who earned a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Montana in 2002. He is currently working toward a Master of Education with licensure in Secondary English at UM, and will be student teaching in the fall of 2010. He is co-author of the nonfiction book The Hermans: Stalking America: The Journal of an Unknown Rock and Roll Band published by Running Press. He currently resides in Missoula with his wonderful and supportive wife and son. Missoula is in Montana. It is nice.

or maybe blue of the stratosphere
with white of clouds mingling
the pupil and iris launched a look my way.
the wind only sways the branch
but its claws dug deep in the spine of pine—that look
launched from where and i don't know
it's that crow! i say
if i had a rifle i'd let him know
it's only the fear of those eyes
tight-branching the pine-rope
that refuse letting go like this
woman from where and i don't know
i'd have shot that bird an hour ago!
she shares that color green, you know,
with the eyes of that crow—
or was it a blackbird? i don't know
—another pint? she'll never know!
i told you i shot that crow—
what crow? oh,
the blackbird with the eyes,
you know, the hemisphere of white
and clouds of blue she shares
with the color green—what crow?
oh, ask the woman from where
and how the hell should i know if it was a crow,
i shot that bird an hour ago!
another pint? christ! i don't know, one or two?
i said guinness is good for you.



On May 13, 2010, the Payne Family Native American Center was dedicated on the University of Montana campus. The 30,000 square foot building houses the UM's Department of Native American Studies, American Indian Student Services and other related programing and organizations and is the first of it's kind on any university campus in the nation. Private funding supported the bulk of the project and it's presence on campus makes huge strides toward's making President Dennison's proclamation that "we proudly identify this campus as an integral part of Indian Country" a reality.

At left, MWP teacher consultant Kamiah DuMontier writes in the new building at an MWP gathering in May.

Reflections on Student Writing

Brenda Johnston

Three days before the last trimester of the year was due to begin, a fellow English teacher and I were asked to teach a class for students at risk. With minor changes in our schedules, we determined that second period would work best for everyone: students, teachers, and counselors. Cheryl and I reviewed assessment results, attendance records, and report cards to determine possible candidates for the class. Once we had built a list of twenty-four possible candidates, we met with the counseling staff, administrative staff, and reading supervisor to review our selections. At the end of the process, we ended up with fewer students than we had hoped to service, but we gained more flexibility in classroom management. Cheryl and I had a lengthy discussion on what we thought we could realistically accomplish with this group of students given that there were twelve weeks left in the school year, but possibly only nine good weeks of teaching. We knew we were not going to teach these kids how to read. We knew we were not going to improve their vocabulary significantly. We knew we were not going to teach them grammar in the remaining weeks. So what were we going to do? We decided that giving the students some skills and strategies that would assist them in their classes next year would be our best option. In my heart, I also knew it was important to make them realize that learning is personal, it is possible, and it is rewarding. The challenge would be how to accomplish this.

After keeping the class together for a week and watching the student dynamics, we split the students into two smaller groups. Cheryl would work on reading strategies with one group while I worked on writing with others. We would trade groups and repeat our lessons midway through the week. Fridays we would bring them together as a large group and wrap up the week. The second week of class we were happy with our students' response. They were doing the work with minimum resistance even though they were more social than what I normally allow in class. But the honeymoon was soon over. Before long, heads were flopped down on the desks, others were engaged in gossip in lieu of work, and one young man wanted to spend his time on the floor. Still others chose not to come to class. It was at this point I gave up my vocabulary development and grammar lessons and decided it was time to focus on writing, hoping they would respond in a positive way. For the first lesson we carefully read narratives in which the narrator describes lessons he/she had learned from a father, grandmother, or grandfather and listed the things on the board. We discussed setting, dialogue, character, and the use of figurative language and imagery. With that done, we selected someone in our lives that taught us things that have helped shape who we are today and created a list of the things they taught us. I chose to write about my stepfather, who is now deceased, and reviewed my list with the students. I think they were surprised when I wrote things like dig post holes, wrestle calves, clean the chicken house, and swear. They were eager to share their lists after listening to mine. I asked my students to do a quick-write using their lists to sketch out a rough paragraph. I began the read-around by sharing what I had written and the students followed my lead. We spent the next day rewriting our rough paragraphs into a half-page paper. When they were complete, we sat in a circle and shared our writing. I emphasized the characteristics of polite listeners, and we thanked each reader when they were done.

On the bulletin board at the back of my room I have "I Am From..." poems displayed written by a group of students I had earlier in the year. I noticed that my new students often gravitated to the display to read the poems. I decided to have these students write "I Am From..." poems next. Knowing the value of front loading or setting that stage, we again began by reading "I Am From..." poems and discussing them in some detail. Next we did our brainstorming session of items found inside and outside their homes, people that link them to their past, common sayings and meals within their family, and music and items of clothing that make up their identity. As we shared our lists, I was awed by the power of their words. I asked them to put their words into order, forming stanzas, creating melody, and giving birth to their words. Their focus and desire to write was exciting. This required some guidance from Cheryl and me since it is not a skill which our students have acquired. When they finished their poems, it was time



Brenda Johnston, pictured here with her husband Jim, teaches on the Blackfeet Reservation. Since becoming a TC with MWP in 2006 she's co-directed the Columbus Summer Institute (just west of the Crow Reservation), co-directed an open program in Columbia Falls, and began working with the Rural Sites Network of the National Writing Project, all while continuing to teach and write.

**“ I knew
it was
important to
make them
realize that
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personal, it
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for sharing. The first time they participated in a read-around, I let them sit at their seats and read their papers to the class. Today, with a little gentle coaxing, they walked to the front of the room and read their poems. They were embarrassed and hid behind their papers, had to be reminded to slow down, and giggled as they read, but their pride in their work was obvious too. Cheryl had been absent during this activity, but entered just as we finished the read-around. I asked the kids if they would like to read again so she could hear what they wrote, and to my delight they agreed. In fact, they were eager to read their papers a second time. This time, they stood proudly and read in loud, clear voices from their papers. They used words like “Baker Massacre” and “two different people, two different worlds” which speaks volumes and tells me of their history, at times making me want to weep. They do not recognize the power in their words, but smile when their work is praised. Following is a collage created by using two lines from each student’s poem.

“Collage “I Am From...” “

I am from make-up and flip flops
jewelry and jeweled belts

I am from photography and old pictures
a mom and dad with addictions

I am from the army and WWII
Oklahoma, Germany, Texas, and Montana

I am from cigarettes and snuff
from strong sisters and brothers

I am from head-held high Arrowtopknots and RunningCranes
from cigarettes and snuff

I am from Fords and Chevys, trucks and cars
from “OMG” and “LMFAO”

I am from two different people, two different worlds
from “Where is your homework?”
and “Do your home work now!”

I am from Irish and Italian ancestors
from the Baker Massacre and mountains of St. Mary’s

I am from not working and good with a D
from cruising town and avoiding cops

I am from the tribe where Indian grass covers our reservation
from mountains covered with cottonwood, pine, and sagebrush

I am from steak and pepperoni pizza
fat red hotdogs and Bush baked beans

This is where I’m from.

Cheryl and I were so elated with their willingness to share and their pride in their work, that we gave each other a quick hug, enjoying the moment. Later that evening, as I reflected on my day, I wanted to savor the taste of success for as long as I could. It is moments like this that cannot be tested and assessed. It is moments like this that cannot be measured and graphed to determine how well our school is doing.

Most students will want to write if we make writing real. We need to let them draw upon their own experiences and those things that are relevant to their lives, and hopefully writing will become a lifelong activity, not a chore to be completed for some exam by which to evaluate a student, teacher, or school. There is always going to be a need to know how to write the standard five paragraph essay, but that should never comprise the bulk of our writing.

What if Ortiz is Right?

Wendy Z. Warren

I read an essay by Simon Ortiz last evening, and it is still with me this morning. It has become a part of me in the way that some things do—they speak to you when you are ready to hear.

“When the student is ready,” a Buddhist saying goes, “a teacher will appear.” This piece must have been lying in wait for me.

I’m on a committee to design the curriculum for Communication Arts in my district in Columbia Falls, Montana. We’ve just begun our work together, only to find out that our curriculum will no longer be designed locally—it is being written for us in Helena, the location of our Office of Public Instruction, by “experts.” These “literacy experts,” not necessarily in Helena but all over this land, are constantly sharing their knowledge with us—we teachers. This is not a reciprocal relationship. They don’t ask of our experience in the classroom and then share their experience as researchers. No, “they” are the gurus—self-proclaimed, and, just like the “popular kids” in the Jr. High where I teach, these experts maintain their status because we allow them to. We grow silent when they speak; we lose confidence. Surely they, with all their years of research/university level teaching—do we even ask about the background in which their theories are grounded?—know more than we. And so a hierarchy is established, and rarely is it questioned. Teachers and administrators accept the verdicts of these education experts as “facts”—even when we see the detrimental effects of these “theories” before our very eyes.

Simon Ortiz helps me realize how much the research of these “experts,” the thinking that drives their research and our entire system of education, is cultural. It is Western European thinking. It is not, necessarily, the way of the world. “Education defines you,” Ortiz writes, “It makes you see with and within very definitive limits.”

In Ortiz’s essay “Song, Poetry and Language—Expression and Perception,” published in *Genocide of the Mind*, he writes of what he learned from his father’s songs. Yes, fathers are teachers. And not all fathers have internalized the educational rules of Western culture. What he learned sends shivers down my spine, it sounds so right. It is exactly the opposite of what the current data-driven “experts” tell us. And what if Simon Ortiz is right?

“...One has to recognize that language is more than just a group of words and more than just the technical relationship between sounds and words. Language is more than just a functional mechanism. It is a spiritual energy that is available to all.” I read these words and remember the blank stares when I suggested in my curriculum group that perhaps what a student has to say should take primacy over how s/he says it. Maybe our time would be better spent, I suggested, helping students mine the depths of their souls rather than teaching them the color to associate with a topic sentence---a color association someone invented, just as we in education feel forced to assign numbers to tasks that have no numerical value. Yet we accept it all, because the “experts” say it is so.

At the moment, as children learn to read, they are sometimes given lists of nonsense syllables. All meaning is stripped away from these “words”—to see if the child is able to “decode.” But what use is decoding if there is no meaning? Surely it is the meaning itself that must be



Simon Ortiz, November 2009, in Missoula, Montana

“decoded” from a piece—or better yet, intuited. If we wait until a child is able to write a “proper paragraph” before they can “move on” to writing more in depth pieces, will the content, the meaning, the stories the child has to tell, die in the holding tank? Are we willing to take that risk? At the very least, might we consider teaching the importance of content alongside teaching form?

“A song is made substantial by its context—its reality—both that which is there and what is brought about by the song. The context has not only to do with your being physically present, but also with the context of the mind...the emotional, cultural, spiritual context in which we thrive—in that, the song is meaningful.”

Certainly, writing involves all of those things—the emotional, cultural and spiritual world in which the author dwells—and which of those do we address when we place value on the form over the mining of the heart?

“We think of English as a very definitive language—useful in defining things—which means setting limits. But that’s not what language is supposed to be. Language is not definition; language is all expansive. We, thinking ourselves capable of the task, assign rules and roles to language unnecessarily. Therefore, we limit our words, our language, and we limit our perception, our understanding, and our knowledge.”

I think of the vocabulary drills, spelling exercises,

word decoding, sentence diagramming, and even poetry interpretation that occurs in classrooms. What kind of limits are we putting on our capacity to think, to feel, to understand at more than a surface level? “When my father sings a song,” Ortiz continues, “he tries to instill a sense of awareness about us. Although he may remark about the progressive steps in a song, he does not separate the steps or components of the song. The completeness of the song is the important thing, how a person comes to know and appreciate it...to know the whole experience of the song.”

Language has no purpose beyond that of creating meaning—and Ortiz suggests that, if we allow it, language takes us way beyond mere meaning. “I listen carefully, but I listen for more than just the sound, listen for more than just the words and phrases, for more than the various parts of the song. I try to perceive the context, meaning, purpose—all these items not in their separate parts but as a whole—and I think it comes completely like that.”

In a class I am taking, one of the professors went to great lengths to show us how we might help a struggling reader. She took a short passage of a book and spent the next forty-five minutes breaking it down into its parts—examining each word and even the parts that make up the word—all of this in the name of comprehension, as if this would then help the student be able to understand the meaning of the entire passage. It doesn’t even make common sense. There is no meaning in those parts, once they are separated from one another. The meaning is conveyed from the heart of the author into the heart of the reader. The words are just the vehicle for that transmission—the song that is language. Just as with a living being, once it is dissected, each piece taken from its context, inspected and interpreted separately, all that is left is something that is no longer alive. And this is how the

“experts” propose we help struggling readers and writers?

Ortiz writes, “Unless you teach and learn language in such a way as to permit it to remain or for it to become all expansive—and truly visionary—your expressiveness and perceptions will be limited and even divided.” I know that language can be allowed to expand in this way at any grade level. If we teach our students formulas to use for writing and decoding when they are young, will they be forever limited by those forms? How easy is it to break a mold that you learn early; something you’ve been told will help you? How do those forms limit our ability to perceive the world—to perceive ourselves, and communicate that perception to others? Is that not the ultimate purpose of education?

Ortiz continues, “You perceive by expressing yourself... Indeed, the song was the road from outside himself to inside—which is perception—and from inside himself to outside—which is expression. That’s the process and the product of a song—the experience and the vision that a song gives you.

The words, the language of my experience, come from how I understand, how I relate to the world around me, and how I know language as perception. That language allows me vision to see with and by which to know myself.”

How willing are we educators to open ourselves to the teachings of “experts” from non-Western cultures—or people who have somehow been able to break the form taught in our educational institutions? To trust the language of our own experience—of our hearts?

What if Ortiz is right?

Ortiz, Simon. “Song, Poetry, and Language—Expression and Perception” in *Genocide of the Mind*, MariJo Moore, ed. New York: Thunder’s Mountain Press/Nation Books, 2003.



Simon Ortiz visiting with a group of MWP teacher consultants at the University of Montana last fall.

The Serious Teacher Knows How to Play

a book review

Donna L. Miller

As a writer, I am happiest when I am twisting, twirling, and tinkering with words, when after wallowing for awhile, the text surges with a powerful message or tickles the reader with humor. Ralph Fletcher's new book, *Pyrotechnics on the Page: Playful Craft that Sparks Writing* (Stenhouse, 2010) reminds me why I write—because it's fun. He also hints at how rarely fun trickles into contemporary classrooms, given the test culture in which we now live. Pressured to make adequate yearly progress or to ensure that they maintain their excelling status, schools focus on reading or math scores, on test prep and statistics. Under this paradigm, play gets snuffed out; classrooms have little time for the experimental discovery that makes learning fascinating rather than a chore.

Unwilling to accept this ashy state of education, Fletcher invites us to poke at the glowing embers of creativity in our students and to fan the flames with language play. Fletcher, like most educators, seems to concur with William Butler Yeats' assessment that "education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

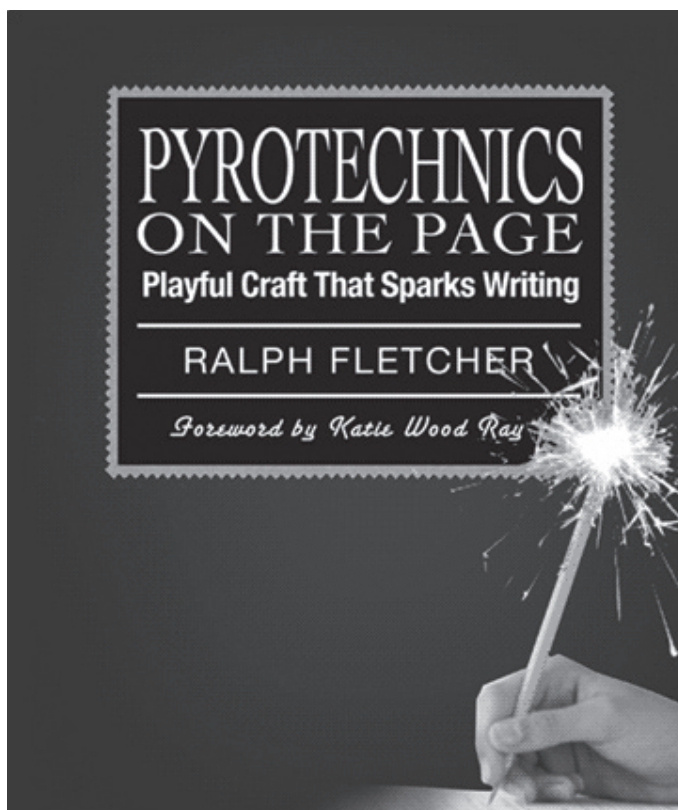
Fletcher's ideas themselves are not new—writing teachers have always profiled the power of puns, alliteration, allusions, and other figurative language that lends color to the craft. Essentially, Fletcher raises the alarm, reminding us about the risks if we let passion die. So, he takes us back to our own childhoods, to the stages of language development when we raised children, to a classroom rich with song and riddles, or to the playground where jump rope rhymes and clapping games abound. With their detailed kinesthetic variations and tongue-twisting sounds, children learn dexterity and develop language skill. Unfortunately, for many policy makers and administrators, play and fun imply an absence of productivity. For them, fun is a frivolous goal. Fletcher argues that word choice and fluency (those sound like test prep words) can expand with wordplay: "Fun is a Trojan horse for weightier educational terms like ownership, engagement, and flow. Fun matters. We have created this elaborate pedagogical contraption called the reading-writing workshop, but fun is the engine that makes it run" (18). To further make his point, he uses the analogy of an athlete juking and jiving on a drive for the basket—poetry in motion—and invites us to wonder, is the athlete working or playing? Such talent, such art requires deep, deliberate practice, but pleasure also resides in the rigor.

We "become more skillful not merely through work and study, but through play" (25).

This rigor begins with a writer's notebook, the place where writers conduct experiments, collect bits of talk, or store "sparks from a campfire that could start a fire" (14). From there, Fletcher shows us how to craft lessons that inspire language play, profiling mini-lessons in shadow boxes labeled "Bringing It to the Writer's Workshop." In those areas, he references Chapter Sixteen, which provides three sections per craft idea: Discussion, How to Teach It, and Resource Material. The sixteen appendices in the book offer a cornucopia of additional ideas and an extensive bibliography that suggests mentor texts for young writers as they experiment with the described techniques: puns and double meanings, invented words, allusions, expression and idioms, metaphors and similes, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, oxymorons, and alliteration. Throughout his book, Fletcher demonstrates how language play subverts the dominant paradigm: "Refusing to stay on the walkway, it romps through the lush and forbidden grass. It disputes the fundamental notion that there is a right way and a wrong way to use a word" (31). Since language players in effect operate within two linguistic worlds at once, they achieve a linguistic sophistication and freshness.

Although Fletcher is writing primarily for an audience of elementary school teachers, I have successfully employed many of his techniques in my high school writing workshops. Like Fletcher, I have long recognized children's literature as a fertile ground for sprouting creativity in writers who, after listening to seedling sounds, concoct their own words and rhythms, imitating these authentic authors and their mentor texts. These are not textbook exercises but real writers at work. On this subject, Fletcher quotes Jerry Spinelli: "We custom-make suits and chili and tricked-out cars—so why not words?" (42) And why not use children's literature to teach writing? With such texts we can teach into young writers' intrepid and inquisitive natures. Besides, to focus solely on convention and correctness leads to potentially mind-numbing prose; drill and kill methods leech the fun from learning.

In addition to diction play, Fletcher offers syntactical strategies like the 1-2-3 and the 3-2-1 cadences, as well as sentence reversals, which he calls "reversible raincoat" sentences, a term borrowed from Calvin Trillin. He shows how repetition achieves emphasis, how questions invite engagement, and how breaking rules with fragments can work.



Although Fletcher is not advocating that we abandon teaching traditional conventions, he does wish to promote play over mastery, to encourage exploration and experimentation, to find the inner music that makes writing sing.

One of the books Fletcher recommends that I have also used in writing workshop, *Amos and Boris* by William Steig, illustrates his recommended, out of the box irregularity:

One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water;
and later, lying on the deck of his boat, gazing
at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse, Amos, a little speck of a living
thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all. Overwhelmed
by the beauty and mystery of everything, he rolled over and over and right
off the deck of his boat and into the sea.

High school students who study this passage have noticed and named the following writer's craft techniques:

- < alliteration (luminous, later, lying, little, living; sea, sight, some, spouting, starry, sky, speck)
- < preposition pairs whose rhythm matches the rise and fall motion of waves (at the sight/of some whales; on the deck/of his boat; of a living thing/in the vast living universe)
- < vivid verbs (marveled, rolled)
- < action-packed participles (spouting, lying, gazing, living, overwhelmed)
- < brilliant adjectives (phosphorescent, luminous, starry)
- < sophisticated syntax to match the action (employing the semicolon rather than the full stop period; repeating the conjunction and to illustrate the rolling movement of the mouse)
- < assonance in the repeated i sound (little, living, luminous, his, immense, in, universe, thing, akin, it, into, everything)
- < stacked appositives (the tiny mouse, Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast universe)

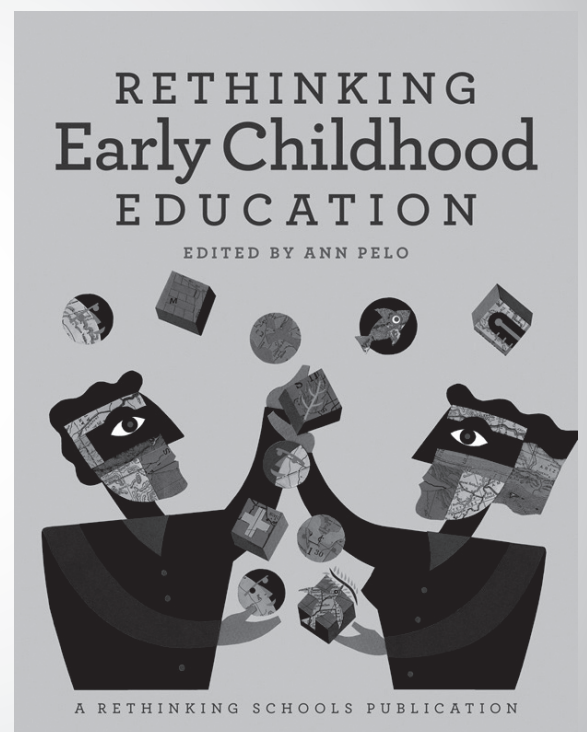
After encountering the imagery richness of this taffy-stretched sentence and its comparatively simple companion, writers often imitate Steig's syntactical craft, attempting to achieve the same effect where rhythm reinforces meaning, where imagery illustrates the scene.

This is the kind of teaching real books can do. Real books show writers at work, playing with patterns and pleasing sounds. According to Fletcher, "play is the ultimate constructivist activity—it's about doing rather than observing" (79). With the help of this hot, new book, teachers can spark real classroom inquiry, not by squelching students' thinking with noticing and naming but by inviting writers to tune their ears to surprises, to invent unexpected and fresh expressions. Under the Fletcher plan, we become serious teachers when we teach students to play.

Ann Pelo

**MEA Keynote Speaker
October 21-22, 2010
in Helena, Montana**

Ann is a teacher educator, program consultant, and author whose primary work focuses on Reggio-inspired, social justice, and ecological teaching and learning. Ann studied child development and family studies at Purdue University, earning a Master's Degree in Education 1992. From 1992 until 2008, she worked at Hilltop Children's Center, a full-day childcare program in Seattle, Washington. As a teacher of 3-5 year-old children and as a mentor teacher, she was responsible for professional development at the Center. Ann is the author of three books: *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* (2008), *The Language of Art: Inquiry-based Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings* (2007), and, with Fran Davidson, *That's Not Fair: A Teacher's Guide to Activism with Young Children* (2000). Her current work is focused on practices to deepen the connections between people and the natural world.





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State Officers:

Heather E. Bruce, Director
Department of English, University of Montana
heather.bruce@umontana.edu

Dave Christensen, Co-Director
Middle School Language Arts, Lolo School
christensens@montana.com

Staff :

Christa Umphrey
Technology Liaison & Publications Editor
montana.writing.project@gmail.com

Merrilyne Lundahl
Program Coordinator
mwp@umontana.edu