

**Athenaeum Lecture**  
**Writing from Life: turning experience into fiction**

Thank you, Neil – and many thanks to you and to Janis for having supported these stories on their long journey from their inception into print – and to Adrienne for editing. It's a real honor to be speaking here, in this wonderful library, with all its historical echoes.

So – writing from life. I must hurry to clarify my mood. I'm not saying, "here's the scoop on turning experience into fiction – come and get it!" I'm meditating on the old saw, "write what you know" – considering what that actually *means* about the inter-relationship of experience and fiction. Please don't assume it means you have to have an exciting life to be a writer. Mind you, it can help. I still remember the envious faces in my fiction seminar when one student said his father was a bank robber. But I assured them, as I assure you, that even mundane life experience can inform the writing of fiction.

Let's start by putting the old saw into the negative: don't write what you don't know. When I was eleven, my sister gave me a typewriter, and clearly, what one did with a typewriter was write a murder mystery. As I typed away, the story became a cross between Agatha Christie and the Black Stallion series. Aside from the male narrator, my characters were old people in their thirties; one of them was pregnant. I loved them all so much I couldn't decide which of them had done the murder, so the novel remained unfinished.

As I moved into high school, tolerant teachers looked at the melodrama that followed the mystery and told me, "write what you know – write about your own experience." Well, I had no experience worth writing about – a happy childhood is such a drag. Still, I switched to realism, and by the time I got to college, I could turn out a Dorothy Parker story or a semi-realistic humorous fantasy with some success. But nothing that I wrote had the depth of the fiction that had inspired me in the first place. I didn't realize that was because the only experience I was drawing on was my *literary* experience, and I certainly had no idea that my difficulties were classic. I just thought I had no talent.

My solution was to become an historian, and I spent the next seventeen years developing my understanding of Tudor England. I wrote a well-received book on Elizabethan culture and society, but at an interview, one historian told me he'd rarely read a monograph that was so personal. I think it was a compliment; but it made me wonder (not for the first time) if I'd chosen the right profession.

During the years in which I'd been writing history, I'd produced two little girls, to whom I told stories a dozen times a day. They liked the stories; I liked the stories; adults told me to write the stories down. I tried. They went flat. It was most discouraging. So were a lot of other things – divorce, single motherhood, and the onset of profound deafness, which lost me my academic job at the same time it robbed me of my "backup profession" as a violinist.

Faced with poverty and a life that was turning into a Grade D movie, I moved to my family's old Vermont summer house, and became a cleaning lady. Then, since the sociological interest of housecleaning wore off quickly, I decided to try fiction again. I went to a summer writing workshop at Bennington College, taking with me the sort of story I'd been writing when I was nineteen -- fun intellectually, but inauthentic emotionally. The instructor wearily suggested – guess what! – that I should write what I knew. So, out of desperation, I wrote a story based on a minor episode in my childhood. And it worked! It was *the* major breakthrough of my writing life.

The story was called "Liar from Vermont," and it was about a seven-year-old girl named Peggy Hamilton, the third daughter in a Michigan academic family that summered in Vermont. In its current form, it's the first and title story of the book Neil and Janis have just published. In its original form – typed, of course, in those pre-computer days – it sat in a drawer for nearly 30 years.

There are various reasons why it sat there for so long. One of them is that I couldn't quite figure out how to pull it together at the end. Another was that I couldn't decide whether I should make it a one-off story, or whether it was the beginning of a sequence. The third – and major -- reason was that it taught me that writing about experience has its perils as well as its pleasures.

Shortly after I finished the story, I had a visit from my eldest sister, who was and is well-known in British poetry circles. I timidly showed it to her – and she went ballistic. Distortion! Injustice! Parody! If I ever published it, she'd tell everybody what a disgrace it was and make sure it got terrible reviews. In retrospect, I suppose I should have pointed out that the distortion was deliberate, that autobiographical fiction isn't autobiography ... but I hadn't really thought all that through yet, and I was acutely aware of not knowing what I was doing ... and, well, we all have families, and there's a lot to be said for peace. So I put Peggy in a drawer and stopped writing autobiographical fiction.

That doesn't mean, however, that I stopped writing from life. What Peggy had taught me was that I could use aspects of my life as a ground bass of my fiction, composing melodies of imagination that harmonized with it. So that's what I did.

To give an example: *Happily After All*, my first novel, is about a child of a bitter divorce whose father's death makes it necessary for her to leave California and go live with her mother in Vermont. I wrote it for one of my daughters, who had decided she wanted to live with her father and stepmother rather than with me, but didn't want to miss out on my stories. The plot (and incidentally, the bitter custody case) is entirely fictitious, but the ground bass – the pain of losing a daughter – is authentic, and gives the book its power. I should add that the power did not spring fully-armed from my forehead. Initially, the book went astray: for reasons transparent now but less clear then, I rushed the reconciliation between mother and daughter by making the mother survive divorce and loss emotionally unscathed. I was saved from this fantasy by a kind friend, who, upon reading the manuscript said, "You've GOT to re-write this: it's sappy, it's sentimental, and it doesn't have any plot." Once I'd investigated (ahem) the mother's emotions more deeply, sentimentality was no longer a temptation, and as mother and daughter worked through their mutual resentments, the plot fixed itself.

What I learned to do in *Happily After All* – and continued to do in its successors – was not in the least original; it's how writers write what they know. Consciously or sub-consciously, they recreate their own emotional experience in the lives of their characters. This process can involve re-experiencing repressed or forgotten emotions right there at the computer. You never quite get used to the way it takes you by surprise – *wham! Where did that come from?* – but it's necessary. Only when authors have successfully captured *experienced* pain, joy, fear, hatred, love on the page, can their readers share those emotions and identify with the imaginary people in the book. I can't speak for other writers, but to me, establishing that emotional ground bass is the most difficult part of writing. The melodies – plot, theme, setting, character development – can be imagined. Emotional authenticity can't.

The trouble is, emotional authenticity is hard to come by. It usually gets distorted by the inauthentic, stereotyped structures that shape experience, in writing as in life. They're familiar to all of us, and ironically, though they're usually attributed to the nefarious effects of TV and advertising, most of them are literary. There's confessional – I was a sinner but now I'm saved. There's its first cousin, kiss 'n tell (which is gossip made lucrative, if you've kissed the right people). There's the poor boy made good, and his mirror image, the honest man who refuses to sell out. There's romance (Harlequin and otherwise), and *its* first cousins, adultery, disillusion, divorce (not necessarily in that order). Attending all these structures are flocks of ready-made moods: self-condemnation, self-congratulation, self-righteousness, hatred, resentment, nostalgia, sentimentality. If you're a writer, all these pre-fabricated

experiences crowd around your computer from the moment your fingers hit the keys, disguising themselves as muses, and begging you to immortalize them on the screen.

The writing that happens as the result of listening to these muses is not necessarily insincere. I know, because I've thrown my whole heart into writing fiction that sincerely reflected the structures I'd willingly adopted in order to avoid reality. And I've spent most of my professional life reading the manuscripts of deeply committed young writers similarly protected from profound emotion by the voices that whisper stories in their ears.

The well-kept secret of writing is that there's a difference between insincerity – the saying or writing of something you don't believe in, usually in order to gain approval -- and inauthenticity, which is just the inability to set aside the stereotypes that govern our lives and dreams, in order to see clearly and experience deeply. Generally, that inability is learned – even cultivated. It's a matter of defense; it begins in school, where acceptance is so important. It continues later in life, mostly out of necessity: given families with two jobs and two kids, forget authenticity – you're lucky if you can keep calm and carry on. Perhaps more seriously, there is – from first grade through last job – a penalty for experiencing emotionally what one sees clearly. The world, seen with real clarity, is not the safe habitat the pre-fab muses assure us we live in. And if you insist on seeing clearly, two of the emotions you feel most deeply are isolation and self-doubt. It is, after all, impossible not to wonder about yourself when you know you don't see things the way other people do – and that they confuse your emotional authenticity with yet another pre-fab term: neurosis.

This brings us back to Peggy Hamilton, the liar from Vermont whose story I took out of its drawer a few years ago and started to make into the collection I'm introducing here. There are now ten stories: the first is set in 1953, when Peggy's seven; the last is set in 1964, when she leaves Vermont at 18, knowing her childhood summers are over.

As my sister noticed, it contains incidents that my family can recognize, and its ground bass contains a lot of re-experienced emotion. In fact, there are certain passages here whose memories took me *weeks* to work through enough to write about. But please – consider the title! We're talking about liars, here, and guess who's the primary one. At a rough estimate, only 30% of the book's contents is factually accurate. The other 70% never happened – to me or anybody else. While a few characters have a murky resemblance to old-timers in Wilmington, Vermont, their reality has been ... er ... sacrificed to the demands of plot and theme. It's a book about lying, about stories, about the way imagination shapes and is shaped by reality. It's also a book about Vermont: specifically, about a summer house, its history, and the way its metamorphosis reflects the changes in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Vermont. That summer house provides 90% of the 30% that's true in the book, and since a picture is worth 1000 lies, let me offer you a visual history.

**Picture.** Here is the house and view at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was then about sixty years old, and it belonged to Jared and Mary Sage. At that time, the farm consisted of the house, with a long ell of sheds, three (possibly four) big barns, and various outbuildings. It's a tribute to the good hands of the Sages (both in their late fifties when they acquired the farm) that until street numbers went in a few years ago, it was still known as the Sage Place.

After Jared Sage's death, the prosperous neighboring farmer added it to his large holding and made it a tenant house. The failing Wilmington economy was hard on the tenants – and the place. This is what it looked like in the late 20's. **Picture.** The farm suffered even more during the Depression. Its barns fell down. Its sheds fell down. In the 30's, it looked like this. **Pictures**

In 1942, a New York couple bought the large farm of which the Sage Place had become a part. They fixed it up the Sage Place a little, but before they could do anything with it, he died and she sold it,

taking a mortgage she soon foreclosed. Into this mess stepped my parents in 1951, buying a house that looked like this: **picture**

My parents put in plumbing, painted it, and replaced its ruined ell with a new woodshed.

**Pictures** Here it is, completed.

Ten years later, they made further improvements: a barn – and a tennis court. **Pictures**

This is the historical progression that underlies Peggy's story. Her family belongs to an academic generation newly enlarged by the GI Bill, just at the time farming in Vermont was hitting a low spot and land was amazingly cheap. That means the Hamiltons are summer folk, with a complicated and tangential relationship to the community in which they spend three months a year. The stories investigate Peggy's discovery of that relationship, as she tries to figure out where she belongs.

At seven, Peggy has no doubts about where she belongs: in Vermont, where there are cows, there is haying – and there are horses! There are also people entirely different from the ones that have surrounded her in the Michigan university town that's her "real" home. Her love of Vermont provokes the lie of the book's title.

Here's the situation: Peggy's father, called The Great Man throughout the book, is a distinguished classicist who has been invited to spend a year at Harvard. Peggy finds herself at a Belmont public school very different from John Dewey Elementary, where she has gone in Michigan. "I'd never seen perfectly quiet children before – at John Dewey we'd been encouraged to express ourselves." Her teacher, Miss Coffin, has asked the class to write her name on the paper provided; Peggy does that; then she dreams off about the wonderful work horses that their Vermont neighbor, Mr. Bartlett, used to build them a wall ... until she's catapulted back into the real world. **1 2**

Having lied in public, Peggy has to keep up the story. That's tough, because she lives across the street from the school. But Peggy's so intrepid that nobody questions her— and even the Principal gets interested. After six weeks of this, however, Miss Coffin sends a note to Peggy's mother, and the whole story is revealed at the dinner party given to celebrate the publication of the Great Man's translation of *The Odyssey*. The guests wonder why a Harvard professor's daughter would claim her father is a small farmer. A psychologist present, hearing that Peggy drifts off into Vermont fantasies, suggests she's schizophrenic. At her end of the table, she's saved by a private conversation with her friend Mr. Zander, who tells her that she's as good a liar as Odysseus. She's dubious, so he argues: **2 16-17**

Mr. Zander is a leftist in the McCarthy era, the owner of classic MG, and a well-known novelist who understands the connection between lying and fiction. He's Peggy's staunchest supporter, from the time she's 7 and he's 27 to the time she's 18 and he's 38, and their relationship becomes more complicated. His remark about Peggy's not fitting into the puzzle she has to live in sets up the basic theme of the stories – which are about her quest for belonging in a family, a place, a time, and a social class.

Part of Peggy's difficulty is her refusal to be the kind of girl (and later, woman) the 1950's think she should be. If it's a problem at 7, imagine what it's like as Junior High threatens: **3 71-72**

Peggy ignores the blackboard and worships Mr. Bartlett. That summer, she hurries to the Bartletts' farm first thing, eager to tell them that she's finally tall enough to drive a tractor solo. But when she gets there, nobody's home. Impossible: it's milking time. As she stands in the dooryard, mystified, Mr. Wolfson, a hired man from the larger farm on the other side of their house, drives up -- and announces he has to do the milking because Jim Bartlett has had a heart attack. The problem, he says bitterly, was worry: the Bartlett farm was going under.

Peggy takes this terrible news home, where Mr. Zander has come for dinner. **4 80-81**

Peggy's parents say they'll go over to the Bartletts' first thing in the morning to help. **82**

She's right. But she resists. She holds onto her boy/girl perspective, which she learns to call "androgyny" after she's figured out how to spell it and looked it up. This all sounds very "now," but hers is a simpler world than ours, and she's merely reacting to her mother's ideal of ladylike behavior. Essentially, this means she must learn to lose graciously to men in competitive situations -- like the school chess tournament, in which she has had the temerity to beat one of the top-seeded boys: "If you want to keep playing with boys, you'll have to learn subtle strategies of competition. The point is to play as well as you can, but ignore mistakes that would let you win, so they appreciate your skill as an opponent without seeing you as a threat."

Faced with the dismal prospect of a ladylike, self-deprecating, upper-middle-class future, Peggy treasures Vermont as a place where androgyny is possible ... but Vermont is changing as fast as she is. The economic realities that have ruined the Bartlett farm have also caused Mr. Weller, the owner of the 650 acre farm on the other side of the Hamilton's place, to sell -- to Mr. Hapney, a millionaire with Rockefeller connections who needs a tax loss. His millions transform the rundown place into a picture from Vermont Life: the barn is painted and expanded, and a ring and a paddock are put in to accommodate the prize-winning Morgan horse that belongs to the Hapneys' beautiful society daughter, Sarah. Unfortunately, Sarah has failed some courses at Miss Porter's, so she has to go to summer school. Mr. Weller and Mr. Wolfson, now the foreman and hired man on the farm, have told the Hapneys that Peggy rides well, so the Hapneys visit the Hamiltons and ask Peggy to exercise the horse during the week so Sarah can continue to win ribbons on weekends.

When Peggy's family comes to watch her try the horse out, Peggy gets a glimpse of a world of class relations she's never seen before. 5 97

The ride goes fine, but when they return home, Peggy is puzzled, because Sarah seems to be the kind of girl *she's* supposed to be, but the family is unhappy. So she talks to Mr. Zander as she walks him to his MG. 99

Ironically, exercising the fancy horse leads to a situation in which androgynous Peggy feels she belongs. Sarah's championships have all been at the junior level, but now she's 18 -- and adult riders outclass her at the National Morgan Horse show. She thus loses interest so abruptly that her father sells the horse at the show, and they all go back to the city. Thus on Monday morning, when Peggy comes down to exercise the Morgan, she finds Mr. Weller and Mr. Wolfson looking at a poor, starved mare that's just been bought at auction by a character called Joe the Frenchman. They ask her to ride the horse because she rides English, and she proves that the mare has been beautifully trained. Joe remarks happily "Sweet Jesus -- I can sell her as a lady's mount." It's the beginning of a partnership; instead of riding for the rich, Peggy rides a series of horses for Joe -- who is, not to put too fine a point on it, a horse trader.

Of course the partnership encounters difficulties. Eventually, Peggy's parents find out what she's been doing, and -- technically out of concern for her safety -- forbid her to work with Joe and Mr. Wolfson any more. But it's threatened more seriously the next summer, when the Great Man inherits what Peggy calls "real money," which changes the nature of the place. Because he builds not only a barn, but a tennis court. 6 112

The tennis court comes between Peggy and her horse trading friends. Particularly, it affects her relationship with one of the riders for Joe the Frenchman: Jake Amidon, an 18-year-old guy who looks like Shane and has the same sort of cool -- And can keep his seat on anything with four legs and a tail. He and Peggy meet when she's riding by and the young horse he's on bucks, rears, and carries on, while he sits on it, unfazed, and tips his hat to her. At Mr. Wolfson's request, Peggy walks her horse around the ring in front of the youngster, and gradually it quiets down. As Peggy is nearly wordless with admiration, Jake cautiously makes a friendly overture 7 117-18

In the next story, they fashion a sort of working arrangement by riding together. The mothers on both sides worry. Mr. Zander is jealous. But all the adult concern is wasted. What Peggy learns from

Jake is that he's unreachable – because she's part of the very world she deplores and the class whose narrow vision she's well aware of. "I was like them, no matter how much I wanted to be just me."

And there we will leave Peggy, caught between two worlds, one which she loves but which is no longer sustainable, and one into which she's being slowly and relentlessly pushed – not just by her family, but by a whole set of sociological changes that affect both her and Vermont. Whether that's a sad story or not, I leave you to decide – but whatever you think, don't worry about Peggy. She sees very clearly. She feels deeply. And she simply can't tell a story without embellishing it. She's obviously going to become a professional liar. She'll be fine.