

### WisCon 27, May 23-26, 2003

This is my favorite convention. No other like it. It's the funniest.

These days I feel I should do a political speech. Or ecological speech but I can't do that. Maybe China will do it. This is all about me and some about writing.

I've heard three or four speeches here. I can't remember exactly, but it seems like all those writers were good students. Well, now you'll hear about a bad student. All my life a bad student. And I hated writing most of all. It was too hard.

One reason I was such a bad student is that, as a kid, I went back and forth to and from France. For a while it was back and forth every other year. I was 8 years old in France, 9 and 10 here, then 11 in France, 12 back here...etc.

At the age of 8 I was dumped into a two-room country school where nobody talked English except me and my brother. I was not aware of learning French. I was not aware of not being understood. I think I just talked and gradually it must have become French. (My daughter saw the same thing when she took my 11-year-old grandchild to Peru. There was a boy his age next door and they played together, one speaking Spanish and the other English. They didn't seem to be aware that they weren't speaking the same language.)

So, going back and forth like that, in school I was hopelessly confused. I can't, even still, spell much of anything. I remember the exact words that made me decide I couldn't learn and so gave up: address/adresse, and: syrup/sirop. I thought, well, if that's how you spell address then obviously I can't learn anything so why try. I quit. I think I was 11. It was as if a curtain came down and I didn't bother anymore. I did manage to squeak through with Cs and a few Ds. In college I failed freshman English and had to take it over and almost failed again. (Did I say my dad was a professor of linguistics at University of Michigan?)

Now studying and researching are my favorite things to do...after writing. I know that's true with most of you, too.

Now writing is my favorite *because* it's the hardest thing I know. That's why I love plots and stories. I love the skill it takes to get everything together. Don't tell anybody but I think short story writing is harder than poetry. Even harder than sonnets.

In France my brother and I stayed about a year each time and usually in different places, but always with the same French woman. My parents and little brothers stayed in Oxford, England, and later in Freiberg, Germany, so I and my brother were alone, but that French woman was a much better mother than my mother was. My mother visited now and then and watched her in action, and learned how to be a good mother from watching her.

One year my brother and I lived in a chateau that had an indoor outhouse, a two-holer. Downstairs. That didn't matter because the Brittany maid emptied the chamber pots every morning. There was a large living room full of marble statues, but they couldn't use it through the winter because they couldn't heat it. The only heated parts of the house were the small dining room, (as opposed to the large one) a small play room for my brother and me and the kitchen. They had little stoves that the maid carried from room to room.

At a different place we stayed (a small house) you went up a bank outside and peed into a hole that went down into a vat. When it was full they carried it out to spray on the fields.

I didn't pay any attention in school but I did read a lot. *Tarzan* and *John Carter of Mars*, but especially Zane Gray and Will James. My parents and brothers would go off on the weekend but I'd stay home to read. I didn't read any "girl" books. I have three brothers and I always wanted to be a boy. (There was no doubt in my family which sex was the important one.)

I wasn't brought up as a girl, I was brought up as a defective boy.

I wouldn't have stooped to reading any book like *Little Women*. (All that was just as I was growing up. Not now. I've changed.)

But I was freer than my brothers because I didn't matter. Boys had three choices. They could become lawyers, doctors, or professors. (So my musician brother is the black sheep.) But it didn't matter what I did.

Writing my Western novel, *Ledoyt*, I was having fun in several ways. I could go back to being a cowboy and I could be a man.

(Like Flaubert said of Mme Bovary, *Ledroit, c'est moi.*)

And I could draw for it exactly as I drew when I was in high school.

I hated anything to do with writing until I met science fiction people though my husband, Ed Emsh. (Freshman English ((and spelling)) had scared me off.) The science fiction writers talked about writing as if it could be learned and as if a normal human being could do it. Through Ed, I got to know (and love) the sf world and wanted to join it. I began to sell stories right away—first to the pulpiest of the pulps. Later on I took classes at the new school. I learned the most from the class with the poet Kenneth Koch.

I've only been blocked when I've learned a lot. After my class with Kenneth Koch, I couldn't write for six months. I had learned so much I had to take time to absorb it. And yet I couldn't tell anybody what I'd learned. I tried even right after the class. What you learn is a secret. It's an experience you have to go through.

I also learned a lot from the various Milford science fiction workshops. And especially from Damon Knight.

I've been doing a lot of war stories lately. I want to give my credentials. Just as I started college, the men started being drafted. We'd look in the newspaper every day to see which of our professors had been called up for WWII. Pretty soon most of the men were gone. (They were either in Canada, or 4F, or in jail for conscientious objecting, or in the war. My husband and my brothers went, though later they marched against the Vietnam war.) Though I was and am, more or less, a pacifist, I wanted to see what was going on. I wanted to experience what my generation was experiencing so I joined the Red Cross.

I spoke French so they sent me to Italy. I handed out coffee and doughnuts, ran a club, and recruited girls for dances... *and* supervised a little library of paperbacks. (We weren't supposed to worry if they were stolen. That's when paperbacks first came out.)

By the time I sailed into Naples on a troop ship, the war had *just* ended. I saw a lot of devastation but no actual war. First I was stationed on the Isle of Capri at an R&R, rest and relaxation place. I can't remember doing a single lick of work. I played pinochle with the guys and took groups hiking on the cliffs. Later I was stationed in Tarcento near the Yugoslavian boarder. In neither of these places did I wear my Red Cross uniform. I learned a lot about how gross *some* (not many) American soldiers could be with the Italians. I was cursed at and spit on by some of our guys when they thought I was Italian. They called me words I'd never heard then and have never heard since. On Capri four or five men would get together and push down the thick mud walls surrounding the houses just for the fun of it. In Tarcento I do remember working. I drove a truck. I loved doing that.

So I went first to music school, then to war, and then to art school, where I met Ed Emsh. Actually we met in front of a naked lady—in life class. After we married, we went off to France for a year and studied at the Beaux Arts. In the summer we rode all around Europe on a motorcycle.

When we came back, Ed started out as an science fiction illustrator, but then went into abstract expressionist painting and experimental film making. We influenced each other. I went into more experimental writing and became part of what others called the new wave in science fiction. That was a long time ago. Now I call it the Old Wave.

Kafka is my favorite writer. I love most of his short stories, better than his novels. (Though I don't care for all the short stories. My favorites are *The Hunger Artist*, *Josephine The Mouse Singer*, *Report To An Academy* which I imitated in *Report To The Men's Club*) I like Kafka because his stories resonate beyond the story. And I like that you can't quite put your finger on the meanings. It's more a feeling that it's telling you more than is on the page. I recently heard a writer on the radio say that stories should be like icebergs, most of them underwater.

I've done many a story without resonance. (All my early work in fact.) But I don't care for those stories of mine much.

The nicest thing that was ever said about my science fiction writing was by Jim Gunn. He wrote that my science fiction stories "Estranged the everyday." That's what I like best about science fiction. You can make the everyday seem strange. You can see ordinary things with new eyes. Sometimes alien's eyes. You can write about the here and now and have the reader see us as odd. Which we are.

Since thinking about this speech I've been watching myself write more closely than I usually do. I see that "estranging the everyday" is often why I work on a story in the first place. (I have several beginnings hanging around that I never went on with because they were simply telling "the story" so why bother?) Also I think it's science fiction's best reason for being. I like the other stuff, too. Some of it I like a lot, just not as much.

I'm finding, in my new war stories, that I can make anti-war comments through science fiction in a way I wouldn't be able to if I couldn't place the stories in a sort of limbo. My story *Repository* (out in the July issue of F&SF) would have been impossible without a science fiction premise that had wiped out the soldier's memories so they weren't sure what side they were on.

Also I don't like to write about a specific war or place or time. I prefer to universalize it. Put it in limbo and

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make it stand for all wars. Science fiction is perfect for that.

A lot of people like science fiction because they're fascinated with gadgets and inventions and odd doodads and all different kinds of aliens, and that's fun and takes a lot of imagining, but I prefer stories with few science fiction elements.

I may have been brainwashed in this—that is in having as few sf elements and as possible—by Damon Knight. I obey that rule of his but not his other rule. This was that, if a story can be told in a non sf way, then do it that way. He forgot that if you want to be a science fiction/fantasy writer then everything goes into that mold.

I always break Damon's second rule, so I guess you guys can break both of them if you want to.

I also have a problem with those stories where strange things, not foreshadowed, keep popping up. If anything can happen at any time where's the suspense? As Damon Knight wrote, it's like that old joke about waiting for the second shoe to drop. (Somebody living above somebody else is going to bed and takes off his shoe and drops it on the floor. Then he realizes he's made a big thump for the guy below him so he very carefully puts down the second shoe. Pretty soon the guy below him knocks on the door and says, "For God's sake drop the other shoe.") In my classes I always say: But be sure to drop the *first* shoe so the reader can be waiting for the second. First shoes are as important as second shoes. I consider writing to be dropping a lot of first shoes.

After Ed died my writing changed completely. And my reasons for doing it. My children were scattered all over the place, my husband was dead.... I needed a family. I created kids, teenagers, and a husband to live with. I lived in my two westerns, *Ledoyt* and *Leaping Man Hill*, in a way I never had lived in my writing before. At that time those characters were much more real to me than my friends. I didn't go anywhere. I just wrote.

Another big change in my life back then that pertains to *Ledoyt*, *Leaping Man Hill*, and also *The Mount*: One of my daughters said something important right after Ed died, she said go and do something you never did before. She couldn't come with me but she sent me to a ranch.

At first I kept telling her: But I don't like horses anymore. After I'd been there I kept saying: It's the lore I like. All the stuff those ranchers know. How they go out as ships with everything to repair *anything* tied on their saddles. And I had never lived on a farm/ranch before. I had *no idea*. And I guess by now I finally say I do like horses.

In my novel *Ledoyt* I went back to being 12 years old in all ways. I drew for *Ledoyt* exactly as I used to draw in my note books in junior high. I loved the

research so much I couldn't leave it out...so the recipes, and medical information of the times, etc. are in it. That was my first *real* novel. My earlier novel *Carmen Dog* is like a series of short stories except, like the *Perils of Pauline*, each short story gets her in more trouble at the end. I was so confused about writing a real novel, when writing *Ledoyt* I remember lining up all the scenes and sections in a long row across the floor trying to decide the order. But after *Ledoyt*, *Leaping Man Hill* just went zipping along. (Some people like the mess of *Ledoyt* better.)

Later at my summer place in California, I took several classes in prey animal psychology, which actually were classes on the psychology of everything. About how we, being predators and having predators such as cats and dogs around us all the time, understand predators, but know very little about prey animals.

I used what I learned in this class for writing *Ledoyt*, but also especially in my novel *The Mount*. Especially the differences between prey and predator. I thought it would be fun to write about a prey riding on a predator instead of the other way around. Us, who can't smell and can't hear very well, and can only see straight out in front, being ridden by a creature who can see in a circle and hear and smell better than we can.

Another fun thing about those classes was, only the ranchers came to them. People with lots of horses and lots of cows and big hats they never took off.

I don't think I ever would have written if I hadn't gotten married. I came from a big bouncy noisy family. Always laughing and talking and arguing. (My dad was one who thought, to argue was to love.) I was so lonely when I first got married with just the two of us, I didn't know what to do. I kept on with art work for a while, but after meeting the so people through Ed, I wanted to join them.

I was a day dreamer, but what kid isn't? My parents let me alone. They didn't worry about my bad grades or whether my homework was done. They let me be. That wasn't just because I was a mere girl. They didn't worry about the boys either. They always thought we'd wise up one of these days all by ourselves and everybody did, but with me, it took a long, long time.

I didn't begin writing until I was thirty and had had my first child. (I had three, so I had to struggle to get any writing time at all. Most of the time I went around feeling as if I couldn't breathe.) I never really had writing time until my husband moved to California to teach at Cal Arts. For nine or so years we had a bicoastal relationship. Both of us got a lot more work done that way.

This conference must be full of mothers? Maybe having as hard a time as I had. I wondered what my kids

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felt like with a mother struggling to write all the time, so I asked them.

One daughter wrote back: "Having a Mom and Dad who were doing their art in the house made making art normal and casual and an integral part of life. It made us kids do art also."

Another daughter wrote: "Getting put to bed and hearing the sound of the typewriter and knowing your mom was right there, was reassuring." (She said, "We didn't know till later Mom was putting us to bed earlier than other kids.")

My son wrote: "I remember being proud and inspired by my mother... I would never have tried to write if it hadn't been for her." His note was full of how unfair it was that Ed got to do his art with no hassle and that I had to struggle for every minute. My son would fit right in here.

I want to set the record straight about me writing in a play pen. It isn't explained properly...and never has

been, ever. OK, you put your desk in the corner of a room. You take apart one corner of a playpen and open it out. Remove the floor. Attach the corners to the walls on each side of the desk. The area will be three times again as big as a play pen. The kids are fenced out and can't reach your papers. Mostly mine were hanging over the fence talking to me. My kids did NOT yell and rage outside it, as has been written. After all, I had learned to mother from that French woman who looked after us. I wasn't quite as good as she was, but almost. The kids came first. They were happy. I was the one who wasn't. I was suffocating there. But now I have all the time to write I want.

Except when I had to write a speech.

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