

Grumpy Old Humorist Tells All: Three Short Essays On Writing, Plus Random Thoughts on Same

by Ed McClanahan

*—“I can read readin’, but I can’t read writin’.
The reason I can’t read writin’ is, it’s wrote
too close to the paper.”*

—Clem Kadiddlepopper

When book reviewers deign to notice that I exist at all, they tend to refer to me as (among other lower life forms) a “humorist.” I’m always flattered, of course, to be nominated for the post, but I’m afraid I must politely decline to run, on the grounds that it would entail too much responsibility, trying to be funny all the time.

The fact is, at my age, being funny ain’t really all that easy—or, to put it another way, being my age ain’t really all that funny . . . or, for that matter, all that easy either. We’ve all heard it said—usually of some poor, befuddled old bird like me—that “he’s taken leave of his senses.” What actually happens, though, is that our senses often preempt us to the punch, and take their own leave almost before we suspect they’re even contemplating a separation, much less a divorce. Corrective measures may, of course, sometimes be taken; cataract surgery is a wonder and a marvel, and I suppose there’s probably one of those “almost invisible” hearing aids circling my head at this very moment, looking for an ear to build its unsightly nest in. My sense of smell has long since abandoned me (an impairment which, having its own occasional compensations, doesn’t even qualify me for disability assistance); and when it left, it took with it a disheartening measure of my sense of taste—so that, at dinnertime, I sit there grieving silently while everyone else is saying grace. And in the ultimate irony, I will no doubt retain to the bitter end my sense of touch, the better to enjoy the companionship of the aches and pains that are such a comfort to us in our delightful golden years.

Yet even in the face of the vicissitudes of age, we so-called humorists are required to maintain our sixth—and signature—sense, our ineluctable sense of humor. So okay, here’s my latest attempt to keep alive the illusion that I’ve still got an amusing move or two:

I. The Forelock: A Lament

Being an Exercise in the Art of Writing Eloquently About Nothing at All

All my life, ever since Superman was a pup, the forelock has been my favorite male adornment. Li'l Abner had a forelock, and so did Robert Mitchum; Elvis and Tony Curtis and Gene Krupa and even that stentorian old foghorn Senator Everett Dirksen all sported forelocks; Charlie Starkweather had a dandy.

Superman's forelock—a tight pubic coil that remained miraculously unruffled even when he flew through the air faster than a speeding bullet—was the sole physical particularity that distinguished him from the bespectacled milksop Clark Kent; without it, the Man of Steel was just another mild-mannered journalism major. Li'l Abner's was a direct descendant of the forelock of Al Capp, his creator, who got it in turn from his early-1940s political hero, FDR's leftish veep Henry A. Wallace. In his dotage, Capp abandoned his old liberal politics to become a virulent reactionary, but he never shed his beloved forelock, which accompanied him to his grave, along with his wooden leg.

My own forelock and I have likewise long been intimately attached; I can't speak for Al Capp, but I wouldn't trade mine for a wooden leg, even if I needed one. (There's a photo of my imposing juvenile self on roller skates outside the local rink in the summer of 1948, forelock jauntily a-dangle, in my book, *O the Clear Moment*, still available at fine booksellers everywhere.) To me, a forelock bespeaks, alternatively, rebellion, brooding sensitivity, cool contempt, reckless abandon, menace, and (in Superman's case) stern defiance, all attitudes I've personally been incapable of sustaining in any meaningful way for the last forty years or so. Still, the dream lives on, in the ghostly form of my present-day wispy little white flag of surrender, now but a faded memory of its bobbish youth, a skimpy foxtail ornamenting a venerable jalopy.

In the antic world of popular culture, forelocks have long played a major role; whole careers have depended upon them—or, if you will, depended from them. Without his forelock, where would Russ Tamblyn be today? Whither Steve Cochran or Vic Morrow or Dan Duryea? (Whither indeed!) Sal Mineo's forelock practically co-starred in "The Gene Krupa Story," and Martin Sheen has pursued his through countless movies, like a mule plodding along after a dangling carrot. Absent their profusion of forelocks, Sha-NaNu might've joined the Vienna Boys' Choir, and *Grease* would be nothing but, well, a greasy spot. If Chet Baker had had a receding hairline, would "My Funny Valentine" retain its wistful off-key charm? If Kerouac and Neal Cassady hadn't had those cute matching forelocks, mightn't Jack's mom have made him stay home in Lowell until a more suitable traveling companion came along?

Nowadays, it seems to me, forelocks have pretty much gone the way of Dash Riprock. (Gov. Blagojevich's bangs don't count; that's not a forelock, that's an awning.) Mitchum, alas, is no longer with us, and Travolta and Kurt Russell are getting on. The television personality Conan O'Brien affects a towering Hokusai tsunami of a pompadour, but, *qua* forelock, it doesn't quite convince. Like its proprietor, it's a bit too bouncy and perky. Real forelocks don't do perky.

Anyhow, unless I can contrive to get myself run over by a bus, I probably won't be taking my forelock to the grave with me (Al Capp's sterling example notwithstanding), because at its present lamentable rate of decline, the actuarial odds are that it will precede me. But then isn't that what forelocks are supposed to do? Male-pattern hair loss being what it is, if we live long enough they generally cross the bar before us, even as, like hood ornaments or bowsprits or unicorn horns—or, for that matter, our very noses—they have steadfastly preceded us wherever we have gone in life. Whither thou goest (whither indeed!), I will surely follow, eventually if not sooner.

So don't rush off, forelock o' mine. Stick around, insignificant little gossamer puff of whimsy that you are fast becoming, hold your ground until, who knows, maybe one fine day three or four decades from now, an affectionate breeze will come along and waft whatever's left of you right off my noggin and carry you away like thistledown, to the Land of Doo-Wah-Diddy.

Hey, I've got your back.

* * *

Well, I certainly hope you enjoyed reading that as much as I enjoyed writing it, and of course I hope too that you find my writing amusing and entertaining and maybe even a little, yes, eloquent. But, really now, who wants to write about *nothing* all the time?

Not me. The term "humorist" is, I think, essentially reductive, one-dimensional, limiting, just the merest cut above "local colorist." How can a "humorist" express sorrow, loss, pain, despair? Whither melancholy? Comedy and tragedy are indivisible; they're just different aspects of the human experience. The best comedy, though, is ironic by nature, which makes it the perfect antidote to maudlin sentimentality; "tragedy" without irony—the "sad clown" Weary Willie, for instance—is mere bathos, even when it's funny. The kind of humor I like best is the sort that turns in on itself and incorporates its own internal irony, like in my story "Finch's Song," when the late Finch Fronk's brother Claude discovers that Finch has left his little pittance of an estate to a certain disreputable Mrs. Mooney: "He left it all to that old two-dollar flat-back, the little pansy!" Claude complains bitterly. "And never done jack-shit for his own goddamn loved ones!"

In my misspent youth, I used to put in a lot of time hanging around the paperback rack in the local drugstore, sneaking peeks at, among other inspirational literature, a wonderfully trashy 35-cent novel called *Tragic Ground*, by Erskine Caldwell.

The protagonist is a downtrodden, penniless, unemployed white southern factory worker named Spence, who is given to such gloriously colorful language as ". . . like a rabbit with his balls caught in a sewing machine!" (usually rendered as "likearabbit-withhisballscaughtinasewingmachine") and my all-time favorite expletive, "Dogbite my pecker!" (Years later, I realized that Spence is just a latter-day version of Huck Finn's Pap, a character with whom I was already thoroughly acquainted.) Spence has an unwashed, over-sexed, over-ripe adolescent daughter who was just my age, and who, you may be sure, immediately got my undivided attention. But as I feverishly thumbed through the book in search of the Hot Stuff, I gradually began to discover, more or less in spite of myself, that for all his coarseness, Caldwell had serious issues on his mind: poverty, social injustice, ignorance, racism, etc. The application of these high-minded, principled considerations to such an irrepressibly unseemly cast of characters was, in itself, a lesson for me in ironic juxtaposition—and in humility as well, in that it provided me with a whole new way of thinking about some of the folks that I myself, as a small-town Kentucky boy, was growing up among.

My favorite characters in my own work are the ones who rise above the reader's expectations—and since I, as The Man behind the Curtain, am responsible for setting those low expectations in the first place, I figure I can afford to needle them a little, to make light (gently, I hope) of their failings and foibles. Tempered by privation and mockery, they gain the strength to effect their own deliverance. Tough love, so to speak.

As an undergraduate, I majored in sociology, a discipline which fancies itself one of the sciences. But I was also a fledgling writer, and so I naturally endeavored to synthesize my two enthusiasms, and to study the characters I wrote about as though they were a specimens under a microscope. "Slice of life" stories, we gimlet-eyed young

neo-realists (“neo” as in “neophyte”) styled our grim, humorless little efforts, smug in our certainty that we were pinioning the bourgeoisie and subjecting it—for its own good, you understand—to our unforgiving authorial scrutiny.

It took me an unconscionably long time—another twenty-five years or so, in fact—to realize that this was no way to treat my characters. I spent most of those twenty-five years writing—and rewriting, and rewriting—what turned out to be my first (and, so far, my only) novel, *The Natural Man*, and along the way I learned some hard lessons about the willful behavior of both fictional and non-fictional characters. After the novel was published, I wrote a little essay, “Empathy Follows Sympathy,” about those discoveries; and when my book of stories, *A Congress of Wonders*, was published a mere thirteen years later (to a McClanafan, patience is not just a virtue but a pre-requisite), I adapted the essay, spiced it up a bit, and recycled it under a new title, thus:

II. Characters with Character

A few years ago at a local college, I did a reading in which I presented the first half or so of “Juanita and The Frog Prince,” which was then a story-in-progress. During the Q&A session that followed, I remarked that I write what I like to call “redemptive fiction,” wherein I lead my characters to the brink of beyond-the-pale unacceptability, trusting that I will find something in them—or better yet, that they will find something in themselves—that draws them back from the abyss.

“Heavens to Betsy!” (or words to that effect) squawked one of my questioners. “How the hell are you gonna redeem this two-nosed guy! He’s a *monster!*”

I could only admit that I had no idea. “‘Freaks’” I reminded him, citing Harry Crews, “‘are people with special considerations under God.’ So I’m putting my faith in a Higher Power.”

In *A Congress of Wonders*, the heroes of all three stories are those characters who somehow find grace or strength in their own suffering (never mind that it’s usually *comic* suffering) and thereby rise above the reader’s expectations for them: In “Juanita and the Frog Prince,” Juanita Sparks puts her fate in the hands of a most unpromising protector (the putative “monster” himself, as a matter of fact) and is richly rewarded for her faith; in the other two stories, Wanda Pearl Ratliff and Finch Fronk (respectively) transcend their barren, joyless lives when Wanda Pearl reveals her capacity for maternal love, and Finch triumphantly discovers that celibacy has not excluded him from fatherhood.

In *The Natural Man* there’s a character named Nadine “Oodles” Ockerman, an immensely overweight, immeasurably foolish Venus of Willendorf (read “Needmore”) who ensconces herself on her front porch and attempts to entice the scornful, derisive high school boys playing basketball in the vacant lot next door.

“After a while,” I wrote at the conclusion of the passage, “miffed at unceremonious rejections and outbursts of raucous guffaws and vulgarities from the athletes, she’d flounce back in the house and slam the screen door.”

But when I looked back at what I had just written, I wasn’t very happy with it; the whole passage seemed mean-spirited, unfeeling, misogynous. My first impulse was to rewrite the entire business, and try to soften it somehow; but then I thought, No, let’s see if I can turn the tables on the bastards. So I added this line: “Lately, perhaps in the depths of a despair that none of her rude court was man enough to fathom, she’d abandoned her post altogether, and mostly stayed inside when a game was going on.”

Voila! Instant redemption!

Character is fluid, not static or rigid; like water, it seeks its own level. Writers make a terrible mistake when they pre-conceive their characters in such a way as to constrict the

possibility of change, of growth—or, for that matter, of diminution. “A door is always open,” said Flannery O’ Connor, “to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul.” In my own work, the characters I like best are the ones who rise above my expectations for them. A character who can’t surprise the writer can’t surprise the reader either. Or, to put it another way, characters need to get *out* of character once in a while, just like regular folks; it keeps the old juices flowing.

In the early 1970s, around the middle of the twenty years I spent wrestling with the fictional characters in *The Natural Man*, I wrote, for *Playboy* magazine, a long, self-referential profile of an old friend of mine, Lexington, Kentucky’s legendary Little Enis, “The World’s Greatest Left- Handed Upsidedown Guitar Player”—who was also the world’s first and, to my mind, still its foremost Elvis impersonator. (Enis’s real name was Carlos Toadvine, or “Carlus,” as his family called him. He took his stage name from the old joke about Elvis the Pelvis and his little brother Enis . . .)

Little Enis—as of 1976, unhappily, the late Little Enis—was notoriously, gloriously raunchy; hanging around with Enis, I used to say, was like keeping company with your own Id. (“That little son-of-a-buck will get laid where most men couldn’t get a drink of water,” a bartender once confided to me back in the ’50s, when I first began following Enis around the local clubs. “I heard a couple of these old girls say he’s awful heavy-hung. They was talking about somebody named Old Blue, and it turned out they was referring to Enis’s pecker!”) He was one rude, crude, lewd little dude, no question about it. Yet I adored him, and I was determined to write about him affectionately, lovingly—and, as best I could, to induce my reader to care for him as much as I did.

A tall order. How was I to render this profoundly unseemly figure in a light that would make him as appealing on paper as he was in person?

It happened that I was just then grappling with a similar problem in the dog-eared manuscript that was languishing in my desk drawer, that old story of mine that was still yearning to become *The Natural Man*. Monk McHorning, a high school basketball star who is one of the two principals in the story, had for years stubbornly resisted my best efforts to make him three-dimensional; at six-feet-five and 235 pounds, he had God’s own plenty of height and breadth, but depth-wise he was the merest shadow of himself. I had conceived him—that is, I had pre-conceived him—as a bully and a brute, and bully and brute he defiantly remained. I was Aunt Polly to his Huck Finn, and Monk, God bless him, would *not* be civilized.

Then came Little Enis. “I yam what I yam,” said Popeye the Sailor, and that was Enis; he was, emphatically and resolutely, what he was. He would say *anything*, absolutely *anything*. (I once went with him to visit his old parents at their sweet little Toadvine homeplace, a small farm in Hogue Holler, Kentucky. “Now Carlus,” said his mama, “the preacher’s comin’ to Sunday dinner this week. You ort to come and meet him.” “You know, mommy,” Enis said reflectively, “I shoulda been a preacher. I like fried chicken and pussy as much as anybody.”) The stories of his Bacchanalian appetites and marathon priapic exploits would curl a satyr’s mustachios, and racist and sexist epithets were as natural to his conversation as aroma is to a billygoat. To have sanitized his speech—or his life—would have been, almost literally, to steal his soul. There was nothing for it, then, but to turn the old boy loose and hope for the best.

Enis—my apologies in advance for this unpardonable but inevitable pun—rose to the occasion. My *Playboy* contribution about him won the magazine’s Best Non-Fiction award for 1974, and changed the course of both my career and, all too briefly, Enis’s. He died at 43, of too much living.

Meanwhile, I was finding that whenever I bestirred my old fiction manuscript in yet another of my sporadic efforts to revive it, my late friend Little Enis was exerting more

and more influence over my portrayal of Monk McHorning. The way to do Monk justice, I was gradually discovering, was simply to *let him be himself*, to leave off judging him—through the medium of Harry Eastep, my spokesman in the novel—and begin just to appreciate him for what he really was: a natural man. And as what had been a story of rejection and alienation began instead to become a story of friendship and reconciliation, the nakedly autobiographical novel I had conceived as a searing indictment of southern small-town values and mores was inexorably becoming, almost in spite of me, a sort of celebration of them.

The Monk McHorning who emerged at last inherits many personal characteristics from Little Enis. Indeed, if Enis had been six-feet-five instead of five-feet-six, and had played basketball instead of left-handed upsidedown guitar, he'd have been, as a boy, just like Monk.

There was even a role in the novel for Old Blue. He plays Monk McHorning's boon companion the Big Inch, and does the part with great panache.

* * *

My dad's definition of a good haircut was that it oughtn't to look like you'd had a haircut at all, and that's the way it is with stories: one strives mightily to make the telling seem effortless, relaxed, conversational, natural—itself all a big fat artifice. “Effortless,” in short, requires a lot of effort.

By way of making that very point, here are four suggestions I once assembled for a group of high school students who were evincing an unwholesome interest in pursuing careers as writers:

1. Master the mechanics of the language; learn the rules and principles of grammar and punctuation, practice diagramming sentences, take Latin or French or German or Spanish. Learn to use the tools of your chosen trade; get some literary grease under your fingernails.
2. Read constantly, but not just for content or plot or purport; try to *listen* to the writing too, cultivate your inner ear, teach yourself to hear the cadences of the language, the drumroll of the sentences. Think of whatever you're reading as a sort of song, and the language as the melody. Notice especially what the writers you like best do with figurative language, language that creates images in the reader's mind, brings color and life and music to the writing, makes it sing.
3. Remember that everything—absolutely everything—is grist for your mill. There are no boring stories; there are only boring writers. Keep your eyes open, pay attention to the world around you, listen to the things people say and the way they say them; your first novel could be going on this very minute, right under your nose.
4. Run away and join the circus at the soonest opportunity.

And finally, to any ill-advised young party out there who is still toying, despite my admonitions, with the misguided (not to mention expensive) notion of going off to school somewhere to major in creative writing, I can only offer a few cautionary words regarding the insatiable little gremlin who is about to move into your life and become, willy-nilly, your neediest dependent; namely

III. The Imp of Writing

When I was invited a while back to do a reading of my work for a group of student writers at a local college, the sponsor asked me to introduce my reading by briefly

remarking on “the importance of writing.” I made a note to myself—“imp. of wrtg.”—on the appropriate date on my calendar, and promptly forgot all about it until, on the very eve of my scheduled appearance, I finally confronted the advisability of having something in mind to say before I actually came right out and said it. So I was mulling over the possibilities, none of which seemed very promising, when I happened to glance at my calendar and . . . there it was! The Imp of Writing! I could blame it all on the Imp of Writing! That scurrilous story in *Playboy* about my irrepressibly salty friend Little Enis, that salacious novel with all those gamy jokes . . . hey, the Imp of Writing made me do it!

For me, writing is a painstaking, intricately complex process that I can best liken to an altogether different art-form, one about which, frankly, I know virtually nothing at all: composing music. I won't pretend that I've written any symphonies, but I do hope that every word I write—indeed, every single syllable—is a note in a little song, disguised as prose, that hums along inside my reader's head just below the level of consciousness. Like any aspiring Tin Pan Alley tunesmith, I use the devices of poetry—rhythm and assonance and alliteration, the internal cadences, the way the words play off against each other—to try to make my stories sing. But unlike, say, Rodgers & Hart, I bear sole responsibility for both the lyrics and the melody, and in my stories the language sometimes almost seems to drive the narrative, rather than the other way around, just as the melody of a song will sometimes shape the lyrics.

Or, to try another analogy on for size, writing is like performing brain surgery on yourself; you definitely don't want to do a rush job with it. The kind of prose I write requires a certain amount of precision, a good deal of coaxing, and vast quantities of patience, because it sometimes seems to take forever. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, it don't come easy, folks. But it's all just a slightly hyper attempt to capture your attention—“Look, Ma, no hands!”—in the hope that I can entertain you and amuse you and, with luck, touch your heart, and maybe even perform a little brain surgery on you when you're not looking.

“Write what you know,” the ancient truism instructs us. How, pray tell, could you do otherwise? “What you know” is whatever's in your head, a seething, bubbling alchemical brew of your personal history and experience and genetics and various belief systems—and that most volatile of ingredients, your own mad, ungovernable imagination. So if your head is full of knights and dragons and fair ladies, that's what you'll write, regardless of whether or not you ever met a dragon socially. Poets and pornographers have at least this much in common: Their heads are full of what they write. Writing, as we used to put it back in the Sixties, is an adventure in inner space; it will help you discover who you are, and what the world is. How do I know what I think, the saying goes, until I read what I've written? Writing will make you a better reader, a better thinker, and a better person.

The Imp of Writing has been sitting on my shoulder for some sixty years now, like an albatross, an organ grinder's monkey, a little bird with secrets to whisper, a tiny demon with a pitchfork, an angel with a halo. The Imp of the Perverse. The Muse. May you be so blessed.

[The preceding essay is a *mélange* of three earlier pieces on writing by Ed McClanahan. One of the pieces entitled “Characters with Character” appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Kentucky Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, July, 1984. The current essay was part of a lecture delivered at Murray State in July 2009. It is used here by permission of the author. ED.]