

**MY WRITING LIFE**

**BY**

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## Portrait of the Artist

Leap of fish—  
faint slip  
of sound as scales  
break the surface  
pane. Head arcs  
toward tail. Petite  
armor plates shoot  
rainbow sparks. This  
ignition of fin to flame can only  
happen when, unfiltered  
through wet, sun  
hits fish-hide.  
Is this why  
they jump—to hold  
perfect form in  
light and color  
a moment high  
in the element of  
death for a fish?

This poem, which I wrote many years ago, is not about a fish. It's a metaphor for the artist's life, treading water on the open sea without a life jacket, teetering always in the danger zone of poverty, and poised just outside traditional circles of life. And yet, as a fish mysteriously jumps into the element in which, were he to stick there, he would surely die, artists live in this danger zone. A small handful thrive, and a smaller number profit from this endeavor.

What follows is an account of my life as a writer and then more specifically, my writing of the *Charity* books. As I am not an Austin, a Woolf, or a Steinbeck, some may wonder, "Who cares?"

Perhaps, no one. Perhaps, other writers or aspiring writers. For most authors we see only their finished books, all crisp, shiny and showing none (thank goodness!) of the oozing mess of pain and doubt that went into their making. For writers who find the process of writing a struggle (I suspect they are in the majority) and getting published nearly impossible (still...the majority), perhaps reading how others have approached both will be, if not inspiring, at least a reality check. While I have been published (and

feel fortunate to have been so) I have never made my living from my writing, though in recent years I have supported myself with corporate work, using my language skills editing and proofing publications.

A few years ago, two Russian women read one of my books and contacted me through my website. They had written a book about their escape from Russia and were now living in Canada. They asked for my advice on getting it published. I knew they did not have even a finger hold on reality, because their first question was, “How much money can we expect to get from such a book?”

I tried to give them a good picture of the landscape of publishing as I knew it and suggested avenues for them to try in getting an agent and a publisher, and I shared a bit of my own story. Their reply was a disgruntled, “You aren’t very encouraging.” (In fairness to me, I did tell them that nonfiction might be easier to place than fiction.)

So, I say at the outset, if you want encouragement, talk to your grandma or buy a Tony Robbins book. If you want a real account of one person’s experience, read on. Every writer will have her own story. There may be overnight success stories out there (and I hope one of them may be yours), but I do not know of any (except Anne Sexton, but keep in mind her success did not keep her from suicide).

Maybe, the bottom line is how one defines success.

## Lessons in Perseverance

I yearned to read and write long before I actually could. In the small prairie town where I was born, in the early 50s we had fall-out shelters but no kindergartens, and I had no one to teach me before I started first grade. About that time, my grandmother gave me *Treasure Island*. A pirate with black eye patch and a peg leg, a parrot whose brilliant red plumage echoed the pirate’s sash, a boy whose ruffled brown clothing matched the woody treasure chest, jagged rocks, a turquoise sea, and a sapphire sky—all this fairly bounced off the hard shiny cover, heralding the riches within; riches just out of my grasp. I longed to read this book. I carried it around with me, opening it at random to ask my mother, “What is this word? What is this word?” until my father became angry. “Why is she carrying that thing around when she can’t even read it?” Humiliated, I put the book away. Remembering this book cover, those feelings come back: a swirl of deepest longing, frustration tinged with anger that I did not have the key to opening this treasure. I don’t know what happened to that book and, to this day, I have not read *Treasure Island*. Although it is on my Kindle, it isn’t the same.

Only my grandmother ever read to me. Bedtime stories from a collection called *What a Jolly Street* and Bible stories from church and Sunday school pamphlets. I loved the Bible story pictures, in dusky desert shades, of men and women (mostly men) in flowing robes. The blood orange sun always broke through billows of rose-tipped clouds to cast a spangled beam on the face of whatever Old or New

Testament figure whose story it was. I remember the gruesome pictures, too—the kind that would be edited out of any modern children’s book—of Goliath’s head dripping with blood, gripped by the hair and held high by the boy David, a lad who looked remarkably like a curly-haired South Dakota farm boy, only with longer hair, more muscle and fewer clothes; the head of John the Baptist, eyes staring, mouth agape, dripping blood, on a silver platter served up to another scantily-clad teenager, Salomé, swathed in veils that exposed enough flesh to signify this was not a nice girl; Stephen, naked torso pummeled with stones, dripping blood; the Crucifixion itself, with Jesus of Nazareth, dripping blood.

I loved paper and notebooks, pencils and pens and, as soon as I could form the letters, copied out texts from the *Little Golden Books* that my grandmother gave me. This was my first attempt at writing. It was unsatisfying, and I gave it up.

My teachers all read to us for the first 15 minutes of every day until the seventh grade, when we no longer had one teacher but a different teacher in a different room for each subject. That 15-minute period of every school morning for those six years was my favorite time of day. That’s where I was introduced to Tom Sawyer (and so went on to read *Huckleberry Finn* by myself) and the first two books of the *Little House* series, and again went on to read the rest alone. By seventh grade, having exhausted everything in the kids’ section of the public library and everything in the school library, I was reading adult material. Back then, there wasn’t much children’s literature to speak of, and the adult books in our library were not very scandalous. I enjoyed everything I read, and read everything from shelf to shelf in our public library without discrimination, except for the Avalon romances, which did not interest me.

I began writing my first novel when I was twelve. On my mother’s old Olivetti typewriter, I banged out a science fiction tale about three boys and a dog who build a space ship and go to Venus where, with Venusians of all bizarre shapes and sizes and a lot of strange food, they have adventures. I didn’t finish the book and so never brought them back to Earth. I wish now I had kept a copy of it. I never showed it to anyone but one friend my own age. She seemed to enjoy it.

When I was a high school sophomore, my English teacher assigned an essay. We could write about anything we wanted, and it could be any length. This was the first time I felt ‘in the zone’ while writing. I began with a quote from the Bible, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” and went on from there. I am sure I was pontificating about something or other. I don’t remember what, but I do remember the feeling of words flowing from my pen, seemingly of themselves. It was a high I had never experienced before. I got an A+. That may have been due more to the fact that my English teacher was a born again Christian and was rewarding me for my opening bit of scripture than to the excellence of the essay.

In my senior year, a different English teacher suggested I enter an essay contest sponsored by Northern State Teacher’s College in Aberdeen, the closest college to my home town. I wrote about my childhood

best friend, Cynthia (the same who had enjoyed my science fiction novel), who, instead of going to high school with me, went into the Benedictine convent in Yankton. At that time, the Catholic kids went to the local Catholic grade school, taught by nuns. They entered the public high school with the rest of us.

Cindy lived just down the block from me. I had been happily anticipating the two of us walking to and from school and doing our homework together. So, in the eighth grade when she told me she was following her sister into the convent, I was shocked and bitterly disappointed. Candidates for the sisterhood were not allowed to write letters, I was told, so it was as if she dropped into a black hole. This was my first experience of loss. I missed her terribly and wrote an essay called “Good Morning, Cynthia,” which won the prize—a \$50 scholarship—but I had to attend that school to claim it, which I had no plans to do. (No sooner had I left my home town for Concordia College, Cynthia left the convent, returned home, got married, and had a bunch of kids.)

In college, though I was an English major, no one, not even my creative writing teacher, was much impressed with anything I wrote. My written assignments usually scored high for style, low for content, a tendency that has followed me through life. Very early on, I got sidetracked by theatre, earned a double major in Speech/Theatre and English, and I did not write again for many years.

In the late 70s, I was in New York, trying to be an actor, taking classes, going to auditions, and living the life of a starving artist. One night I went to a lackluster off-off Broadway play. I said to my roommate, “I could write something *that* good.”

So, I went home and started writing. It took me a couple years to finish the play. It was about Nazi SS troops occupying a hospital/convent in northern France at the beginning of WWII (I still had vestiges of nun-envy, I suppose). The play, entitled “Angelique,” got a staged reading at a small, mid-town theatre called the Apple Corps. I invited agents of all stripes to attend the reading (I was reading the part of the lead, Mother Superior), and one agent gave me an appointment.

She was elderly. Her name was Bertha. She said that she wanted to sell the play to a film company, but that it was easier to sell novels to film producers than plays. Could I turn the play into a novel?

I had never written a novel, I said (I didn’t mention my boys’ trip to Venus with their dog). “We’ll help you,” she said. “Send me a few chapters and we’ll go from there.”

So, home I went and began to write. I sent her the first three chapters. Bertha called me, excited. “You are a novel writer! You don’t need help. Keep going. Finish it and send to me.”

I was elated, finished the novel in a little over a year, and sent it to her. She read it and called me in. “You know,” she said, “This is really good. Have you ever considered turning it into a play?”

The Apple Corp Theatre lost their lease before they could mount a full production of “Angelique.” Bertha submitted my novel to all the big publishing houses. They all rejected it. It was not very good. However, in writing this not very good book, I proved to myself that I could finish something as long and time consuming as a novel.

Years later, when I began work on *Charity*, I had a drawer full of rejection letters from my first effort telling me in some cases what I had failed to accomplish. I took that criticism to heart, and this time, I showed my writing to everyone as I went along and finally landed in a not just decent, but exceptional, writers workshop, a group I’ve been with ever since: the Every-Other-Monday-Night Brilliant Writers Workshop.

You might think my writing career was launched at that time, and it was. Sort of. But not without a couple big missteps along the way. The first was my libretto for the musical version of *Dracula*.

It was the late 1970s. An acquaintance got word I was writing. Steve was an opera singer with a small success in a production that aired on public television. The big thing a few years prior had been the Broadway production, and then the movie, of *Dracula*, starring Frank Langella. Steve and I had gotten a kick out of the play, and I had long loved Bram Stoker’s book. I decided to write the libretto to what we hoped would be a musical version of *Dracula*. I wanted the twist in our production to be that Mina, instead of being rescued by the men, saves herself. (This was not an original idea. I had seen it done in the 1922 silent vampire movie, *Nosferatu*.) Steve wanted to play Dracula. He had the voice. He had the looks. He said he had the contacts.

So, off I went to write a few scenes and the lyrics to a handful of songs. I especially liked my patter song for Renfield, Dracula’s minion, where, from his cell in the insane asylum, he sings in a cheerily demented fashion of his love for flies and bugs, especially those fat with blood.

Steve liked what I had done and said he would show it to Tom O’Horgan. Tom O’Horgan was best known for his success with the original Broadway production of *Hair* about the time I was in college underwhelming my professors with my writing. O’Horgan, for a number of years, had worked in Europe, but he was back in town; Steve gave him what I had written so far, and he wanted to meet with me.

Steve escorted me to a fabulous, light-drenched, spacious, apartment filled with potted plants and antique furniture. I was used to much humbler digs and was in awe. He introduced me to the famous director, who received me cordially, was very friendly, and told me about his ideas for developing the musical. He liked it very much, he said. He just wanted to change it. The insane asylum was to be run by Nazis (I didn’t tell him that I had already written a play with Nazis and it hadn’t been very good); there were to be Druids, holocaustic fires and rituals. I was gobsmacked. What had happened to my little

romantic, feminist treatment of the classic vampire story, which, except for the ending, I had kept fairly true to Stoker's book (which is remarkably free of Nazis and Druids)?

I thanked him sincerely and told him he had given me much to think about. Steve was beaming.

When I got home, I called the Ann Wright Agency and was referred to Dan Wright, who handled writers and composers (his wife handled the actors, singers, and dancers). I saw him the next day and explained the situation, admitting I was overwhelmed and didn't know what to do. Tom O'Horgan was a very famous person. Should I turn my idea over to him for a complete makeover? Dan was candid. He said, "O'Horgan hasn't done a thing in this country for years and he is just looking for another project. He doesn't care what your idea is. He will take it over if you let him." I wondered...should I let him? I also had a bad feeling about being in so far over my head that this wouldn't make my career but be the death of me. Dan agreed. He called a composer he knew in California to see if he would look at my libretto and do the music. The guy was booked up for five years. Dan Wright was kind and confirmed my own fears: that I was not up to this business with Tom O'Horgan.

I saw Steve a few days later. He reminded me I needed to call Tom right away. I said I didn't think I'd be doing that. He was furious and we never spoke again.

A year or so after my *Drac* fiasco, a friend of a friend referred to me two fellows looking for someone to write a play about Richard III. They were part of an organization whose mission was to rehabilitate the legacy of the hunchback king, which has been shaped almost entirely by the Bard's version. Richard was apparently not a bad guy at all, as old English rulers went, and not as severely deformed as Shakespeare penned him. I mentioned that this had already been done, and quite brilliantly, by Josephine Tey in her novel, *Daughter of Time*. They were of course familiar with that iconic mystery, but wanted something different, and they wanted a play. They offered no other guidance.

So, off I went to write a play about Richard III, a play that was not really about Richard III (Shakespeare had done it) or about the research into his actual history (Tey had done that). Something completely different. I came up with what I thought was a good idea and started writing. After months of intense work, I had the first act and the synopsis of the rest. A wealthy, young man suffers a stroke and becomes a recluse, never leaving his room. Bitterly content with being waited on, he refuses all therapy. He also hallucinates Richard III, who appears to him and answers him, or comments on what's happening, in lines from Shakespeare's play. He of course has conjured up this character, a deformed and bitter man, as a projected view of himself. A friend calls in a new psychiatrist who decides to not try to rehabilitate the young man, but instead, to rehabilitate Richard III. She brings in materials for the kid to read and talks with him about Richard. The actor who plays Richard, whom no one can see but the young man and the audience, begins to change, gradually losing some of his physical deformity and departing

from the lines of Shakespeare's play. As Richard evolves into a more historically accurate and attractive figure, the rehabilitation of the young stroke victim progresses as well. What *happens* in the play is, at the end, the young man walks out of his room, and the historically accurate Richard fades to black.

I took my first act and my synopsis to a second meeting with the two fellows. They hated my idea and that was the end of that. They explained that they didn't know what they wanted, but they would know it when they saw it, and they didn't see it in my version. (I don't know if they ever found what they were looking for. To my knowledge, such a play was not mounted in New York City while I was there.)

I brought the first act to my Every-Other-Monday-Night Brilliant Writers Workshop. They very kindly told me that it had no conflict, no drama. It was dull.

I learned three valuable lessons. I was not a playwright. I could not write to spec, I needed to write for myself alone. And I needed to write what interested me. Which I have done ever since and which led me to writing my first poems and then a short story.

In the early 1980s, when I wrote my novel about nuns and Nazis, I researched WWII, especially the invasion of France. My dad was a soldier in the Second World War so I knew a little but not enough. When I still had hopes of publishing the novel, I entertained the idea of a sequel, following one of my characters to a concentration camp; so I continued my research into the Holocaust, reading everything I could get my hands on and watching all the documentary footage I could find on that subject. The novel was eventually put in a drawer and my plan for a sequel was scrapped. Nevertheless, the images from the Holocaust continued to spin in my mind, giving rise to my first poem: "See, Nadia!" It is a short poem—the final vision of a woman dying in Auschwitz.

Shortly after I finished this poem, I saw in the New York Times supplement an editor's query for poems about the Holocaust. I sent him my poem. He wrote me immediately, asking me what camp I had been in. I wrote back, explaining that I was not a survivor, nor was I Jewish. The letter he sent me in response almost burned my hands, it was so full of vitriol. He said I had no right to write about the Holocaust. He told me there were plenty of survivors who could and did tell their own stories.

I was stung. His query had not been for poems by survivors but for poems about the Holocaust. I had not misrepresented myself in any way. I had not claimed to be anything but a writer. I did not respond to his poisonous letter and put my poem away.

I had been attending a walk-in writers' workshop for a while in the Village (this was before I found my Brilliant Writers Workshop). One evening, with some trepidation, I read my poem. Silence followed. One man identified himself as a Jew and told me I did not have the right to write such a poem. That it was not my heritage. I didn't get it right, because the character ended on a note of hope and that, he assured me, was completely impossible. I remained quiet. Other people in the group mentioned rather

timidly (he was very angry and outspoken in his criticism) that not all writers experience everything they write. If that were necessary, there would be a lot less literature. He remained adamant.

So far no one had commented on the poem itself, only on my right to have written it. Once again, I tucked the poem away.

Then I saw another query for another anthology of Holocaust poems, *Beyond Lament: Poets of the World Bearing Witness to the Holocaust*. Being a glutton for punishment, I suppose, I sent the editor my poem. This time, in my cover letter, I stated that I was not a survivor, nor was I Jewish. Again, this editor, Marguerite M. Striar, had not specified that poets had to be survivors, but I was taking no chances. Without responding one way or the other to my letter, she accepted the poem for inclusion in her anthology. A year or so later, she telephoned, asking permission to give my contact information to an artist who wanted to use my poem in a collection of books on the Holocaust she was making for the Whitney Museum. She was using actual photos from the period and inlaying them in her hand-made paper, so the effect was one of translucence; with each image, she included text. She wanted my poem with one of her images. I agreed.

When the artist, Carol Rosen, called me, the first thing I said was, "I want you to know that I am not a survivor, nor am I Jewish." She said, with a note of real surprise, "It never would have occurred to me to ask."

Now, "See Nadia" is in Carol Rosen's collection of hand-made books. One set resides in the Whitney in New York City, another set is in the Simon Wiesenthal Center in LA, and a third is in the University of Tel Aviv Library.

I have always loved and been interested in animals. I began churning out little poems about animals, which were being published in small journals and in the newsletters of animal rights organizations. I wanted to write something more substantial about the grizzly bear, and so I spent over a year reading everything I could about the great bear. There was no Internet, no e-mail. I made use of the library in Nutley, New Jersey, where I was living, having lost my sublet in New York City. Nutley had a well-stocked library with an interlibrary loan system in place. The books they did not have, I could get from other libraries. Once, I got a book from as far away as Texas.

When I had done enough research to fill out my story idea, I wrote it, showed it to my only Nutley friend, whom I had met on the bus commuting back and forth to the city. She was an editor at Atheneum. She gave me some insightful criticism and told me that the writing was good. I sent it out to many places, including a short fiction contest sponsored by Negative Capability in Alabama. The prize was a thousand dollars and publication in their journal. I won. They sent me the check, which helped pay for my first

computer. The Internet was still fairly far in the future, but now I no longer had to type and retype new drafts of my writing.

The story “The Old Man and the Bear” never appeared in print (it is now included in *Epiphany*, a collection of many of the animal-related pieces I wrote during this period). About a year later, someone from the organization offered me a weak apology, explaining that their journal was put out by volunteers and somehow my story had fallen through the cracks. Because they had sent me what, even now, is a lot of money for one story, I did not complain.

I continued to write stories, poems, and articles about my great love, animals. They were all published somewhere, in small newsletters and journals, and one well-known magazine, *The Animals Voice*. The editors there, in fact, asked me to write an article for them on the theme “winds of change.” I broke my own rule about never writing to spec and wrote a lengthy essay on the evolving animal rights movement. This time, the experience was a good one and they published the piece. My next animal story, this one a true story about my grandmother’s horse, Dolly, was published by a Canadian newspaper. They sent me \$25 Canadian—my first payment (previously I had been paid in copies of the publication where my work appeared). I was writing for myself, and enough people liked what I wrote; I was happy. Though far from earning a living at it.

Stories my grandmother told me when I was a small child had been haunting me for years. I decided to write about that. *Charity* was begun.

I set it a generation earlier than my grandmother actually lived and had to do a lot of research as I was writing, even though there were things of the period of which I had first-hand knowledge. I have, in my day, peed in chamber pots and outdoor toilets (much preferring the latter). I have pumped water from a hand pump outside and from one installed at the sink, filling the reservoir of an old cook stove and dipping hot water out of it as needed. The houses I grew up in had modern electricity and plumbing, but just down the block, on many farms, and in my paternal grandparents’ home they did not.

I was living in NY again. It was the early 90s and there was still no Internet, and the New York Public Library’s catalog was in a series of ungainly bound books that seemed not to be updated often. To get a book, you had to already know the title and then fill out a self-addressed, stamped postcard with all its pertinent information and give it to the librarian. When you got the postcard back, sometimes it meant that the book was waiting for you at your branch library. Most of the time, my postcards said “not found” or “unavailable.”

I had a good friend who was a professor at the University of Wisconsin. I sent her a list of books I needed, and she sent them to me from the University library. I was able to keep them for a long time. When I finished, I shipped them back.

My saving grace during that period was the South Dakota State Historical Society. I subscribed to their publications and ordered books from their bookstore. On summer vacation trips back to South Dakota, I discovered various publications not to be found in any library system at the time. In a souvenir and craft shop on the Sisseton-Wahpeton reservation, I found an especially helpful Dakotah/English dictionary by Paul Warcloud. I also came upon a series of soft-covered booklets entitled *Wagon Wheels* in my hometown drug store. The editor, Norma Johnson, worked at Fort Sisseton, the old army fort the state keeps as a tourist attraction and historical site. These books were enormously informative, as there wasn't much written about that part of the country or its history. I met Norma once, after having read every volume of her *Wagon Wheels* series. I thanked her for her work and asked her how it was possible that there were so few sad stories, or stories of violence or tribulation. Did people just not write of those things? Did they only record the better times? The amusing and heartwarming anecdotes? Some hard times were recorded but mostly for their inspirational value, I thought, because things worked out in the end for these hardworking people of faith. She said they did get some darker stories when they were collecting material. They decided not to use them. "That's part of our history, too," I said, as gently as I could muster.

The stories my grandmother told me held enough sorrow in them for a novel or two.

Not only research without benefit of the Internet, but also the physical act of writing a book was different back then as well. I wrote these books on an electric typewriter. No correcting on screen and printing out a fresh copy. The metal letter key, with its sharply embossed symbol, hits the inked ribbon and then slams the paper leaving its image behind. If you want a fresh copy, you must retype the entire page, often the entire manuscript. You start over and start over and start over.

You had to retype the page, and often the entire manuscript many times before you arrived at a final, and clean, copy. It is labor intensive and there were writers who probably made corrections and re-writes to their manuscripts and then handed them over to a hired typist for clean copies. There is something to be said, however, for typing and retyping your own manuscript. You stay engaged with it on a physical level, not just mental (reading and re-reading it). The physical act of typing can literally keep you awake enough to catch earlier mistakes, slow you down enough to think of new ideas. With computers now, you can just re-print a corrected manuscript without re-typing. Much has been gained with that, but something has also been lost.

Of course, nothing says you can't retype the manuscript if you want to, and I have re-typed pages here and there just for the benefits mentioned above.

With the help of my Every-Other-Monday-Night Brilliant Writers Workshop I finished *Charity* and sent it out to agents. I made at least 30 submissions (again, this was before email; all submissions were

hard copies) of a few pages of the novel and a cover letter. Only one agent responded that she would like to see the rest of the novel. I boxed it up, included my profuse thanks for her request along with return postage, and mailed it.

After several months, I got an envelope from her that contained only a narrow strip of paper, not even a full page, that, in a few dimly mimeographed words, thanked me for my submission and wished me luck in placing it with the right agent. I waited for the return of the manuscript. I had supplied the postage and it was a matter of principle that I should get it back. I finally called her. She sounded harried and distracted on the phone and said that she was sure her assistant had returned it. She would check it out and get back to me.

I waited a couple more days, and then she called me. This time, she was very animated. “That rejection slip was a mistake,” she said. “I want to send you a contract.”

This agent, my second, quickly placed *Charity* with Simon and Schuster. She knew I was writing the sequel, and she sold them both books. I was elated. It was 1997. I was 50 years old and publishing my first novel. I had hoped to do it earlier, but I was happy to be doing it at all.

Then, my editor at Simon and Schuster, the man who had bought the book, left. The second editor approved each portion of the sequel, entitled *Fervent Charity*, and then she left too.

The third editor was primarily an editor of non-fiction books. She did not like *Fervent Charity*, and on her recommendation, S&S would not publish it. Because the previous editor had approved it, they had to pay me.

While my agent tried to sell the sequel elsewhere, I wrote another book. I called it my “sand” book, or the book you take to the beach. Contemporary, fun, no research required. *Death Can Be Murder*. My agent hated it. I did another mailing and found a new agent, my third, who loved it. She loved all my work but couldn’t sell any of it and then stopped communicating with me. After two years, I sent her my registered termination letter and moved on.

I went through the process again, and found my fourth agent. She loved *Fervent Charity* and the beach book, and she flipped over the brand new mystery I wrote in the years it took me to find her. This was *Command of Silence*. However, after a year of trying to sell them all to the big publishing houses, she terminated me, explaining that she could not make money selling books to smaller publishers. The responses from the publishers were pretty similar: No one knew how to market *Fervent Charity*, though they all claimed to like it; many editors (mostly the men) found the main character in *Death Can Be murder* too acerbic; and no one knew what the hell to do with *Command of Silence*. I understood her need to make a living and we parted amicably.

*Charity* was long out of print. I still hadn't published its sequel, and I had two more new unpublished novels.

I began submitting *Fervent Charity* to small independent publishers who did not require agented submissions. Bold Strokes responded that they liked the book but were the wrong publisher. They referred me to Spinster's Inc. Katherine Forrest read it and generously wrote me a lengthy email detailing why she wouldn't take it. She liked the writing, though, and did I have anything else? With no hope at all, but with nothing to lose, I sent her *Command of Silence*. To my amazement, she took it, asking if I could make one of the characters lesbian, since most of their readers were lesbian. She suggested the doctor, Ray Martinez. I didn't even have to change the name, just the pronouns. She did not want *Death Can Be Murder*.

*Fervent Charity* was finally accepted by a publisher who kept the book for three years (I was under contract and could not terminate without considerable cost to myself—that would be cost in money, not only the time wasted). Finally, shortly before the end of the three-year period, they announced they were going out of business. I sighed in relief, but realized I was back at that old familiar square one with a book I had written nearly two decades ago. *Command of Silence* had been published and was a finalist for the Lambda Awards that year. My beach book I published myself since I wrote it for fun. I make no claim for any literary value in it, although I don't think it's a bad little mystery. I've read worse.

*Fervent Charity* was different. I did not want to self-publish that. I wanted it taken seriously, and so I began to mentally gird my loins for beginning again that tedious process of submitting a manuscript.

The very day I got the publisher's going-out-of-business announcement and was contemplating how I was going to drag myself off that square one, which kept pulling me back like Charybdis, I received the most charming email from Astrid Ohletz at Ylva Publishing asking me, since my publisher was out of business, was I looking for a new one? She had read *Charity* years before and remembered it. She had started her own publishing firm in Germany and was opening a branch in North America for English-language books. When my termination was final with the defunct publisher, Astrid and I met on Skype. I signed the contract, believing then in the *deus ex machina* of the Greeks. Ylva literally descended from the skies and saved my writing life at the last minute.

So, have I arrived? No, there's no arrival.

That's the thing writers need to remember. It does make a difference in your life when you publish a book. The difference is mostly in self-image, and that's not small. And writing one book doesn't mean you can write another one; and getting one book published doesn't necessarily make it any easier to publish the next one.

I began with a bit of talent, perhaps, but every sentence I write, even now, is earned by some hard work. Nothing now flows from my pen. At least, nothing that is often in the nature of a keeper. I believe that I am the least talented person in the Brilliants workshop that has kindly kept me as a member for almost 30 years (and through Skype, even though they are in New York and I have returned to the Midwest, I can still participate). For their feedback, prodding, and encouragement, I owe them, as I owe all the agents and editors who have pushed me to always do better.

I have come to discern when criticism is helpful and when it is not. My ego has never once stopped whimpering at the least negative word, and I've learned to treat it like a puppy, patting its head, *Hush now. You'll be fine.* Since 1977, when I wrote that first bad novel, nothing has gotten easier.

To paraphrase Jeanette Winterson: don't write unless you have to. I have had to—and I guess I always will. I love the written word; I have believed in the stories I wanted to tell; and every day I learn something more about good writing.



Lena and William Magnus on their wedding day: 1909

## WRITING CHARITY

Facts. Fiction. Fantasy. All went into the roux that formed the base of the *Charity* books. I began with the stories my grandmother told me of her life and family. Set it all a generation or so earlier than she lived, underpinning it with substantial research into the history of that time and place, filled in the gaps in her stories with much from my imagination, and added a *souçon* of magical realism.

While I heard these stories in my early childhood, I first put pen to paper when I was 37 years old. I anchored my novel on the central fact of my childhood and of my grandmother's marriage: my grandfather's drinking.

The characters of Lena and Will are based on my grandmother and grandfather. I created more

characters based on people she knew, and that, in a few cases, I knew. Of course, I couldn't know any of these people well enough to write about *them*. I used them as jumping off points for characters that I invented, even Lena and Will, as I never knew them when they were young.

Yes, Grandma was a story teller. She told me stories about biting off her sister's toe; about Dolly, the horse who saved her life; about seeing Jesus standing at the foot of her dying father's bed; about seeing the devil cross their farmyard and enter the barn; about her mother-in-law, who wanted my grandparents to spend their wedding night with her; about Martha Magnus and her sister, living in houses side by side and staring at each other through their kitchen windows years on end and Pa Magnus going back and forth between them; about giving birth to my mother on her dining room table presided over by the horse doctor; about my grandfather buying shoes for the town whore. All these anecdotes found their way into my novels. (In my novels, I gave her friends she did not seem to have in real life: Gustie, Alvinia, Mary.)

My grandmother was not only the teller of stories but also the keeper of secrets. One of these secrets makes a ghost of an appearance in *Charity* in the scene where Lena hosts the Ruth and Esther circle and, after some sharp words are exchanged, she glares at her sister-in-law Nyla and thinks, *You better not say anything or I will tell a few things I know about you, too.*

The story of how her brother died was the incident around which I plotted *Charity*. “He hanged himself up there, right there in that bedroom,” she told me over and over, as she pointed to the north bedroom of our house, now my parent’s bedroom in the house in which my grandparents began their married life. She had come home, she said, to find her brother Halvor had hanged himself in that upstairs bedroom. The most interesting thing about this story is that it isn’t true. The second most interesting thing is why my grandmother bothered to tell me anything at all about her younger brother. She had nine or ten siblings (her Bible record is unclear), and she didn’t talk about any of them except the two who were still alive: Annie and Tilla. I never even heard the names of the others except for Halvor, the younger brother who killed himself. When I was a child in the 50s, hearing her stories, I didn’t think to ask her, “How could he have hanged himself in a room with such a low ceiling? Was he very short? What was there back then that isn’t there now for anyone to attach a rope to?” I didn’t think of these questions till I began imagining the scene to write it, and I had to make it not just plausible, but possible. So, I simply made up the story around it. How he did it and why. I fashioned the novel around that incident, weaving in fragments of what she had told me about other members of the family.

My research fed the story as I wrote it. For example, I did not know who did what to whom when I started writing. I was three quarters of the way through writing the novel when, in *Wagon Wheels*, I came across the account of how people chopped out big chunks of ice from the frozen lakes and hauled them back to their ice houses, and this ice would last them through the summer. That’s when I got the idea of my ice house...I hadn’t had an ice house in my novel until I came across that. Some stories by Joyce Carol Oates had also haunted me for a few years. They say there is nothing new under the sun, it’s just how you put things together. It was reading about that icehouse when it all fell together for me and I was able to finish the book. Oddly enough, as I look back, I didn’t have to change or tweak very much to fit the ending.

As I mentioned, my grandmother’s account of her younger brother’s death wasn’t true. I didn’t learn the real story until after my novel was published. (Whether the story was true or not was irrelevant; I was writing fiction.)

I learned the truth from my mother who, after reading my novel, got curious about Halvor Halvorson. Her uncle. A man she had never met but she too had heard the story of how he had hanged himself in the room that was her and my father’s bedroom for 13 years. She went to Ortley, the town where many of the Halvorsons and Petersons are buried. She found many graves of old family members she had either heard of or had known as a child. No Halvor. Why wasn’t he buried with the rest of them? She knew he wasn’t buried in the Webster graveyard with the Magnus clan. So, very uncharacteristically, she went to the Ortley newspaper office and looked up old papers from the year she believed he had died. She found the story.

Lena Magnus, a young married woman, had come home one afternoon to find her kitchen spattered with blood and her younger brother and sister dead.

The newspaper reported that Halvor Halverson had stabbed his sister to death and then cut his own throat with one of Lena's kitchen knives. No one knew why. The name of the sister was not given.

"What else did she lie to me about?" my mother asked me.

Well, there was something else. I'll get to that later.

The mystery of why a young man killed himself and his sister and why my grandmother fabricated a story about her brother's death and ignored the death of a sister, simmered like a koan in my mind for years. And then, after years of harboring the ungraspable, like a Zen monk, I imagine, having that moment of illumination, that *kensho*, the answer burst upon my mind. I'm deeply certain it is right.

I think Halvor and his sister were in an incestuous relationship. Perhaps she was even pregnant. My grandmother found out and did not offer help, or support. Because of her religious beliefs, she only rained on them severe condemnation and perhaps threats of exposure. So, they not only committed suicide but laid the bloody mess of responsibility for it at her feet by doing the deed in her home. And she couldn't bear it—the shame of the incest, the horror of suicide, and the guilt she must have felt. So she simply changed the story and told it over and over again, probably trying to overlay, if not replace, the horrid picture in her mind with something else, something for which she had no responsibility.

As I said, she kept another secret, not for or about herself, but for her sister-in-law—about the infant she gave up for adoption. She kept that secret, not by a lie, but by silence. Revealed only when that child, at 60 some years old, appeared at her doorstep and introduced himself as Keith Lang, the child of Nancy and Walter Magnus. My grandmother, his aunt, at 96 or 97, was the only Magnus surviving of her generation. She invited him in without ceremony. My mother, meeting her new cousin for the first time, was dumbstruck.

I have a recording of his interview with my grandmother, where she describes his birth father, my grandfather's brother, as a devil who virtually enslaved his mother. Then she added, "Nancy never really liked me."

"Why?"

"Well, I knew too much about her, you see. I think she was always uncomfortable around me." Grandma said that without rancor. She also told Keith that she had wanted to adopt him but that Nancy and Walter wouldn't let her. They had already made arrangements with the foundling home in Sioux Falls. And after he was born, a girl was born and they gave her up, too. He had tried and been unsuccessful in searching for that sister. Nancy and Walter did finally marry and had another daughter, Maureen, whom they kept. Keith interviewed Maureen's sons. They had little to say and weren't much

pleased to be interviewed, except to say their grandmother, who raised them after Maureen died very young, was “a saint.”



Nancy Magnus

At the end of his interview, Keith added his own narration, which concluded with: “Pauline Magnus is the most remarkable person I have ever met.”

I told Keith’s daughter much later, when she took over her late father’s research into his birth-family history, that he was lucky not to have been raised in this family. He was a kind, intelligent man, a good

father, had lived a happy life. Had he been raised in this rat's nest, I told her, his story would have been very different.

The Langs did more research into the Magnus family history than I did. I did none. I was writing fiction and I didn't care if what my grandmother told me was true or not. My research was about the time and place, not about the Magnus clan per se. Still, I wondered about her other stories. About the two sisters. In my novel they are Gertrude and Julia. In reality, they were Martha... and, well I wasn't even sure she had a sister. But it seemed she did, and according to what the Langs unearthed from old newspaper clippings, her name was Sally, and Pa Magnus seems to have run off with her for an indeterminate period of time. Then he returns to Martha and there is no more mention of Sally. We surmised she died.

One of my grandfather's brothers had a son, Roy, and Roy's wife was Mary. I remember her visiting my grandmother when I was around 12 or 13. That memory was the seed for the character of Mary in my novels. I remember her as a beautiful woman with unusual coloring for this part of the country, where people are of German/Scandinavian/Polish descent. That means fair to brown hair, and rosy to ruddy complexions, and blue eyes. Mary's hair was black. Her skin was white, not ruddy at all except for a little color at her cheek, which might have been expertly applied rouge. And her eyes were very dark. Women did not wear eye makeup then, and her brows were dark and well shaped. She wore bright floral dresses, which complemented her high coloring. She and Roy were childless. But she, herself, apparently, had not been. My mother told me that before Mary died, she gave instructions that she was to be buried in her parent's family plot next to her baby, not next to Roy in the Magnus plot in the Webster graveyard. Prior to that, no one had known she had had a baby and no one knew who the father was.

Pa Magnus purchased a lot with space for himself and Martha and for each of his four sons and their wives. He and Martha are planted there, and only two of his sons and two daughters-in-law. And my parents are both there. That means there's one spot left out there for me.

## THE QUILT

There's a saying among Buddhist teachers: Don't believe everything you think.

I could add: Don't believe everything you write.

In *Fervent Charity*, I describe in detail a quilt fashioned by the ladies of Charity as a gift for Lena on the birth of her child. I've always loved quilts, the idea of quilts, and what they represent, especially when done communally.

I wrote the book quite a few years ago, and when I took it out again for a final spit and polish prior to its publication by Ylva Publishing, I came to the chapter about the quilt and became angry with my

mother all over again. I have a history of anger at my mother, and I added this new transgression...not taking care of the quilt. It had been made with great care and treasured and passed down to her by my grandmother. Where was it? What happened to it? My mother never treasured anything or took care of anything...this train of thought went on for some time, until I realized: there is no quilt. I made it up. Sorry, mom.



My grandmother kneeling in the white dress, holding my mother. Martha Magnus (her mother-in-law) is standing right in the middle.



Martha Magnus

## REMEMBRANCE

Only years after I finished writing *Fervent Charity* did I realize that I had written both *Charity* books as an homage to my grandparents.

Putting ghosts to rest, trying to work out for myself why my family was so devoid of joy—these were of course factors contributing to my compulsion to write these stories, but what I really wanted to do was, in some way, give life to my grandparents who gave me life. They were not perfect people. They were unique. They did the best they could. They suffered. They are worth remembering. I want something of them to survive.

I have no children. Since I haven't carried any part of them forward biologically, I can do it literarily. I could not insure their survival with genes and chromosomes. I have tried to do it with words.

I have written many other things that have nothing whatsoever to do with my family, but the *Charity* books have everything to do with the legacy of my grandparents. I don't idealize them, but I remember them. And I honor them.



Baathor and Mattie Halverson (they appear in the true story of Dolly, the horse who saved my grandmother's life. See [Epiphany](#) under non-fiction.)