



Rayitos

Newsletter of the South Texas Writing Project

July 2010

STWP's First Advanced Institute Calls TCs Back to Writing Roots

Blanca Donovan

South Texas Writing Project held its first Advanced Institute from May 31 to June 4 at Casa Ortiz, a historic home that now serves as offices and meeting spaces for TAMIU.

Founders Dora Flores and Lucinda Farroukh hosted seven TCs for a week of writing, critiquing and sharing.

The attending TCs were Mike McIlvain, Ana Silva, Ann Whitehawk, Blanca Donovan, Patricia Gonzalez, RosaMaria De Llano and Paty Cantu. Each TC, as well as Dora and Lucinda, presented a writing lesson based on a mentor book (a book that demonstrates a favored, teachable writing concept) and shared an original written piece. TCs discussed their original pieces with their response groups, and some plan to pursue publication opportunities.

By the end of the week, everyone came away with fresh ideas about what good writers do (and don't).



Back Row L to R: Lucinda Farrokh, Paty Cantu, Ana Silva, Ann Whitehawk, Blanca Donovan, Patricia Gonzalez, Mike McIlvain. Front Row L to R: RosaMaria De Llano, Dora Flores.

Good writers...

1. "think first"
2. "pay attention"
3. "speak up"
4. "consider other people"
5. "create choices"
6. "love words"
7. "KEEP TRYING!"

As you read our excerpts, ask yourself this question: *What do good writers do?*

Peterson, Art. *The Writer's Workout Book*: 113
Stretches Toward Better Prose. Berkeley, CA: NWP, 1996.

Desert Escape *by Mike McIlvain*

There is plenty to see in a roadway circle slightly west of Beatty under dust-stirring gusty winds.

Rhyolite sits quietly over those surrounding mountains four miles west of Beatty, and was an active mining town 100 years ago. Rhyolite.com says it was the state's third largest city at the time of 8,000 in those days. It also claims that 21 movies, documentaries, newsreels, or travelogues have been shot there. Rhyolite could look a little familiar once there, and some sculptures made by mostly Belgian artists stand out in white and rusty brown to give this ghost town a sometimes chilling, but attention-grabbing effect.

Taking a right out of Rhyolite leads directly into Death Valley National Park, and the California state line. Death Valley is home to the lowest point below sea level in the U.S., and remembered by some as the namesake of long gone western TV show – Death Valley Days.

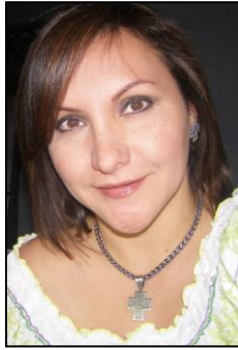
Television helped give Death Valley its image of being a hot, tough, challenging landscape, but that didn't hold up in a drive through in late May – a breezy mid-70s is not close to the 130, or more, of legend. Only a hint of heat crept into my shirt sleeve on the tail end of a breeze during a roadside photo stop in the soft, light brown and tan sandy shoulder.



LIVING POCHA in MEXICO

By Ana Villarreal-Silva

Speaking of who I am...I'm still no certain. Yet, like I would often tell my students when prompting them to write their biography poems and trying to help them figure out who they were, sometimes, I'd



say, it's easier to start with the process of elimination and determine who you are by figuring out who you are NOT.

This is where I find myself...almost three years after coming to this vast city of *Expats* and *MexPats*. I know this much. I've sadly realized that I'm not Mexican (only because I wasn't born here) because I do know that I inherited those Mexican genes and traits from my *Abuela* Antonia, I'm not *gringa*, not *pocha* (although *Regios* might argue that I do fit the description), I'm not a teacher anymore (this one in particular I struggle with), I'm not ready to define myself as being a label. I'm living on this side of the border thinking that society, the world in general, needs bigger and better options to define who I've become.

This is what I do know...almost three years of grappling with labels and categories too confined to capture who I really am...that all of it is irrelevant and even more so *que importa* who people perceive me to be. I can be Mexican, I can be American, a combination of both: not flawless, but I can be either and/or both at any given time.

Ana Villarreal-Silva

- Currently living in Monterrey, N.L. Mexico - working as a Community Liaison Officer with the U.S. Consulate General
- Married with three sons
- BIS Bilingual Ed.
- MS Reading
- Master Reading Teacher
- Reading Specialist
- 10 years in the classroom

WHAT IF

By Ann Whitehawk

The rest of his classes flew by. Before he realized it, the school day ended and he climbed onto the bus heading towards home. As he reached into his book bag for his *Gameboy*, he heard a voice say "You're Sean, right?"

Sean looked around to see where the voice had come from and noticed a guy about his own age with glasses wearing a bright yellow and orange tie dyed t-shirt. "Yea, that's me. Who's asking?" said Sean.

"Alberto Jesus Armando Solis de Gonzalez Jr., but everyone calls me Beto. It's short for Alberto but that's what everyone calls my Dad so I get "Beto" so no one confuses the two of us! The "Armando Solis" is from my Mother's side of the family but I usually leave that part out. You're new so I thought I'd let you know my whole name."

"Gees," thought Sean, "This guy talks a mile a minute."

"Hey, Sean said as he couldn't think of anything else to say."

"It sure was brave of you to go first in English class today. I thought I would puke right there in the middle of room....." Beto continued almost without catching his breath. "You must like stuff like that, or be one really brave hombre. Want to play, WHAT IF?" Beto asked moving into the seat next to Sean.

Sean scooted over as far as he could towards the window. "What is? 'What If?'" he asked confused. Sean thought "I'm trapped on the bus with this guy; I guess I'll play along and see what happens."

"OK," said Sean wondering if this guy ever stopped talking, "how do you play the 'What if' game?"

He was hoping his stop would come up quickly. But no such luck; picked up at the first bus stop in the morning meant dropped off last in the evening.

"It's not hard," said Beto, "All you have to do is ask 'What if...'"

Beto continued, "It's a game my Dad made up for when we're bored or need to kill time on long trips and stuff. Like now."

"Well, I was going to play with my *Gameboy*," said Sean hoping this guy would take a hint, stop bothering him, and go away.

"Well the problem with a *Gameboy* is that only one person can use it at time," Beto said.

"When there is only one person its fine but what do you do when there are more people? Like us. With 'What If' any number of people can play at the same time. My whole family plays while we travel and I have two brothers and two sisters at home not counting me."



THE ROSEBUSH

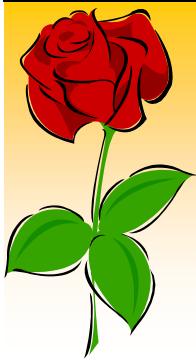
By Paty Cantu

When I was seventeen, I took an innocent life, not a human life but a life nonetheless.

Just weeks before my senior prom and high school graduation, I ripped a ligament near my left ankle. As a result, I needed both a plaster cast and crutches. For me learning to "walk" with wooden crutches was like learning to ride a unicycle: frustrating—I just couldn't do it.

One night soon after my unfortunate incident, a storm crashed outside my window with a mighty force while inside a storm of anger, stemming from my frustration, raged inside my mind: why did I have to go tearing





a ligament so close to the prom and graduation? My dreams of gracefully whirling around the dance hall and walking across the stage for my diploma vanished and so did my self-control.

The following morning, my first day returning to school, I hobbled on my crutches down the path leading to my dad's Ford pickup where he and my little brother Javi waited for me patiently, even though we were already twenty minutes late. Of course, the stupid cast was to blame. Scowling, I lumbered towards them when suddenly I tripped, crashing to the ground crutches and all with a thunderous thud. I turned to see the culprit: the rosebush, the one and only rosebush my mother had planted when we first moved to our house on Plymouth Lane. The storm last night had bent its stems, which looked like scrawny, crooked arms now spread across the path. Blood boiling, rage racing, I somehow shot up and with my crutches attacked the rosebush. I hacked it to pieces like a lunatic until it bled, its petals battered and scattered over the sidewalk.

Once my rage subsided, I collected myself and once again headed towards the truck. Both my father and my brother stared at me in utter disbelief.

As my father helped hoist me into the truck, he said, "Why'd you do that? All the rosebush ever did was offer you a rose on your way to school each day."



MICRO-FICTION by Patricia González

Patricia González (born September 22) a Mexican writer and adjunct professor of Spanish at the [Texas A&M International University](#) is a native of [Los Dos Laredos](#). She was born in Laredo, Texas, and raised in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. González has held a variety of professional positions, working as an accountant and as a teacher and has maintained a strong commitment to community and literary causes. A member of the adjunct faculty at TAMU, Patricia also serves as teacher consultant for the [South Texas Writing Project](#). She is a doctoral candidate in Hispanic Studies at Texas A&M University and is currently writing her dissertation. Professional interests include cross-cultural factors in language learning. She loves innovation.

INTRO TO MICRO-FICTION

Blanca Donovan

Micro-fiction is simply stories of 500 words or less, although, some websites have specified 400 or less, or even, 700 or less. With such a severe limit, the writer is pressed to make a lot of things happen quickly, yet still infuse the story with depth or "resonance".

Camille Renshaw of [Ringpoem.com](#) lists seven essential characteristics of micro-fiction:

1. Length and Form: "Readers discover something brief and intimate in a very short space."
2. "Be willing to edit and re-edit."
3. "Soul-stirring language"
4. "In such a short space some thread must hold the story together." That thread is imagery.
5. Keep the wording tight.
6. "Play against expectations."
7. "**Implication:** The key requirement of a literary short-short is implication. There's no room for life stories. Just enough for resonance."

[The Essentials of Micro-Fiction @ Ringpoem.com.](#)



Fear of Freedom To

I never imagined we would be afraid to utter the last letter.

-Patricia González



**EXCERPT FROM A BOOK
REVIEW OF WRITING
CIRCLES: Kids Revolutionize
Workshop by Jim Vopat**

by Blanca Donovan

**THE END GAME OF WRITING
CIRCLES**

The mechanics of writing circles concludes in Chapter Eleven. All the dots for operating circles have been connected. Students and teachers have written and vocalized their evaluations. The next chapter, "Writing Circle Variations", diverges from management and mechanics to open the playing field to cross-curricular variations. Writing circles are applied to subjects other than Language Arts. For example, a Science writing circle featured in Chapter Twelve, the "Benchwarmers", chose to address cloning. The Benchwarmers used various genres to address different perspectives: (1) the scientific process of cloning; (2) advantages of having a clone; (3) disadvantages of cloning; (4) a letter from a clone in the future to its original in the past.

A strong selling point of this book is a section on writing circles for teachers. Without being preachy, Vopat describes the humanitarian and professional advantages of practicing circles within a community of teachers. WCs allow teachers to work out any kinks, gain valuable experience modeling the steps, "reignite the joy of writing" for themselves, and foster self-affirming reflection.

The last section, not labeled as a chapter but as an epilogue, specifically serves teacher workshop participants. "The End Is Also the Beginning" seems to suggest that the results of a writing circle experience may affect what happens in the next one. The book study suggestions included here are ripe for discussion in a professional setting. Each chapter is broken down to its thesis and contains a list of discussion questions -- another strong selling point for this book.

Workshop participants can select from a broad menu of topics and issues related not just to writing circles, but also to learning objectives in general. Without this section, the book would be quite average. The inclusion and especially the format of book study suggestions add to the marketability of this book to writing projects for their institutes.

The strengths of WRITING CIRCLES lie mainly in its design. From the table of contents to the epilogue, Jim Vopat has anticipated where teachers might have questions, might feel fear, might be in danger of losing control, and might wonder how to evaluate. It has been painstakingly designed to promote, to organize, to manage, to celebrate, and through it all, learn to improve writing, regardless of skill level. Informative, thoughtful, and practical: an excellent choice for writing institutes.



Blanca Donovan has been teaching Language Arts since 1995. She began her career in the Archdiocese of San Antonio parochial schools where she taught ELA,

Reading, Religion, Journalism, and Computer Literacy. She became a teacher-consultant with STWP in 2005, became editor of RAYITOS in 2006 and has continued to assist in organizing and presenting at STWP events. Currently, she teaches 8th Grade ELA at Trautmann Middle School where she will be head of the ELA department for the 2010-2011 school year.

Read more book reviews by Blanca at

The Festering Blurb

Bursting open with pungent prose!



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