

William Sleator's *Oddballs*: A Discussion Guide

By David Bruce

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Cover Photograph

Photographer: Katrina Brown

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Preface

The purpose of this book is educational. I enjoy reading William Sleator's *Oddballs*, and I believe that it is an excellent book for children, young adults, college students and middle-aged adults such as myself to read.

This guide contains many questions about William Sleator's *Oddballs* and their answers. Of course, I hope that teachers will find it useful as a guide for discussions. It can also be used for short writing assignments. Students can answer selected questions from this guide orally or in one or more paragraphs.

A major reason to use *Oddballs* in schools is as a model for autobiographical writing. Writing autobiographical essays can be a fun composition assignment, and for some students it can be an art.

Be aware that although *Oddballs* was written for children in middle school and junior high school and for young adults in high school, it can also be used in college courses. The essays are entertaining and well written, and they are excellent models for the autobiographical essays you can ask your students to write.

I hope to encourage teachers to teach William Sleator's *Oddballs*, and I hope to lessen the time needed for teachers to prepare to teach this book. I also hope to give teachers many anecdotes to tell in class.

Many reasons can be advanced for teaching William Sleator's *Oddballs*:

- *Oddballs* is quite simply a well-written and entertaining book with many anecdotes.

- *Oddballs* is readily available in book form, and an earlier version of *Oddballs* (it is the version that William Sleator submitted to the publisher) is available at

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sleator/oddballs/oddballs.html>

- Because of the existence of two versions of *Oddballs*, teachers and students can compare the two versions. Teachers and students can speculate about why William Sleator made changes in the printed version of the book. In doing so, students will learn to consider the reader when they write.
- *Oddballs* can be an excellent model to use if you wish your students to write autobiographical essays. Students can read about the games that Billy and his siblings played, and they can write about the games that they play now or played when they were younger.

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Note: It's a good idea to look at the appendixes before reading this guide because some of the study questions refer to things such as short reaction memos and the autobiographical essay assignment.

Games

Note: Two William Sleators exist. One William Sleator is Billy, who grew up to write *Oddballs*; the other William Sleator is Billy's father. From now on in this Discussion Guide, "William Sleator" and "Mr. Sleator" will be used to refer to Billy's father. "Billy" will be used to refer to Billy and to the author of *Oddballs*.

Note: The online version of this essay is titled "Danny and Tycho." Teachers may want their students to read both the printed version of the essay and the online version, then talk about why Billy made changes in the printed version.

• What can you learn from this essay that can help you write better — including perhaps an autobiographical essay of your own?

Anecdotes are funny and good reading.

Eccentrics and nonconformists are fun to read about.

Dialogue reads well when well written.

Games that you played when you were a kid make a good topic to write about.

Note this very good transition:

On his fifth birthday Tycho very calmly and skillfully went on the toilet, as though he'd always done it that way. He's been using the toilet ever since.

Without Tycho's messes to clean up, babysitting became a lot easier.

The transition is from Tycho's toilet training to babysitting.

• What is your opinion of the opening sentence of the printed version of this essay?

This is the opening sentence of the printed version of this essay:

The best presents our parents ever gave to my sister, Vicky, and me were our little brothers.

I like this opening sentence. It lets us know that this book is about family and about love.

Perhaps this sentence is a little misleading. This is not a sappy family. The members of this family love each other, but certainly they will not always get along.

• The online version of the opening sentence of this essay is a little different. How is it different, and why do you think that Billy made that change to the opening sentence?

This is the opening sentence of the online version of this essay:

The best toys our parents ever gave to my sister, Vicky, and me were our little brothers.

“Toys,” to me, is a more materialistic word than “presents.” Toys are physical objects such as balls, board games, and Frisbees.

• What game about BMs do Billy and Vicky play on car trips? (What are BMs, anyway?)

BMs are Bowel Movements.

The way that Billy and Vicky play the game is to pretend to be Bowel Movements and to describe the passage of the BM through the intestines.

Vicky pretends to be the BM of Elizabeth, the Queen of England, and she does such things as to describe the royal bathrooms, which are very fancy. Vicky pretends to have been an Oreo cookie or a Hostess cupcake that has been eaten by Queen Elizabeth.

Billy had been sick from overindulgence a couple of times. Once he ate way too many pints of blackberries. Another time he ate way too much tzimmes, which is “a Jewish meat-and-carrot stew” (4). Therefore, his BM is composed of these two kinds of food, resulting in “a purple-and-orange-striped BM” (4).

• **Are kids fascinated by the subject of BMs?**

Billy writes that the subject of BMs fascinates kids, and this seems to be true. For example, one very popular book for very young kids is *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi. A book review that appeared in *The Expositor* says this:

Everyone Poops by Taro Gomi is part biology textbook, part sociological treatise and all celebration of a very natural process. Both my daughters begged me to read the book over and over again. They marveled at the enormity of the elephant’s poop and searched with the skill of a scientist for the tiny specks which represent bug poop. The text is simple and straightforward but not without humor. ‘*An elephant makes a big poop,*’ the book begins. ‘*A mouse makes a tiny poop. A one-hump camel makes a one-hump poop, [a]nd a two-hump camel makes a two-hump poop. Only kidding!*’ The colorful illustrations are eye-catching and deceptively detailed. The poop of each animal species is very distinctive in size, shape and color...A book which doesn’t have any preachy overtones but merely explains where and how each living creature poops seems to work for my two-

year-old. In fact, it's number one on the bathroom reading list at our house. — *The Expositor*

Source:

<http://www.kanemiller.com/book.asp?sku=25>

Downloaded: 13 July 2008

Other books for young children on this and related topics include these titles:

Where's the Poop? by Julie Markes

The Truth About Poop by Susan E. Goodman

The Product Description of *Where's the Poop* says this:

With the aid of this playful book, your child will see that he or she has a place to poop, too. While reinforcing the concept of toilet training, *Where's the Poop?* gives children the confidence they need. This engaging lift-the-flap book shows children that all creatures have a place to poop: tigers in the jungle, kangaroos in the outback, and monkeys in the rain forest.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/nao7y9u>

Downloaded: 13 July 2008

In Athens, Ohio, a couple of people put on a puppet show for young children. The puppets represented children with handicaps. For example, one puppet represented a child in a wheelchair. Part of the program was a question-and-answer period in which the children in the audience could ask the puppets questions. One little girl in the audience asked the puppet in the wheelchair, "How do you go to the bathroom?"

The father of a friend of mine worked at IBM. This embarrassed his daughter, who thought of IBM as forming a sentence: I BM — that is, I have a Bowel Movement.

• On page 4 of the published version of this essay, we read about “a Jewish meat-and-carrot stew” and “a purple-and-orange-striped BM.” What rule for using hyphens is being followed in those phrases?

When you put two or more words together to create an adjective that appears before the noun it modifies, connect the words together with hyphens.

• What is the reaction of the Sleator parents to the BM game?

The Sleator parents are in the front seat of the car while Billy and Vicky play the BM game. They must hear Billy and Vicky playing the game in the back seat, but they don't stop the game. Mr. and Mrs. Sleator are oddballs, just like their children, and by not stopping the game, they are encouraging their children to be original.

• In the online version of this essay, how does another mother react when her child plays the BM game?

In the online version of the essay, we read:

Once we made the mistake of playing this game with our friend Albert when his mother was within earshot in the front seat. Albert began a spectacular tale about his very special transformation from a Matzoh ball inside the bowels of Superman. We never heard the end of the story, and it was years before Albert rode in the car with us again.

This kind of reaction is likely to stifle imagination, unfortunately.

• How can parents encourage their children to be creative?

Some parents encourage their children to be creative. One child's parents allowed him to paint cartoon characters on the family garage, which was located in the back yard. His parents knew that the neighbors would not be able to see the garage and so would not worry about their property value being lowered.

Another set of parents who were wealthy and had lots of room allowed their child to draw in a room set aside for that purpose. By "draw," I mean draw on the walls. Once in a while, the parents would have the room painted white so that their son would have a clear space to draw on.

Parents do have to set boundaries to keep their children safe, but the boundaries need to be big enough to allow their children enough freedom to be creative. Unfortunately, parents can be overprotective.

The parents of Jenna Iszauk, who was one of my students, were not overprotective, but they did set boundaries. When Jenna was very young, her family went on vacation where they met a friendly Southern woman who asked Jenna her name. Of course, Jenna answered, "Jenna," but the Southern lady wanted Jenna's full name, so Jenna answered, "Jenna Iszauk." However, by full name, the Southern woman meant first name, middle name, and last name, so young Jenna took thought and answered with what her parents often told her, "Jenna Pleasedon't Iszauk." (Of course, her real middle name was not Pleasedon't. It was Ariel.) (Source: Jenna Iszauk, "Jenna Pleasedon't." In David Bruce, editor, *Me, Myself, and My Family and Friends*, pp. 85-89.)

• **Write about one or more examples of creativity.**

As a young man, Ludwig Bemelmans, author and illustrator of such children's books as the *Madeline* series, lived in a sparsely furnished apartment. To brighten up the apartment, he painted scenic views on the window shades and pictures of elegant pieces of furniture on the walls. (Source: Norah Smaridge, *Famous Author-Illustrators for Young People*, p. 70.)

New York City's Guerrilla Girls use posters to protest art exhibits dominated by male artists. One poster asked, "When Racism & Sexism Are No Longer Fashionable, What Will Your Art Collection Be Worth?" True artists, the Guerilla Girls dress up in gorilla masks to gain publicity for their cause. (Source: Marc Aronson, *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 154, 158.)

• **How is the game Babaloo Bum played?**

This is a game that Billy and Vicky play with six-month-old Danny on car trips when they get tired of rocking him back and forth. They place him on a suitcase that rocks back and forth under his weight as they chant "Babaloo Bum." Eventually, of course, he falls off and starts wailing. Then they play the game again. Of course, Danny is too young to realize the danger he is in, so he enjoys being on his suitcase until he falls off again. It takes him a long time to catch on to the fact that eventually he will fall off the suitcase.

Oddly, their parents allow this game to happen. Billy does point out that they know that Billy and Vicky would never do anything to *really* hurt Danny.

• **In the published version of this essay (newly titled "Games"), the author makes it clear that his parents knew he and Vicky would *never* hurt Danny. Why do**

you think he added that to the published version of the essay?

Readers may wonder about the parents. Sometimes, it does seem as if Billy and Vicky are mean kids — mean to their siblings. Of course, Billy loves his parents (and siblings) and doesn't want to write anything that would hurt them. Besides, it is true that Billy and Vicky would never do anything to *really* hurt Danny.

• The published version of this essay did not include the part about Vicky's broken leg and the new baby's pyloric stenosis ("a blockage of the passage from the stomach into the intestine"). Why do you suppose Billy took out those parts?

Readers may wonder about the mother. Sometimes, it does seem as if Mrs. Sleator is negligent. However, doctors are often this way. They take care of other people's kids, but not of their own. Apparently, they are so used to parents who bring in their children to see the doctor about very minor things that they usually think that their own children are OK. No doubt, they are usually right. Billy and his siblings seem to have been very healthy.

Of course, Billy loves his parents and doesn't want to write anything that would hurt them.

• How did the new baby get its name?

This is the last baby Mr. and Mrs. Sleator will ever have (apparently, they believe in birth control), so it is their last chance to name a baby. Because of that, they come up with a lot of names, including the names of relatives they wish to commemorate. Because there are so many names, they can't choose among them, so they don't name the new baby anything.

Mr. Sleator refers to the new baby as “that other kid” (7), while Vicky and Billy call him “New Baby,” which soon is shortened to “Newby” (7). Soon the baby is called Newby, and Newby he remains for the years he goes without a name.

Eventually, after two years, the Sleators realize that they have to call the new baby something, so they call him everything. On his birth certificate is listed “Tycho Barney George Clement Newby Sleator” (7).

The new baby is now called Tycho, although he pouts at first when he is called that, as he prefers to be called Newby.

By the way, in the online version of the essay, we learn that the authorities force the Sleators to name the new kid:

When Newby was about two, the authorities got fed up. Mom and Dad received an official notice that they had ten days to fill out “Baby Sleator’s” birth certificate. After that deadline, the authorities would fill it out themselves, giving him some random name, and Mom and Dad would have no choice in the matter at all.

It is certainly interesting to read this, and I don’t know why Billy edited it out of the published version of the essay.

• **How did the new baby learn to be toilet trained?**

Newby, aka Tycho, refuses to be toilet trained. At age three and four, he is still wearing diapers. This is, apparently, an “act of independence” (8).

Vicky and Billy had to change his diaper, and of course, they don’t like doing that, so they try to convince Tycho to use the toilet. Tycho replies, “When I’m five” (8). Sure enough, on his fifth birthday, he begins to use the toilet.

• How is the game “What Would Be Worse?” played? (This game is described in the published version of this essay.)

Some games didn’t work out. For example, Vicky would ask the two youngest children: Who do you like better — me or Billy? And she would promise to give her dessert to whoever chose her and throw out the window whoever did not choose her. But since she (and Billy) never carried the threats and rewards, soon the game lost its appeal.

A new, better game was What Would Be Worse? Billy and Vicky would come up with good questions to ask their younger siblings. For example (10):

What would be worse? ... To be impaled on a bed of nails and take three days to die or to have all your arms and legs cut off and live?

What would be worse? To spend the rest of your life in jail for a crime you didn’t commit or for everyone else in the world to die except for you?

This game was fun because Danny and Tycho were so bothered by the questions.

• Why do you suppose that the game “What Would Be Worse?” appeared in the published version of this essay and not in the online version of the story? Usually, Billy deletes things from the online version of the story rather than adding things.

Billy wrote the online version of *Oddballs* first, and chances are that he then emailed copies to his siblings and parents for their feedback. My guess is that occasionally they remembered something that he had forgotten about. Apparently, Vicky remembered the game “What Would Be Worse?” and asked Billy to write about that game, too.

This shows a kind of research that students can do for their own autobiographical essay. They can write the essay, then email it or show it to parents, siblings, or friends for feedback, including their memories of events.

• What games do Billy and Vicky play while babysitting?

One game they play is to sing a song about two little boys whose parents go away and never come back home again. This makes Danny and Tycho cry; nevertheless, they request Billy and Vicky to sing the song again and again.

Another game is to teach the two little boys “every obscene word” (12) they knew. The two boys, of course, repeat the obscene words to adults because they enjoy seeing their startled expressions. This game, however, goes a little too far because Danny sings an obscene song to Grandma. Therefore, Billy and Vicky make up an obscene word — “drang” (13) — and tell their younger brothers never to say that word. Of course, they do, but soon they go back to saying the real obscene words because “drang” does not provoke a satisfying horrified expression from adults.

• Is it OK to teach little children “bad” words and songs? (By the way, you can look up the lyrics to “Canal Street” online. We will not discuss the lyrics in class — I don’t want to be arrested.)

Bad language doesn’t bother Mr. and Mrs. Sleator at all. Still, I don’t think I would recommend teaching little kids bad words and songs. It can upset other parents and other adults.

However, my sister taught her little daughter about her body parts:

Where is your head?

Where are your arms?

Where are your boobies?

In Kathryn Forbes' excellent collection of autobiographical essays titled *Mama's Bank Account* is an essay titled "Mama's Uncle Chris." Uncle Chris can be ill tempered, but after he dies the family discovers that he is a very kind and empathetic man. In the essay, Uncle Chris discovers that Arnie, his grandnephew, has a lump on his knee, and so he takes Arnie to the hospital for an operation. After Arnie's operation, Uncle Chris sings to him to keep his mind off his pain. Occasionally, however, Arnie is in pain. Therefore, Uncle Chris teaches Arnie two swear words. Apparently, Arnie is supposed to say one of the swear words when the pain is bad, and he is supposed to say the other swear word when the pain is very bad. Saying the swear words at the appropriate times helps, Arnie says. In the movie *I Remember Mama*, which is based on Ms. Forbes' book, Arnie says a swear word, but the word is in Norwegian. I don't speak Norwegian, so I don't know what the word means, but a Norwegian nurse in the movie is shocked, although she doesn't say anything.

• What is your opinion of the ending of the online version of this essay?

The online version of this essay ends with this:

And so we began to learn that these wanton games with our little brothers could backfire against us. Now Danny, especially, knew that it could work both ways, that we were not the only ones with power. We had gone too far to change him into a docile, obedient creature who would not use what power he had. And the worst was yet to come — at a Florida hotel.

It certainly makes the reader wonder what happened at the Florida hotel.

• Why doesn't the essay about the Florida hotel appear in the published version of *Oddballs*?

It appears that Billy wrote a lot and then deleted much more material than he added. The Florida hotel essay does appear online here:

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sleator/oddballs/node12.html#SECTION00012000000000000000>

However, the Florida hotel essay does appear weaker than the other essays and therefore I believe that Billy was correct in his decision not to use it in the published version of *Oddballs*. For one thing, many of the essays in the online version of *Oddballs* refer to the Florida hotel. This builds up readers' expectations very high, and the essay would have to be really good to meet those expectations.

By the way, another essay appears online but not in the published version of *Oddballs*. That essay, "The Magic Chalk," appears here:

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~sleator/oddballs/node10.html#SECTION00010000000000000000>

Often, professional writers are ruthless in their cutting of material, including good material.

• Why do you suppose that Billy changed the name of the essay from "Danny and Tycho" (the online title) to "Games" (the title of the published essay)?

Possibly, Billy realized that some of the games of the essay did not involve Danny and Tycho. Some games were played before Danny and Tycho were born, and some games were played before Tycho was born. Therefore,

“Games” is a more accurate description of the topic of the essay.

Creative Topics:

- **In a short reaction memo or journal entry, write about a game you played when you were young. Make it interesting. If relevant, use dialogue.**
- **In an autobiographical essay, write creatively about games you played when you were young. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**

Frank's Mother

- **What can you learn from this essay that can help you write better — including perhaps the autobiographical essay you are writing now?**

Lead an interesting life so that you have lots of stuff to write about. (Reading can also be important.)

Mark Twain combined experience and reading. He certainly led an interesting life because he worked as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River, prospected for precious metals in the American West, worked as a journalist, gave humorous lectures in public, and traveled all over the world. However, he also got married and raised children, and he had a much-used library.

- **What kinds of work do Mr. and Mrs. Sleator do? Which social class are they in?**

Mr. Sleator is a physiology professor at the university.

Mrs. Sleator is a pediatrician.

They are probably Jewish, although not religiously observant in a big way. Mrs. Sleator is definitely Jewish (17), and so the children are Jewish.

They are middle-class or upper middle-class. They have a good income.

They are probably Category X. (See Paul Fussell's book titled *Class*. It's in the bibliography.) They are certainly in many ways unconventional.

They are highly intelligent.

By the way, when my nephew Jeremy Fouch was very young, his father asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Young Jeremy replied, "A Smurf."

• What kinds of things did Billy and Frank do for fun while alone?

They stand on the back porch railing and pee in the back yard. (Billy's parents are at work.)

They look at Mrs. Sleator's medical books.

They toss raw eggs back and forth, knowing that sooner or later an egg will break and they can make fake vomit that they can place on the sidewalk outside their house.

They go up to the refurbished attic — which is Billy's room — and cuss and talk and read comic books. One of the good things about the Sleator parents is that they let their kids read what they want to read.

• Why are Mrs. Sleator's medical books interesting?

Billy and Frank look at Mrs. Sleator's medical books — at photos of disgusting diseases and probably at photos of naked females. (They are in the 6th grade.)

Billy doesn't actually say that they look at photos of naked females, but he hints at it:

Other pictures were fascinating for different reasons. (16)

Of course, considering that some of the readers of *Oddballs* may be in middle school, Billy is intelligent when he simply hints at female nudity. He is considering his audience (and their parents).

• What are a few ways in which Mrs. Sleator is unconventional?

Mrs. Sleator does not wear makeup and high heels — although she did wear makeup when a very young Vicky requested her to when Mrs. Sleator was going to Vicky's school.

Mrs. Sleator does not keep a close watch on Billy and her other children. According to Frank's mother and people like her, this is unconventional.

Mrs. Sleator does not wash food and she allows Vicky to eat an apple that has dropped on the floor and rolled in potting soil. Mrs. Sleator is aware that eating food that has not been washed can be good for you because exposure to dirt builds up immunities.

Mrs. Sleator's house is to be lived in, not to serve as a museum of cleanliness. Her house is clean, by the way. She has a cleaning lady, and she also cleans. However, she is Jewish, and she relaxes on Saturdays (the Jewish Sabbath), which is the day that Frank's mother comes over and snoops around to check her out.

Mrs. Sleator does not much care what strangers think of her and she will not go out of her way to impress them — but she is aware that Frank's mother can spread damaging gossip about her.

Mrs. Sleator breastfeeds in front of Frank. Frank is embarrassed, but Mrs. Sleator is not embarrassed.

• Compare and contrast Billy's mother and Frank's mother.

Frank's mother is a pill (a tiresome or unpleasant person).

Frank's mother has a permanent and way too much makeup. She smiles tightly and falsely, and she speaks to children using an artificial voice.

Frank's mother serves sugary sweets (donuts, jelly rolls, cookies) and milk.

Frank's mother does not work, and she does not approve of Billy's mother working.

Billy's mother is a live person whom it would be nice to know.

Billy's mother would have dressed better to meet Frank's mother, but Frank's mother arrived an hour early to check her out.

Billy's mother serves cookies, but close to supper, the snacks are things like apples.

Billy's mother is a pediatrician.

• Compare and contrast Billy's home and Frank's home.

Frank's home is a monument to cleanliness. The furniture is wrapped in plastic. She has wall-to-wall carpeting — a status symbol of the time. Frank's home is spotless.

Billy's home is to be lived in. It can be messy at times.

If anyone were to have allergies, it would be Frank because his house is so clean. We do read that Billy is healthy and never misses school.

• Which mistake does Billy make? Why is it a mistake?

Billy invites Frank over for a sleepover with two other boys. This turns out to be a mistake because Frank's mother comes for a visit — earlier than she was expected — to check out the Sleator house and family. She is horrified by what she sees and does not allow Frank to stay the night.

• What is Frank's mother's opinion of Billy's house and Billy's mother and Billy's siblings?

Obviously, Frank's mother does not think that the Sleator house is clean. (Actually, the Sleators have a cleaning woman, and Mrs. Sleator also cleans. However, Mrs. Sleator relaxes on Saturdays, which is the Jewish Sabbath.)

Frank's mother does not approve of the way that Mrs. Sleator is raising her children. Vicky gets an apple, drops it on the floor, and then bites into it without washing it first. This horrifies Frank's mother.

Frank's mother does not think that thumb sucking is good, so she tells Danny not to suck his thumb. Mrs. Sleator is so fed up that she tells Danny to put his thumb back in his mouth.

Frank's mother is surprised that the new baby does not have a name yet. She cannot understand that kind of originality.

Frank's mother is so horrified by Mrs. Sleator and the Sleator home that she won't allow Frank to stay the night.

• Is it good to eat food that has fallen on the floor?

Yes, in general.

It helps to build up immunities.

Some parents can keep their children, food, and house too clean. Those children can grow up with asthma and allergies.

It's a good idea to let your kids play in the dirt frequently.

• In the published version of this essay, some of the sentences about Tycho have been cut. Why do you suppose the author edited out the sentences about Tycho?

One of the sentences that we read in the online version of this essay is this:

But when Vicky took the apple from the bowl on the counter it slipped out of her hand and rolled across the floor — which, due to potting soil and

Tycho's stomach problem, was not what anyone would call clean.

Tycho's stomach problem results in his vomiting when he is fed. It is kind of gross that Vicky ate an apple that could have rolled in Tycho's vomit. Apparently, Billy does not want to gross out his readers so he deleted some of the sentences about Tycho often vomiting.

Also, in earlier chapters Billy edited out the sentences about Tycho's pyloric stenosis, so that may be a reason why he deleted some of the sentences about Tycho often vomiting. If he were to write about Tycho often vomiting in this chapter, he would have to explain why Tycho so often vomits.

In addition, Billy may be protecting his parents. He may not want anything that other people may consider bad about his parents to appear in his book.

• **How did Frank and Billy turn out as adults?**

Billy turned out to be an oddball, an original, and an eccentric. Billy, of course, became a renowned author of books for young adults.

Frank, on the other hand, turned out to be an ultra-conformist preppie. He is now probably making a lot of money somewhere.

Frank went to a fancy private school, while Billy went to public junior high school.

Both went to Harvard, but at the end of the book, we find out that Billy hated his four years there. (This might be a good topic for another book of autobiographical essays.)

• **Do you have any anecdotes about your mother?**

These are a few anecdotes about the mothers of students I have taught at Ohio University:

- Many families have stories about how the parents met, fell in love, got engaged, then married, and started raising a family. For example, when the father of Ohio University student Emily Kresiak proposed to her mother, it was April Fool's Day, although he didn't realize that. It took a long time for her mother to realize that her father was serious in proposing to her.
- When Ohio University student Nathaniel Sturgil was a child, an alarm clock caused a major panic in his family. The alarm was set very loud to allow the family to wake up to music, but one morning a radio drama was playing on the station. The radio drama was about a house fire, and the crackling of the flames could be heard very clearly. His mother ran screaming through the house, waking up her children and making them go outside until she realized her mistake.
- Kimberlee Eichhorn's mother knows sign language. She was once asked to sign the Miranda rights ("You have the right to remain silent ...") at the police station to a person who was deaf and mute.
- A mother was worried that Kendall Alway, her daughter (who later became an Ohio University student), wasn't popular enough in high school. So whenever she saw her daughter coming home from school, she would lock the door and yell, "No! Stay outside and get a tan so you can be popular!"

Creative Topics:

- **For a short reaction memo or journal entry, write an anecdote or an essay about your mother or best friend. Make it interesting. If relevant, use dialogue.**
- **For your autobiographical essay, write creatively about your mother or best friend. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**

The Freedom Fighters of Parkview

• Write a short character analysis of Nick and Vera Greenberg.

Nick and Vera Greenberg are friends of the Sleator family, and so are their parents, who are laid back and relaxed like the Sleator parents. Nick and Vera are a little older than Billy and Vicky, so they don't hang around together at school, but the four kids enjoy what time they spend together outside of school when their parents visit each other.

One of the great things about Nick and Vera is that they were popular although they were not *pituh*.

• Define “pituh.”

We read:

Pituh was a term that Vicky and her friends Avis and Eleanor had coined to describe the members of the popular cliques at junior high and high school. (27-28)

• Do you, your friends, and/or your family have any words that you have made up and that only you, your friends, and/or your family know the meaning of?

The family of *Times Herald Record* columnist Beth Quinn, like many families, sometimes makes up its own words and its own phrases — words and phrases that have their own known-to-family-and-friends-only meanings. For example, her family, which loves dogs, uses the word “eardo” to describe a dog that has one long ear flopped up on top of its head instead of hanging down as it should. And her family will sometimes use the phrase “Here! Have a kifling!” to say that something is really huge. This phrase originated when Beth's grandmother asked Kathy, one of Beth's

friends, for her kifling recipe. A kifling is a small, delicate cookie that is supposed to be no bigger than your pinkie finger. However, after getting the recipe, Beth's Grammy created a batch of huge kiflings, each of them bigger than her hand. Staggering into the living room under the weight of the tray of huge cookies, Grammy told Beth and Kathy, "Here! Have a kifling!" (Source: Beth Quinn, "Yikes! The dog's eardo is a big doodad!" *The Times Herald Record*. 27 January 2008 <<http://tinyurl.com/k8su3c3>>.)

• Have you ever played I Doubt It before? Have you ever played any games that had you screaming with laughter? Why can't Billy and the other kids play I Doubt It one Thanksgiving?

Billy explains how the game is played in the online version of the essay, but this explanation does not appear in the published version of the essay. Apparently, Billy felt that explaining the rules of the game was not necessary to the essay.

While I was in the United States Navy, we played a game that also involved trying to get rid of your cards, similar to I Doubt It. Our version of the game, or perhaps it was a completely different game (I played the game 30 years ago, so I have forgotten the rules, although I remember the fun we had playing it) was called "F**k Your Neighbor." If the game worked in your favor, you would give all of your cards to your neighbor.

Billy and the other kids can't play I Doubt It one Thanksgiving because Danny tore up and fed several of the playing cards to Tycho, as the evidence in his dirty diaper shows.

• **How do the Sleator children and the Greenberg children think that their parents treat them?**

Of course, both sets of kids think that their parents mistreat them.

The Greenberg Family

One thing that the Greenberg parents do is to force their children to eat. The parents put food on their children's plates, and Nick and Vera are expected to eat all that food. This is something that shocks the Sleator kids.

The Greenberg parents sometimes inspect the faces of their children for pimples, especially when they catch one of their kids eating chocolate. If the parents find a pimple, the kid with the pimple has to use pimple cream.

Vera writes this complaint:

In the privacy of their home, the parents drop their fake public behavior and reveal their true natures: disgusting slobs who laze around the house, reprimanding their kids the instant they are not industrious, engaged in constructive behavior, or impeccably groomed. (31)

The online version of the complaint is slightly different:

In the privacy of their home the parents drop their artificial public behavior and reveal their true natures: disgusting slobs who laze around the house, brutally reprimanding their kids the instant they are not industrious, engaged in constructive behavior, or impeccably groomed.

The differences are these:

- 1) The published version has a comma after the introductory clause in the first paragraph. This is good proofreading.
- 2) The published version has “fake” instead of “artificial.” Billy is using a simpler word probably because many of his readers are very young and in middle or junior high school.
- 3) The published version deletes the word “brutally.” Here we have a softening of the complaint. That is a good edit. Comedy may be tragedy plus time, but the tragedy cannot be too severe. Plus, there is no need to upset the Greenberg parents.

The Sleator Family

The Sleator parents are always telling their kids how much better other families’ kids — such as the Greenberg kids — are.

• Where did the name of the show — *The Freedom Fighters of Parkview* — come from?

Mrs. Sleator finds the list of complaints, and she thinks that it is hilarious. She wants the kids to turn the complaints into comic skits and perform them in front of an audience that will include numerous parents.

Mrs. Sleator also comes up with the name of the theatrical group: The Parkview Traumatic Club — there’s a nice and appropriate pun on *Dramatic* there. She also comes up with the name of the show: *The Freedom Fighters of Parkview*.

Parkview is the middle-class suburb that the Sleators live in. “Freedom Fighters” comes from a serious moment in history. In 1956, Hungarians revolted and toppled the government, which was controlled by Josef Stalin and the Soviets. Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary and crushed the

revolution. The Hungarian Freedom Fighters were brave but doomed.

• Describe a few of the comic skits that the children put on.

In one skit, Vicky (playing a kid) is forced to eat a huge plate of pancakes. When she gets up from the table, her stomach (stuffed with a pillow) reveals just how much she has been forced to overeat.

In another skit, the parents complain about their kids while praising the kids of other parents. In this skit, it is pimple-inspection time, and the daughter is forced to use pimple cream and other pimple crap.

In another skit, the kids are preparing for a revolution against their parents, but the revolution is stopped when a parent grabs the leader's ear and drags her back home.

• Does Mrs. Sleator learn anything about the Greenberg parents?

Mrs. Sleator briefly learns that some of the complaints that the Greenberg have about their parents are true. At a visit to the Greenberg family's home, she notices that the Greenberg parents do say embarrassing things about their children to other parents when the Greenberg children can hear them and be embarrassed. She also notices that Nick is wearing some pimple cream on his face.

She is quiet for a while, thinking, but the next day she is back to her regular self.

• What other changes have been made in the published version of the essay from the online version of the essay?

For one thing, the name of the other family has been changed. The published version of the essay has the

Greenberg family, while the online version has the Lermontov family.

Billy begins the online version of the essay with an anecdote about Mr. Greenberg, who is called Dr. Lermontov in the online version of the essay:

They were also urbane and bawdy. I remember Dr. Lermontov (the father) telling a story at dinner about being interrupted by a phone call while he was in the bathroom. His lazy kids weren't at home, he made sure to point out, or else they would have answered it instantly, if they weren't already talking on it. So he had to stop what he was doing in the bathroom and run to get the phone. It was a woman working for a survey. "What television program are you watching?" she asked him. "I'm not watching television," he said. "What magazine are you reading?" "I'm not reading a magazine." "What newspaper are you reading?" she persisted. "I'm not reading a newspaper," he said, his patience dissolving. "Then what are you doing?" she wanted to know. "I'm trying to take a shit!" he shouted, and hung up. Everyone else at the dinner table laughed, kids and parents alike, while Dr. Lermontov took a swig of beer.

This is a funny anecdote, but apparently the use of the s-word was enough for Billy to delete it from the published version of the essay, although Vicky does use the s-word in the essay "The Séance."

Creative Topics:

- **Make a list of all the horrible things that your parents have done to you and to your siblings, if you have any.**

- **Put yourself in the place of your parents. Now make a list of all the horrible things that you and your siblings, if you have any, have done to your parents.**
- **Write your own scene of a play or your own essay about either the horrible things that your parents have done to you and your siblings, if you have any, or all the horrible things that you and your siblings, if you have any, have done to your parents.**

By the way, when Barbara Gallagher (one of my former students at Ohio University) was a child, she and her sister used to put on plays for their parents, who applauded enthusiastically. When Barbara and her sister had grown up, their parents admitted that they used to dread watching those plays.

The Hypnotist

- **Write a short character analysis of Jack.**

Jack is slow moving and slow talking, but his mind is not slow. It is Jack who notices the ad for a booklet about hypnosis. When the booklet arrives, he reads it and then follows its instructions and hypnotizes Tycho.

- **What happens while Tycho is hypnotized? What are the things that Tycho does?**

One thing that Jack tells Tycho is that his nose itches. Tycho scratches his nose so vigorously that it bleeds.

The most interesting thing that happens is that Jack tells Tycho that he is thirsty and that his arms are tied to his sides. Because Tycho can't get a glass of water, he drinks out of the toilet.

- **What is a post-hypnotic suggestion? What does Tycho do after he has been hypnotized?**

On July 18, 2008, Wikipedia.com defined the term in this way:

Post-hypnotic suggestion is the induction, under hypnosis, of a person into a behavior or thinking pattern that makes itself manifest after he has come out of the hypnotic state.

Whenever Tycho hears the word *window*, he picks up whatever object is closest to him and throws it on the floor.

- **Which Sleator parent discovers what happened?**

Mr. Sleator discovers what has happened. He notices that Danny is uneasy at the dinner table when Tycho throws on the floor the thing he is nearest to whenever someone says the word *window*. He then has Danny tell the family what has happened to Tycho.

• **How is Tycho unhypnotized?**

Once the Sleator family finds out that Tycho has been hypnotized, they call Jack's family. Jack's mother quickly arrives with Jack so that he can unhypnotize Tycho.

• **What is the “secret” that Jack tells Danny?**

Jack actually doesn't have a secret to tell Danny. What he does is to hypnotize Danny and give him a post-hypnotic suggestion. Whenever Danny is ready to attack Tycho, all Tycho has to do is to say the word *door* and Danny will not attack him.

• **To find out where Billy lied in this essay, read the conclusion of the book. Do you think the lie is justified?**

We find out that the ending is a lie. Jack really did not hypnotize Danny and give him a post-hypnotic suggestion. Billy explains that all writers lie a little. He writes,

I lied.

Writers of fiction always do. We take something from life and then tidy it up, tying loose ends together, changing the results of actions, arranging situations to suit our whims, playing God. We do this because it's fun — and to make our stories appear to *mean* something, which events rarely do in real life. (129)

Of course, Billy is a writer of fiction. He especially writes science fiction, but of course *Oddballs* is autobiographical, with some exaggeration here and there, and only this one outright lie.

I think that the lie is justified. The lie makes a good conclusion to this autobiographical essay, and good conclusions (and introductions, and middle sections) are needed in a good autobiographical essay.

We can learn from this. If exaggerating — or lying — will make a good story better, then by all means exaggerate — or lie.

Here's an example: One of my students wrote a humorous autobiographical essay about a game in which he and his brother would swing through the air and drop into a huge pile of snow. At one point, his brother had an accident in which he fell into the pile of snow and then complained that he had hurt his neck. As the reader, I immediately began to think about paralysis and wheelchairs, which is not what the writer wanted me to think about — the accident was very minor, and his brother was not badly hurt. Therefore, I suggested that the writer lie a little. Instead of writing that his brother had hurt his neck, why not write that his brother had hurt his butt?

Oddly, Billy's confession that he lied a little helps convey confidence that the rest of the story and all (or most) of the other stories that he tells are true. He says straight out that Tycho really drank water out of the toilet.

“The Séance”

- **What can you learn from this essay that can help you write better — including perhaps the autobiographical essay you are writing now?**

Note that Billy has a good transition from Vicky’s playhouse to the séance:

Vicky never did have a birthday party in the playhouse. Instead, it was the setting for the séance I conducted the summer after ninth grade. (59)

I hope that you will agree with me that Billy is a good writer, as shown by this sentence:

That changed when he was suddenly struck by virulent acne, which persisted throughout his teenage years, and left him with permanent scars that were not merely physical. (62-63)

- **In your opinion, does it matter whether five-year-olds say things such as “shit pit”?**

In the Sleators’ back yard is a big pile of sand, which cats and dogs in the neighborhood visit to poop and pee in. When a visitor sees the big pile of sand, she says that the children have a big sandbox to play in. Five-year-old Vicky says that it is not a sandbox — “It’s a shit pit” (58).

Some people such as Kevin Smith, director of the Jay and Silent Bob movies (he plays Silent Bob), do not believe in censorship (except for self-censorship). He points out that if you ban the word “f**k,” then no one can say, “F**k the government.” Mr. Smith uses the f-word at home and in public.

• **In your opinion, is it possible to be too thorough?**

Yes, I think it is. Mr. Sleator promises to build Vicky a playhouse. He never gets around to finishing it, partly because he is a procrastinator and partly because he is so thorough in building the foundation, floor, and three walls that are completed within eight years.

In business writing, it is better to hand in a communication on time that is only 90 percent complete than to hand in a completed communication that is 100 percent late.

Sometimes it is better to do something imperfectly rather than to try to do something perfectly and never get it done. Often, it is important to get a start on something such as writing a paper even if the start is not perfect. In the writing process, you get started, and then you keep working on a paper until it is at least good enough. Often, getting started is the hardest part.

In a lesson on correcting clichés, one of my students made a twist to the cliché “Better late than never.” He wrote, “Better late than later.”

• **Mrs. Sleator wrote the fortunes for the Halloween party. In fact, she sometimes wrote her children’s papers for school. In the published version of this essay, Billy does not mention that his mother wrote some of the school papers for her children. Why do you suppose he left that out?**

Once again, he doesn’t want to write something that would hurt his mother or the memory of his mother.

He is also probably thinking about the audience. He doesn’t want kids to think that their parents should write their papers for them.

• Describe some of the good parties that the Sleators have.

Two kinds of parties are described here. One is the séance of the title. The other is the Halloween parties of the Sleator children.

One feature of both is the fortunes that are told.

For the Halloween parties, Mrs. Sleator made up the fortunes, including the classic “Sorry, my dear, you have no future” (61).

These parties are creative. The Halloween parties are held in the attic, where the children have been allowed to paint a mural on one wall. The fortunes, of course, are comedic creative writing. Creative touches such as dry ice to create an eerie and foggy atmosphere are features of the séance.

• Based on your high school experience, what are “the rigid rules of teenage convention”?

The phrase “the rigid rules of teenage convention” does not appear in the published version of this essay.

I imagine that the rules would include what you can and you can’t wear.

A rule at some high schools is probably don’t suck up to the teacher — in other words, don’t study.

Many of these rules are probably counter-productive.

One rule may be that you should be mean to certain kinds of kids.

• Which clique were you in, in high school?

I was in the clique that was rejected by all the other cliques.

One definition of clique on the Web:

- small, exclusive group of people, as in: I wasn't invited to join their clique.

www.business-words.com/dictionary/C_1.htm

Source:

http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&defl=en&q=define:clique&sa=X&oi=glossary_definition&ct=title

• **Write a short character analysis of Nicole.**

Nicole is an artist who has created the best artwork for the Sleator Halloween parties.

Nicole is the smartest kid in school. She writes papers for other students at her school.

Nicole is a very good writer. She writes a paper that is so good that a new teacher thinks it is plagiarized.

Nicole understands other people; she knows what makes them tick. She would have been a great psychologist or psychiatrist. She knows that Matilda studies so hard and is so proud of her 18-inch waist because she thinks she is unattractive.

She says that she doesn't eat much, that she has a problem with her metabolism and everything she eats turns to fat. Mrs. Sleator, a pediatrician, does not believe this. Later, Nicole has a religious experience, joins a group of nuns, and loses a lot of weight.

As a nun, Nicole works doing the menial labor that poor people do, including cleaning toilets (which one of Billy's comic fortunes predicted she would do).

The adult Nicole is the one who is happiest with her life and who is most fulfilled.

• **Write a short character analysis of Matilda.**

These days, Matilda would be considered pretty, but her hair was frizzy, red, and unfashionable, so she was not considered pretty when she was in junior high school.

Matilda has an 18-inch waist, so she is very thin.

Matilda studies all the time, practically memorizing *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Matilda's parents (or at least her father) worry about her because she studies all the time, and they offer her \$25 for each B she gets on a report card. However, she keeps on studying and she keeps on getting A's.

Matilda becomes an erudite professor and writer.

• **In the published version of this essay, Billy leaves out the part about Matilda bringing a razor blade to school to use to slash her wrists if she does badly on a test. Why do you suppose he left that out?**

In the published version of this essay, Matilda is not pathological. In addition, the author says that today she would be considered pretty although at the time her hair was unfashionable.

Billy is picking and choosing the facts he puts in his stories. The published version is funnier and has less darkness, although there are hints of darkness. (Vicky and her mother argued frequently.)

Again, Billy is considering his audience of children who may be in middle school.

- **Tony is a character who appears in the online version but not in the published version of this essay. Why might he have been cut from the published version of the essay?**

Tony is an interesting character. He knew a lot about girls. We read:

Once Tony and I went on a double date to a carnival held annually by the fraternities at the university. I was with Gail, a popular girl whom I worshipped from afar. It was Tony who gave me the courage to ask her out, insisting to my disbelief that she liked me enough to accept — and he was right. Tony was with a new girl at school, a year younger than us, who was extremely pretty and had very quickly established the right kind of bad reputation. Almost the first thing we did at the carnival was to go on a ride that was essentially a large metal cylinder. Inside the thing you sat in seats on a platform that tilted back and forth while the cylinder rotated around you, lights blinking on and off. Tony immediately began to complain that the thing was making him sick. There was, of course, no way to stop it. In an impressively short period of time, Tony was leaning over the back of his seat and loudly vomiting, while the new girl kept murmuring, “Oh, my God, Oh, my God.” That was the end of the date, and Tony’s relationship with her.

Nicole didn’t think it was odd, as I did, that Tony enjoyed spending time with me. She quoted a remark that the actress Katherine Hepburn had once made about some old movie stars from the 1930’s, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: “He gives her class; she gives him sex.”

Later, we read that Tony became a Presbyterian minister. I can come up with two reasons why Tony was cut from the published version of the essay:

1. Tony may have requested that he be cut from the published version of the essay. As a Presbyterian minister, he may felt uncomfortable with his younger self. Possibly, Billy showed the essay to him and asked for his feedback.
2. Keeping in mind that many readers of the essay will be fairly young, Billy may have wanted parents and teachers to be spared from having to answer questions such as this: “What does ‘He gives her class; she gives him sex’ mean?” Or: “What does ‘the right kind of bad reputation’ mean?”

By the way, Quaker humorist Tom Mullen once took his family to Old Town, a section of Chicago that he knew as an artists’ hangout, but that unfortunately had been invaded by strip clubs, porno theaters, prostitutes, pimps, and johns. His seven-year-old daughter, Ruthie, was all eyes, staring through the car window and asking embarrassing questions such as “Why isn’t that woman wearing any underwear?” and “What does ‘l-u-s-t’ mean?” Eventually, she asked, “How come all those men are going into that place?” Mr. Mullen replied, “Ask your mother, dear” — a reply that he admits may possibly be grounds for divorce. However, his wife gave an honest answer: “Those men are buying tickets to see someone’s bare bottom.” Ruthie asked, “Why would anyone pay money to see somebody’s bare bottom?” Indeed. An advertisement asks, “What kind of man reads *Playboy*?” Mr. Mullen answers that question: “Witty, sophisticated types who pay to see somebody’s bare bottom.” (Source: Tom Mullen, *Seriously, Life is a Laughing Matter*, pp. 30-31.)

This excerpt from the online version of the essay also does not appear in the published version of the essay. Teachers and parents are unlikely to want young children to ask what “the feelies” and “orgasmic heights” are:

“She will quickly eclipse Brigitte Bardot as the reigning sex goddess of her time. Clad only in a towel, her image will slither and writhe before vast audiences in all corners of the world. With the advent of the new type of entertainment known as ‘the feelies,’ her popularity will soar to orgasmic heights.”

Creative Topics:

• Describe the best and most creative party you have participated in.

One of my students wrote about a hosting a Spring Theme party for a younger sibling.

Some people held a Come as You Will Be in Twenty Years party. Two guests arrived with tombstones made out of poster paper. Makeup made them appear to be skeletons.

One of my students wrote about a Wine-Tasting Party that turned into a Wine-Chugging Party. She has never seen her father as drunk as he was that night.

• Describe the best and most creative Halloween you have ever had.

One Halloween, some friends and I went to a place where we were told that we would see our future on Halloween. After following the instructions perfectly, we arrived at a cemetery.

Halloween in Athens, Ohio, home of Ohio University, is famous. It is a chance to show wit and originality when coming up with a costume. One of my witty and original

students wrote a set of instructions about how to make a Cruella de Vil costume for Halloween.

By the way, one practical joke is put dry ice in the urinals in the men's room on Halloween. The dry ice creates a foggy atmosphere.

Here are a few anecdotes about Halloween:

- When Olympic medalist Shannon Miller was a pre-teen gymnast, she wore a memorable costume to a Halloween meet at Dynamo Gymnastics. She went as a bag of groceries. Because she was so small, a grocery bag (with the bottom cut out) fit around her torso. To the top of the bag were glued such items as cereal boxes and egg cartons, and her mask consisted of a potato chip bag with holes cut out for her eyes and nose. Shannon's costume was voted by the applause of the audience to be the best in the meet. (And her mother didn't even have to sew anything!) (Source: Claudia Miller, *Shannon Miller: My Child, My Hero*, pp. 40-41.)
- One Halloween, basketball player Michael Jordan had to play an out-of-town game for the Chicago Bulls. Since he didn't want the neighborhood children to miss out on any Halloween candy, he put this sign on his apartment door: "Dear Kids, I'll Be Back In Three Days If You Want Trick Or Treat." (Source: Thomas R. Raber, *Michael Jordan: Basketball Skywalker*, p. 26.)
- When ballerina Darci Kistler was five years old, a neighbor gave her a Halloween costume — a pink tutu. Because she knew that she wanted to learn to dance (even at age three, she was cutting photographs of ballerinas out of magazines), she wore the tutu around the house after Halloween as a

hint for her mother to sign her up for dance lessons. The hint worked. (Source: Darci Kistler, *Ballerina: My Story*, pp. 19, 99.)

- Back when *Tucson Weekly* columnist Tom Danehy was in high school, he and some other guys played a Halloween trick on a friend. All together, they decided to dress in costumes on Halloween for school. But after the friend left, they decided not to. The next day, the friend showed up dressed as a pirate, while Tom and the other guys were dressed normally. The following year, they got together and decided again to get dressed up in costumes on Halloween for school. The friend didn't want to be fooled again, so he showed up for school in normal clothing. Of course, Tom and the other guys were dressed in costumes. As Tom says, "There's nothing like squeezing two gotchas out of the same gag." And one Halloween while he was in college Tom told a friend with a beard to spray the beard with Right Guard deodorant so he could go to a costume party as an armpit. By the way, one Halloween Tom's wife made a very inventive costume for their son. She cut a rectangular area out of the front of a cardboard box that fit over their son's head. She then covered the rectangular area with gauze, and she put a glow stick in the cardboard box so it looked like a glowing computer screen. Next, she attached a realistic-looking keyboard to the cardboard box. Finally, she gave their son a toy ax, completing his outfit as a computer hacker. (Source: Tom Danehy, "Tom's gearing up for trick-or-treating at George Will's house." *Tucson Weekly*. 25 October 2007 <<http://tinyurl.com/nkbu4xg>>.)

- Illustrator Bill Morrison was very much into Batman when he was a kid, and he liked to run around his neighborhood wearing his Sears catalog Batman costume, which was vastly superior to the Batman costumes sold at dime stores. Unfortunately for young Bill, a mother in his neighborhood was an excellent seamstress, and she made absolutely perfect Batman and Robin costumes for her two sons, so the costumed Bill felt like he had to hide whenever those two boys were playing in their perfect costumes. Later, when he was an adult, he bought an expensive — \$300! — deluxe Batman costume that came in handy when his sister wanted him to take Justin, her young son — for whom she had made a Robin costume — treat-or-treating on Halloween. The event was a success. Mr. Morrison says, “With my cape down, I made a pretty good Batman. To Justin, I *was* Batman.” (Source: Diana Schultz, editor, *AutobioGraphix*, pp. 39-44.)

- Lesbian humorist Garbo participated in a gay and lesbian bowling league where one Halloween she saw a drag queen bowling in three-inch stiletto heels. This is definitely against bowling alley rules, but the manager didn’t say a word — this drag queen was *big*. Garbo herself bowled on an all-lesbian team called the “Girl Gang,” but when a gay friend named Ron joined them, they offered to change the team’s name. As it turned out, they didn’t have to change their name — Ron thought that it was accurate. (Source: Garbo, *The Complete Garbo Talks*, pp. 22-23.)

- While growing up, Janet E. Hersh wore a nurse’s costume for Halloween; after Halloween, she kept the costume. Whenever anyone was ill, she ran to put on her costume and pretend to be a nurse. As a

grownup, she became Janet E. Hersh, RN. (Source: Linda Gambree Henry and James Douglas Henry, *The Soul of the Caring Nurse*, p. 20.)

- **Make a list of fortunes that could be given out on Halloween. (If you want, number the fortunes 2 through 12 and tell the reader to roll dice to determine his or her future.)**

For an example of how this question could be answered in a short reaction memo, see Appendix E.

- **Write a short opinion or satiric piece on how to be a conformist.**

If you want to be satiric, you could write about how all the nonconformists seem to conform. Many nonconformists talk alike, look alike, dress alike, and think alike.

Both conformists and nonconformists seem to look down on other people who do not conform to their way of thinking.

A real nonconformist would probably be disliked by both groups of people.

Gandhi is a nonconformist who tried not to look down on other people.

A conformist will watch lots of TV.

A nonconformist will never miss class.

- **Predict some people's (celebrities'?) futures.**

Everyone either grows old or dies young. Everyone dies.

Every Hollywood beauty will either grow old or die young.

Hollywood stars tend to be well preserved.

Students could write wittily about face-lifts for Hollywood stars. Someone could be 70 and look 35.

The movie *Escape from LA* is witty on the topic of Hollywood stars who have had too many facelifts.

• **Predict your own future.**

For me, more of the same.

Each year, I will read another 125 to 250 books.

Each year, I will have a bigger net worth — until I retire, then my net worth will begin to decrease.

Each year, I will study intently another few books.

“The Pitiful Encounter”

- **What can you learn from this essay that can help you write better — including perhaps the autobiographical essay you are writing now?**

Important: You can lie, but Billy is not necessarily lying here.

It helps to have eccentrics and non-conformists in your family.

It helps to have lots of funny stories to tell — as Billy does in his book of autobiographical essays titled *Oddballs*.

Anecdotes are funny and good reading.

Eccentrics and nonconformists are fun to read about.

Dialogue reads well when well written.

- **What is your opinion of the beginning of this essay?**

The beginning of the essay may help show that Vicky and Billy are non-conformists. They do hate a lot of people.

It definitely shows that they are well educated, as they are able to quote from Euripides’ play *Medea*:

When my sister Vicky and I were teenagers, we talked a lot about hating people. Hating came easily to us. We would be walking down the street, notice a perfect stranger, and be suddenly struck by how much we hated that person. And at the dinner table we would go on and on about all the popular kids we hated at high school. Our father, who has a very logical mind, sometimes cautioned us about this. “Don’t waste your hate,” he would say. “Save it up for important people, like the president.” We responded by quoting the famous line from *Medea*:

“Loathing is endless. Hate is a bottomless cup; I pour and pour” (71).

• Is this essay worth reading? Has the writer made it interesting?

Yes, this essay is worth reading, and Billy has made it interesting by using lots of anecdotes.

In this essay, he tells about a put-on that Vicky and her friends used to perform for total strangers. The put-on involves Vicky and an attractive friend being mean to a less attractive friend and acting like the pituh people they hate.

• What is ABC gum? What do the initials stand for?

ABC gum is Already Been Chewed Gum.

We read:

We [Billy, Vicky, and friends] were the first hippies at our high school. We wore ancient sandals, carried our books in cloth sacks, and let our hair grow long and untamed. Vicky and Avis were the most daring. They pried discarded gum out of the school drinking fountains and casually popped it into their mouths to chew — making sure, of course, that pituh-people were observing them. The resulting expressions of bafflement and awed disgust were a joy to behold. Vicky and Avis insisted they weren’t just doing this for effect. They claimed that ABC gum had a far more subtle depth of character than the unripened fresh stuff. (72-73)

• Define “pituh.”

We read a definition of the word “pituh”:

What Dad did not understand was that hate was not exactly what we were talking about. We had

something a little different in mind; that was why Vicky and her two best friends, Avis and Eleanor, had coined their special term, *pituh*. There was no word in the English language that specified all the particular characteristics that made someone pituh. Though it was pronounced something like the first two syllables of *pitiful*, the term certainly did not mean that the person was pitiful or pathetic in the sense of being an outcast. On the contrary, most of the people our group considered to be pituh were members of the popular clique: the girls with perfectly groomed beehive hairdos who giggled and flirted and were always fixing their makeup; the arrogant guys they flirted with, athletic types who rarely opened a book and who considered me a nonentity because I was lousy at sports. It was these slaves to peer pressure who we considered the most pituh of all — somehow they did not seem to understand that we, as oddballs and deliberate nonconformists, were far superior to them in every way. (71-72)

• Why do you think Billy changed the names of some of the characters in this essay from the names that were used in the online version of the story?

The names are different in a couple of cases:

Ann: Online Version

Avis: Published Version

Emily: Online Version

Eleanor: Published Version

Probably, Billy wants to protect the privacy of these two people, who are real. On the other hand, he may simply have told them that they could pick whatever names they

wanted to appear under in the published version of the essay. Maybe Ann likes the name Avis, and maybe Emily likes the name Eleanor.

By the way, I was once interviewed for a study about the teaching techniques used by composition instructors at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. I was allowed to use whatever pseudonym I wanted to protect my privacy, and I chose to be known as Meme Ramone.

• **What is the origin of the Pitiful Encounter?**

The Pitiful Encounter was invented on a streetcar on which Billy, Vicky, Eleanor, and Avis were riding. Billy, Vicky and Eleanor all looked well groomed, while Avis was her usual slovenly self. Vicky starts the pitiful encounter by saying loudly that she didn't want Avis to sit by her and her friends. After a few moments, Avis catches on to the put-on and starts playing along.

• **How does Billy make it clear that Avis is not hurt by this game but is instead an eager participant?**

Clearly, Avis enjoys putting on other people:

Avis struggled to suppress her own giggles, to press her lips together and maintain her miserable demeanor in front of the now kindly woman and the other outraged passengers. Only when they got off the streetcar could she let it out, explosively, as the three of them staggered away arm in arm, bent over in mirth. (75-76)

• **What is your opinion of the ending of this essay?**

It is an interesting ending. Normally, Vicky and Eleanor act mean to Avis as part of a put-on. This time, Avis plays a joke on them. Some college boys are acting nicely to Avis because they don't like the way that Vicky and Eleanor are

treating her (the college boys even invite Avis to a party), so Avis pretends that this is not a game:

“Avis, *tell them!*” Vicky insisted.

“Tell them what?” Avis asked her, sounding completely innocent. “That you two walk around with yer noses in the air, treatin’ me as if I was dirt? And then these three young men start treatin’ me like a ’uman bein’, and suddenly yer all cozy and sweetsy?” She folded her arms across her chest.

“*Avis!*” Vicky cried out in furious, powerless frustration. “The game is over! Stop it! Just tell them the *truth!*”

Bob sighed, giving Vicky a disgusted look, and turned back to Avis, who smiled sweetly at him. “This is our stop,” he said. He tore a page out of his notebook and wrote on it. “Here’s our address and phone number. Call us if you need a lift on Friday.”

The three boys got up, brushing rudely past Vicky and Eleanor. “Bye, Avis, see you on Friday,” they said, grinning engagingly at her, and dismounted the streetcar with casual college boy aplomb.

Now Avis was the only one laughing. “I just couldn’t resist,” she gasped, barely able to get the words out. “I mean ... when ... when would another opportunity like that ever come along?”

“Avis, we are *never* going to forgive you,” Vicky said, fuming. “Will we, Eleanor?”

“Never,” Eleanor agreed. “What’s their address, Avis?” (80-81)

• In your opinion, why did the author write this essay?

Some things are probably better to read about than to experience, and in my opinion this is one of them. I would feel very uncomfortable if these three girls were to perform this put-on when I was the victim. Even witnessing a put-on like this would make me feel uneasy. This put-on even made Billy uneasy. Nevertheless, reading about this has its pleasures, and probably writing about this also has its pleasures.

Creative Topics:

- In a short reaction memo or journal entry, write about a put-on you played when you were young. Make it interesting. If relevant, use dialogue.**
- In an autobiographical essay, write creatively about put-ons you played when you were young. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**
- Perhaps you did not perform put-ons when you were younger. Invent a put-on now and write about it as if it did happen.**

Leah's Stories

• Write a brief character analysis of Leah.

Leah is very intelligent, but she is not popular, and her family is not wealthy. She dresses in shabby clothing, as do Billy and Vicky and other people in their group, but Leah has to dress that way because her family lacks money.

We find out this about her:

When I was in high school, I got to know a strange, smart girl named Leah Moses. She had coarse black hair, an oily complexion, and wore thick glasses. Though she had independently styled her appearance like the girls in our group — long hair, no makeup — she was never accepted as a member of our circle. Most of our friends couldn't stand her because she was such a pretentious intellectual snob. (83)

One important fact about Leah is that she is a true outcast. She is not popular, and she has no chance to be popular. Other people, such as Vicky, are outcasts by choice. Vicky could have been a member of a pituh group at school, but she rejected having pituh people as friends and became an outcast by choice.

• What are some of the outrageous stories that Leah tells?

Here are two big outrageous stories that Leah tells:

Leah claimed she had a serious and physically intimate relationship with a wealthy and titled English athlete-scholar named Neville Asquith-Smythe. She was always telling us how handsome and well-built Neville was. He was a brilliant college philosophy major. Leah often attended

classes with him at the university, and went on at length about his explanations of Hegel and Kant. But she was never able to produce Neville. When I mentioned him to a friend of my parents who was a philosophy professor, he said there was no English philosophy major at the university

Leah bragged a lot about her older sister Ze'eva (she never neglected to pronounce the apostrophe), who had been three years ahead of us in high school, was recognized by all as the most brilliant and beautiful student in her class, and now lived on a kibbutz in Israel and fought in the Israeli army. Beginning to be suspicious, I asked Vera Greenberg, who had been in that class, about Leah's sister. Vera was three years ahead of us and had known everyone in high school. She said nobody named Ze'eva Moses had been in her class, or in any classes for several years before or after hers, and proved it by showing me her yearbooks. (84)

Be sure to note the evidence that the stories are not true.

• Which of Leah's stories turn out to be true?

Two stories turn out to be true:

Leah does spend Fridays with an Israeli folk-dancing troupe.

Leah does get a scholarship to Stanford (an excellent school), thereby passing up her senior year of high school.

• Why does Leah act the way she does?

Chances are, the stories are an attempt to be popular. Apparently, she can't impress anyone with her looks. She also isn't particularly graceful when she dances. She definitely can't impress anyone with her clothes. One thing

that she has going for her — other than the Israeli folk-dancing troupe — is her intelligence. Unfortunately, she exaggerates. That is why she becomes what Billy calls “such a pretentious intellectual snob” (83).

• **What is Nicole’s analysis of Leah?**

Nicole has insight into human character. The adjective she uses to describe Leah is “poor” — not in the sense of impoverished but in the sense of “I feel sorry for her.” Like the others, Nicole at first thinks that Leah is lying about the Israeli folk-dancing troupe, but of course that turns out to be true. Later, when Nicole and Billy was discussing why Maria does not seem to like Leah, Nicole says this:

“I think the Davidsons must have gone out of their way to be friendly to Leah at first,” she said, somewhat pensively. “Like maybe they trusted her in some way, and now Maria feels insulted that Leah kept feeding her these lies. You can sort of understand it, in a way. Poor Leah.” (99-100)

Later, after Leah has gone to Stanford (it takes a while for Billy and the others to notice that she has gone), Nicole writes to Billy (Nicole is in Italy):

I think she’ll be happier there, Nicole wrote back. No wonder she wanted to get away. She had only one good thing in high school — and she lost it. (101)

• **Why do you suppose Billy wanted to write about Leah in this book?**

We write for many reasons. We can write to remember fun times and to entertain other people, as Billy does in most of the essays in *Oddballs*. We can write to come to terms with our feelings, as I did after my mother died. Or we can write

in an attempt to understand something. Billy may be writing in an attempt to understand Leah.

• Leah's name is the same in both the online and the published version of this essay. Why?

I think that we can assume that a pseudonym was used in both versions of the essay. Since Billy had already used a false name in the online version of the essay, he did not need to change the name in the published version of the essay.

Creative Topic

• Mrs. Sleator is amazed that Russ doesn't figure out something better to do with his money than to buy a Rolls-Royce and to pursue his interest in Israeli folk dancing. What would you do with your money if you were truly wealthy?

Pituh-Plays

• Describe the first true pituh-play: *Vanya, the Insane Pianist*.

The first true pituh-play, *Vanya, the Insane Pianist*, is apparently based on Billy and Vicky's piano teacher, who was known for rocking back and forth as he played. When Vicky performed this pituh-play, she started playing a piano piece normally, then started rocking back and forth, and continued to grow more and more frenzied until she finally shrieked and ran off the stage or out of the room. This is the pituh-play that ends the concert.

• How do you suppose these put-ons got the name "pituh-plays"?

Elsewhere, Billy has described "pituh." Apparently, pituh-plays of the put-on variety are performed for pituh-people. It is a way of bringing some excitement into their lives or of shaking up their existence.

• Describe the telephone game or a few other pituh-plays.

The telephone game is a pituh-play that I sometimes dislike. In one version of the game, Vicky would call up people at random, say that she was alone and it was her birthday, and get them to feel sorry for her and do such things as sing "Happy Birthday" to her. This version is not so bad.

Another version is bad. In this version, Vicky pretends to be a little girl alone at a bus station where stinky men who talk funny try to give her candy. In one case, the person she was talking to on the telephone went to the bus station to find her. I would hate to be in the place of the person who went to the bus station and did not find a little girl alone

there. For the rest of my life, I would worry about what had happened to the little girl.

In another pituh-play, Vicky has a small watermelon that she has wrapped up like a baby. Onlookers can't see that it is a watermelon and not a baby. Vicky, Billy, and their friends go to a fountain, and Vicky coos at the "baby" and shows the fountain to the "baby." Then she becomes angry and starts shouting at the "baby" and eventually throws it at the fountain, where it splatters, shocking innocent bystanders. (Billy and her friends pretend to try to stop her, but of course they are too late.) Then Vicky and her co-conspirators take off running.

• **What is a happening?**

A happening is described in this passage:

The most elaborate pituh-play of all was Albert's brainchild. He had been reading about happenings, a new avant-garde art form. Happenings were often multimedia events in which the viewers were invited into a strange environment to interact with the artwork or the performers. In the most effective of them, Albert said, unexpected things actually *happened* to the surprised audience. (108-109)

Of course, the most elaborate pituh-play is the concert.

• **Describe the concert pituh-play.**

The concert pituh-play takes an awful lot of work on the part of the participants. Here are a few things that happen:

- The first piano piece is played on a piano that is badly out of tune.
- The second piano piece undergoes a series of interruptions. Vera Greenberg arrives late, just as planned, and annoys lots of people as she finds a

seat, loudly apologizing and popping her bubble gum.

- When Billy plays the piano, a hidden tape recorder starts playing lots and lots of grinding sounds.
- The concert pituh-play ends with Vicky performing *Vanya, the Insane Pianist*.
- At this point, the concert pituh-play ends, and everyone can see who is amused at being put-on and who is annoyed or angry at being put-on. The Sleator parents are amused, but many parents are “highly offended” (112).

• Suppose that you were the victim of some of these pituh-plays. Would you think they were funny, or would you be very angry?

I would be angry in some cases, I think — or at least very worried.

The telephone game is one that would make me angry or worried. When Vicky pretends to be a child alone in the bus station where strange men are trying to give her candy, I would worry greatly. If I were the person who rushed to the bus station to get the little girl and I didn’t find her there, I would call the police. Forever after, I would worry about what had happened to the little girl. Also, I would probably feel guilty because I had not arrived in time to save the little girl. And if I were to find out that I had been tricked, I would be very angry. This version of the telephone game is a pituh-play that I hope no reader does in real life.

On the other hand, some pituh-plays can be fun and interesting. I might be shocked at first when Vicky throws the “baby” (actually, small watermelon) at the fountain, but

I would be relieved to see the seeds among the red pulp, and I would probably laugh.

I hope that I would laugh at the concert pituh-play once I realized that I had been put on. I also hope that I would appreciate the original and creative effort that went into the pituh-play.

Other pituh-plays are simply fun for everyone. For example, *Vanya, the Insane Pianist* is definitely fun. So are the pituh-plays that are not put-ons but are performed in front of and for friends, as when Vicky, who has been pretending to be so ugly that she has to wear a paper bag over her head, says that Billy is so ugly that she could never marry him.

By the way, the comedian Andy Kaufman performed put-ons. Early in his career, he would appear on stage as “Foreign Man,” who spoke with a funny accent and who tried to be a stand-up comedian and impersonator. Mr. Kaufman would stand up on stage and deliberately bomb, telling “jokes” that were not funny, and doing “impressions” that sounded like Foreign Man, not like the celebrities that he said he was trying to imitate. Then, after bombing for several minutes and getting the audience to feel sorry for him, Mr. Kaufman would announce that he would do an impression of Elvis Presley. Of course, the audience would expect another terrible, terrible impression, but this time Mr. Kaufman would do a truly great Elvis impersonation. The audience, realizing that they had been put-on, would applaud in the presence of true comedic genius.

Of course, being a performance artist is like having a license to be creative and have fun. For example, Ohio University School of Art graduate students Nate Lareau and Marin Abell saw 2,400 ping-pong balls for sale on eBay. They immediately bought them for \$80, and then set about

finding ways to make use of them. One thing they did was to put them in a dryer (on the “tumble with no-heat” setting) at a coin-operated laundry (with permission). According to Mr. Lareau, “That was a good one. The ping-pong balls in the dryer created quite a racket. They sounded like a hailstorm, and looked a little like a weather system.” Another thing they did was to simply pour the ping-pong balls onto a street on a hill. The street was lined with bricks, and the sound the balls created as they bounced down the hill was interesting — like rain hitting a roof. Finally, Mr. Abell and a friend took the balls and a ping-pong-ball shooter and played a game where Mr. Abell tied 10 tennis rackets to his body and tried to hit the ping-pong balls being shot at him. Mr. Abell said he actually got very good at hitting the balls. Mr. Lareau and Mr. Abell still have the ping-pong balls, and the balls may yet appear in future pieces of performance art they create. (Source: Nick Claussen, “Student performance artists use Athens area as their canvas.” *The Athens News*. 9 July 2007 <<http://tinyurl.com/mlsrap3>>.)

• Describe a pituh-play that appears in the online version of the essay but not in the published version of the essay. Why do you suppose that Billy cut this material from the published version of the essay?

The following pituh-play appears in the online version of the essay, but not in the published version.

One of the most popular pituh-plays, also performed by Vicky and me, was based on the movie of Tennessee Williams’ *Night of the Iguana*. In the movie, Richard Burton is a defrocked, dissolute clergyman, staying at his friend Ava Gardner’s crummy hotel in Mexico. Also staying at the hotel is a dignified elderly poet in a wheelchair, cared for by his devoted granddaughter, Deborah Kerr, who

is always dressed in white. The poet and his granddaughter earn a meager living by traveling to different towns, where the old man recites his poems in public.

One night Richard Burton is tied in a hammock on the veranda, suffering from the DT's. Deborah Kerr, all purity and goodness, sits beside him to give him comfort, and during the long night they trade their life stories. The closest she has ever come to physical intimacy was one evening when she and a gentleman hired a boat in Hong Kong harbor. He never touched her, she explains. All he asked was for her to give him her underpants, and she modestly obliged.

"You didn't think that was disgusting?" Richard Burton asks her.

"Nothing human disgusts me," she says with gentle eloquence, "unless it is violent, or unkind."

In the Pituh-Play, I was Richard Burton, Vicky was Deborah Kerr. We sat beside each other on a bench. While sweet, innocent Vicky told me in her quiet voice about the incident in Hong Kong harbor, I munched complacently on saltines. At the end of the story I asked her thickly, "Didn't you think that was kind of disgusting?"

Vicky folded her hands and lifted her eyes. Fervent with noble sensitivity and compassion, she said, "Nothing human disgusts me, unless it is violent, or unkind."

"Not even this?" I asked her, and spit a big wet glob of chewed up crackers into her lap.

Why doesn't this pituh-play appear in the published version of the essay? As usual, Billy is thinking about his audience of children (and about the parents and teachers whom children would ask, "Why would someone want a woman's underpants?").

Creative Topics

• Describe an original pituh-play that you could possibly play with or on your friends.

In high school, author Beth Lisick had a truly original boyfriend. He could pass gas whenever he wanted, and for Christmas one year he gave her a toilet seat. Beth was quite original, too. After seeing a few too many catfights on the TV series *Dynasty*, Beth and her best friend Amy used to fake catfights in public places, rolling on the ground and pretending to kick each other and pull each other's hair until somebody stopped the "fight."

• Do research and see if you can come across any interesting happenings or examples of performance art.

Hint: Google "flash mob."

Dad's Cool

- **What can you learn from this essay that can help you write better — including perhaps the autobiographical essay you are writing now?**

The author makes good of repetition: “Shut up, darling.”

- **The published version of this essay deletes a few things, such as Vicky bleeding profusely after her father throws her in the air and her head hits the ceiling. In addition, the dirty limerick is deleted. Also, the final two paragraphs were deleted. Why do you suppose that the author deleted these things?**

Two things:

- 1) Don't embarrass the family.
- 2) Remember that young people will be reading this book: ages 11-14.

- **Write a short character analysis of Mr. Sleator. How does being a scientist affect Mr. Sleator's outlook on life?**

Being a scientist seems to make Mr. Sleator cool and logical.

He doesn't get upset. He solves problems. He remains calm.

When he finds the grubs under the skin of the fried chicken, he keeps on eating the fried chicken. As a scientist, he knows that the grubs are simply protein.

• What is your opinion of the game that the children and their father play where the children are blindfolded, driven to a place in the city that is unfamiliar to them, then dropped off and allowed to find their own way back home?

These days, that would be regarded as dangerous, but nothing bad ever happens to Billy and Vicky.

Because of TV, people have an exaggerated sense of danger in the United States. When a tragedy occurs anywhere in the world, we see it on the news. Many fictional TV shows portray murders and other crimes. Because of this, we can think that the United States (and the world) is much more dangerous than it really is.

• Write a short character analysis of Vicky's lawyer.

When Vicky is accused of passing bad checks, the lawyer assumes that Vicky is guilty. The lawyer has a bad opinion of middle-class teenagers, thinking that all they care about is money and clothes and conforming (boy, does he have Vicky wrong!).

The lawyer comes highly recommended; he wears “a jazzy suit and very expensive pointed shoes” (123).

• Describe Mr. Sleator's problem-solving skills.

Mr. Sleator is able to fix a hole in the canvas boat that he and his family sometimes use on weekends.

Mr. Sleator is able to use doors to make an extra-long table for Vicky's birthday party — which is held on July 4 although her birthday is actually July 15.

Mr. Sleator is able to think up a way to prove that Vicky is innocent of the charge of passing bad checks. He gets a copy of one of the bad checks and shows it to a handwriting expert who works for the police department. The

handwriting expert compares Vicky's signature with the one on the bad check and says that Vicky cannot have written the bad check. This clears Vicky's name.

When Billy is accepted into Harvard (despite his poor grades), then not accepted (because of his poor grades), Mr. Sleator gets several professionals to write the Dean of Admissions, then after the letters have arrived, he calls the Dean of Admissions. He remains calm, but he does make the point that it is unprofessional for Harvard to tell Billy that he has been accepted (thus influencing him to reject other colleges that have accepted him), and then tell him that he has not been accepted after all.

• **What is your opinion of the ending of this chapter?**

The ending of this chapter is interesting:

It was almost certainly on the basis of dad's cool behavior during this phone call that Harvard decided to accept me, after all — where I went on to spend the four most miserable years of my life.
(127)

This ending makes me wonder what happened at Harvard — I would imagine that Billy ran into some super-conforming kids at Harvard. I also have to wonder whether Billy will ever write a book detailing what happened at Harvard.

The above refers to the ending of the published version. In addition, looking at the ending of the online version, the reader wonders what happened at the Florida hotel.

• **Do you have any good anecdotes about your father?**

When Ohio University student Lindsey DeStefano was growing up, she and Erin, her younger sister, were afraid of monsters. Fortunately, they had a loving father who

protected them. He invented “Monster Spray,” a concoction that he sprayed in all corners, under the bed, and in the closet to keep away monsters of every kind. Later, of course, they learned that the Monster Spray consisted of ordinary tap water, but when they were young, they believed in it. One night after their father had finished spraying, Lindsey called him back because she thought that he had missed a spot. Ms. DeStefano’s essay, which is titled “Ten Times,” appears in the final Appendix K of this book.

Creative Topics:

- **In a short reaction memo or journal entry, write about your father. Make it interesting. If relevant, use dialogue.**
- **For your autobiographical essay, write creatively about your father. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**

Oddballs

**• What age group was this book specifically written for?
Does it matter that you are older than that age group?**

I hope that you enjoyed reading these stories.

Apparently, *Oddballs* was written for an audience aged 11-14.

No, it should not matter if you read a book that was written for an audience younger than you as long as it is a good book and as long as you enjoy reading it.

In England, the Prime Minister can read *Winnie the Pooh* and no one thinks anything of it.

C.S. Lewis once said there are things we have to do (such as make a living and pay our bills), things we ought to do (such as exercise and take care of our health, and act morally), and things that we want to do (in his case, these things included reading fairy stories). He also said that if the things we want to do don't conflict with the things we have to do and the things we ought to do, then by all means we should go ahead and do them.

A good way to get information fairly quickly is to read biographies written for teenagers. They will give you a lot of information without overwhelming you with too much information. (A little girl was supposed to write a book review, so she read a book about penguins, then wrote, "This book told me more about penguins than I wanted to know.")

• How did these four oddball siblings turn out?

Very well.

Billy became a famous writer of books for young people, of course.

Vicky became a nurse. (Her husband did a lot of the work of raising the children. Apparently, he was a househusband.)

Danny is a computer scientist.

Tycho is a physicist.

They are still oddballs, they still speak their minds, and they still don't care what other people think of them.

The Sleators are members of what critic Paul Fussell calls Category X in his book *Class*. I recommend the book — read it. Category X people are intelligent people who don't care what other people of them. They don't feel the need to conform to a certain class.

• How did Mr. and Mrs. Sleator end up raising a family of oddballs? Is that a good thing?

They ended up raising a bunch of oddballs because of these things:

- They are a little odd themselves.
- They are nonconformists.
- They know more than many other people. (Mrs. Sleator knows that it is good for children to eat unwashed food.)
- They don't care what other people think of them.

• How are you going to raise your children?

I hope that you raise a bunch of oddballs.

• Does Billy lie in his book?

At the end of the book, we find out that Billy has lied a little. Tycho did drink water out of a toilet bowl, and Jack did really hypnotize Tycho. However, the ending of the

essay was made up. The author says that all authors lie, and they lie to make a better story. This ending is very good, so the lie works.

• Authors pick and choose when they write. No author tells everything because that would be impossible. An author can create his or her own reality simply by choosing what to put in an essay and what to leave out of an essay. What, if anything, do you think that Billy might have left out of his book?

Billy wrote and published a humorous book, so he left out anything that was especially dark. For example, Matilda once brought a razor blade to school to use to slash her wrists if she did badly on a test. Fortunately, she did well and so felt no need to slash her wrists. This, of course, did not appear in the published version of the essay.

In addition, apparently Vicky and her mother had a number of screaming arguments. These are mentioned only briefly in the book. Wisely, Billy left them out of the book that he published. We do read in “Dad’s Cool” that “Vicky was not the most obedient teenager” (122), but we don’t get any details. This is fine. In a humorous autobiographical essay, create your own reality by leaving out anything especially negative.

As you know, some books, even bestselling autobiographies, are filled with misery. These authors apparently do the opposite. They leave out the funny stuff, and instead they concentrate on the misery. I prefer to read the funny stuff.

Another point is that our perception of things changes over time. An event that is horrifyingly embarrassing today will become funny with the passage of time. For an example, see Maggie Wendell’s essay titled “The Youth in Asia,” which appears in the final appendix of this book.

• How does Billy make his book interesting to the reader?

One of the major things he does is to tell interesting stories. An author simply has to know what is interesting and what is not interesting.

He also makes good use of dialogue and good use of humor.

The author is writing about what he knows: his family life while growing up. And, since all of us have families and have grown up, we can relate to what he writes.

Finally, he exaggerates where needed. (He doesn't mind lying a little to make a better story.)

He writes for a particular audience. The online versions of these essays include much very good material that he deleted because he knew that children would be reading the published version of the essays.

In summary, he does these things that you should in your own autobiographical writing:

- He uses good content. He knows what is interesting.
- He exaggerates where needed. (He doesn't mind lying a little to make a better story.)
- He uses dialogue.
- He uses humor and tells anecdotes.
- He writes for a particular audience.

Of course, you the teacher (as well as you the writer) must be aware of your audience. Some of the anecdotes and stories that appear in this Discussion Guide will not be appropriate for children, although they are appropriate for

an older audience. You will have to decide whether a particular anecdote or story is appropriate for the students you teach.

An Important Point

You don't need to be 100 percent truthful in your autobiographical writing. As the great bard Fflewddur Fflam says, "I can't help, ah, adding a little color to the facts — most facts need it so badly."

Creative Topics:

- **For your autobiographical essay, write creatively about a pet. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**
- **For your autobiographical essay, write creatively about one or more school experiences. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**
- **For your autobiographical essay, write creatively about one or more good deeds that you or one of your friends have done. Make it interesting. Use dialogue.**

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See also Tycho Sleator's website:

<http://www.tycho.org/sleator.shtml>

Appendix B: Writing Assignment — Autobiographical Essay

- Write an essay about your life. For example, you can write a humorous essay about when you were a child.
- Write 750 to 2,000 words — or whatever length your teacher assigns you. Yes, you may write more than 2,000 words — but be sure to proofread carefully. A shorter, well-written, carefully proofread paper will receive a better grade than a longer, badly written, poorly proofread paper.
- Double-space your autobiographical essay.
- Make it entertaining.
- Use dialogue.
- Do not write an encyclopedia entry. Make it more like a short story.
- You need not be 100 percent truthful. Feel free to make yourself better, funnier, wittier, etc., than you are in real life. (Or, as Mark Twain occasionally did in books such as *Roughing It*, you can make yourself dumber than you are in real life.)
- Use the stories from *Oddballs* as models of good autobiographical writing:

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/user/sleator/www/oddballs/>

Here is an online version of *Oddballs*. This is the version that Billy submitted to his publisher. It has a couple of additional essays. In addition, some things have been added or changed. For example, the chapter titled “Games” in the book is titled “Danny and Tycho” in the online version. In addition, some names have been changed.

Use the student autobiographical essays in Appendix K as models of good autobiographical writing.

Appendix C: Uses for Autobiographical Essays

What is an autobiographical essay good for? Once you write an autobiographical essay, what will you do with it? If you can figure out what it is good for, you can figure out the audience.

- You can mail or email your autobiographical essay — perhaps as a pdf file — to your friends and family.

- If your autobiographical essay is a fun paper about your parents, you can write the most sentimental and loving letter you have ever written in your life, then mail both the letter and the essay to your parents. They will love to receive both. By the way, when she was an adult, comedian Phyllis Diller knew that her aged father was fading and that he would die soon; therefore, she wrote him a very nice letter thanking both him and her mother for giving her a happy life and for everything that they had done for her during her then-30 years of life. After both of her parents had died, she went through their belongings and found that letter. Its much-worn condition showed that her parents had treasured it and had read it many times. (Source: Phyllis Diller, *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse: My Life in Comedy*, pp. 62-63.)

- You can post your autobiographical essay on a personal website. Your readers will mainly be family and friends. You can add a few (or many) more autobiographical essays if you want.

- You can write for yourself and your future children. When your oldest child turns 18, you can give him or her a volume of autobiographical essays — and a new car.

- At one time, zines were popular. A zine is a personal magazine. With a personal computer, you can create your own personal magazine with your autobiographical essay as the main piece. You can also add anything you want to

your zine: jokes, anecdotes, song lyrics, news and opinions, etc. Then you can make copies, staple pages together, and mail them to your friends and family — or simply e-mail them a copy, perhaps as a pdf. (David Bruce's column "Wise Up!" in *The Athens News* started as a zine.)

- It's easy with Microsoft Word to make a pdf file of your Autobiographical Essay and share it with others. You may even create your own zine.

- You may be able to get published, but this can be difficult. However, if your autobiographical essay turns out well and interesting, why not send it to a magazine, newspaper, or relevant website? You may be lucky and get published. (Don't worry about rejection. Every writer gets rejected, including some very famous authors: Mark Twain, Stephen King, etc.)

- Everyone needs to have an art; perhaps autobiographical writing can be your art. If you write a few (or several) autobiographical essays, you can self-publish your own memoir at Lulu.com. This can make a very nice holiday (Christmas or otherwise) gift, especially for a close-knit family. (At Smashwords.com you can publish your book as an ebook.)

Appendix D: Advice for Writing an Autobiographical Essay

• Keep a journal.

All people have good stories to write or tell about, although they may have forgotten some of them. Keep a journal, and write down your memories. Soon you will remember funny things that you have forgotten.

“I keep a journal, like many writers do. But the journal has changed its shape. I realize now that a journal is not just a collection of random written notes. Now, thanks to modern technology, it can also contain snippets of tape recordings, photos, video excerpts, stills from movies, poems, a myriad of images and jottings, magazine clippings, and newspaper articles. I set down those things that make me laugh or cry. These all become fodder for additional stories.”—Paul Zindel, author of *The Pigman*

“First, if you want to write, you need to keep an honest, unpublishable journal that nobody reads, nobody but you. Where you just put down what you think about life, what you think about things, what you think is fair and what you think is unfair. And second, you need to read. You can’t be a writer if you’re not a reader. It’s the great writers who teach us how to write. The third thing is to write. Just write a little bit every day. Even if it’s for only half a hour—write, write, write.”—Madeleine L’Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Children’s author Jane Yolen writes, “I have three pieces of advice for young writers. One: Read, read, read! You must read every day, and try to read a wide range of books. Two: Write, write, write! Keep a journal, write letters, anything to keep the ‘writing muscles’ in shape. Three: Don’t let anyone stop you from writing. Be persistent no matter what the ‘naysayers’ or critical editors have to say about your

writing.” She also says, “1. Write what interests you. 2. Write for the child inside of you—or the adult, if you are writing adult books. 3. Write with honest emotion. 4. Be careful of being facile. 5. Be wary of preaching. 6. Be prepared for serendipity.”

Karen Hesse, author of *Out of the Dust: Write!* Says, “Keep a journal, a diary, write poetry, vignettes, short stories, character sketches, descriptions of places, people, things. You don’t have to think in terms of an entire book. Develop your powers of observation, use all of your senses, and don’t forget to use your heart and soul as you take the measure of your world. Live life, experience a range of possibilities, look at the way things connect, intersect. Be a dedicated observer. And READ! Read every day. Read the paper, read magazines, read short stories, poetry, novels, nonfiction. Read fantasy and history and sports and biography. READ, READ, READ.”

• **Rise above.**

Theater director Tyrone Guthrie advised his actors and crew to do this. The advice means to rise above whatever forces are working against you. All of us have personal problems. No one’s life is perfect. Sometimes, life seems to conspire against us. Rise above all that, and produce the best work you can.

• **Astonish me.**

Dance impresario Sergei Diaghilev advised his choreographers to do this. The advice means what it says. Do such good work that the person who commissioned the work — and of course the audience — is astonished. (Tyrone Guthrie also used this phrase.)

- **Do it now.**

As a young man, choreographer George Balanchine nearly died and so he believed in living his life day by day and not holding anything back. He would tell his dancers, “Why are you stingy with yourselves? Why are you holding back? What are you saving for — for another time? There are no other times. There is only now. Right now.” Throughout his career, including before he became world renowned, he worked with what he had, not complaining about wanting a bigger budget or better dancers. One of the pieces of advice Mr. Balanchine gave over and over was this: “Do it now.”

- **Go out and get one.**

Ruth St. Denis once taught Martha Graham an important lesson when Ms. Graham was just starting to dance. Ms. St. Denis told Ms. Graham, “Show me your dance.” Ms. Graham replied, “I don’t have one,” and Ms. St. Denis advised, “Well, dear, go out and *get* one.” (Everyone needs an art to practice. Your art need not be dance. Perhaps your art can be writing autobiographical essays. Of course, you may practice more than one art.)

- **Work a little harder.**

“I think high self-esteem is overrated. A little low self-esteem is actually quite good — maybe you’re not the best, so you should work a little harder.” — Jay Leno.

- **Make the First Mark**

Barbara Feldon, who played the role of Agent 99 on TV’s *Get Smart*, is friends with artist Jan Stussy, whom she calls “the most prolific artist” she knows. She once asked him about his creation of art, “How did you develop the courage?” He replied, “When I was in the 10th grade, I realized that if you simply make the first mark, the rest will just happen. Whether it’s that first mark with a brush on a

canvas or pencil to paper, boldly make it and then let yourself free-fall. Art creates art.” Ms. Feldon, author of *Living Alone and Loving It*, has added writing to her other creative endeavors, and she often tells herself, “Make the first mark.”

• **Write with Authority**

“When you write about what you know, you write with authority. The two words go together — author-authority, and what that means is when you write with authority, you give the reader the feeling, ‘This author knows what he, or she, is talking about.’ That’s very important.” — Betsy Byars.

• **Try**

When young people’s author Beverly Cleary was a child, she entered a contest in which the best essay about an animal would win \$2. She won the \$2, and she found out that she had been the only person to write and send in an essay. Ms. Cleary says, “This incident was one of the most valuable lessons in writing I ever learned. Try! Others will talk about writing but may never get around to trying.”

• **“Writers Don’t Fail Because They Don’t Write Well; They Fail Because They Don’t Produce”**

“What I honestly believe is that writing can be learned by anyone truly interested in language and literature. The trick is not to wait for inspiration, but rather to train yourself to sit down and write on a regular basis. Writers don’t fail because they don’t write well; they fail because they don’t produce. My advice to young writers is to read as much good literature as they can so they will experience the best uses of language and the most sensitive storytelling, and then train themselves to write on a regular basis.”—Walter Dean Myers.

- **Two Skills**

“I have two skills: One skill is the ability to use language. You learn language from other people ... from reading people who are good, so you have to be a good reader. The second skill I have is discipline. You sit down and you start something, and you have to finish it. Do you have the ability to work at this trait? You don’t have a boss ... it’s not easy. ... writing is work—it’s hard work, but hard doesn’t mean bad.”—Walter Dean Myers.

- **“You Just Have to Work”**

“Most people have creative impulses, but few nourish and develop them. Every day, whether you’re inspired or not, you just have to work.”—Andrea Juno.

- **Answer the Readers’ Questions**

One student wrote an autobiographical paper in which she mentioned driving a truck when she was five years old. Of course, I wondered how that was possible. She added some explanatory sentences to her autobiographical essay to convey this information: She was helping her father in a field on their farm. She was not allowed to drive faster than five miles per hour. Her father followed her and loaded bales of hay in the bed of the pickup truck. Her mother had a big problem with her being allowed to drive at such a young age, but her father told her, “Don’t worry. I was driving when I was five years old.”

Appendix E: A Sample Short Reaction Memo

The questions in this guide to William Sleator's *Oddballs* can be used in discussions; however, they can also be used for short reaction memos or journal entries. For example, my students at Ohio University sometimes write short reaction memos. See below for the assignment and a sample short reaction memo.

How Do I Complete the Reaction Memo Assignments?

You will have to write a series of short memos in which you write about the readings you have been assigned.

Each memo should be at least 250 words (or whatever the teacher tells you). Include a word count for each memo, although that is not normally part of the memo format.

Following the memo heading (To, From, Re, Date, Words), write the question you are answering and the part of the book that the question applies to.

You may answer one question or more than one question. I will supply you with a list of questions that you may answer.

Note that a Works Cited list is needed if you use quotations.

To: David Bruce

From: Jane Student

Re: *Oddballs*, “The Séance”

Date: Put Today’s Date Here

Words: 372

• Make a list of fortunes that could be given out on Halloween. (If you want, number the fortunes 2 through 12 and tell the reader to roll dice to determine his or her future.)

Note to reader: To tell your fortune, roll a pair of dice. The number you roll will determine your future.

2: You will finally lose those extra pounds, get a nose job, and be good looking. You will meet the significant other that you have always dreamed about. Then you will wake up and find out that it just been a dream.

3: You will go shopping at the local Walmart and select CD after CD after CD, as well as a hefty number of DVDs you have been wanting to see. Unfortunately, as you leave Walmart, you will be arrested because the kind of shopping you do is shoplifting.

4: You will get your dream job as an athlete on a professional team. Unfortunately, you will be fired after only one day because you aren’t good enough to play on a professional team.

5: You will work hard and publish a novel with a major publisher. Unfortunately, the critics will hate it.

6: At Ohio University, you will spend the best eight years of life as a junior.

7: You will live a very long life — which means that you will get older and uglier and creakier for many, many years after you reach old age.

8: You will marry the person you wish you could be married to — and you will learn to hate that person more and more as each year passes.

9: You have always wanted to be number one at something — and you will have more divorces than anyone else in your high school graduation class.

10: You will become President of the United States — and after you are dead, U.S. citizens will line up to dance on your grave.

11: You have two futures to choose from. You can lead a life of wit and intelligence, or you can lead a life of beer drinking and TV watching.

12: “Sorry, my dear, you have no future” (61). (Note: This future has been stolen from William Sleator’s *Oddballs*.)

Works Cited

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Appendix F: A Few Rules for Writing Autobiographical Essays

- The American style is to put commas and periods inside quotation marks.

“Hello,” he said. “I haven’t seen you for ages.”

- Set off speaker tags with a comma. Speaker tags are short phrases such as “he said” or “she replied” or “David yelled” or “Sally asked.”

Bill asked, “How are you?”

Sally replied, “I am well.”

“Hi,” she said.

“Hello,” Brad Pitt said.

- Set off direct address with a comma. Direct address occurs when someone is addressed directly by name or by a name.

John shouted, “Bill, wait for me!”

George said, “How are you, Sally?”

Bill yelled, “Stay away from me, cheater!”

Note: “mom” is sometimes a name, as are other words we call each other.

“Hi, mom.”

“Hello, son.”

“Welcome home, dear.”

“Back off, sis.”

“Keep away from me, pest.”

“How are you, granddad?”

“Up and at ’em, girls,” my father said.

“Hello, Billy,” dad said.

- Don’t put a comma in front of a parenthesis.

Wrong: Dad could fix it, (or so he claimed).

Right: Dad could fix it (or so he claimed).

Also Right: Dad could fix it, or so he claimed.

Also Right: Dad could fix it — or so he claimed.

- In general, delete throat-clearing words, especially when they are not part of dialogue.

Bad: Well, the next thing that happened was

Better: The next thing that happened was ...

- Q: Can you use “bad” words when writing this paper?

A: It depends on the teacher. (You may want to use asterisks: “S**t!”)

- Q: Can you use words like “gonna” and “ain’t” when writing dialogue?

A: If that is the way the characters speak, yes.

- Remember to use all the normal rules of punctuation and writing well. For example, use the apostrophe as needed.

Ex: We fell into each other’s arms.

Ex: We saw each other on New Year’s Day.

- Remember to avoid comma splices. Doublecheck your dialogue for comma splices. You may be able to correct a comma splice with a dash.

- Remember to set off parenthetical words with commas. “Though” appears occasionally in dialogue, and sometimes “though” is a parenthetical word.

- Remember to avoid clichés. Often, clichés will appear in a first draft. The writing process consists of working on a piece of writing until it is right. That includes identifying clichés and getting rid of them.

Example of a cliché: right off the bat.

Example of a cliché: avoid it like the plague.

- Use hyphens where hyphens are needed.

Correct: I was a mean eight-year-old. (“Eight-year-old” is a compound noun.)

Correct: I was a mean eight-year-old boy. (“Eight-year-old” is an adjective that appears before the noun it modifies.)

- Be aware that you should use “all right.” “Alright” is nonstandard.

Correct: “All right, ladies,” Mom said. “It’s time to get up.”

- Be aware that whether you capitalize the words “mom” and “dad” (“Mom” and “Dad”) is up to you. Choose one style and use it consistently. (Wrong: mom and Dad.)

Correct: “All right, ladies,” Mom said. “It’s time to get up.”

Also Correct: “All right, ladies,” mom said. “It’s time to get up.”

- Remember to keep related words together. For example, the word “only” should be placed next to the word or words it modifies.

Wrong: I only had two beers that night.

Better: I had only two beers that night.

- Remember not to overuse punctuation. Don't use two or three exclamation points in a row. Don't put an exclamation point and a question mark in a row.

Wrong: "That's silly!!"

Better: "That's silly!"

Wrong: "That's silly!?"

Better: "That's silly!"

- Don't put a question mark and a period together, and don't put an exclamation mark and a period together.

Wrong: "Is that silly?."

Better: "Is that silly?"

Wrong: "That's silly!."

Better: "That's silly!"

- Write out numbers one through nine. Use numbers for 10 and above. Exception: Use numbers for dollar amounts.

Ex: Only two of us could fit at one time.

Ex: Three pigs went to market.

Ex: I spent \$4 for a cup of coffee.

Ex: Over 400 cattle stampeded.

Note: An excellent way to learn the rules for punctuating dialogue is to look at novels and autobiographical short stories.

Appendix G: Sample In-Class Activities

See following pages.

What are Clichés, and How Do I Cure Them?

What are Clichés?

According to Maxwell Nurberg, clichés “are generally fixed idiomatic phrases, some of which may have originally been valid, fresh, and colorful but through constant use have become about as personal as a rubber stamp or a mimeographed love letter.” Clichés were original at one time, but now are predictable.

Cliché examples:

Right off the bat

As quiet as a mouse

Avoid him (her, or it) like the plague

Write five clichés.

How Can I Cure Clichés?

1) Simplify the cliché.

For example:

“A bolt from the blue” equals a shock.

“Right off the bat” means quickly.

“As quiet as a mouse” means quiet.

Take three of the clichés you have written above and simplify the phrase.

2) Give the cliché a “twist” that changes the meaning of the phrase.

For example:

“Live and let live” can be changed to “Live and let die.”

“Better late than never” can be changed to changed to “Better late than later.”

Can you twist any of your clichés and give it an alteration that changes the meaning of the phrase?

3) Make up an entirely new image or phrase — one you have never heard before, but one expresses the same idea.

For example: Mark Twain could have written, “Miles Hendon was shocked.” Instead, Mark Twain wrote this: Miles Hendon “felt much as a man might who had danced blithely out to enjoy a rainbow, and got struck by lightning.” — From Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*

Can you make up an entirely new image or phrase, one you have never heard before, but one that expresses the same idea as one of the clichés you wrote down earlier expressed?

Source: This activity is based on a pdf file from

library.cn.edu/wacn/pdfs/clichfix.pdf

Write Your Own Similes and Metaphors

Definitions of Similes and Metaphors

Source of Definitions:

<http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/literacy/PC_met.htm>

A simile is where two things are directly compared because they share a common feature. The word AS or LIKE is used to compare the two words. E.g. As cold AS a dog's nose

A metaphor also compares two things, but it does so more directly WITHOUT using AS or LIKE. E.g. The shop was a little gold mine.

Examples of Metaphors and Similes

- What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset. — Crowfoot, Blackfoot warrior and orator, 1890
- The human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out a tune for a dancing bear, when we hope with our music to move the stars. — Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
- A book is like a garden carried in the pocket. — Arab Proverb
- A clear conscience is a soft pillow. — German Proverb
- Anger is as a stone cast into a wasp's nest. — Malabar Proverb
- Fortune is a woman; if you neglect her today, do not expect to regain her tomorrow. — French Proverb
- Gray hairs are death's blossoms. — English Proverb

Note: Do not feel that you have to use similes and metaphors in your autobiographical essay. If they will improve your autobiographical essay, use them. If they won't improve your autobiographical essay, don't use them.

Write Your Own Similes and Metaphors

Example:

(About a baseball player) He was as hitless as

(About a baseball player) He was as hitless as the
Ramones.

As bald as _____

As crazy as _____

As cool as _____

Come up with a few other similes and metaphors of your
choosing.

One Secret of Writing Well is Writing Vividly

One secret of writing well is writing vividly. For example, you could write, “We had always heard that nuns are mean,” and then stop. Or you can write like this:

We had all heard horror stories about the nuns who taught at the Catholic school, how they used yardsticks like broadswords and dipped the edges in salt so they would hurt more and didn’t care if you bled as long as you didn’t drip on the floor. Whenever I had seen nuns, they always seemed quiet and almost nice, but there were Catholic boys so mean they scared bad dogs, and these boys would cross the street and hide in back of a garbage can in terror when they saw Sister Eunicia walking by. — Gary Paulsen, *How Angel Peterson Got His Name and Other Outrageous Tales About Extreme Sports*, p. 57.

Take one of the following sentences and write vividly about that topic.

- My friend was a daredevil.
- My friend was the best-looking boy in high school.
- My friend was the worst driver in the state.

How Can I Identify and Correct Dangling Modifiers?

Spotting Dangling Modifiers

“To spot a dangling modifier, look for a sentence that begins with a modifier but doesn’t name the person, idea, or thing modified. Readers will think the modifier refers to the subject of the sentence that follows. If it doesn’t, the modifier dangles.” — *The Longman Pocket Writer’s Companion*

Example No. 1

The following sentence says that the Courthouse was walking down Court Street:

Dangling Modifier: Walking down Court Street, the Courthouse glittered in the sun.

The clause “Walking down Court Street” modifies what follows it: “the Courthouse.” Clearly, this is wrong — the Courthouse was not walking down Court Street.

To get rid of the dangling modifier, the writer needs to identify who was walking down the street.

Correct: Walking down Court Street, I saw the Courthouse glittering in the sun.

Example No. 2

The following sentence says that the police tested positive for many and various illegal drugs:

Dangling Modifier: Having tested positive for many and various illegal drugs, the police arrested the suspect.

The clause “Having tested positive for many and various illegal drugs” modifies what follows it: “the police.”

Clearly, this is wrong — the police did not test positive for many and various illegal drugs.

To get rid of the dangling modifier, the writer needs to correctly identify who tested positive for many and various illegal drugs.

Correct: Having tested positive for many and various illegal drugs, the suspect was arrested by the police.

Also Correct (and Avoids the Passive Voice): After the suspect tested positive for many and various illegal drugs, the police arrested him.

Example No. 3

The following sentence says that my grandfather was still in diapers when he went back to college

Dangling Modifier: Still in diapers, my grandfather went back to college.

The clause “Still in diapers” modifies what follows it: “my father.” Clearly, this is wrong — my grandfather was not in diapers when he went back to college.

To get rid of the dangling modifier, the writer needs to correctly identify who was still in diapers.

Correct: While I was still in diapers, my grandfather went back to college.

Dangling Modifier Exercise #1

Correct these dangling modifiers:

1. Driving much too fast, the car swerved out of control.
2. By writing my autobiographical essay, readers will be entertained.

3. Working the night shift, the little son and daughter were rarely seen.

Write some of your own funny dangling modifiers.

Peer Review

In a peer review, you exchange drafts of your communication with other members of the course. They evaluate your writing, you evaluate their writing, then both of you talk about each other's writing, telling what the other person has done right and how the other person can improve his or her communication.

- Bring two or more copies of your draft to class and to conferences. The reviewer can read (and perhaps mark) one copy; you can mark another copy as the reviewer makes comments.
- Bring a full draft to peer review sessions and to conferences. If your draft is incomplete, the reviewer can't make helpful criticisms on all parts of your communication.
- Bring a draft that you have proofread to peer review sessions and to conferences. If your draft is sloppy, the reviewer will be distracted from other important considerations.
- Read the other person's writing word for word. You won't help the other person by simply scanning their communication.
- Actively read the other person's writing. Try to find as many mistakes as you can.
- Take reviewing seriously. If all you do is glance at a draft and say it looks good, you aren't helping the reader, and you aren't learning the job skill of reviewing. Talk to the person whose work you are reviewing and give that person good advice about revising his or her draft.
- Get more than one review (several if you have time).

Peer Review Sheet: Autobiographical Essay

1. Exchange papers with another student.
2. Read the other student's Autobiographical Essay.
3. Write down briefly your opinion of the other student's Autobiographical Essay. Good? Bad? Interesting? Boring?
4. Write down any questions you would like to ask after reading the Autobiographical Essay. Was everything clear to you? Did you understand all the terms that were used? Do you have any questions about what did or did not happen?
5. Write down one thing that the writer did well, in your opinion.
6. Write down one thing that the writer should improve, in your opinion.
7. Write down any other suggestions for improvement that you have for the paper.
8. Go through the Autobiographical Essay again and make any proofreading corrections that need to be made.
9. Go over the Autobiographical Essay orally with the writer. Make any comments or suggestions for improvement that you would like to make. Of course, the writer will do the same things with the Autobiographical Essay that you wrote.
10. Give this sheet of paper to the writer, then exchange Autobiographical Essays with another writer and go through the process again.
11. Go home and revise your Autobiographical Essay.

12. Hand in your paper on time to avoid the late penalty. Also, make sure that your Autobiographical Essay uses dialogue, which is a requirement of this paper.

Appendix H: Lulu.com and Smashwords.com

If you wish, you may go to Lulu.com and print your own autobiographical essays or those of your students.

Lulu.com is a print-on-demand company that will not charge you except when you order print copies of your book or order one of the special services such as making your book available at Amazon.com. You may upload books for free.

You (or your students) can also go to Smashwords and make ebooks of your manuscript for free.com

Obvious but Important Reminders About Printing Student Work:

- If you print your students' essays, you will need their permission, or if your students are under 18 years old, you will need the permission of their parents. As you know, you do not own the copyright to what your students write.
- You cannot make money from your students' writing, so the book will be royalty-free. Neither you nor your students will make a penny from it. I recommend making it a free download — anyone in the world will be able to download it as a pdf file for free.
- It's a good idea to get some kind of written permission to print each student's essay.

To see samples of books that contain student writing, go to

<<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/brucebATohioDOTedu>>

and download any or all of these books for free:

The Great American Essay

Life in America: Tales of Love and Laughter

*Love and Laughter: Stories About Growing Up
Me, Myself, and My Family and Friends
Outstanding!*

Appendix I: Everyone Has Funny Stories to Tell or Write About

Everyone has funny stories to tell or write about. (And you can tell or write about the funny stories of your friends.) Here are some of mine:

- Ohio University physiologist Fredrick Hagerman, who worked at NASA, vouches for the authenticity of this anecdote: The first man to walk on the moon was Ohio-born astronaut Neil Armstrong. The first words he spoke on the moon are famous — “One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind” — but he said other things on the moon, including, “Good luck, Mr. Gorsky.” At first, people assumed that Mr. Gorsky must be a Russian cosmonaut, but no Russian cosmonaut had that name. For a long time, Mr. Armstrong declined to reveal who Mr. Gorsky was, but after years had passed, he said that the Gorskys had died and so it was OK to reveal the story. It turned out that the Gorskys were next-door neighbors to the Armstrongs when Neil was growing up. One day, during a game, a ball was hit into the Gorskys’ yard, and young Neil went to get it. The ball had landed near an open window, and Neil heard the Gorskys arguing. In particular, he heard Mrs. Gorsky yelling, “Sex? You want sex? I’ll tell you when you’ll get sex! You’ll get sex when the kid next door walks on the moon!”

- Retired Ohio University professor Warren Ruchti studied under the famous philosopher Nelson Goodman, author of *Ways of Worldmaking* and other important books, at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Goodman’s intelligence was awesome, and Dr. Ruchti tells several anecdotes about him. A visiting lecturer once was busily writing numerous premises for his arguments on the chalkboard before his lecture when Nelson Goodman walked in. Dr. Goodman glanced at the columns of premises, then told the visiting

lecturer, “You have contradictory premises — look here and here.” The lecturer said, “Oh my gosh, you’re right!” Another time a visiting lecturer gave a long, involved talk at a colloquium. At the end of the talk, Nelson Goodman looked at Warren Ruchti and said, “He hasn’t got the answer,” then walked out of the room. Nelson Goodman moved on to Harvard, from which he retired, but he has not been forgotten. The Ruchtis’ family pet was named in honor of the eminent philosopher: Nelson Gooddog.

- The late Ohio University English professor Frank Fieler knew and loved books. Frequently he would make wise acquisitions for OU’s Alden Library. Once, in England, he had almost succeeded in acquiring some important first editions at an auction when a bidder for another university — that was rich because of oil money — spoke up and gave a bid that was twice as large as Dr. Fieler’s. The bidder was showing off his university’s wealth by waiting until the bidding was almost over, then jumping in with a big bid. Dr. Fieler was so angry that he bid the first editions up until the other fellow’s bid was way over the books’ true value, then Dr. Fieler stalked out — to the applause of the other people in the auction house.

- A student once wanted to interview Ohio University zoologist Scott Moody for a term paper on herpes simplex after learning that Dr. Moody was a herpetologist who taught BIOS 472/572: Herpetology. However, herpetologists study amphibians and reptiles, while virologists study viruses such as herpes. Still, the student’s mistake was not as bad as it may sound. Interestingly, herpetology and herpes share a common root word, “herpo,” which means crawling. As Dr. Moody explains it, “‘Herpeton’ means creeping, crawling creature. The earlier naturalists used this term for the slow sprawling terrestrial vertebrates (lizards, snakes, turtles, salamanders) in contrast with the more active terrestrial vertebrates

(mammals and birds). The first herpes described scientifically was ‘herpes zoster’ or shingles. The way a shingles infection manifests itself is as an outbreak of skin rash and blisters that then spread in a linear fashion, hence crawl in one direction. The Greek word ‘herpes’ was chosen as the genus name for this group of viruses.”

- Here is a story that Scott Moody, a zoologist at Ohio University, tells his friends: “When I was a graduate student living in Germany collecting data for my doctoral dissertation, I often used the public bathroom at the Berlin Train Station. One of the ‘sanitary engineers’ who happened to be an older woman got her jollies by waiting until there was a long line of men urinating in the contiguous urinal stand, then she would flush real hard, spraying water everywhere, causing men to jump backwards while urinating on the floor or on themselves, displaying their shagadelic [fans of the Austin Powers movies will recognize the reference] tools, and so forth. I witnessed this several times, and it was always the same ‘putzfrau.’”

- When the late English professor Calvin Thayer used to teach Shakespeare — his specialty — and talk about Falstaff, the fat rogue living on his wits, he would recite a long list of Falstaff’s traits: Falstaff is an alcoholic, very fat, a spendthrift, has a white beard, etc. From when I attended Ohio University graduate school, I remember that when Dr. Thayer, who had a white beard, mentioned Falstaff’s white beard, he looked shocked, glanced up at his students, and protested, “There’s nothing wrong with *that*, of course.”

- Robert Roe, retired professor (he reads Old English!) at Ohio University, served in the tank corps in Africa during World War II. One day, while driving a tank he ran out of gas in the desert; an Arab saw him and tried to speak to

him, but neither spoke the other's language. The Arab shrugged, went to a nearby clump of trees where he had a cache of gasoline, then filled Mr. Roe's tank with gas.

- Many people don't regard reading, writing, and learning as working. The late Ohio University philosophy professor Robert Wieman once decided to clean his office one day, so he got sweaty moving furniture around and throwing away heaps of old, outdated files. A maintenance worker passed by and said, "You're the first person I've seen working around here."

- Ohio University Classics professor Steve Hays says that he doesn't want his students to graduate only to write poetry to themselves in coffeehouses; humanity can be well served by engineers, journalists, nurses, physicians, dentists, and lawyers. According to Dr. Hays, building a better fuel injector is a wonderful way to serve humanity.

- The late John Jones specialized in Milton and Swift as an English professor at Ohio University. One day, a first-year student came to Professor Jones' office and asked him why he should take his course. Professor Jones pointed to one bookshelf, then another. "Milton! Swift! What more do you want?"

- When the late Ohio University English professor Barry Roth first came to OU, he was asked to teach a course on mysteries. But instead of teaching mysteries by such people as Agatha Christie and Rex Stout, he taught such "mysteries" as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*.

- A janitor at Ohio University is a good problem-solver. OU students aren't supposed to drink soda, coffee, or other liquids in classrooms, but several do anyway — and they leave behind their cans and bottles, creating a huge mess for janitors. One janitor made a statement by collecting all

the cans and bottles in each classroom and stacking them up on the professor's desk in the classroom. The next morning the professors reminded their students not to bring liquids to class.

- Retired Ohio University sports publicist Frank Morgan occasionally talks at elementary schools about sports. Once he explained that baseballs are made of horsehide, and a horrified little girl exclaimed, "You mean they kill horsies to make baseballs!"

- This is a story that one of my correspondence students wrote me. (The college she is writing about is not Ohio University!) She was attending college. Her hardest course was computer programming. At the end of the quarter, the brightest student in class started passing out to anyone who wanted it the answer to the final programming project of the class. Her acquaintance took the answer, but she didn't. Result: Her acquaintance got an A; she got an F and had to retake the class. One year later, her acquaintance was fired from her job because of a lack of knowledge of how to program computers (although her resume states that she got an A in programming). However, the honest student — who now knows how to program computers — was (and is) working, so she copied her paycheck and mailed the copy to her acquaintance with this message: "Ha, Ha!"

- One of my students was a United States Marine, where he had to take a wilderness survival course that taught him such things as bugs are a very good source of protein if you are trapped without food behind enemy lines. As part of the course, my student and some other soldiers parachuted into the wilderness, where they made good use of their problem-solving skills. As they parachuted into the wilderness, they looked around and noticed a road in the distance. Once they dropped to the earth, they used their compasses to find the road, then they walked into a town and ate pizza.

- During a discussion at Ohio University about cheating, OU student Adam Ciarlariello told a story about a high school student he had known in Indiana. The student had been an exchange student in Japan and knew Japanese well. Mr. Ciarlariello noticed that she had Japanese written on one of her wrists and when he asked her about it, she rolled up her sleeve and showed him that she had Japanese written up to her elbow. Mr. Ciarlariello asked if she were getting ready to cheat on a test in Japanese, and she replied, “No — biology.”
- One day I was teaching my students how to avoid using discriminatory language. One of the things we did was to go over some discriminatory sentences and point out why they were discriminatory. For example, this was one sentence we went over: “All Irish men are drunks.” Of course, I expected my students to point out that this sentence used a stereotype; however, one of my female students pointed out that the sentence was sexist because “Irish women can be drunks, too.”
- One of my philosophy students saw a slaughtered cow when she was a young child, and as a result she stopped eating meat. Her parents wanted their young daughter to eat animal protein for her health, so they had to convince her to eat meat again. They finally figured out how to do that: they told her that meat grows on trees. (As a young, no-longer-so-naive adult, she became a vegetarian.)
- Ohio University engages in problem-solving occasionally. For example, students often create their own paths on a green instead of walking on the brick pathways. Of course, this means that the grass is killed where the students frequently walk. To keep students from creating their own paths, OU groundskeepers sometimes put a load of stinky manure right where the students like to walk.

- One of my first-year students didn't want anyone to know that she was a freshman. Because she realized that only freshmen look at maps of the Ohio University campus, when she got lost during her first few days at OU, she would walk into a building, find a women's restroom, go into a stall, lock the door, and only then look at a map to see where she was.
- A new student about to attend college in Athens, Ohio, came from New England; since she knew absolutely no one in Ohio, she was really worried about attending Ohio University. Just before she left to come to Athens, her younger sister told her, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Just don't talk to strangers."

Appendix J: How Do I Write Humor and Satire?

- Humor is funny; satire is humorous criticism.
- You may want to write humor simply to amuse other people; you may want to write satire both to amuse and to educate other people.
- If you are going to write satire, it will definitely help if you have some strong opinions.
- If you are going to write satire, it will definitely help if you recognize foolishness when you see it.
- If you are going to write satire, you will need to call a fool a fool, either directly or indirectly. (It is possible to call a fool something other than a fool, and still have the readers know that you are calling a fool a fool.)
- This section gives a few techniques for writing humor. They may or may not be useful when you or your students are writing a humorous autobiographical essay. They are definitely useful for stand-up comedians. If these techniques and examples help when you or your students are writing a humorous autobiographical essay, wonderful, but no one should feel obligated to use any of them. Also, no one should feel obligated to write satire in his or her autobiographical essay.

A Brief Satire

“When I started my junior year of high school, I was already the captain of the football team and the baseball team, I was a straight-A honors student, and girls were offering themselves to me. I just couldn’t say no to easy sex and free booze, but I knew I was risking my future. So I prayed on it, drove to Boise, and got this butt-ugly haircut. I haven’t been laid since, praise Jesus!” — MARK G., Atomic City, ID

Source: <http://www.theagitator.com/archives/012245.php>

Even Briefer Satires: Bumper Stickers

- When Jesus said, “Love your enemies,” he probably meant don’t kill them.
- Who would Jesus torture?

Humor/Satiric Techniques

Write a Misleading Title and Introduction.

Hunger in the First World

Hunger is widespread. Emaciated bodies, excessive thinness, lack of calories — such things are prevalent in many parts of the world, including countries that are considered rich.

Is there anything we can do to stop the hunger?

Yes.

The next time you see a fashion supermodel, give her a cheeseburger. ...

Note: No one is required to write a misleading introduction. This is merely one technique that you can use if it is relevant to your paper. The same thing is true of the other techniques discussed in this section.

Seem to Agree with the Position that You are Actually Attacking.

“I think that’s what we need: more people carrying weapons. I support the [concealed gun] legislation, but I’d like to propose one small amendment. Everyone should be able to carry a concealed weapon. But everyone who carries a weapon should be required to wear one of those

little beanies on their heads with a little propeller on it so the rest of us can see them coming.” — Molly Ivins

The word “propose” helps show that Molly Ivins is writing satire. She is making a reference to Jonathan Swift’s famous satire titled “A Modest Proposal.”

Be Funny in the Details — When Appropriate.

Not Funny in the Details

And before you accuse me of being some kind of wussy, please note that I am a sports guy myself, having had an athletic career on the track team at Pleasantville High School.

Funny in the Details

And before you accuse me of being some kind of sherry-sipping ascot-wearing ballet-attending *MacNeil-Lehrer-NewsHour*-watching wussy, please note that I am a sports guy myself, having had a legendary athletic career consisting of nearly a third of the 1965 season on the track team at Pleasantville High School (“Where the Leaders of Tomorrow are Leaving Wads of Gum on the Auditorium Seats of Today”). — Dave Barry

Note: Dave Barry uses parody in the passage above. Answers.com defines parody as “A literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule.” Mr. Barry parodies high school mottos when he writes a motto for Pleasantville High School: “Where the Leaders of Tomorrow are Leaving Wads of Gum on the Auditorium Seats of Today.”

Put the Punch at the End.

“Women want men, careers, money, children, friends, luxury, comfort, independence, freedom, respect, love, and three-dollar pantyhose that won’t run.” — Phyllis Diller

“There ain’t nothin’ an old man can do but bring me a message from a young one.” — Moms Mabley

“Happiness is finding a book that’s three weeks overdue, and you’re not.” — Totie Fields

Be Controversial.

“I say this to the dude with a ‘Stop Abortion’ picket sign, ‘I have the answer to abortion: Shoot your dick. Take that tired piece of meat down to the ASPCA and let ’em put it to sleep.’” — Whoopi Goldberg

“I’m getting an abortion. I don’t need one, but I feel that as an American I should exercise that right before it’s taken away.” — Betsy Salkind

Engage in Word Play.

“I became a mom six months ago. I adopted a highway. I’m trying to teach it to pick up after itself.” — Nancy Jo Perdue

“I’m getting older, and I’m thinking about getting my eggs frozen. Well, just the egg whites. I’m trying to cut back on my cholesterol.” — Brenda Pontiff

“I’m descended from a very long line my mother once listened to.” — Phyllis Diller

“I love animals, especially with gravy.” — Cyndi Stiles

Make a Twist on a Cliché or Well-known Expression.

“Remember, we’re all in this alone.” — Lily Tomlin

Exaggerate.

“The walls of my apartment are so thin that when my neighbors have sex, I have an orgasm.” — Linda Herskovic

Have a Weird Outlook on Things.

“The other night I was home by myself, and all the lights went out. I absolutely freaked out. I thought, ‘There’s a guy in the basement, he flipped a switch, and he’s coming up to kill me.’ Then I looked out the window and saw the lights in the whole neighborhood were out. I was relieved because I thought, ‘Maybe he’ll start at the end of the block.’” — Paula Poundstone

Write a Triple (Three Things, with the Funny Thing Coming at the End).

“‘Children need booundarieees,’ child psychologists harangue in that sing-songy, whiny voice that annoys the crap out of me. ‘They need limits on what they’re allowed to dooooo.’ I wholeheartedly agree. I am a firm believer in setting boundaries as a way to help children grow. My own kids have learned the Basic Rules for Getting Along in the Deckers’ House: be respectful to others, never hit your siblings, and never, ever cheer against the Colts.” — Erik Deckers

“Trapped in time. Surrounded by evil. Low on gas.” — Poster for the movie *Army of Darkness*, starring Bruce Campbell

“Dollywood surprises me. It embraces all the values of the American South — patriotism, Christianity and 3lb portions of apple pie...” — Simon Hattenstone.

Point out Contradictions or Incongruities.

“I just got junk mail from this organization that wants me to save the forest. I sent them back a letter saying, ‘Stop sending me junk mail and save the forest yourself.’” — Linda Herskovic

Say Something Unexpected.

“This woman goes into a gun shop and says, ‘I want to buy a gun for my husband.’ The clerk asks, ‘Did he tell you what kind of gun?’ ‘No,’ she replied, ‘he doesn’t even know I’m going to shoot him.’” — Phyllis Diller

Tell an Anecdote.

Humorist Frank Sullivan had a sister named Kate, who bought a TV in the days when TVs were rare. Very quickly, she called a TV repairman, who asked, “What seems to be wrong with it?” She replied, “Well, for one thing, a lot of the programs are lousy.”

Appendix K: Sample Student-Written Autobiographical Essays

All of the following essays are copyrighted by their authors. I am grateful for their kind permission to print their essays in this Discussion Guide.

Ronald & Me: It Will Never Be

By Kaily Buemi

At the ripe age of three, my true fear came to life, and this was not just any old fear. This fear involved something terrifying: something that is not human. It involved something with white skin, ruby lips, round nose and fire hair. It had feet the size of Montana and hands that could easily rip you in half. Of course, I am talking about a clown, but not just any clown. It was a clown whose image makes my skin raise and crawl around like centipedes. Now who could that possibly be? Ronald McDonald. I know — he scares you, too. Don't worry, I'll spare you the vivid details of his appearance and focus on why I've been plotting my revenge against him for the past 17 years.

It was just like any normal Saturday in the Buemi household. Dad was chasing me around the kitchen with his hand shaped like some kind of crazy claw trying to tickle me, and mom was reading a book while wondering how she ever fell in love with such a man. But today was not any ordinary day, oh no — today was the day my worst nightmare came to life.

Every Saturday in my house was a day of relaxation. My father didn't work, and my mother didn't cook. Instead, my parents would treat me to the meal of my choice. "Of course I want McDonald's, daddy!" I'd say as loud as my little lungs could puff out the words. "I don't know, hunny. Why not somewhere with a healthier selection?" my mother chimed in. Instantly I turned to my mother and gave her the saddest puppy face I could. "Pretty, pretty please, mommy?" It worked every time. "Okay," mom gave in, "only if you promise to be a good girl." I batted my big blue eyes and smiled angelically, "I'm always a good girl, mommy! I am your little angel!" I was a crafty child and

from a young age knew how to wear them down. “McDonald’s it is,” mom said.

I was so happy I could hardly contain myself. I ran excitedly to my room and picked out my favorite OshKosh B’Gosh pink-corduroy overalls and put them on — backwards. My mom walked in and instantly broke out in laughter. “Are you trying to be a big girl today?” she laughed and redressed me appropriately. “Don’t you want to look presentable? And what if we see Ronald McDonald?” Who? I had no idea who she was talking about, but there is nothing threatening about the name “Ronald,” right? That’s what I thought, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.

I climbed into the back of my dad’s navy-blue Cougar and prepared for our adventure. I did everything I could to keep myself calm. I watched the birds flying above — I sang Disney tunes — I did anything to occupy myself on that seemingly endless seven-minute journey. At last, we made it. I could hear the Hallelujah Chorus playing in the back of my head. I ran inside so fast that I nearly tripped over my own feet, which seemed to be moving at a much quicker pace than the rest of my body. Before my parents could even get inside, I ran through the crowd and maneuvered my way to the front of the line. “Um, ok, I’m ready! Can I please have a hamburger kid’s meal with a soda and a Barbie toy, please?” I had been ready to say that all afternoon. My parents squeezed their way through the crowd and found me at the register. “What can I say? She’s a big girl now,” my dad laughed. I got my meal and headed for a table, and up until this point, I was the happiest girl in the world. However, that all changed in about three minutes.

I am not sure if this was part of my parents’ ingenious plan to cure my fear of clowns, but if it was, they failed

miserably. I'd already experienced a few bad encounters with these Satanic creatures at birthday parties, and my parents knew that I did not take this fear lightly. It just so happened that Ronald McDonald *was* visiting our local McDonald's that day, and allegedly our encounter was purely coincidental. What could be worse than being in the same room as that monster? I would have to say it was being within reaching distance of those fingerprint-concealing gloves. I was the youngest child there — how perfect. Of course, this is what directed Ronald's attention to me. He immediately wanted to pick me up and entertain me, or abduct me — I'll never know which.

Let me quickly explain my reasoning for being terrified of clowns, because I know many can't understand this fear. What is it exactly, that draws these crazies to children? These crazies are big, scary strangers who conceal their true identities and then go play with other people's kids. I don't know about you, but that sounds a little whacky to me. Apparently, I was the only one smart enough to recognize that, because when that crazy man dressed in crazy clothes picked me up, I began crying hysterically. I did not know this man, or why he was covered in white and red makeup and had shoes that could crush me. Going back to my general knowledge as a young child, the phrase "Stranger Danger" rapidly ran through my mind. I was pretty sure he was going to make a run for the door with me still in his arms. That, or his teeth were about to turn into giant fangs so he could devour his lunch, and baby-back-ribs were the specialty of the day. So I did the only thing I could as a helpless child — screamed my bloody lungs out.

I looked around with my blurry, bloodshot eyes for someone to help me. My dad was standing close by, laughing embarrassingly and watching Ronald try to nervously calm me down. I could hear the chuckles around me. People were laughing, but I didn't think it was funny.

Tears were streaming down my face, and I couldn't control my screaming. "It's okay, pumpkin pie, he doesn't want to hurt you," my mom said, trying to calm me down. In my mind all I could think was, "Oh, really? How do you know that? I'm pretty sure he probably has a secret dungeon of torture for kids whose parents are dumb enough to trust him." This may seem over-exaggerated, but watch the movie *It*, and you'll quickly rise to my level of concern about these beasts that freely roam the streets.

I realized that simply screaming was not sending across the appropriate message. It was sending an "I am really scared and don't like this" message, but I wanted to send a "PUT ME THE HELL DOWN" message. Once my screams turned into violent struggling to get free, good ole Ronald got the picture. "Oh, okay then, here is your daddy," he said nervously as he handed me back to my father, who was still laughing at the whole situation. "Calm down, you're fine," he said with a sigh. I was relieved, and my breathing slowly stabilized. My parents high-tailed it out of there, probably due to the embarrassment I had just caused them. From that point on, I never had to deal with clowns again. My parents had learned that day to never again test the boundaries of my fear, or my lung capacity.

Ten Times

By Lindsey DeStefano

It is hard to go through life with just one person whom you can call your best friend. I feel this way because I have learned that it is almost impossible to have a best friend. People come and go, change, and grow apart. It is very rare that you can find someone that you can relate to so well and trust completely. I am lucky to have found that person at such a young age.

Growing up, Erin (my younger sister) and I used to spend every second of our time with each other. We enjoyed playing catch in the backyard, singing while swinging on our swing set, and simply following each other around the house. We spent every moment possible around each other. I remember not wanting to sleepover at a friend's house sometimes because I wanted to stay at home and play with Erin. Some of the greatest memories about my sister and me were at bedtime.

Erin and I had separate rooms as children. However, I can't remember a night that she didn't sleep in mine. We used to get into trouble for staying up late on school nights and laughing so hard that we would cry. My father was a main contributor to all of the fun.

The night would typically begin around eight p.m., usually after some sort of athletic practice for the two of us, and then an episode of either *Full House*, *Seventh Heaven*, or *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*. Then, Erin and I would head upstairs with a long day of elementary or middle school behind us.

"Come up in ten minutes," I reminded my parents each night as I ascended the stairs with Erin close behind. We would spend about 30 seconds sprinting through brushing our teeth. Next, after waiting several minutes for our

parents to come up we would begin to get frustrated. At this time we would argue over who would go to the stairs to yell down that we were ready for them to come up.

My mother would come up first. She would usually tell us a made-up story or read us a book. However, she would always leave the room with something positive or special that both of us had achieved that day that would make us feel good. Next, my dad would come in and the fun would begin!

The story Erin and I most enjoyed was my dad's version of "The Billy Goats Gruff." He would tell the story from memory, in the dark. We would get so excited for the story we could barely stand it. Dad would tickle us while shaking our beds, and Erin and I would fly up and down because of his massive weight pushing on our twin-sized beds. We would laugh so hard that we would cry, and sometimes even have to run to the bathroom. One night, my dad even broke my sister's bed. Then, the excitement came to an end and we would repeat our nightly routine.

"Love you ten times!" I shouted.

"Love you one hundred times!" replied dad.

"Love you one thousand times!" screamed Erin.

"Love you girls!" dad answered.

The routine would continue and finally come to an end once one of us decided to quit. The final goodnight for the evening would end with my dad scaring all the "monsters" out of my room. Erin and I were deathly afraid of monsters, especially under our beds and in our closets. My father, being the loving person that he is, decided to make a "monster spray." The spray consisted of simply water. Of course Erin and I were unaware of this until much later in our lives. Erin and I made sure he sprayed every area of the

room and he would, which would make us feel better. I still remember yelling at him to come back in the room because I thought he had missed a spot.

Once both parents had finally ended their goodnights, Erin and I would continue to sing, laugh, and extend our “bedtime.” We would sing songs from Girl Scout camp as well as songs from our chorus at school. However, our favorite game was “The Scaring Game.” When we had an extremely difficult time trying to fall asleep, we would get out of bed and play the game. Erin would usually hide first. The only rule was that she must hide in my room and not make any noise. We always broke the second rule. From the moment I got close enough to the door to walk in and be scared, I could not control my laughter. This was mainly because I was so scared she would jump out and scare me to death. I remember my stomach hurting because of how hard the two of us would laugh. These nights ended with a much later bedtime that my parents were very unaware of because my room was way down the hall. Those were some of the greatest times of my life.

As we grow older and move on with our lives, I am positive that the three of us still think of each other when we go to sleep at night because of that special bond that my father created for us. I’m lucky to have these special memories with the people whom I care the most about. To this day, as a college student, I still end my phone conversations with an “I love you ten times” and my dad replies with the same old familiar response. Erin continues to do the same. We also still sleep in the same room when we come home from college and continue to stay up late and laugh so hard that we end up crying. Sometime in the future I’m sure that these traditions will have to come to an end. I’m scared for that day to come.

The Court Jester: My Father

By Molly Gedeon

When I think of my family, I immediately think of laughter. The Gedeons are known for a lot of things, some good and some even better. However, the most common impression we leave with people is one of outlandish pranks and practical jokes. I am the way I am because of my family; my sense of humor and outlook on life is in large part due to my father. My father, a 51-year-old magistrate, is the funniest man I know. Most people can't figure him out and hardly anyone appreciates his humor more than I do. The best way I can describe my childhood and young adult life is to explain my father and his role in my upbringing.

Richard Gedeon, or "Dicky-Poo," as I tend to call him, is much more than a practical joker. Dick's a man with a warped and twisted sense of humor; and I mean that in the best possible way. From the minute I came out of my mother's womb, my father began joking with me. My name, Molly, is not my birth name. My parents couldn't decide on a name: Monica or Molly. Personally, I think they just didn't care all that much seeing that I was the third and last child. They had more important things to worry about than a silly little thing like the name of their unborn baby. From the information that I have gathered, my mother wanted to name me Monica and my father wanted to name me Molly. After about two seconds of intense discussion (I'm sure my sister was screaming for their attention), my parents simply gave up. My father thought they had made a choice; however, it was not the choice my mother thought they had agreed on. The result of all this was eighteen years of my life with two first names. My birth certificate says Monica; however, my father has called me Molly since the second he saw me. This caused many problems in grade school all the way through high school.

My teachers didn't know what to call me, and my friends always joked about it. On my 18th birthday, I filed for a legal name change. Sure enough, the magistrate my case went before was none other than the Honorable Mr. Dicky-Poo Gedeon himself. Although he had every opportunity to play the most horrible joke imaginable — changing my name to something completely absurd — he followed my wishes. On May 4th 2004, I legally became Molly and the joke finally ended, or so I thought. My father now calls me Monica.

Taking advantage of every awkward situation in my life was my father's forte. From joking around at teacher-parent conferences to "interviewing" every boy I've ever brought home, my father lives for any opportunity to laugh or make others laugh. I have never laughed as hard as I did when my father volunteered to become my swim team's mascot. I was eight years old and probably one of the five worst swimmers on the team. The fact that I wasn't the greatest swimmer never stopped my parents from sitting on the bleachers at every meet screaming their lungs out. I can still hear my father to this day, "Let's go, GEDEON — just don't sink to the bottom of the pool again." However, at one meet my parents and entire extended family didn't cheer at all. Instead, they had brown paper bags over their heads with small holes cut out for eyes with signs reading, "WE'RE NOT WITH GEDEON." This of course would make me look up and laugh uncontrollably and then miss the beep off the blocks. However, sitting on the sidelines wasn't cutting it — my dad was getting bored. Thus the idea of "Lake Shore Man," Lake Shore Swim Club's first and last team mascot. He tells me today that the idea came to him in the shower: "the place where all great ideas are born."

With my mom as his accomplice, they sewed, stitched, stapled, and glued the most unflattering superhero costume

imaginable. Please picture my father, 6 foot 4 inches and 180 pounds, in bright blue tights, a skintight shirt, a red cape, fins, and a florescent yellow spandex swim cap. “Lake Shore Man” was the hit of all the swim meets. He could be found behind the blocks, on the sidelines, and in the bleachers cheering for every swimmer there. Although I hung my head when he first unveiled himself, *all* of himself, in front of my fellow teammates, I eventually grew proud of my dad. No other parent would dare dress up like a raging lunatic in spandex just to make the long day of sitting on hard bleachers a little more amusing.

“Lake Shore Man” was not the only character my father created to get a laugh from the crowd. Every year for over 56 years my entire extended family has gone on a weeklong family reunion at Allegany State Park in New York State. Started in 1949 by my father’s parents, Robert and Margery Gedeon, the tradition has carried on ever since. This vacation is my father’s time to shine — nothing is off limits here! From pretending to “accidentally” drop my cousin’s newborn child into the fire pit (it was only a baby doll he had dressed in the child’s exact clothes) to outlandish practical jokes around the campfire, my father is known for pulling the most unexpected and unpredictable jokes during this one week.

In the summer of 2003, my father came up with the idea of a game show night while at Allegany. Along with our sleeping bags, food, clothes, and flashlights, my father had secretly packed three full game show host outfits, an entire game show set, and coordinating team attire. One rainy evening everyone was told to gather in the mess hall for a surprise visitor. Once in the mess hall, we were thrown into a cheesy version of *Jeopardy*. With loud music blaring from an old boom box, “Dick Trebek” appeared behind red velvet curtains in the most outlandish outfit imaginable. Dressed in a hideous floral button-down shirt and purple

pants that were four sizes too small and went up to his ankles, he introduced his sidekick, “Vanna”: my mother. In an ’80’s blue bedazzled dress with shoulder pads and pink patent leather pumps, “Vanna” smiled, waved, and turned over the cards in such a way that it looked like she must have practiced in front of a mirror for hours. That night the mess hall was shaking with laughter. Every person there was bent over with stomach pains from laughing and wiping the tears out of their eyes. With questions that centered around embarrassing family members that ranged from old boyfriends to how many times my aunt has been married (five), everyone there was involved in the questions.

When I tell stories of my childhood and my father, people usually look at me funny. Some people think he’s out of his mind and others think he is just cruel. My father is an amazing man. With a mind like no one else, my father has the unique ability to make any dull situation the most amusing time of your life. Although I have been the butt of countless jokes, I can still look back at my childhood and laugh. My father has given me the ability to laugh at myself, a quality that helps me get through each day. Like my father always says, “If you can’t laugh at yourself, you’re missing out on some of the funniest moments in life.”

Houdini Dog

By Molly Gilmore

Unlike most people, I got to pick out my sister when I was six years old. My sister did not look like me or my parents. She was white, fluffy and weighed only fifteen pounds fully grown. However, she worked tirelessly throughout her life to earn equality and prove that, contrary to her appearance, she was a true member of our family. Biologically, she was a West Highland White Terrier, but she wouldn't let a little thing like genus and species stand in her way. My first dog played an important role in my childhood and her entrance into our life was as unique as she proved to be.

After months and months of me begging my parents for a puppy, they finally relented and we headed to the local pound. We searched and searched through what seemed like endless cages of dogs of all shapes, sizes, colors, and degrees of manginess. My parents and I ended up with different favorites. As the smallest in the family, I felt a need to show allegiance to the runts in the pack, so I was pushing for a minute black puppy, the smallest in the lot. My parents' pick was a white little puffball with soulful brown eyes. However, I begged and pleaded and used my own soulful eyes to convince my parents to choose my puppy. They broke under pressure, and we put our names down to pick up the new member of our family that Friday.

The days of that week dragged on like an eternity. They say that time flies when you're having fun, so I tried to play my little heart out but it didn't help. All I could think about was that little bundle of joy that we would be bringing home at the end of the week. Unfortunately, however, my little black runt did not make it to the end of the week. My parents got a call from the pound, informing them that our puppy had a terminal condition and had to be put down. I

was devastated, but my tears were soon stemmed when we learned that my parents' choice was still available. I would still be getting a puppy!

That Friday, my mom picked me up from school and we drove toward the pound. The moment was approaching! I was going to be a big sister! As soon as she got in the car with us, I fell in love. She rode home next to me in a cardboard box we had set up as a bed for her. She sat there so politely, giving no clues of the sly genius that lie dormant within her. However, that side of her personality would not stay hidden for long.

Unsure how the pup, as yet unnamed, would react to her new habitat, we set up a safe area for her in the laundry room. We covered the floor in an old, comfy blanket and blocked off the entrance with an old screen door that we had in our garage. My mother was delegated the job of standing guard. She set a chair against the screen and dutifully watched her ward until the phone rang. While in the midst of a conversation with my aunt, Mom looked down and found soulful, brown eyes gazing innocently back up at her. The puppy had escaped! Baffled, my mother returned to the laundry room to find the screen door still securely in place. The only way out was through a tear in the screen, four feet up. Unbelieving, my mother returned the dog to her prison. In no time, the puppy had escaped not once, but two more times. My mother finally accepted defeat and from that day forth, the dog did everything in her power to keep from being separated from us.

The new puppy quickly assimilated into our family, winning all of our hearts. After much deliberation, we decided to call her Annie, because she was our "little orphan." She continued her refusal to be locked away from us in a number of ways, earning the nickname "Houdini Dog." After the failure of the screen door to keep her in,

my parents purchased a state-of-the-art dog gate, similar to the contraptions used to keep toddlers from falling down stairs. The gate fit in the laundry room door and could be opened only by unhooking a hook on the kitchen-side of the gate. However, Annie soon learned how to use her paw to reach through the gate and unhook the latch. When vacations forced us to board her at a local kennel, she would scale the walls or unhook the gate latch — anything she could do to gain her freedom. If her escape tactics failed her, she would simply bark constantly until someone came and let her out due to pure annoyance. Many a time, we returned from vacation to find Annie as hoarse as a chain-smoking bullfrog and banned from yet another kennel.

My father viewed this ingenious little pup as a challenge and commenced building a pen in our backyard that would hold her in. He constructed an enclosure about the size of half a basketball court with a five-foot-high chain-link fence and a pad-locked gate. Unsurprisingly, the maiden usage of the pen was not a success. Annie dug out under the fence. My dad then added two feet of cement under the fence. Confidently, he boasted, “Let’s see the little mutt get out of that one!” We tried out the improved pen that Sunday and locked Annie up when we went to church. Houdini struck again. On our return, we were greeted by a smug puppy, casually lounging on the porch, far from the pen. She leapt up and gave my dad’s hand a gloating little lick, as if to say, “Nice try, buddy!”

We were stymied by this latest break out. She hadn’t dug out, the gate was locked tight, and no holes were in the fence. We devised a plan. We set up the video camera in the backyard and climbed in the car for a trip around the block. When we returned, Annie greeted us at the car, just as we had hoped. We hurried back to the camera. Inside, we gathered around the TV to watch our little Houdini in

the act. The tape commenced and we watched Annie mill around her pen nonchalantly. You could tell she would have been whistling an innocent little tune if doggy lips allowed that utterance. Her ears perked up as she heard our car pull away. She glanced toward the gate, started toward it at a trot and climbed that fence with less effort than a five-star chef making Easymac. Our petite pup, no bigger than a loaf of bread, scaled that five-foot fence with ease. My parents were so impressed that they couldn't bring themselves to be mad. Our local pound had really delivered. We had a puppy with brains to rival Stephen Hawkins and spunk that would put any high school cheerleader to shame. Plus, she was fifteen pounds of pure adorable. When she walked in a room, all babies were robbed of the customary 'cooing' because everyone realized they weren't so great compared to this dog.

With the tape as evidence, my dad decided that the only way to keep Annie in her pen would be to chain her to a pole inside the fence. This effectively rendered the fence useless, but my mom and I didn't mention it, allowing my dad this small victory. Whenever we chained her up, Annie would give us a pleading look as if to say, "What are you doing? I am a person! Don't you see?" Dad soon caved into his guilt and decided to build Annie a doghouse to improve the time she spent in her pen. It was a nice thought, but a total waste of time. Annie never set foot in her house. She glared at it disdainfully with a look that said, "What do you think I am? A dog?" However, the house did end up serving a purpose, as Annie took to sitting on top of it to improve her vantage point. From the top of the house, she could see our car from about a mile up the road. We grew used to searching out our house from afar so we could see the tiny white speck jumping up and down with excitement on the roof of her doghouse, celebrating our imminent return.

Annie and my family got along like peanut butter and jelly. We were meant to be together. Annie had a way of knowing when you were sick or feeling blue, and she would come over and lay her small head on your knee or give your cheek a soft, sympathetic lick. She was such an important part of our family that I often was greeted by my parents with “Hi, Annie — I mean Molly.” Most people’s parents confuse them with their siblings. My parents confused me with the dog. Annie was my only companion when my parents were busy, so we spent a lot of time together. I would try to dress her up in my doll’s clothes but this was one human habit that she did not approve of. She was the sourest-looking doll in history, and when I finished with her she would hide in embarrassment until I removed whatever frilly frock she was currently wearing.

During the summer, my canine companion and I would spend days in our pool: me swimming and Annie floating on a raft. She hated water, but she couldn’t stand to be on the edge of the pool while I was in the water. She would stand on the edge whining until I brought her raft over so she could float along and join the fun. Annie hated water so much that when we finished giving her a bath she would roll around on the carpets, trying to rid herself of as much of the vile liquid as possible. We had to take to drying her with the hairdryer to avoid our carpets getting a wet rubdown every time she needed cleaned, which was often. Annie was a curious, rambunctious dog, so she often returned from an adventure completely filthy.

One night, we heard a pitiful whining at the door. When we opened the door, we were greeted by a pathetically comical scene. The reason for the whining was immediately obvious as a wave of nauseating skunk aroma washed over us. Between gags, we saw that Annie had tried to wipe off the scent in the garden mulch so she was covered in woodchips and looked completely miserable. We couldn’t

help laughing and I am not sure she ever completely forgave us for that. We carried her to the bathroom. My mom had heard that washing a dog in tomato juice helps to rid the hair of the stench of skunk. In our defense, the smell was so overwhelming that immediate action was required, so we didn't think through our plan very well. We simply started pouring the tomato juice on the wretched dog. We worked as an assembly line. I opened cans, Dad poured and Mom scrubbed and scrubbed. After what seemed like hours in our tiny bathroom, we had used the last drop of tomato juice in the house and we were ready to rinse Annie and see the results. My dad and I filed from the room, as the rinsing promised to be a wet ordeal because of Annie's aversion to water. We heard the tap turn on and then the hairdryer. After the hairdryer was turned off, my dad and I watched the door with anticipation. The hinges creaked and out bounded a pink dog that smelled just as much like skunk as before. She looked like a mutant puff of cotton candy. I don't know if I have ever laughed louder or longer in my life. Her pink dye job faded in about a month, but the memory will be with me forever.

Another fond memory is the debut of "Annie the amazing tree-climbing dog." As a terrier, Annie was bred to chase things smaller than her. She was born to hunt and the sound of her bark struck fear into the hearts of all cats and rodents in our neighborhood. Since we lived in a residential area, we walked Annie on a leash but occasionally she would sneak out of the house untethered. One day, Annie spied a neighborhood cat across the road and before anyone could stop her, she pushed her way through the screen door and was in hot pursuit. Her prey, an orange tabby, sprinted toward her only chance of safety, a nearby tree. Annie, yapping her head off and moving so fast her feet were a blur, came to the tree and kept right on going. Her speed carried her about five feet up the tree, where she came to

rest between two branches. The terrified feline clung by her toenails to the spindliest branches at the top of the tree. Annie found herself five feet up with nowhere to go. Adrenaline and speed had carried her up the tree — not high enough to reach the cat but too high to jump down safely. Luckily, her faithful family came to her rescue. My mom lifted Annie down to solid ground and returned her to the house, while my dad coaxed the terrified cat from the treetop.

Annie died when I was fifteen years old. She kept her sweet demeanor to the end, although her spunk had ebbed a little with age. Annie was a constant throughout my childhood and was a full-fledged member of our family. Although she was small in stature, her heart and spunk made up the difference. She had more personality in her smallest toenail than most full-grown men have in their whole body. She taught me many things, including loyalty, unconditional love and not to let your looks dictate who you are. I will always miss and fondly remember my fluffy, white, brown-eyed sister.

Payback: The Harrison Way

By Rachelle Harrison

“SETH!” shouted my mother at the top of her lungs. The voice came from the bottom of our old, creaky staircase. When my mother yelled, we all listened.

“Yeah!” answered my brother nonchalantly as he continued to aim all his focus on what level he was playing on his precious Xbox.

“The phone is for you, and it’s a girl!” Mom said in a goofy, smooth-talking voice.

Almost instantly my sister, Taylor, and I stopped watching our traditional Tuesday night shows. Seth seemed as shocked as we were. This was the first time that a girl had called our house for him. Which was typical, considering my brother was only twelve. As a matter of fact, I don’t think my brother even thought about girls. (Personally, I think his Xbox was of more value to him.) Seth didn’t even seem excited that his first phone call from a girl was even occurring, but for my sister and me, this was the first step to payback.

Seth slowly put his controller down and ran downstairs to answer the phone. Once Seth was clearly downstairs and out of sight, we ran down our long skinny hallway into our computer room. Taylor picked up our second receiver and pressed the mute button. She held the phone slightly away from her ear so we both could hear Seth’s conversation. At first nothing special was taking place — it was the typical pre-teen jitters of calling your first boy. The girl was just giggling, and her friends were in the background. I looked at Taylor, who rolled her eyes. Seth sounded annoyed that he had been torn away from his intense game to listen to some stupid girl giggle into the phone.

“Who is this?” Seth said in a rather annoyed voice.

The girl finally found the courage to reveal her identity, “It’s me, Jo, from swim practice.”

Taylor and I immediately locked eyes. Swimming was something that our entire family participated in, and we were all members of the same club team.

Taylor whispered, “It’s Jo Beachy.”

I gave her a look of confusion. I was much older than Seth’s crowd and the only swimmers I interacted with were my own age.

“What are you doing?” asked Jo in a shaky, nervous voice.

Seth replied in an odd voice that we had never heard before. He was trying to act as if he were the coolest person on the earth.

“I was just chilling,” replied Seth.

I found this whole situation comical. When I looked over to see how my sister was reacting to this conversation, she had this gleam in her eye, and slowly a smirk came across her face.

“What?” I asked her, wondering what the evil smirk was about.

“I have the most brilliant idea of all time!” she said, almost jumping up and down with excitement.

I was excited that she was excited. I knew something good was about to come next.

“It’s payback,” she said, and that’s all she had to say to get me involved.

As Seth chatted on the phone with his new “girlfriend,” Taylor and I started thinking of embarrassing things to do. I had the idea of getting out cheesy love songs and playing them in the background. Taylor agreed that this was a good idea. We got out the cheesiest Mariah Carey songs and played them into the phone. Seth was mortified! He came running up the stairs to get the phone from us; luckily we had hidden the phone once we heard him running. We then sat in our room like we were completely innocent. He was so embarrassed. His first girl calling him and his horrible older sisters had humiliated him. Once Seth realized we weren’t going to give the phone back, he got right back on the phone, and began to try and act even cooler to make up for the incident. Taylor and I decided to wait awhile to pull our next trick. After about two minutes or so, we decided to get on the phone and make kissing noises. Once again, Seth was embarrassed.

“It’s just my older sisters — they’re kind of mean,” he said to poor Jo.

Jo seemed embarrassed also, probably because we were listening in on her intimate conversation with our younger brother.

“Well, I think I’m just going to go. I’ll see you at school!” she said.

Seth tried to sound unbothered by this comment, “All right, dude, see you around.” Seth hung up the phone and went straight back to the Xbox.

After that Seth really didn’t get that many phone calls from other girls, so my sister and I had to think of an alternative way to embarrass him. We began to invent silly things to do to Seth and his friends when they slept over. There were times when I Saran Wrapped Seth to his bunk bed, while Taylor did the same to his friend sleeping on the futon. We

also shaved one strip of their leg hair, and mastered the famous prank of shaving cream on the hand, all while they were sound asleep. Now, these tricks may seem a little over the top, but so far you've only heard what Taylor and I had done to Seth. Seth, of course, had to earn such a punishment. Our dad also had a goofy side to him, and we think this is where Seth gets his crazy ideas. Although we are able to pay Seth back for all his tricks, we are sadly unable to pay our dad back.

For example, I began dating my boyfriend, Adam, when I was a sophomore in high school. We met at swimming practice. He was the team captain for our rival school, and I was the team captain for my school. We began to flirt a lot, and since I was Adam's first real girlfriend, he was extremely shy. It took him awhile to get the guts to actually come over to my house. It was the first real "date" that we had been on. Adam had arrived at my house wearing his Dover basketball tee shirt. My dad, unfortunately, answered the door.

He immediately saw his Dover shirt and asked, "Are you from Dover?"

"Yes, sir, I am," answered Adam nervously.

My father then slammed the door on his face. I ran down the stairs as fast as I could.

"DAD!" I screamed, horrified.

"What, hunny, I was only kidding!" he said laughing hysterically while re-opening the door.

"Adam! I am so sorry. He was just kidding," I apologized.

Luckily Adam had a sense of humor. My dad apologized and shook his hand, then thankfully left us downstairs to watch television. We sat on the couch, talked, and watched

TV. I couldn't believe he was still here after what had just happened to him. I thought that was the worst the night could get.

Enter Seth. He was eight at this time, small as can be, with as much energy as the sun gives off. He came running down the steps in his whitey-tighties.

"Hi there, guys!" he said as happily and jauntily as could be.

I was so shocked. How could he be doing this to me? At this time we had just bought a treadmill and it was currently claiming its spot in our living room.

Seth jumped on the treadmill and shouted, "I'm just going to go for a quick jog, and I'll be out of your way!"

I couldn't believe it. First, my dad slammed a door in his face and now, here was my eight-year-old brother in his whitey-tighties, running on a treadmill. It was completely ridiculous, and I was completely mortified. Now that this memory is in our past, we can tell this story and laugh about it. My sister's story, on the other hand, is even more mortifying.

My sister is the most amazingly beautiful girl. She's the type of girl who all the boys think is gorgeous. She's thin, she has the bluest ocean clear eyes, and her gorgeous long blond hair could probably be put on a Pantene hair advertisement. Boys often called the house asking for Taylor, which gave my brother lots of opportunities to embarrass her. He had done many cruel tricks, but the one that stands out the most is the one he did to her while she was talking to her biggest crush, Michael. Taylor had been flirting with Michael for a long time. He was the popular boy who was extremely good looking and all the girls wanted to date him. She would talk to him for hours on end, and one night Seth decided to strike. While Taylor was

giggling on the phone and twirling her hair while talking to the boy most girls considered a god, Seth was sneaking on the other line. He quietly picked up the receiver, put it on mute, and carried the phone upstairs. I watched him creep up the stairs, and I just thought he was being his weird, annoying, self. I knew I had been wrong when I heard the high-pitched, glass-breaking screams. While Taylor had been talking to her crush, Seth had snuck the phone upstairs into our bathroom. When the moment of silence came, he would make his move. That awkward silence would be the end of her, and the poor thing had no idea.

As they both were quiet for a moment on the phone, Seth flushed the bathroom toilet and made a noise like “aahhh” as if he had relieved himself, then quickly hung up the phone. Taylor was completely humiliated! How could she explain *that* to Michael? Michael asked her what she was doing and Taylor, so completely humiliated, quickly replied, “I have to go,” and hung up. She then screamed at the top of her lungs in such a way you’d think she was in a horror film. This was Seth’s cue to run for his life. Although Seth may have had to run for his life, our family is very close. We are a fun, loving family who enjoys a good laugh.

Underneath all the torture and the humiliation, our family is pretty amazing. My brother, although eight years younger than me, is the most protective person I know. He once kicked an ex-boyfriend of mine in the privates for making me cry, and punched a boy in the face for calling my sister a nasty name. We may have our little prank wars, and maybe even a few fist fights here and there, but we always have each other’s back. No one messes with one sibling, without taking on the other two. We love each other. Our family lives by a quote that my father says often, “You will have plenty of friends, and significant others come and go throughout your life, but family will always be there.”

A Life of Unfortunate Events

By Caitlyn Holleran

My father is brilliant. He graduated third in his law school class at Cleveland State University, has another degree in pharmacy from the University of Cincinnati, and has a high enough IQ to be a member of Mensa International (a society for people with exceptionally high IQ's). However, borrowing a line from the movie *Forrest Gump*, my father often says, "I'm not a smart man." My dad has the worst of luck, and has gone through so many unlucky events in his life that he should write a book: *Tim Holleran's Life of Unfortunate Events*. Most of these events he brings upon himself, which is why he does not feel like he's a smart man. Other events are simply unlucky occurrences he attributes to fate. Either way, my father's unlucky life stories have been told and retold to his children on countless occasions. My father always puts a humorous spin on his anecdotes, which allows everyone to laugh at my father's foolishness and, in general, his lack of luck.

During his first few months of kindergarten, my father learned the importance of thinking before acting. Billy, the little boy who sat next to my dad in class, crossed the room to sharpen his pencil. Being the practical joker that he is, my father quickly concocted a prank to play on Billy. As Billy started to sit down, my father kicked the chair out from under Billy, causing Billy to miss his chair and fall to the floor. But my dad had not factored in one thing: the radiator that was right behind their table! Poor Billy hit his head on the radiator, and the teacher immediately shouted for my father to come to the front of the room. And what was the teacher's punishment? My dad had to sit in 'the hole' (sitting Indian-style with your head bent down between your legs) every day during snack time for the rest of the year. Billy may have suffered temporarily from his

head injury, but my father suffered in the corner for the rest of the school year because of one spontaneous decision.

Decades after the ‘kindergarten incident,’ as my dad refers to it, my father and mother got married and moved into their first apartment together in Cincinnati. My mother’s sister came to visit the newlyweds and help unpack. At one point during the day, my Aunt Sandy noticed my dad’s careless use of a box cutter and warned him to be careful with the sharp razor. My father responded, “Don’t worry, Sandy. It’s not sharp.” As these words came out of his mouth, he took the box cutter, thinking the blade was retracted, and swiped it across his forearm in an attempt to scare my aunt. Unfortunately, his joke did not go according to plan. He quickly realized the blade was not retracted as his forearm suddenly split open and started squirting blood all over the new apartment. My aunt, who has never been a fan of blood, turned white and almost fainted, while my mother ran to find the box packed with bandages and gauze. Fortunately, my mother was in nursing school at the time and finally got the bleeding under control. My father refused to get stitches and now has a prominent scar to serve as a reminder of his joke that went terribly wrong.

Then there was the time my father accidentally killed Bambi. I had been asleep in my bed for a few hours when I heard the phone ring in my parents’ bedroom. I looked at the clock and wondered to myself, “Who the hell calls the house at this hour?” Concerned, I walked into my parents’ bedroom and found my mother, extremely upset, on the phone talking to my dad. I heard her say, “Why don’t you call the State Highway Patrol and have them come find you?” A few minutes later, she hung up and leaped out of bed, racing to put on clothes and find shoes.

“Mom, who was that? What’s going on?” I asked.

“It was your father. He’s been in a car accident. He said he hit a deer and it went through the windshield. He has no idea where he is, but he can hear trucks rumbling nearby.”

My father had been in Columbus and decided to drive home late at night rather than get a hotel room and come back the next morning. When my dad was less than an hour from home, a deer sprinted across the highway from the left and caught my father completely off-guard. The deer went through the windshield, breaking the glass into a million pieces. My father swerved and came to a stop on the side of the road, but he couldn’t open his eyes because the glass from the windshield flew into them and he felt blood on his face. After he called my mother, my dad contacted the State Highway Patrol and they were able to locate him quickly. An officer called my mom and told her where they were taking my father. She told me to take care of my siblings and make sure they got ready for school in the morning, and then she was out the door. As my siblings were packing up their book bags, my mom and dad walked through the back door. My father, bruised and bandaged, looked like he had just come back from a fight with Mike Tyson. The doctors spent an hour or two removing fragments of glass from my dad’s eyes, and made him wear a patch over the eye that was the most damaged. It took my dad a couple of days to recover, but he had to continue wearing the eye patch for a few weeks. Now, the actual accident is not very funny, but it’s how my dad behaved afterwards that made this unlucky event another humorous story in his comedy annals. After his first day back at work, my father came home with a smiley face sticker on his eye patch (trying to make it seem a little less intimidating, I suppose). I had just started to date a new boyfriend a week or two before my dad’s accident, and I had to deny my dad’s requests to meet ‘the new boy’ because I was worried the eye patch would

scare the guy off! To this day, my dad is deathly afraid of deer and thinks they can sense his fear from miles away.

Last Christmas, another bout of bad luck hit my father. On Christmas Eve, my mom asked my dad to pick up some pies she ordered from a local bakery. It was one of those windy days where the tree branches almost touch the ground and you can hear the wind howling through every crevice of the house. My father snatched the money for the pies off of the kitchen counter and got into his three-month-old car to begin his journey to the bakery. About fifteen minutes after he left, my mother received a call. Standing right next to my mother, all I could hear over the phone was “F***!” “SH**!” and “attacked my car!” My mom was turning red trying hard to hold back a laugh at the foul words shouted on the other end of the phone, and hung up the phone with a quick but pitying “I love you.” She turned to me with a sad look on her face and explained, “Your father was driving on the Interstate when one of the little I-90 signs came out of the ground and hit his new car. He is not a happy camper!” It turns out that the windy weather uprooted the sign from the ground and flung it across the highway at the exact moment my father was passing. Under normal circumstances, a scratch on my father’s car would not be such a big deal. However, this car was his new “baby.” This was his first new car in over a decade and he washed and vacuumed it every other week, so a little scratch on it was a huge deal to my father! After his initial reaction, my dad calmed down and finished his errand. When he got back to the house, he told my mom, “I was so upset about my car that I just had to buy some other goodies at the bakery. I may have spent twice as much as I was supposed to.” Thus, my dad resolved the situation with a little bakery-related retail therapy!

A few days after the Interstate sign attacked my dad’s car, another inanimate object attacked my dad. For Christmas,

my parents purchased a large projection screen for our basement. The day after Christmas, my father, a lousy carpenter, woke up early to install the screen so he could enjoy the upcoming college football games on the big screen. My family was upstairs trying to stay out of the mad man's way when we heard a thundering crash from below. There was no audible screaming or cursing from the basement, so we all assumed my father knocked over his toolbox. Later that night, after he had installed the screen, my father came down to the kitchen wearing a pair of shorts. With no warning, he said, "Hey, everybody, look at my leg." With that, he lifted up one side of his shorts to show the ghastly wound on his thigh where a nail had gouged his skin. Apparently, the loud crash we heard was not my father knocking over his toolbox, but the screen coming loose on one end. My father was screwing in the other side when the screen swung down from the ceiling and a nail used to secure that side hit my dad directly in the thigh. On any given night, you can find my father sitting in the basement watching the news or sports on the big projection screen, but I do not think you will see him taking on any more home improvement tasks anytime soon.

Although my father has had many unlucky events happen to him throughout his life, he isn't an unlucky man. He has a stable, well-paying job, a wife he's been married to for 25 years, and six healthy, wonderful children. My father has learned that he won't ever be able to avoid his knack for unlucky situations, so he's made the best of these situations and tries to find humor in everything that happens to him. The stories above address only a small fraction of the crazy, unlucky anecdotes my father has shared. I haven't even begun to elaborate on how my father taught us the true meaning of stop, drop, and roll...

The Bonnie Bell Invitational

By Sarah Morrill

“Morrill, don’t get excited!” said The Lusker as he lit a cigarette. Greg Lusk, or “The Lusker” as he was known to most of us, wasn’t your ordinary cross country and track coach. From his grey hair, Coke-bottle-bottom lens in his glasses, and two-pack-a-day smoking habit, you could tell that he didn’t care about two things: his appearance and his health. And, one more thing, the boys’ team. He despised the boys’ team and yelled at them, “Go play in traffic,” whenever they crossed paths. Although my coach wasn’t the friendliest coach around, there was always a reason to his madness. That is, until the Bonnie Bell Invitational rolled around.

It was a warm, sunny day in May, and our track team was headed for the Bonnie Bell Invitational. You could almost taste the excitement in the air. This wasn’t any ordinary track invitational — it was the Bonnie Bell Invitational complete with free Bonnie Bell lip balm for anyone who participated. Not only was this a big deal because I was a freshman going to a big invitational, but we were going to get free lip balm and all of the flavors Bonnie Bell had were delicious. The senior girls on the team had been telling us about The Bonnie Bell Invitational since the beginning of the season. They even told us what flavors they got the previous year.

My friend Amanda and I went over the different flavors we might choose.

“Root-beer or strawberry,” she said, licking her lips.

“MMM...grape, chocolate mousse, or pineapple,” I chimed in.

After an hour and a half of dreaming about Bonnie Bell products, we finally arrived at our destination: The Bonnie Bell Invitational. All of the excitement of the free lip balm had helped me avoid thinking about the inevitable, until now. The one and only Lusker had decided to put me in the 400-meter dash.

“Dash!” I complained to Amanda. Under no circumstances was I going to be running a dash. I was a distance runner — dash was not in my vocabulary.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” Amanda said positively. She didn’t understand, though, because she was a sprinter. She could dash.

“But, I’m a long-distance runner,” I whined to The Lusker as I begged him to put me in another event. “Morrill, don’t get excited!” said Lusk. Not getting excited seemed to be his solution to everything, but it still didn’t solve the fact that I was being put in the 400-meter dash although I was a long-distance runner. I guess my experience as a veteran distance runner in middle school was of little use to me now.

As I was sitting alone watching everyone else warm up, something hit me. It was the fact that I hadn’t run the 400-meter dash in a very long time and I might actually do well in it! A new wave of self-confidence rushed over me, and I started to get ready for my heat. I ran up to The Lusker with a little more excitement this time and asked what lane I was in.

“Morrill, you’re in lane eight,” he said in his raspy smoker’s voice.

“Lane eight!” I shouted disapprovingly. Lane eight was quite possibly the worst lane ever. It was the last lane on the track, and I had to stay in it the whole race! I couldn’t

believe my ears. My self-confidence immediately went downhill.

Before I knew it, it was time for me to race. I jogged to the starting line and lined up in lane eight. The official began to shout instructions, but everything was a blur. My legs shook as I waited for the gun. I tried to calm myself down by looking around. The sound of the gun going off brought me out of my daze, and I had to run. I started running faster and faster, and as I looked around, I noticed that I was ahead. But then another gun went off immediately. A false start! Someone had false started. In the back of my head, I was hoping it was me because then I wouldn't have to run. Unfortunately, I wasn't that lucky. I jogged back to lane eight for a grueling second time. "How can this be happening," I thought to myself. It was bad enough I had to run the 400-meter dash despite being a distance runner and then, someone false starts. The next gun went off signaling the start of the race, the dash. Once again, I ran as fast as I could, glanced around, and saw that I was winning! I couldn't believe it; I was winning 100 meters into the race! Suddenly, I hit the 200-meter mark and it felt like I ran into a brick wall. The rest of the girls in my heat zoomed past me and onto the finish. I struggled to move my legs. They felt like they weighed 1,000 pounds each. I ran to the finish line as fast as I could, but it didn't matter. Everyone else was already done and had been done for at least a few seconds.

Out of breath and out of energy, I somehow managed to get to The Lusker. "Not too bad, Morrill," he said in between coughing up a lung.

At that point, I didn't even care about my time. It was over. Somehow I had sprinted 400 meters around a track despite being a long-distance runner. I was exhausted, and I was thrilled to find out that my time didn't qualify me for the

finals later that evening. What made me even happier was something I had forgotten about during my dreadful lap of death around the track: the free Bonnie Bell lip balm!

I sat in anticipation as I watched the end of the meet. I couldn't wait to get the lip balm! The team packed up the tent and began boarding the bus. As we started to leave, I asked one of the senior girls about the lip balm I had yet to get.

She laughed and exclaimed, "Sarah, you actually thought you were getting lip balm?"

"Yeah, it is the Bonnie Bell Invitational," I said confidently.

"Hahaha," she said bursting into more laughter along with the other seniors.

Through their laughter, I heard one of the girls say to Amanda and me, "It's just a joke we play on freshmen! This invitational isn't even called The Bonnie Bell Invitational, it's The Bell Invitational. Bonnie Bell doesn't sponsor it, and there's no free lip balm!" she giggled.

After having to run the 400-meter dash despite being a long-distance runner and then not getting the lip balm I was anxiously awaiting, I was really ticked off. All of the other freshmen also were upset that we were fooled into thinking we got free lip balm. Our role models, our mentors, the seniors, and the rest of the upperclassmen tricked us! We didn't really know why they did it to us, but we decided that the next year we were going to trick the new freshmen into thinking they were going to get free lip balm, too.

As for The Lusker's explanation as to why I had to run the 400-meter dash in the first place, he told me it was to build character. He said, "I made you run the 400-meter dash to see how you would compete. Even though you are a

distance runner, you won't get any better if you just run long distances all of the time." As much as I hated running the 400-meter dash that day, I realize now that he was right.

The Youth in Asia

By Maggie Wendell

I had already been awake for half an hour before my alarm clock went off at 6:30 a.m. The alarm was on my cell phone, and for some reason, instead of just turning it off beforehand, I had been holding it in my hand in a state of nervous anticipation so I could quickly hit the button before waking up my new roommate. It was the first day of my college career, and I wasn't about to make the stranger I was sharing a bunk bed with despise her over-anxious roommate already. I clumsily hobbled down the end of the bed in an attempt to be as quiet as possible, but ultimately missed the last rung of the ladder and came crashing down on the brand-new leopard-print shag rug that she had so graciously added to the room before I moved in. By the time I made it to my desk, it was 6:34 a.m. — I had less than an hour and a half before my first class as an Ohio University student.

As I waited for my coffee to brew, I checked my schedule online and reviewed the building directory and map on the student webpage to make sure I knew exactly when and where I was going. After two bowls of cereal and a healthy dose of <people.com>, I finally slipped on my spongy flip-flops, grabbed my stylish stainless steel shower caddy, and headed down the hall for the showers. To my absolute horror, I wasn't the only early bird on my floor and all the showers were taken but the smallest one in the corner! Of course I was too restless to wait the two minutes for a normal one, so I spent an endless ten minutes slammed up against the tile wall while shampoo poured into my eyes — there was no way I was closing them even for a second for fear that the moldy shower curtain would creep up and make contact with my skin.

After getting ready and checking my schedule and campus map two more times, I finally walked out my door wearing my cool new outfit I had picked out the night before. Okay, maybe it was more like five nights before, but either way, my short-sleeved Abercrombie and Fitch polo and distressed jeans coupled perfectly with my Old Navy flip-flops in a way that definitely asserted my being a cool college student who OBVIOUSLY wasn't trying too hard to look good on the first day of school.

The first class of my college career was Communications 103, a public-speaking course required for my major. I arrived a respectable seven minutes early, took a seat in the third row, and quickly realized that most of the people in the room were sitting in silence and constantly yawning. I immediately decided to hide how awake I was by slumping far back in my chair and “carelessly” tapping my pencil on the desk as I stared at my feet — I fit in perfectly with the 8 a.m. class crowd. After a couple of minutes, a small elderly man hurriedly walked through the door and stood at the podium before us.

“Good morning, wonderful public speaking students!” he practically shouted in his high, nasal voice. “It’s the first day of the new quarter, which means that you will all be giving your first speeches today!”

We all looked around with dumbfounded expressions on our faces, wondering if we had heard our professor, Mr. Wilson (not his real name), correctly. *Did he just say we were giving a speech TODAY?* I thought. A tidal wave of hands flew into the air, with numerous outbursts: “Uh, excuse me?” “WHAT?” “Huh?” and “Dude, are you serious?” During this brief 30 seconds of apparent panic, Mr. Wilson stood at the podium with a look of sadistic pleasure on his face.

“You all signed up for a public-speaking class, didn’t you?” he asked. “Let’s get right to it then!” He proceeded to explain to us that his way of taking roll on the first day of class was to call us up to the front of the class, where we would walk to the front of the room, stand at the podium, and introduce ourselves. After this, we were given a random topic that we had to speak about for a minute and a half — and yes, we HAD to talk the entire time. It was the classic impromptu speech — the surefire downfall of any student (like myself) who lives for planned schedules and ample preparation time.

A collective groan thundered across the room as we were all suddenly not so tired and groggy anymore. When Mr. Wilson announced that we’d be going from the bottom of the alphabet to the top, I had serious thoughts of wanting to inflict physical pain on this terrible man, who, it seemed at that time, had truly just ascended from Hades before entering this classroom. My last name starts with ‘W,’ which meant that only two people went before me. I sat at my desk, nervously cracking my sweaty knuckles and gnawing on the inside of my bottom lip. *How am I going to do this? I’m going to make a fool of myself! I know I’m just going to freeze up. This is so cruel,* I thought. My heart sank when the guy before me finished his speech. For the past minute and a half, I had completely tuned out his quiet, shaky voice as he discussed his thoughts on high school hazing.

“Let’s see here, Margaret Wendell?” said Mr. Wilson, whose annoyingly calm voice I had already managed to despise made me want to throw something at him.

I slowly walked to the front of the room, trying my best to hide how nervous I was. After a brief introduction of myself, it was time for me to receive my topic. I clenched my fists behind the podium and prayed for something easy

— something I had a chance of filling an entire minute and a half talking about. I stared at Mr. Wilson like I imagine a person on trial for second-degree murder would stare at the judge when being read the jury's decision.

“Okay, Margaret. Your speech topic is euthanasia. You have a minute and 30 seconds, and your time starts now.”

As I heard the quiet beep of Mr. Wilson's stop watch, I felt my stomach do some sort of advanced gymnastics move that it had never done before. I didn't have time to panic — the clock had already started! So many thoughts were buzzing around in my head, but I couldn't control them enough to make any sense of them. Finally, I was forced to succumb to the tried-and-true method that, while not desirable in asserting that I was a bright student with the ability to organize and present a coherent set of thoughts, would at least guarantee that I fill my time: verbal diarrhea. I just began talking, hoping that at some point I'd talk myself into a point that would get me on track.

“Um, when I think about the *youth in Asia*, the first thing that comes to mind is how different they are from the youth here in America,” I began. “I would say that the biggest difference between Asian children and American children is the level of discipline in the school systems, and just what the adults expect of them in general. The *youth in Asia* seem to be more well mannered and respectful than the youth in America.” It all felt like an out-of-body experience — I listened to the words coming out of my mouth while never being able to recall ever telling my brain to say them. I went on to tell a story of a made-up friend I had in grade school who was from Asia and how he was so quiet and polite compared to other obnoxious and unruly boys in my class. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, the soft beep of the stopwatch sounded again.

“Okay then,” Mr. Wilson said shortly, the corners of his mouth beginning to curl.

For the first time in a minute and a half, I became aware of my surroundings. I had been concentrating so hard at the white wall at the other end of the room during my speech that I didn’t even take a second to realize that everyone in the room was smiling at me; in fact, quite a few were clearly holding back laughter. I racked my brain for reasons why my speech could possibly be considered humorous. As I stood there wondering if I said a bad word, or if my fly was undone, Mr. Wilson cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter in his chair.

“Thank you, Margaret. I must say, your take on the Asian children of the world was quite interesting, and I think we would all agree that you did a great job delivering your speech. I think it’s right to point out, however, that you may have been a little confused about the topic I gave you. I actually meant for you to talk about *euthanasia*,” he said, speaking like he was addressing a first-grader. “Euthanasia is actually one word. You might be more familiar with the term ‘mercy killing’?”

My heart literally skipped a beat. I felt a surge of extreme embarrassment coupled with acute nausea as I came to the realization of what I had done.

“Oh, um, yeah, I know what euthanasia is,” I said as I felt my whole body go numb. Finally, the whole class burst out in laughter. “No, really! I swear I do. I do.”

After a little more babbling and apologizing, I was eventually able to join the class and laugh at myself. While I was beyond mortified, I couldn’t help but think how ridiculous I must have sounded. Mr. Wilson thanked me for providing the comic relief, and assured me that the next time he issued that topic he’d be more careful in his

pronunciation. I shook my head and looked at my feet, still bearing the now dying laughter of the class. The walk of shame back to my desk was particularly painful. I tried to hide how humiliated I was by acting like I didn't care and that I was even somewhat pleased with myself for making everyone laugh. In reality, all I could think about was not just how all these people were laughing, but that they also all thought I was a complete ditz. The rest of the class time I just sat slouched back in my chair, counting the milliseconds until ten o'clock. Finally, after another hour of speeches, everyone had successfully made the journey through hell and back. I grabbed my book bag and was the first person out the door.

The entire walk back to the dorms consisted of me trying to figure out exactly how many times I had said the words "youth in Asia" in my speech. A stint of nausea hit me every time I replayed that endless minute and half of my life over in my head. My friend called my cell phone as I was unlocking the door to my room, and I hit the silent key, knowing that I didn't have time to talk to her quite yet. As soon I walked in, I marched straight over to my computer. After a few swift clicks of the mouse, and a couple pecks of the keyboard, my computer landed on the screen I had been thinking about ever since I made it back to my desk after the speech: ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DROP CLASS # 03087 COMS 103? Without even a second of hesitation, I hit the YES button, and called my friend back.

Appendix L: About the Author

It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a cry rang out, and on a hot summer night in 1954, Josephine, wife of Carl Bruce, gave birth to a boy — me. Unfortunately, this young married couple allowed Reuben Saturday, Josephine's brother, to name their first-born. Reuben, aka "The Joker," decided that Bruce was a nice name, so he decided to name me Bruce Bruce. I have gone by my middle name — David — ever since.

Being named Bruce David Bruce hasn't been all bad. Bank tellers remember me very quickly, so I don't often have to show an ID. It can be fun in charades, also. When I was a counselor as a teenager at Camp Echoing Hills in Warsaw, Ohio, a fellow counselor gave the signs for "sounds like" and "two words," then she pointed to a bruise on her leg twice. Bruise Bruise? Oh yeah, Bruce Bruce is the answer!

Uncle Reuben, by the way, gave me a haircut when I was in kindergarten. He cut my hair short and shaved a small bald spot on the back of my head. My mother wouldn't let me go to school until the bald spot grew out again.

Of all my brothers and sisters (six in all), I am the only transplant to Athens, Ohio. I was born in Newark, Ohio, and have lived all around Southeastern Ohio. However, I moved to Athens to go to Ohio University and have never left.

At Ohio U, I never could make up my mind whether to major in English or Philosophy, so I got a bachelor's degree with a double major in both areas, then I added a master's degree in English and a master's degree in Philosophy. Currently, and for a long time to come, I publish a weekly humorous column titled "Wise Up!" for *The Athens News* and I am a retired English instructor at Ohio U.

Shameless Commerce

Visit David Bruce's storefront at

<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/brucebATohioDOTedu>

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/bruceb>

By the way, this storefront offers free downloads of collections of my students' autobiographical essays. For example, one such collection is titled *Love and Friendship: Stories About Growing Up*. It also has a number of free downloads of collections of good deeds.

If all goes well, I will publish one or two books a year for the rest of my life. (On the other hand, a good way to make God laugh is to tell Her your plans.)

Other Books by the Author

Author: Discussion Guides Series

Dante's Inferno: A Discussion Guide

Dante's Paradise: A Discussion Guide

Dante's Purgatory: A Discussion Guide

Forrest Carter's The Education of Little Tree: A Discussion Guide

Homer's Iliad: A Discussion Guide

Homer's Odyssey: A Discussion Guide

Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice: A Discussion Guide

Jerry Spinelli's Maniac Magee: A Discussion Guide

Jerry Spinelli's Stargirl: A Discussion Guide

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal": A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Black Cauldron: A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Book of Three: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper: A Discussion Guide

Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind: A Discussion Guide

Nicholas Sparks' A Walk to Remember: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's Aeneid: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's "The Fall of Troy": A Discussion Guide

Voltaire's Candide: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: A Discussion Guide

William Sleator's Oddballs: A Discussion Guide

(Oddballs is an excellent source for teaching how to write autobiographical essays/personal narratives.)

Retellings of a Classic Work of Literature

Dante's Inferno: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Purgatory: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Paradise: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Divine Comedy: A Retelling in Prose

From the Iliad to the Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose of Quintus of Smyrna's Posthomerica

Homer's Iliad: A Retelling in Prose

Homer's Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose

Jason and the Argonauts: A Retelling in Prose of Apollonius of Rhodes' Argonautica

Virgil's Aeneid: A Retelling in Prose

Author: Kindest People Series

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 1

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 2

Author: (Free) Kindest People Volumes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 3

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 4

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 5

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 6

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 7

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 1)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 2)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 3)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 4)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 5)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 6)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 7)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 1)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 2)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 3)

Some Other Books by David Bruce

250 Anecdotes About Opera

250 Anecdotes About Religion

250 Anecdotes About Religion: Volume 2

The Coolest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Comedy: 250 Anecdotes

Don't Fear the Reaper: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Comedy: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Dance: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 4: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 5: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 6: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Movies: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Music: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Music, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Music, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Neighborhoods: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Relationships: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Sports: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Sports, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Television and Radio: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Theater: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People Who Live Life: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People Who Live Life, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds, Volume 1: 250 Anecdotes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

Maximum Cool: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Movies: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Religion: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Sports: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People Who Live Life: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People Who Live Life, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

Resist Psychic Death: 250 Anecdotes

Seize the Day: 250 Anecdotes and Stories

Children's Biography

Nadia Comaneci: Perfect Ten