



Remarks given by Erma Bombeck at the
University of Dayton Writers' Workshop
on November 19, 1982.

Includes hand-written notations.

- *Owned by the Archives Collection, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio*

University of Dayton Writer's Workshop - November 19, 1982

Okay, you've heard Ellie's introduction.

Now, let me tell you mine.

Today's speaker was advised in her freshman year to give up studying English composition and devote her life to being a sex object. Failing miserably, she was graduated in 1949 and was married shortly thereafter to a man with whom she's never had a meaningful conversation in her entire life. Against repeated protest that she was too short for pregnancy, she bore three children. At age 37, she pulled herself together one day and declared that visiting her meat in the food locker was less than a religious experience and turned to writing a column for the Kettering-Oakwood Times.

She subsequently produced six books. One, THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER OVER THE SEPTIC TANK, was made into a TV movie starring Carol Burnett. Frank Rich, critic for Time, said, "The only thing good about it was that Erma Bombeck didn't appear in it."

In 1974, she produced a record album for Warner Bros. called, "The Family That Plays Together Gets On Each Other's Nerves." It sold two copies at a J.C. Penney's in Beirut. Last year, she produced and wrote a TV series called "Maggie" for ABC. In the ratings, it was listed just below a nature documentary on "The Birth of a Bog."

That's the introduction you should hear.

If I were an aspiring writer sitting out where you are sitting, I wouldn't even listen to a speaker until I had heard of his failures. Because that's what writing is all about. You fail a lot more than you succeed and how you handle it determines whether or not you become a writer.

I've never given a writer's seminar before. In fact, I never went to one before. It's just a shot in the dark, but I assume all of you want to be rich and famous writers. No problem. You got 30 years?

I remember in my senior year here at the University of Dayton, I read on the bulletin board where Robert Penn Warren was going to appear. He had won a Nobel Prize for his poetry and a Pulitzer Prize for literature.

Two other people beside myself showed up and we sat down in the cafeteria around a table and talked.

I was scared to death no one would show up today.

I've divided my lecture into two segments.

The first part of it will deal with the great advantages to being a humor writer.

The second part, I'll devote to the negative side of writing.

The advantage to being a humor writer is that due to a shortage of them, it pays extremely well.

And now for the negative aspects.

Looking back, I wish I would have been younger when I started to write humor. People laugh with you when you're young. When you're between Estrogen and death, they feel sorry for you. As it was, I was 37 years old when I wrote my first humor column, and Jean Kerr had told all the good Catholic jokes in Please Don't Eat the Daisies and Fran Lebowitz had a curb on the Jewish jokes, so what did that leave me? A few cheap shots on Miss America pageants.

When I took stock of myself, sitting there in the suburbs of Dayton, Ohio with three unplanned children, a car that didn't run and a toilet that did...and a mother-in-law who called me Edna...I wondered

what I had that was unique and ironically enough I discovered something. I was ordinary...painfully middle-of-the-road, no frills, bare-boned, Ohio-midwest-beige-Our Town-ordinary. *NO ONE LIKES TO ADMIT IT, BUT EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW YOU CAN LAUGH AT IT.*

I was the woman who went to the supermarket and always got the cart with four wheels...none of them going in the same direction. I was the woman who went to the restroom and always came out dragging a piece of toilet tissue on my shoe.

Ordinary. That was to be my turf.

Since 1965 when the syndicated column first began, I have averaged from five to 35 letters a week from women who want to write a humor column on domestic drolleries. During the past 20 years, I daresay there's been a book of the week on domestic drolleries. What do I tell them? First, don't go out and give birth to three children just to have something to write about. Don't do that.

MS FOR BOOK
Secondly, don't start writing just because you want a microwave or you owe the orthodontist \$2,000. Don't expect to go to the post office and on the way home buy a dress for your appearance on the Carson show.

I'm a great believer in paying your dues. Now, I'm going to sound like Debbie Allen on Fame. You start paying your dues right here, at the University of Dayton or wherever. You begin by writing grocery lists, bad checks and go on to obituaries, notices of meetings of the Devotion to Children and Wine Tasting League. You write advertising copy for termite control. You write for the school paper. You write a letter to your mother that's coherent. You write whatever you can write and whenever you can write and you don't talk it to death. I can always tell the difference between serious writers and those who are just fishing.

The serious ones write shorter letters.

You read good stuff and you read bad stuff and you find out what makes it good and what makes it so bad. You learn how to speak and write the English language and you observe every bit of life you can and file it away for future use. Then get set. The discipline is unbelievable.

If you don't remember anything I say today, remember that. DISCIPLINE.
Enjoy writing? PUT IN HOME - HAVE TO KNOW - GOOD DAY - NO MORE 4 PAGES.

There's a couple of myths floating about that I should like to dispel right before your eyes. The first is "inspiration." I used to fantasize about inspiration. I even had a costume for it. I'd be in an ivory satin dressing gown bathed in Estee Lauder with my knees tucked under my chin sipping a Perrier and my husband would come in and say, "Problems, Darling?" and I'd say, "Can't we go to Cannes or somewhere in the south of France? I'm just not inspired."

It never happened. I'd be sitting in my bedroom in Centerville, Ohio in a pair of slacks giving birth to 450 words and my husband would poke his head in the door and ^{I'd} say, "Give me five minutes and you can drop this off at the post office and pick up a Cessano pizza on the way home."

FIGHT - LAUGH THEMSELVES TO DEATH Syndicated columnists and cartoonists consider inspiration a luxury. We can't afford it. I have 900 editors who could care less if we have a headache or a family crisis or nothing funny happened to us on the way to anyplace. One old Detroit Free Press editor said..."never read you, but by God, you're on time and you fit." So much for inspiration.

We go with what we've got.

The other myth that I love is called Writer's Block. Now Writer's Block to me is like North Dakota. It doesn't even exist. Well, has anyone ever seen North Dakota?

For those of you who are not familiar with the disease, let me explain. Writer's Block is a fancy term used by writers to describe a condition when they are unable to write. It's when your fingers show up for work, but your mind is still out to lunch.

I used to pretend I had it because it made me feel so...literary.

I used to sit at my typewriter and time a bug to see how long it took to get from the baseboard to the ceiling.

Sometimes, I'd pick up a waste basket with my knees to tighten my stomach muscles.

Other times, I'd go to an open window and yell out, "I don't need this job. My face is my fortune."

Writer's Block is just another word for putting it off. You can train yourself to shut out the world and write. And you must.

The disease that no one talks about, but should, is Fear of Failing. It's the writer who writes stacks of stories, begins three or four books, writes reams of poetry and puts it in the kitchen drawer, a suit box or a file and doesn't have the courage to let anyone read it. We all have that. We can tell ourselves we're good, but if we don't have to prove it or make ourselves vulnerable to truth, we can live on that for a long time. That's where you need the courage to submit your story and find out how good or how bad you are.

And if you think it gets any easier for professional writers, you're wrong. STILL ADDITION - Family Circle - Good Housekeeping -
FREELANCED EVERY MAJOR - REWRITE - POLISH 5-YRS

I'm going to anticipate two questions most of you have. The first one I get all the time is, "How do my kids feel about being exploited in a national column?" I have several answers I give for it. First,

who cares? The other one is, "They don't know what I do. They think I sell Amway products."

Those are flip answers. The truth is, although I have never mentioned them by name, I feel they have had to carry some of the heavy baggage of my humor and they've done it well. They were always able to discern where the real Bombecks left off and the fictional ones began, but the public couldn't. When they were young, it didn't matter. Now that they're older, they understand they're a composite of Americana.

Remember one day on the Donahue show, the question came up and before I could even answer it, Phil looked rather annoyed at the woman who asked it and said, "Look lady, our kids have enough problems being ^{you'} related to us, don't make it any tougher." *people travel up images about auto. at Communion - I that she had a sense of humor*

At the very beginning, I set up a wall of taste and privacy to which I have never gone beyond. This applies in all areas of humor whether it's family or not. *Don't consider humor topics +*

The second question I get a lot is, where do you come up with ideas?

This may surprise you. The ideas aren't the problem. The biggest thing I have to deal with is the attitude or the approach I'm going to take with it.

How can I explain this? Okay, suppose you've got a trend like people are consumed with soaps. So what? How do you find humor in it? Okay, using the basics of humor, you can do a couple of things with it. You can bring it down to a personal experience. Like my son at USC has built his entire schedule around General Hospital. He says it hasn't controlled his life, but because of scheduling he has switched his major from Business to Hebrew Flower Arranging.

Or, you can give it the nostalgic approach...a middle-aged woman saying, "My goodness, what has happened to daytime television? Until I started watching Days of Our Lives, I thought Masters and Johnson was a golf tournament."

Or, you can go for the absurdity of comparing the addiction to soaps like the addiction to alcohol and ~~outline~~ ^{parallel} the symptoms: Do you have to watch Ryan's Hope...just to get going in the morning? Do you watch As the World Turns alone? After a day of soaps, are you a public embarrassment?

There's a lot of tricks of presentation. When kids are moving away from homes, you can use the old reversal technique, like the parents approaching the kids and saying, "I don't know how to tell you this, but your father and I are getting our own apartment."

Then you have the kids telling you that you can use your own car anytime you like and call on them when they need you and you can have your own bedroom suite.

Ironically, you have to go a long way these days to get art to imitate life. I wrote once that a bride shot her husband in the foot at the wedding because he was fooling around with the bridesmaid. It actually happened in Pennsylvania.

People are so bizarre you can't take exaggeration beyond them anymore. Whatever you do, it'll show up on the six o'clock news with tape at 10.

But that's probably the toughest part.

I've been doing the column for 18 years now and normally, I would have run out of gas ten years ago (how many toilet-training jokes

can you write?) had it not been for an interesting development...women in this country went through a revolution.

They said in essence...enough.

They said I do not feel fulfilled replacing toilet tissue spindles.

I am sick of being 50% at the marriage and 10% at the divorce.

They said housework is not an equal opportunity employer.

I've told editors this and they know it's true. I've had one of the most interesting beats on the newspaper. Domestic drolleries gave way to a larger base for me to work from. My audience is now 46% women who are working outside the home, latchkey children whose first words were microwave, and husbands who will bury no leftovers before their time. The American family didn't die -- it just re-grouped.

Advice on writing a syndicated humor column. If you want to start one, pick an area that is saleable and up to date and something you know something about. Keep it short because newspaper space at the moment is at a premium. Not the greatest of times -- so what is? Richard Simmons just started one. Syndicate new writer or cartoonist every 3-4 years. There are only a dozen reputable syndicates. Pick one and send in samples and if you have a patron saint, write him a check.

Now, I'd like to move on to books.

Three of mine have been a collection of columns and three have been all new. My seventh one comes out in the fall of 1983. I'm not

going to tell you the title yet, but it's outrageous. *Woody Allen - not failing*
not trying anything new.
Writing a book is like giving birth. You figure the stupidest girl in the class did it, so how hard can it be?

It's a real trip. Especially for me. Since I'm basically a newspaper writer, I have a vocabulary of five adjectives. I find myself writing too tight and too terse, and I always have to go back and loosen it up. Flip a switch.

Every author...especially new ones...have their horror stories and I have mine. My first book, AT WIT'S END, came out in 1967. I had no agent running interference, only a representative of a syndicate which no longer exists. I got a percentage of the hard book and the paperback rights were sold for \$1500, of which I got \$750.

To date, the paperback has sold 5 million copies and is still in print.

Doesn't that make you want to throw up?

But considering the price of an education, it was cheap at the price. Looking back, I don't think I did anything right with that book. I went to New York to promote it. Keep in mind I'd never done a bit of television in my entire life. The publicist said, "How would you like to go on the Tonight Show? I said terrific. I kept saying terrific until two hours before I was to go on.

(Mom story)

Well, I want you to know I went on the show that night and I was myself -- and I bombed. Had it not been for Carl Reiner, we would have had 90 minutes of silence.

It's just been within the last few years that I can talk about it without a sedative.

There are a couple of myths about books, too. One of them is that at least you'll sell 2,000 copies to your friends and relatives. If you write a book, prepare to become a friendless orphan.

This is a true story. I swear it. I went out to Elder Beerman in Centerville for an autographing. I sat in the main aisle for three solid hours and directed five people to restrooms. Nothing. Finally, a couple came up...wanted to buy the desk.

The first three books sold well, but never made it to the N.Y. Times list. It wasn't until I changed publishers and went from Doubleday to McGraw-Hill that I hit the jackpot. *Indiv. attention - just book.*

In 1976 we brought out THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER OVER THE SEPTIC TANK. The invasion of the Falklands should have had such a plan. You hear a lot of talk about hyping. Pros and cons. Obviously, I am for it. I can turn on a bathroom light and do 20 minutes. I've been on four extensive book tours like a death march, but they pay off. If anyone has a copy of THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER OVER THE SEPTIC TANK - not signed - it's worth a fortune. Some authors are against it. They feel their work speaks for itself. I couldn't agree more, but with 10,000 new books coming out four times a year, I'm afraid my book won't speak up, so I do it for it.

There is a lot of snobbery in publishing. I love the author who quote, refuses to write down to his public's level, unquote, and is barely understood by William F. Buckley. He doesn't write for the masses. He writes for himself...which is why he sells 200 copies which are used as doorstops in his home.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying there's a correlation between literature and the number of books that are sold. There isn't. This year's Nobel Prize for literature went to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I see no recognition. *IT WOULD SURPRISE NO ONE IF* ~~The man sold 10,000 copies of his book.~~ *JANE FONDA'S BOOK FOR EXPECTANT MOTHERS TOPPED 'MOM* ~~AUNT ERMA'S COPE BOOK sold 700,000 copies in hard cover in eight months,~~ *IN SALES* ~~and it certainly wasn't worthy of a Nobel Prize for literature.~~

N.Y. + L.A.

I make no apologies that I write to be read by a lot of people. I love it when teenagers write and say, "This sounds like my family!" I love it when elderly people write and say, "What memories you've stirred up. I didn't remember it being that funny though." I have no illusions about myself. ~~I'm a pop.~~ Face it. I'm Barry Manilow in pantyhose.

But I would be doing my readers a great disservice if I did not say that underneath it all is an underlying truth in what this generation and the times we live in is all about.

It takes me a full year...sometimes longer...to write a new book, mostly because all the other deadlines are still with me. But it is hard for me to turn off one style of writing and turn on another. When I promote, I get ready for it like a marathon. I lose weight, I eat sensibly, and day by day I turn into Marie Osmond...smiling, smiling, smiling. Occasionally, depending on whose publishing at the same time you are, you meet the same author going and coming from city to city. I once traveled about a month with Garson Kanin and that helps.

Advice if you want to write a book. It helps to outline it and find out if you can write or if you like it before you start shopping for a publisher. When you're sure you can finish it, you send a three or four-page proposal to a reputable publisher, and they will decide if they want to see more. I would never send in a completed manuscript to anyone without first sending them a proposal of the book asking them if they want to see it. I get a lot. I don't solicit them or read them.

Reason is DON'T EVER SEND A MS TO INDIV. WHO

Does NOT Request Themx

An agent helps. Never pay anyone anything until the book is sold. Agents generally take 10% of everything they sell. They critique your work and offer suggestions and find markets to sell it. Only then do they get their money.

Another word of caution. There are a lot of vanity presses about. These are the people who will print and bound together your book of thoughts, poetry, philosophy, or novel. They're very expensive. Some are reputable and some will rip you off. Be very careful. I would stay clear of vanity presses if you're a serious author. It works the other way around. The publishing house pays you. The advance...if there is any...depends on how well known you are, how well published you are... and what kind of a deal the agent can get for you.

If you think you can do all of that yourself, fine, but remember, there's a lot of financial decisions to be made regarding paperback rights, foreign rights, reprint rights and serialization. You're playing ball with the pros.

Also remember, there are two people in this world who need attorneys: people writing their first book and people who own Yorkshire terriers.

I've saved television writing until last because that's what I got involved in last.

Nearly eight years ago, Bob Shanks, an ABC vice president, came to Phoenix and invited me to breakfast. He said ABC was going to fire another volley at the 20-year-old "Today" show in an attempt to get into the morning ratings.

I said, "What have you put together?"

He said, "David Hartman, Nancy Dussault, Rona Barrett, Jack Anderson and Jonathan Winters."

I almost fell out of my chair. The idea of those people being in the same country boggled the mind, let alone on the same show.

I was asked to do two or three-minute vignettes on humor three times a week. I could do anything I wanted, tape it from Phoenix and send it in. I write it, produce it, and perform it.

I had to turn on another switch. It wasn't newspaper writing. It wasn't book writing. It was the spoken word that I had to deliver myself.

I made a lot of mistakes in television and I'm still making them. It's a visual medium. You can do a lot of humor with expressions, timing and props. I must tell you. I find it fascinating. I own 700 blouses because that's all you ever see; I've done comedy I never thought possible for a shy person; and I have a cookie sheet older than my executive producer - 30 years old - but it's a kick.

Each producer brings with him or her their own brand of television and change. I've lived through five of them. The current one wants me to do more remotes, move through the country and do live featurettes, so I find myself in the space shuttle to the inauguration to the Grand Canyon to Philadelphia doing Rocky IV.

Several weeks ago, I did a thing with Phyllis Diller in Los Angeles.

(TELL STORY. CARSON IN CARTIER'S)

In one of my contracts was a provision for me to conceive and do a television special or series. I opted for the series and a year ago came out with "Maggie," which didn't fly. My mother loved it. Unfortunately, my mother is a Harris and not a Nielsen.

The Nielsen family...whatya wanta bet they live in North Dakota?

Writing for television is a whole new deal. Do you remember the old Dick Van Dyke show where Dick and Rosemarie and Morey Amsterdam used to get into an office and role play and take all the parts?

That's the way it works.

You write by committee and the seat of your pants. You get 2,3,4,5 writers in a room -- and I surrounded myself with some terrific ones, notably Bill Davenport, who wrote All in the Family; and Tom Whedon, who wrote for American Dream Machine, Benson, Alice; and Charlie Hauck, who wrote for Maude and The Two of Us.

I cannot remember any time in my life where I have worked harder, but there comes a time when the series is out of your hands. You can control a lot of things, but you're working ^{for} a network. They can reject scripts in which they feel you are being too irreverent. And that in essence is what I feel happened to Maggie. She got watered down by too many nervous people who don't understand what women feel. Just because we yell at our kids doesn't mean we don't love them or when we fight with our husband, it doesn't mean we're splitting. I wanted the dark side of Donna Reed. I got Florence Henderson with a Twinkie in her teeth.

As an executive producer, you also have no control over your time slot. They originally scheduled me opposite Dallas. I told Tony

Thomopoulos I was calling from the inside of an oven and as we spoke was lighting a match. They put me opposite Barbara Mandrell and I lost to "Sleeping Single in a Double Bed."

I wasn't devastated by it. I was just angry that they didn't give it longer than three weeks to work it out. *a victim of impatience*

I remember Tom Whedon went home after we had taped our last show. He walked in on Laverne and Shirley. Shirley was spreading cooking oil over Laverne's body, and Tom looked up and said, "There is no God."

Advice: If you want to write for television, know there is 85% unemployment in Hollywood. Good, experienced writers are the most sought-after commodity in the entire industry. Yet, there is literally nothing there for you to get a start in. Jim Brooks, who was head writer for Mary Tyler Moore and created Rhoda and Taxi, has a reputation for hiring young people to just sit and observe, but that's about it. It's a union town and it's a catch-22 situation. You have to have two scripts performed before you can get into the Writer's Guild and you can't get anyone to look at a script unless you belong to the Guild or it's submitted by an agent of some repute. You figure it out.

Most ongoing series accept few scripts from outside their own writing staff. Again, never send in the entire script, but a proposal.

I hope I've left time for some questions, but I just wanted to say a few things on behalf of humorists. We're a small group. When anyone writes Art Buchwald and says, "How do I get into humor writing?" he says, "One of us has to die and then you try to get our place."

It's not too crazy. ^{but} For what it's worth, I figured out one day that Ohio had produced more humorists than possibly any other state in the Union: Bob Hope, Phyllis Diller, James Thurber, Kaye Ballard, Tim Conway,

Paul Lynde, not to mention the five Ohio presidents and the Wright brothers.

It would be suicide for me to suggest why.

There's a society of people at Arizona State University who conduct symposiums on humor every year. They gather together all these serious people who look like they're suffering from terminal irregularity and ask them why they think people laugh.

Who cares? What will you find when you dissect humor and beat it to death with a stick? Only words.

Humor is an emotion that takes the deftness of a scalpel to unearth. If the world were to come to an end tomorrow, Buchwald would blame it on Reaganomics, Russ Baker would explain the meaning of "End," Andy Rooney would clean out his desk drawer, and Bombeck would eat a glazed doughnut and say thank God she found out in time.

We all have something in common. We share with you that part of our personal and private lives that few other writers share. We chronicle every experience we've ever survived.

At one time or another I have used every character I've ever met. I've used a lot from the University of Dayton...from you-know-who, the cheerleader type who had pom pom hands and a waist with the same number as her I.Q. Her name was Madonna Magdalene Schlosser. But we called her Barfy.

And I had to use the girl I graduated with whose name was too long for the diploma, so they shortened Mary Van Dyke Brown to Mary V.D. Brown. I swear.

I used to describe humorists as a band of pied pipers dancing and singing down the Yellow Brick Road ignoring all the human misery about them.

That's not really ~~accurate~~. We don't ignore the human misery. On some days it becomes unbearable. We don't ignore it. We just rise above it and try to put it in some perspective.

People always want to know whom you admire or what you admire within your own profession. Someone recently asked Stephen King, who wrote *The Shining* and *Cujo* and the new movie, *Creepshow*, what frightened him when he went to a movie and he said, "The price of popcorn."

What makes me laugh is someone I've been legally married to for 33 years, my husband. We both graduated from U.D. and I remember when our engagement was announced, his history teacher took us aside and said, "I totally disapprove of mixed marriages." And I said, "What are you talking about, we're both Catholic." He said, "I'm talking about a history student of some brilliance married to a woman who took history of Russia to get a tan."

To say that we are the antithesis of one another is the understatement of the year. I will close with his remark when a reporter asked him what it was like to be married to a humorist. He said, "It's the same as when Bob Newhart was asked why he remained a friend of Don Rickles. It's a rotten job...but someone has to do it."

Thank you.

Home for me to return