

Hotbed of writers

Marin is loaded with writers, wannabe writers, writing teachers and workshops

BY NIKKI MEREDITH

"I'm marrying Marvin. I think there's a book in it."
—*New Yorker* cartoon

Every era has its favored literary genre. In the fifties, everyone was a closet novelist. In the sixties, the *New Journalists* were born and by the seventies, Tom Wolfe declared the novel dead. Then in the eighties, he wrote one and proclaimed that the Great American Social Novel was the only worthy endeavor. In the nineties, the literary memoir moved to center stage.

But forget genre. Now everybody's writing everything: the Great American, well, you name it—in fact, you probably already have. More than likely you've got a novel or a collection of poems or stories, a travel book, a mystery, a romance, a memoir, a how-to book about love, cooking or exercise under your hat or in your computer. In Marin, we've got writers of them all in abundance, both published and unpublished.

Molly Giles suspected the writing frenzy had gone too far when she discovered that her veterinarian, her neighbor and her attorney were all writing books. But she was certain the whole damn business was out of control when the stranger who picked her up after her car broke down asked her to read his screed. "He didn't rob me or rape me, but when I told him I was a writing teacher, he reached into the back seat and handed me his manuscript."

While some are cheering the fact that so many are taking pen in hand, many who have to read these works are wishing some of the multitude would take up sailing instead.

"Everyone should write," says Giles, "but sometimes reading what they've written is arduous."

Many of these would-be writers are inspired by the numerous successful ones in our midst: Isabel Allende, Martin Cruz Smith, poet laureate Robert Haas, Anne Lamott, to name but a few (see sidebar). These writers are accessible. They give readings, make appearances at fundraisers and teach writing classes at our local bookstores, some of which have become virtual literary salons. Recently Book Passage vastly expanded its store to accommodate the many workshops, seminars, mystery teas and conferences it puts on. This summer the store will host its third annual mystery writer's conference and its fifth annual travel writer's conference—both featuring well-known Bay Area authors as well as such nationally known writers as Jan Morris and Elizabeth George.

Also this summer A Clean Well-Lighted Place For Books is sponsoring two advanced workshops with award-winning writers: a poetry workshop with Mill Valley poet Jane Hirshfield and a workshop on the art of the memoir with Bernard Cooper, a writer whose critically acclaimed memoir, *Truth Serum* (Houghton Mifflin), was published last month.

But these public events represent only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Each writing class, conference and workshop spawns scores of writer's groups that go on to meet in private homes. And a whole writer's cottage industry is flourishing. We now have private writing coaches, writing consultants, writer's therapists, freelance editors, self-publishing advisers and a whole new breed of book doctors.

Then there are the books on writing. In addition to



Molly Giles is a Marin author and writing teacher (Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club*, is a former student) who believes everyone should write, but not everyone should be read.

Anne Lamott's best-selling *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anchor, 1994) and Natalie Goldberg's perennially popular *Writing Down the Bones* (Shambhala, 1986), the shelves of Marin bookstores are crammed with titles such as *A Writer's Life*; *Writing for Your Life*; *Writing from Your Heart*; *Writer's Dreaming*; *A Writer's Time*; *Writing Past Dark*; *Writing Toward Home*; *Writing from Your Inner Self*; *Writing as Witness*; *Writing Right* and many, many more.

WHAT IS THIS passion to write all about?

Flannery O'Connor said she wrote because she was good at it; James Baldwin said he wrote to be loved. Joan Didion has said she writes to find out how she's thinking, "what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means."

Tiburion writer Judy Greber, author of both mysteries and mainstream novels, says she writes because she loves words, and for her writing is one way to live an "alternative existence."

Tom Parker, a Palo Alto writer who teaches advanced fiction workshops, says he believes people write to be acknowledged for who they are. "I think it's the desire to have someone say, 'Yes, you are a worthwhile human being.' There's always a lingering hope that some editor, some reader will say, 'Yes, you are fucking fabulous. Did all of this come out of your head?'"

But a growing number of people declare that writing is about purging psychic pain.

"Some of the recent books on writing assume you're mentally ill," says Giles.

Writer Nancy Mairs has called it the literature of catastrophe, others call it the *anorexia* of the dysfunctional—but whatever you call it, it's now in vogue. This spring more than 20 new memoirs are coming out which focus on some sort of pathology, including David Mura's, *Where the Body Meets Memory*, an exploration of his addiction to pornography, and *First Comes Love*, by Marion Winick, which describes her transition from a Harvard Law School graduate to a heroin addict married to a gay man. These are the more sensational ones, but the point here is that the stories of common people and their travails are in.

Writer Jill Johnston calls this category "plebeian autobiography" and welcomes its popularity because it includes voices in the literary mix that have heretofore been ignored. In an essay in the *The New York Times Book Review*, she pointed out that autobiography, once the medium for winners, is now open to all corners "to insulate the centrality of every person, every kind of family, to celebrate difference, is the direction of the plebeian autobiography."

But Jonathan Yardley, editor of the *Washington Post's Book World* is not celebrating. When he's not railing against what he calls confessional autobiographies, he rails against novels that are thinly disguised autobiographies. "The subject of contemporary literature is the self," he said recently in a phone interview. "Baby boomers assume since they are of interest to themselves everyone else is interested. It's solipsistic."

Yardley claims that accounts of unhappy childhoods now dominate all literature—both fiction and non-fiction. "This all may have therapeutic value, but it's dangerous," he says. "It's bad for writing. It turns writing into therapy and it stops being a craft or an art. This whole trend has had a very harmful effect on American writers."

Molly Giles is also disquieted by the blurred distinction between therapy and writing. "I had five psychologists in a writing group who wanted to sit and discuss their feelings, but didn't understand the feelings of their characters. They were intelligent and regular writing machines, but nothing was said."

In the February issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Garrison Keillor vents his fury about the state of creative writing in a story about judging a poetry contest. After making his way through piles of manuscripts, he writes that he wanted to sit all the poets down and lecture them: "Self-expression is not the point of it, people! We are not here on paper in order to retail our injuries."

Keillor derides teachers of creative writing who encourage their students into writing journals—"yards and yards of sensitive wallpaper"—and who advocate the pain theory of literature. And just in case readers didn't get the point, this month, in a follow-up letter, he mocks creative writing teachers who are encouraging people to write "turgid poems about Bad Daddies and The Struggle to BE Me and all the other flat, morbid, narcissistic writing that is encouraged by bad teaching."

Kathy Evans, who teaches poetry at College of Marin, is also concerned that there's been a lowering of standards, but she makes a distinction between poetry that's written for art and poetry for self-expression. "Many students come to class for other reasons than to create excellent art," she says. "They come with their fantasy of being a writer and they need a community to hear their work. That's a valid reason."

But Evans is also displeased with the lavish self-absorption

continued on page 12

continued from page 11

tion that shows up in so much poetry—a state of affairs she attributes, in part, to a general lack of education. The problem, she says, is that more people seem to want to write than to read. “Many of my students who want to write don’t have basic information about the world. I’ve had students who think the Holocaust is a Jewish holiday and that Walt Whitman is the superintendent of schools.”

It is difficult for students to filter the world through words, she says, when their world is so limited. All they have is themselves to ponder.

• • •

“NOW HEAR THIS: every woman has important stories to tell and the ability to tell them. There are no exceptions.”

—Leslea Newman, *Writing from the Heart*

MANY AUTHORS of books on writing believe that deep inside each one of us is a writer struggling to break free. It’s this kind of advice that drives some editors and agents crazy because it encourages people who have no talent.

“Creative writing can’t be taught,” says Giles, “but it can be learned. It can be learned by those with enough talent and enough need to do it.”

According to Esther Wanning, a former literary agent who lives in Inverness, conferences and workshops are often fraudulent because they don’t stress the importance of talent. “A lot of people who go to these workshops are lied to,” she says. “They are told how wonderful they are and then when they can’t get published, they go around with a big chip on their shoulder.”

And some become conference groupies who, failing to get positive feedback from



Judy Greber, a Tiburon writer with many mysteries and mainstream novels under her belt, supports the impulse to write, no matter what the outcome.

one workshop, pack up their manuscript and take it to another. Tom Parker calls it the rusty staple syndrome. “If you participate in enough writer’s conferences, you hear the same stories again and again. When these people get criticism, they

reaction she got to her story said icily, “Well, Dorothy Parker liked it.”

Teachers vary on how much writers who don’t display talent should be encouraged. Kathy Evans says she “waters all the flow-

Ed Smith
don’t hear a word of it. They just take it to the next group waiting to be discovered.” (The label is a bit of a misnomer these days, he says, because the staples are no longer rusty. “Now that everyone uses computers the manuscripts look fresher, but they’re still the same old stories.”)

According to Giles, some hardcore conference goers challenge negative comments about their work by referring to positive remarks they’ve gotten at previous conferences. “Some will say, ‘Oh that’s not what Richard Ford told me.’ They’ll even invoke dead writers.” She says one woman who was displeased by the

ers” in her poetry workshops. Molly never tells anyone not to write, but she never encourages bad writers.

Esther Wanning believes that teachers should be more direct. “They never say they would with a bad football player or one who can’t play the violin, ‘I don’t think you’re going to make the grade.’ I’d like to be an opera singer, but I can’t sing, so no one ever held out any false hope to me.”

“You’re not doing anyone a favor by encouraging them if they aren’t good. People work at low-paying jobs in cab driving, taxis, pursuing their art in the fashionable way thinking they are one three or four million who aren’t going to make it out of there.”

Wanning adds, “People who want to write often make the mistake of believing that loving to write is the only prerequisite. When I was an agent, people would come up and say, ‘Hey, I love to write.’ I would say, ‘So what?’ What sort of virtue is there in loving to write? Most people who turn out to be great writers don’t. It’s only the truly bad writers who love to write.”

“Most real writers avoid writing,” says Giles. “They avoid it because it’s hard work. There are long hours of boredom and it’s better if you’re a little masochist.”

Giles, who was Amy Tan’s writing teacher when she was working on *The Luck Club* (Putnam) and the *Kitchen Wife* (Putnam), says Tan is a good example of how talent and hard work can earn success. “It was a job to her. She’d work 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. writing and rewriting.”

In the book world, no matter what genre, tenacity is often as important as talent. There are many psychotherapists in Marin walking around grumbling about the phenomenal success of Mill Valley resident John Grey’s book, *Men Are from Mars*

Women Are from Venus, (years on the best-seller list, audiotapes, videotapes, infomercials) believing that a clever title brought him fame and fortune. What they don't know is that Grey had been a tireless promoter and marketer of his brand of pop psychology for years before his book's success.

•••

Many writers of how-to-write books talk about writing as if it's a noble pursuit, regardless of the quality, regardless of whether the work is ever published.

In *Bird by Bird*, Lamott writes, "Even if only the people in your writing group read your memoirs or stories or novel, even if you only wrote your story so that one day, your children would know what life was like when you were a child and you knew the name of every dog in town—still, to have written your version is an honorable thing to have done."

In a recent interview, Lamott said she knows it can look ridiculous for so many people to be writing when not very many will make any money or become Amy Tan. "But I think it's great for people to find out who they are, try to preserve what was when the world made more sense. People are trying to shine a little light on a dark and creepy time."

Judy Greber also says she supports the

impulse to write, no matter what the outcome. "If you really want to muck around with words and you do it as professionally as possible, you treat it as a discipline that you'll never conquer, that's wonderful."

Over her desk Greber has a quote by the poet Robert Haas about reading that she says also applies to the way she feels about writing: "Reading is a gymnasium for the imagination where people can work out, get ready for the shock of existence."

•••

Much of the wrangling about who should write, what subjects are valid and what genres are worthwhile may ultimately be beside the point. Good writing is good writing. Yardley may call the focus on self a phenomenon of our era, but didn't a poet named Walt Whitman (not the superintendent of schools) write "Song of Myself" in 1855? And with respect to Keillor's disdain for poems about bad daddies, didn't Sylvia Plath write a highly acclaimed (though controversial) poem in the sixties called "Daddy"?

The art has always been in the transformation of the personal to the universal, no matter the genre, no matter the subject, no matter the decade. It's difficult to believe that adding more voices to the chorus is a

continued on page 14

Follow your dream?

Who are these people who devote so much time to writing? Many work at regular jobs, getting up early each day or stealing a few hours every night. But some turn their whole lives around to follow their dream.

Meet Bob Levy, 52, a former computer systems manager who lives in Mill Valley. "Six years ago I went to a baseball game with my company and decided to write about it for the in-house newsletter. The story was funny and irreverent, and as a result, I was asked to write a column. After three of four issues, the editor asked me if I ever thought about writing fiction. The question prompted me to take a fiction class at U.C. Extension, and there I wrote two stories based on childhood remembrances. Then I wrote a very, very short story and submitted it to the *Bay Guardian* fiction contest and placed third. I was hooked.

"Now I'd written three stories and one got mentioned. It seemed easy and I believed I had talent.

"Then I wrote another story and it got accepted by the *Jewish Bulletin*. Wow, I thought, I got paid. It's getting easier. That was in 1989. It was the last success I've had."

Nonetheless, Levy has completely reorganized his life around writing. He quit his own career and does administrative work for his wife's consulting business part-time. He writes a minimum of four hours a day, takes writing classes, attends writer's groups. He's now written 60 stories and he submits his work regularly to various publications, but to no avail.

Why does he keep writing?

"I tell myself I'm accumulating a body of work so when I am successful and they say, 'Do you have any more of these stories?' I'll say, 'Yes, I have seventy-five more.'

"Many people worry that when

they die they will have regrets about what was left unsaid, things they didn't tell people they should have. I will have none of those regrets. I'm saying almost everything I want to say.

"I feel cleaner and healthier for having done it. For having written about hard things, urges and peccadilloes without embarrassment."

How does his wife feel about being the primary breadwinner? "She always earned more money than I did, even when I was working full time. She earns enough so that money isn't a problem. And she sees the benefits. For twenty-five years she saw what the cost was to me in my other work. I was cut off emotionally from what was going on around me. Now she sees me exercising another part of me. I'm more playful, softer, funnier.

"But she doesn't understand how I can keep going. She would have stopped years ago, because in her life, she's extremely results oriented. She's exasperated for me. She would need the recognition."

So is it worth it? "Even if I don't publish another story between now and when I die, I'll think it's worth it. Now that I'm doing it, it's something I have to do. But I also have to say that if I had known how hard it was going to be, I would never have done it in a million years. I didn't know how difficult it would be to look deep into myself this way."

So is it therapy? "No, it's not therapy. It's a creative outlet. You can be a painter and not sell and still be a painter. Carver and Cheever were writers because of what they wrote, not because they published.

"No one ever said to John Cheever, are you doing this for therapy? Selling or not selling is not what makes the difference.

"Besides," he says, "if it were therapy I'd be better at it after five years. I finished therapy in one-and-a-half years."

Women Are from Venus, (years on the best-seller list, audiotapes, videotapes, infomercials) believing that a clever title brought him fame and fortune. What they don't know is that Grey had been a tireless promoter and marketer of his brand of pop psychology for years before his book's success.

• • •

Many writers of how-to-write books talk about writing as if it's a noble pursuit, regardless of the quality, regardless of whether the work is ever published.

In *Bird by Bird*, Lamott writes, "Even if only the people in your writing group read your memoirs or stories or novel, even if you only wrote your story so that one day, your children would know what life was like when you were a child and you knew the name of every dog in town—still, to have written your version is an honorable thing to have done."

In a recent interview, Lamott said she knows it can look ridiculous for so many people to be writing when not very many will make any money or become Amy Tan. "But I think it's great for people to find out who they are, try to preserve what was when the world made more sense. People are trying to shine a little light on a dark and creepy time."

Judy Greber also says she supports the

impulse to write, no matter what the outcome. "If you really want to muck around with words and you do it as professionally as possible, you treat it as a discipline that you'll never conquer, that's wonderful."

Over her desk Greber has a quote by the poet Robert Haas about reading that she says also applies to the way she feels about writing: "Reading is a gymnasium for the imagination where people can work out, get ready for the shock of existence."

• • •

Much of the wrangling about who should write, what subjects are valid and what genres are worthwhile may ultimately be beside the point. Good writing is good writing. Yardley may call the focus on self a phenomenon of our era, but didn't a poet named Walt Whitman (not the superintendent of schools) write "Song of Myself" in 1855? And with respect to Keillor's disdain for poems about bad daddies, didn't Sylvia Plath write a highly acclaimed (though controversial) poem in the sixties called "Daddy"?

The art has always been in the transformation of the personal to the universal, no matter the genre, no matter the subject, no matter the decade. It's difficult to believe that adding more voices to the chorus is a

continued on page 14

Follow your dream?

Who are these people who devote so much time to writing? Many work at regular jobs, getting up early each day or stealing a few hours every night. But some turn their whole lives around to follow their dream.

Meet Bob Levy, 52, a former computer systems manager who went to a baseball game with my company and decided to write about it for the in-house newsletter. The story was funny and irreverent, and as a result, I was asked to write a column. After three of four issues, the editor asked me if I ever thought about writing fiction. The question prompted me to take a fiction class at U.C. Extension, and there I wrote two stories based on childhood remembrances. Then I wrote a very, very short story and submitted it to the *Bay Guardian* fiction contest and placed third. I was hooked.

"Now I'd written three stories and one got mentioned. It seemed easy and I believed I had talent.

"Then I wrote another story and it got accepted by the *Jewish Bulletin*. Wow, I thought, I got paid. It's getting easier. That was in 1989. It was the last success I've had."

Nonetheless, Levy has completely reorganized his life around writing. He quit his own career and does administrative work for his wife's consulting business part-time. He writes a minimum of four hours a day, takes writing classes, attends writer's groups. He's now written 60 stories and he submits his work regularly to various publications, but to no avail.

Why does he keep writing?

"I tell myself I'm accumulating a body of work so when I am successful and they say, 'Do you have any more of these stories?' I'll say, 'Yes, I have seventy-five more.'

"Many people worry that when

they die they will have regrets about what was left unsaid, things they didn't tell people they should have. I will have none of those regrets. I'm saying almost everything I want to say.

"I feel cleaner and healthier for having done it. For having written about hard things, urges and peccadilloes without embarrassment."

How does his wife feel about being the primary breadwinner? "She always earned more money than I did, even when I was working full time. She earns enough so that money isn't a problem. And she sees the benefits. For twenty-five years she saw what the cost was to me in my other work. I was cut off emotionally from what was going on around me. Now she sees me exercising another part of me. I'm more playful, softer, funnier.

"But she doesn't understand how I can keep going. She would have stopped years ago, because in her life, she's extremely results oriented. She's exasperated for me. She would need the recognition."

So is it worth it? "Even if I don't publish another story between now and when I die, I'll think it's worth it. Now that I'm doing it, it's something I have to do. But I also have to say that if I had known how hard it was going to be, I would never have done it in a million years. I didn't know how difficult it would be to look deep into myself this way."

So is it therapy? "No, it's not therapy. It's a creative outlet. You can be a painter and not sell and still be a painter. Carver and Cheever were writers because of what they wrote, not because they published.

"No one ever said to John Cheever, are you doing this for therapy? Selling or not selling is not what makes the difference.

"Besides," he says, "if it were therapy I'd be better at it after five years. I finished therapy in one-and-a-half years."

bad thing, as long as the splendid aria
continue to be heard above the din.

"The house of fiction has, as Henry
James informed us, many rooms," writes
Nicholas Delbanco in an essay in *Writing*
(Middlebury College Press). "The art
of descriptive is clear; that it is prescriptive
is to be desired; that it should be prescriptive
strikes me as inane....The virtue
of the marketplace lies in its competitive
jumble, its contradictory standards, its
multiplicity of wares."

Some recent books by Marin writers

Mainstream Fiction

Cathryn Alpert, *Rocket C*
(MacMurray & Beck, Inc.)

Isabel Allende, *Pau*
(HarperCollins)

Maxine Chernoff, *Americ*
Heaven (CoffeeHouse)

Judy Greber, *With Friends L*
These (Ballantine,)

Cary James, *King & Raven* (

Martin's Press)

Martin Cruz Smith, *Ro*
(Random House)

Susan Trott, *Holy M*

Short stories

Gina Berriault, *Women in Tl*
Beds (Counterpoint)

Molly Giles, *Creek W.*
(University of Georgia Press)

Poetry

Kathy Evans, *Imaginat*
Comes to Breakfast (Signat
Press)

Robert Haas, *The Essen*
Haiku (The Ecco Press)

Jane Hirshfield, *The Octo*
Palace (HarperCollins)

Kay Ryan, *Elephant Ro*
(Grove Press)

Literary Nonfiction

Bill Barich, *Big Dreams: I*
the Heart of California (Vintage)

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bi*
Some Instructions on Writing
Life (Anchor Books)

Jaja Sun-Childers, *The Wh*
Haired Girl (Picador Press)

Environmental

Mark Dowie, *Losing Grou*
(M.I.T. Press)

David Harris, *The Last Sta*
(Times Books)

Mysteries

Robert Burton, *Doc in a*
(Soho Press)

Jaqueline Girdner, *Most Li*
to Die (Berkeley Press)

Joe Gores, *Menaced Assas*
(Mysterious Press)

Meg O'Brien, *I'll Love You*
Die (St. Martin's Press)

Joanne Pence *Somethin*
Cooking (HarperCollins)

Gillian Roberts, *The Mumm*
Curse (Ballantine, forthcoming)

Shelley Singer, *Interview*
Mattie (Penguin)

Psychology, Spiritual, Etc.

Lonnie Barbach, *The Pa*
(Penguin)

Jean Bollin, *Crossing to Av*
A Woman's Midlife Pilgrim
(HarperCollins)

Sylvia Boorstein, *It's Ea*
Than You Think (HarperCollins)

John Grey, *Men, Women*
Relationships (HarperCollins)

Jack Kornfield, *Living Dha*
(Shambala)

George Leonard, *The Life*
Are Given (Putnam)

Judith Wallerstein, *The G*
Marriage, (Houghton Mifflin)