

The truth is...we gather on the Third Monday of each month to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

We started in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a 1 to 1 ½ page document. We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

Curious? Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member.

Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group
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March 2017 selection – Madness

I Heart Schubert
By J. Smetana

The Schubert concert is never very well publicized. I know it's sometime in January (Franny's birthday is 31 Jan.) and I think it's always on a Sunday. Or a Saturday. I found out by accident. I was in the Fine Arts Building looking for that guy who used to own a used bookstore in the basement of a building on Broadway near Brompton. He moved to the Fine Arts Building on South Michigan Avenue. I just cannot imagine why. Maybe he was getting kicked out of his old space. I wonder what's in there now? Maybe a hair place. Have you ever noticed how many real hair places look just like that tacky set in "Sheer Madness"? I guess I was looking "lost" because a lady sitting at a card table asked me if I were going to the music concert. What music concert? I asked her. That's how I first heard about this all-day Schubert Extravaganza. Last Sunday it rolled around again and I decided I'd go for at least a couple of hours. It's no longer held in the Fine Arts Building. Now it's in the Piano Forte store located at 1300-something South Michigan Avenue.

I was making some good progress on the Blue Line. I didn't want to press my luck. Riding the Blue Line is like riding the roulette wheel. You gotta know when to hop off the gravy train. If today were yesterday I'd ride it to either Washington or Jackson then scoot over to the Red Line so-called through the tunnel. Sometimes Kareem Abdul-

Jabbar is playing clarinet in the tunnel. Did I just say Kareem Abdul-Jabbar? I meant Kahil El'Zabar. I bailed out because I had to use the toilet but where? If I was close to the Berghoff I'd just run in the bar. If Marshall Field was still Marshall Field I'd find the men's room that has the holes drilled into the stall partitions. I settled for the main library--I was heading in that general direction anyway-- the jewel of Michigan Avenue, what's now known as the Cultural Center. I'm not real sure what passes for culture today. A couple of years back they had more than a dozen artists working in the building in a first floor studio--each artist had his or her own groovy space and they were all mentally challenged. And each one was a completely unique, fully realized artist. They all just happened to be nuts. Well they got their asses kicked out. They're still doing their thing. Now their thing is being done at 35th Street and Racine. I don't know about you, but I walk by there all the time. Not really--I'm joking. God bless 'em. God bless America. The hallway to the can used to be festooned with b&w architectural photos. Some real beauties. I remember one being miscaptioned. I think the Delaware Building (now a McDonald's) was labeled the McCarthy Building (now demolished) or the other way 'round. You'd think that would be easily checkable and before you hung up the labels you'd double check it (including dates and spellings) just to make sure. 'Specially if you were hanging a show in the Cultural Center so-called. Or maybe not. As I approached the toilet I saw a number of denizens exiting, dressed like characters 'from "The Road Warrior". At that point I made an executive decision to find another toilet. But I did not want my time in the Cultural Center to be completely wasted. There's a room on the northeast corner of the building that has calendars and maps and schedules...the paper ephemera I love. All manner of paper ephemera. You can always get a current CTA map there. And there's a slick magazine devoted to art galleries that's all but useless but I always make sure I get one and send it to Nancy Pletos in Detroit. She used to live in Chicago as a working artist right on Halsted near 18th, right on the artists' strip. On the way to the paper ephemera room I have to pass through a large open room, I don't think it has a name or anything but in the past they've sometimes held little concerts there. I saw Los Guitarristas, a fantastic guitar quartet. I also saw two gypsy style guitar players who really tore it up. I saw one of the Umbrella concerts there: Mike Reed played drums for an Italian sax player. Mike Reed always looks like he's scowling, like he's in a bad mood or something but I'm not sure that's the case. I talked to him after the concert and I told him the horn man reminded me a little of Rich Corpolongo a first-rate tenor saxist from Elmwood Park. And Mike said, "Yeah I can see that." I also saw Paulinho Garcia in that room. If anyone today has the bossa nova sound, it's him. Try to see him sometime when he's playing with Greg Fishperson a tenor man who can do the Stan Getz thing without sounding like a Stan Getz impersonator. But now, today, there's no gypsy style guitar strummers strumming. Nor are there drummers drumming. There's definitely not any Italiano sax man blowing his avant-garde brains out. There is a line of people, mostly men but some women waiting in line for a plate of spaghetti. There's at least sixty people either waiting for, or sitting down and enjoying, their lunch. As I skulk my way out of this room a young chap hands me a religious tract. Of course I take it. I take all of those things. "Promise you'll read it!" he implores me. "I promise!" I tell him. Later in the bus I pull it out of my pocket and see it's authored by Erwin Lutzer. I would read anything by that nutty crackpot Erwin Lutzer! Now the Paper Ephemera Room is in sight! But the door's closed, locked in a kittywampus manner with a chain--that's right, a chain--

wrapped around the crash bar. There's an older man and woman sitting in front of the door, not really DOING anything, I don't think they work there or anything, maybe they're DOCENTS, that's it, they're probably DOCENTS. I bet they took a course so as to become DOCENTS. I ask them, "What's the deal with the propaganda room?" gesturing in that direction. "It's all gone!" the lady says. I'm at the end of my tether now. I don't know what to do or say next. If they're really DOCENTS maybe I can ask them a lively question about the Widow Clarke House.

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I Don't Understand
By Susan J. Wilfong

I don't understand basketball.
To me, "March Madness" is a waste.
Grown people running back and forth
As if they were being chased.

Football makes more sense to me.
At least I understand the rules.
But still, grown people are running around,
Sometimes just acting like they're fools.

I don't understand hockey.
The puck just moves too fast.
But I see others getting excited
As that silly puck gets passed.

I don't know how to keep score
In the sports I've mentioned above.
Don't let me forget about tennis
Where zero equals "Love".

The first point you make in tennis
Is actually fifteen.
The next point is thirty then forty.
To me, this is obscene.

I have a little question
If in scoring all sports under the sun
Would it make a big difference
If your first point would be one?

Then two, then three and then four,
The same way baseball is scored.
I don't think the excitement would change.
I don't think the fans would get bored.

Sometime, scoring rules are just weird.
There's nothing more I can say.
I guess I'll be confused by sports
Until my dying day.

###

Madness... Sheer Madness I Tell You
By N. Stewart

We were sitting in front of the TV, listening to the news. "Wait. What was that about someone who torched a woman that asked him to put out his cigarette? Did I hear that right?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. You heard correctly. According to the report, he throw the cigarette on the floor, stamped it out, left the Behavioral Clinic and returned with a can of gasoline, threw it on the woman and lit a match. She died from her injuries a few weeks later."

"What her family must have gone through, the unanswered question of why and then holding a bedside vigil while that loved one suffered in agony."

"And, since he has been declared insane and not liable for his actions he wasn't sent to prison. Instead, after treatment, the judge ruled that he can partake in a mental health reintegration program that allows him to go on escorted field visits into the community."

"Are you serious?"

"Again, yes, I'm afraid so. If he does well and continues to take his meds, he can be released from the institution and sent to transitional housing within the community."

"I'm going to find out that judge's name and see if I can do anything about his not being re-elected."

"It may not be the judge's fault. The law is the law. The man is not a criminal, but was a mentally sick individual that now is regaining normal status, and given that he continues with supervision and stays on his meds he will be returned to society."

"You just know he will do something again. I can't image that he will continue to take his meds without supervision. It will be only a matter of time. This is a mad, upside down,

crazy world we live in. Someone carrying a little marijuana is sent to jail for years, but someone that deliberately kills an innocent person is merely slapped on the wrist and allowed to return to the community to do who knows what the next time. I just don't get it. This is madness... sheer madness I tell you."

"But there's nothing we can do about it. Is there?"

"Guess not. Just doesn't seem right."

(Source: Chicago Tribune, March 18, 2017, page 3: *Man OK'd for trips from institution*)

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"Madness" in the Movies **By Elvira K. Castillo**

Hollywood is no stranger to "Madness" as a subject matter for some of their films. I am totally unfamiliar with current movies covering this subject, because, although I've been a great movie fan since a kid, I do not find most of the present-day films to my taste, especially ones dealing with madness or horror -- too many special effects to be real or believable.

At any rate, I do remember films from earlier decades that dealt with "madness" or shall we say 'mental illness' in an enlightening manner, which may have eventually led to better treatment as they made us aware of the conditions of institutions and the, sometimes primitive or destructive, treatment in dealing with the mind. Also, other movies just dealt with demented individuals and their resulting dangerous consequences.

"Snake Pit," a 1948 film, stars Olivia DeHavilland as Virginia Cunningham, a woman suffering from schizophrenia and guilt. She was institutionalized by her husband in hopes she could overcome her demons and return to him and her career as a writer. This was the first time the subject of mental illness was treated intelligently and exposed the inadequate facilities for treatment. Although her doctor paid her much attention, she still found herself amongst a herd of noisy women, wondering who she was and where she was. The film did make the public aware of the plight of mental institutions. What I will never forget is at the end of the movie, a camera shot was made looking down at several women closed up in one room, just like snakes in a pit. The title of the film came from an ancient habit of throwing lunatics into a snake pit to shock them into sanity.

Another film in 1975 which brought the treatment of mental illness to light was "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," starring Jack Nicholson as Randal Patrick McMurphy. McMurphy was sent to a mental institution for "evaluation" because of his belligerent and rebellious personality. He came from a work farm after being arrested several times for assault, including statutory rape of a 15-year old girl. The actual administrator of the hospital/institution where it was filmed wanted to have an historical look back at how far mental treatment had come, and he is in the movie as the hospital administrator.

McMurphy is very rebellious and fights against authority, especially Nurse Ratchet, who in their daily group discussions continually concentrates on the circumstances that originally put the patients in the mental hospital. He believes the authority is sicker than the patients. But, Nurse Ratchet, or shall I say Nurse Hatchet, was in charge, and no matter how he stirs up the patients to rebel, she is in control. What brought everything to a head was when McMurphy brings two prostitutes with liquor into the facility getting everyone drunk. During this incident, he encourages a vulnerable young patient to have sex with one of the prostitutes. After Nurse Ratchet learns of this, she threatens to tell the young man's mother which leads to his suicide. McMurphy becomes enraged and tries to strangle Nurse Ratchet, but we know who's really in charge. Nurse Ratchet survives and McMurphy is given electrical shock treatments. The lobotomy leaves McMurphy a complete vegetable. Remember this is a man who really was only brought to the facility for evaluation. In the final scenes, we see a large Indian who McMurphy befriended and referred to as "Chief" finding his friend just a body -- no mind. The Chief smothers McMurphy to set him free. Then he goes to the water cooler, rips it out, throws it through the window and escapes himself, with all the patients cheering him on. So much for how far mental treatment had become at that time. Jack Nicholson said, "It's difficult to hold on to reality when you're playing a psychopath."

Now to a couple of films that dealt with deranged people and their madness. First, there was the character Norman Bates played by Anthony Perkins and his "Mother" in the 1960 film "Psycho," who were the owners of the Bates Motel. Unfortunately, Marian Cram (Janet Leigh), who was a thief, made the mistake of taking a room at the Bates Motel. Norman was a psycho case whose Mother was actually dead, but he keeps her alive by imitating her voice and wearing her clothes. I don't think any one of us can forget him stabbing Marian to death in the shower accompanied by the shrieking music to the beat of the striking knife. Lila Cram (Vera Miles) attempted to find her missing sister Marian, and was almost stabbed to death by the freakish looking caricature of Norman dressed up as his Mom again. Mom was just a skeleton in a room and Norman was taken off to jail. In the 1962 film "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane" we have two sisters Jane Hudson (Bette Davis) and Blanche (Joan Crawford) living in a decaying old mansion. Jane is a former child star and dresses like a child, and sister, Blanche, a former movie queen, is crippled and bedridden due to an automobile accident. The only contact they have with the outside world is their cleaning lady Elvira Stitt (Maidie Norman). When Jane learns that Blanche wants to sell their mansion, she begins to persecute Blanche by serving her such things as roasted rats (Can we forget that?) and reminding her that she is dependent. Jane also deludes herself into thinking she can make a theatrical come back. When Blanche attempts to escape from the home, Jane ties her up and locks her bedroom door. Elvira was fired, but she always worried about Jane's behavior, so she went back to check on Blanche and Jane kills her. Blanche by now is almost dead, but before she dies, she confesses to Jane that she was jealous of Jane and fixed the car, causing the accident that crippled her. Now, you tell me which sister was mad? Perhaps both? Jane is later arrested for the death of Elvira.

So much for the "madness" I found to be both enlightening as to the awareness of mental institution facilities and to be suspensefully entertaining in the movies, and God Bless Elvira!