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The Treefrog Tattler

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the contest issue

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Welcome to *The Treefrog Tattler*, the semi-monthly newsletter of Leapfrog Press. Here you will find information for writers, Leapfrog news, author interviews, and more. To submit an article, writing tip, or news for inclusion in the *Tattler*, email leapfrog@leapfrogpress.com.

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Talent Is Learned, Not Taught

by Lisa M. Graziano, editor-in-chief

Most of us would agree with the statement "Mozart was talented." Well, yeah. He wrote his first symphony at age 8, and it's not bad either. But what exactly is talent? Is it something he just "had"? Is it something that most of us ordinary mortals just don't have?

We hear it everywhere: "I wish I could write, but I don't have the talent." "I gave up piano lessons because I just wasn't talented."

Talent is not something one is born with. It is acquired. It can be acquired quickly, and in genius proportions, by young children in some environments: Mozart was steeped in generational talent from the moment of his birth; he also had a musician father who kept him at it night and day, forcefully, sometimes brutally. His sister Nannerl was just as talented (and pressured), so Wolfgang was in no way a solitary genius. (Her talent was cut off when she reached marriageable age and was required to leave music behind.)

OK, so most of us didn't have Leopold Mozart to teach us how to write--we weren't forced to sit with pen in hand late into the night, scribbling out stories, at the age of two. That may be an efficient way to acquire talent, but it's not a desirable way.

Talent, for most of us, has to be learned. It cannot be taught by a writer during a seminar or even a semester-long course. Craft is largely what is taught in classes. One can be taught how to write grammatical sentences, and how to punctuate dialog, but one cannot be taught how to write realistic dialog, or how to develop a character with depth. One cannot be taught how to write with rhythm.

These things require talent as well as craft, and they can only be learned with long-term exposure. So how do you learn writing talent? First, you

read. I don't mean some expert's list of the 20 best novels ever written. I mean reading as a lifestyle, reading for years, reading every day, a hundred books a year, year in, year out, reading everything: the classics, translations, just-published books, great books, mediocre books, famous books, obscure books. Go on author binges: Read everything by an author. You'll learn a remarkable amount by reading an author's obscure juvenile writings after you've read the famous books. You will see how that author developed her talent. Read Homer, read modern books, read everything in between. You don't have to study literature; you just have to read it.

A few years of that, and you'll have raw talent aplenty. You'll also absorb most of the craft you'll ever need. And the best part is that you'll enjoy yourself. There's nothing like having a thousand unique worlds with all their characters floating around in your head. You'll start having bizarre thoughts. "What if d'Artagnan had dinner with Stephen Dedalus? What would they talk about?" "What would Elizabeth Bennett say to Sarah Palin?"

Somewhere in there, you start writing.

I had a childhood friend who decided to become a writer. Sometimes we got together and wrote stories. Ridiculous, idiotic stories full of third-grade bathroom humor. By the time he was 12, this friend was sitting at a tiny desk in his bedroom (the desk was painted a painful orange, as I recall), with a stack of scrap paper--the back of his dad's typed manuscript drafts--and a pencil, writing until midnight, one, two in the morning. Every night. He filled hundreds, thousands of pages. For 20 years, he wrote in silence. Stories. Novels. Essays. More Novels. About a decade ago, he decided his writing was good enough to be seen, and started sending it places. His "first" novel came out a few years ago. It was 15th novel he'd written.

If you are sitting in a writing course and the instructor says "I can't teach talent," don't give up. Don't fall for that old line "if you don't have the talent, you'll never be a writer." Go out and get yourself some talent.



Leapfrog News & Reviews

Listen to an interview with Richard Klin and Lily Prince ([Something to Say](#)) on WKCR's Radioactive Lunch ([part 1](#) and [part 2](#)).

Read [Casey Anthony, the Jury's Decision, and the Neuroscience of Morality](#) and ["Why Is Music a Religious Experience?"](#) by Michael Graziano ([God Soul Mind Brain](#)) in The Huffington Post.

Articles on Jazz musicians by Mick Carlon, author of the forthcoming *Riding on Duke's Train*, can be read in *Jazz Times*: Read ["In Its Own Time: Remembering the Miles Davis Quintet of 1955-1956"](#) and ["Dave McKenna: The Big Man and his Big Fan."](#)

Read an essay by Suzanne Kamata ([Losing Kei](#)), [Home, At Last](#), for her perspective on life in Japan after the March 11 tsunami.

[Read a blog](#) by B.B. Wurge ([The Last Notebook of Leonardo](#)) on imagination and children's books.

Read an op-ed by Li Miao Lovett ([In the Lap of the Gods](#)) in New America Media: [Should California Deny Farm Workers Their Basic Rights?](#)

Listen to an interview with Michael Mirolla ([The Facility](#)) on [Liquid Lunch](#).

[Listen](#) to an interview and reading with Helen Phillips ([And Yet They Were Happy](#)) on KRZA news, Alamosa (go to time index 8:50).

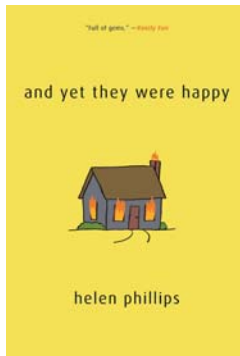
Helen Phillips' story "Things We Do" was awarded first prize in the DIAGRAM innovative fiction contest, and was published in the June issue of DIAGRAM.

Helen Phillips' essay "Life Care Center" won the 2011 Iowa Review Award nonfiction prize, and will be published in the December issue.

Please view our [Events Page](#) for upcoming author events that may be in your area.

New Reviews

AND YET THEY WERE HAPPY Helen Phillips (LeapLit, May 2011) Read the first fable [here](#). See the [book trailer](#). Visit the author's website: helencphillips.com.



Book cover images are clickable links

Contrary magazine
review by Harriet Green

In her first book, *And Yet They Were Happy*, Helen Phillips doesn't [begin](#) at the beginning, or even, as some writers do, at the end. Instead, she selects themes--some sacred and some intimate, some ordinary and some fantastical, some political and some apocalyptic--to weave a complex tale of one couple's life journey into a series of miniature, interconnected stories.

Phillips divides her book into nineteen segments, such as "the weddings," "the fights," "the droughts," "the monsters," "the wives," and "the envies." Within each section are numbered chapters where the absurd mingles with the mundanity of human relationships. Intensity permeates every line of the text in these short chapters that depict variant imaginings of the same theme.

In "fight #2:"

She becomes a maple tree. He taps her for syrup. She poisons her sap. He falls beside a stream. She becomes a stream. He vomits in the stream.

While in "fight#8:"

The kitchen. Pan on the stovetop. Unsweetened cocoa powder, sugar, five magical ingredients. Pour in water, stir until it becomes a spicy paste. Add milk--yes, whole milk, it has not been easy lately, we need milk that will save us.

The commonplace and the magical smoothly intertwine in the narrative to create an inexact and multi-faceted portrait of this couple's life across time, relationships, and physical locales. The stories play out the title's subversion of "happily ever after," charting how the now-united two survive obstacles both understandable and unexpected. Unicorn-hunters and ghosts appear in the wife's attempts to navigate her marriage and its aftermath. Strange creatures appear in the forests; monsters stalk children from televisions, and magicians in hot-air balloons fill the skies above the couple's home.

Dystopia also haunts the setting of the novel, which hints throughout of oppressive forces and a fractured world. In "regime #7," we read:

They order us to grow raspberries on our windowsills. We don't know what motivates this [law](#). We do know it's been

Writers on Writing
Spare the Reproductive
Anatomy--and read the slush
pile
Michael S. A. Graziano

Beginning writers laudably want to be brash. They push limits in their vocabulary and imagery. The narrative voice is salty, sassy, often profane. Editors read the modern prose and -- yawn. Why? Because out of every thousand-odd manuscripts considered, nine hundred are going for the same effect. The brashness doesn't seem terribly brash when you've read a few hundred of them. You start to see past the surface, the ubiquitous casual sex, the constant reference to

reproductive anatomy, the sassy writing, into the deeper bones of the stories. And you realize that certain themes, plots, and linguistic styles that may feel terribly original to the writers are, in fact, the most dreadfully common. How can a young writer get a better sense of what is truly new, what is special, what is actually edgy, and what is merely the same thing that everyone and her brother is writing? If you would like to stand out from the pile, whether to improve your chances of publication, or to improve your art, or most likely both, one good way is to volunteer to read the slush pile. Every publisher takes in a pile of manuscripts each year and wades through it, looking for that rare book that escapes the mundane. Become an intern. Read a few hundred of these submissions and you will learn more than any writing course can possibly teach you. You will come away with a clear sense of what works and what doesn't. If you want to break the common pattern, find out what it is first.

a long time since supermarkets carried raspberries; our children wouldn't recognize them.

And in "failure #7," the narrator and her husband visit a museum where we come upon the Hall of North American Environment, but between ourselves we call it the Hall of Nostalgia for Things We Ourselves Have Never Seen.

In Phillips's world, the veil between the fantasy and the reality regularly tears apart. Even the characters are difficult to classify; one moment recognizable and the next, not. In the concluding section on "the helens," the narrator is a character named Helen Phillips, a young woman who has an affair with Bob Dylan and also:

a wife who had transformed from a human into something else. The plaque beneath the cage bears only her first name: *Helen*.

Employing a character with the same name as the author in a fictional work allows this final section to speak not only to the complexity and depth of the work itself but also to the issue of the author as an element of the story, as well as to the ongoing literary conversation on the thin line between fiction and nonfiction.

In stories marked by a shattering of the wall between concrete and ephemeral, a constant shifting of fates and realities, and a core truth that nothing is what it seems, *And Yet They Were Happy* chronicles two lives bound together for better and worse. Through a realistic kaleidoscope of perspectives, it delicately probes how two people survive in a world that includes large terrors and small unicorns, a world with which we are all familiar.



The 2011 Leapfrog Fiction Contest Winners

The 2011 Leapfrog Fiction Contest brought in 546 manuscripts from 16 countries. Twenty-four percent were short-story collections; the rest were novels and novellas. Judging was done by Leapfrog editors and author Marge Piercy, who critiqued the finalist and winning manuscripts. Next year's contest will open for entries on January 15, 2012, and will include a children's fiction division.

First-Prize Winner

Congratulations to **Allen Learst**, who has been awarded first prize and a publication contract for his linked story collection *Places Part Dream*.

A high school graduate from a suburb on Detroit's Eastside, Allen Learst grew up believing he was destined to work for the auto industry, and when he was eighteen, took a job at the Chrysler Tank Plant; and later, after Vietnam, where he served as a combat infantryman in the 101st Airborne Division, he worked for the Ford Motor Company Interior Plant. After more than twenty blue collar jobs, Allen decided to go to college. He earned a BS and MA from [Northern Michigan University](#), and a [PhD](#) in Creative Writing from Oklahoma State University. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Marquette.

"My stories reveal the aftermath of war through the voices of Vietnam veterans and their families. These stories take place in Detroit, a bleak

environment that backgrounds the edgy, violent, and often dysfunctional motivations of my characters, who manage throughout their wanderings to exhibit moments of tenderness and compassion. My intention is to show my audience parallels between all wars, the suffering those who return from combat must confront and the suffering of those who survive war's consequences: threats of violence, suicide, anxiety, alienation, and depression. These stories are about loss and redemption; they are about survival."

Finalist

Click on the author's name to read about the author and the manuscript.

[C. K. Killheffer](#) "[A World of Born](#)" (novel)

[George Rosen](#) "[On the Flats](#)" (stories)

[Tracy DiBrincat](#) "[Hollywood Buckaroo](#)" (novel)*

**Hollywood Buckaroo* also won the Big Moose Award, and will be published by Black Lawrence Press.

Semifinalist

Rooms and Closets (stories) by [Janice D. Soderling](#)

Into the Wilderness (stories) by [David Harris Ebenbach](#)

Honorable Mention

Heart's Blood (novel) by [Elizabeth Zinn Ervin](#)

Revelation (novel) by [Colin Winnette](#) (forthcoming, Mutable Sound Press)

A Wilderness of Monkeys (stories) by [Robert McKean](#)

Splendorific (stories) by Liza Kleinman

Outside In (novel) by [Scott Shachter](#)

The Impossibility of Crows (novel) by [Rosanne Daryl Thomas](#)

Saluting the Magpie (stories) by [Jacob M. Appel](#)

Family Lovers (stories) by [Norma Rosen](#)

The Incurables (stories) by [Mark Brazaitis](#)

Sidewalk Dancing (stories) by [Letitia L. Moffitt](#)

The Water Monarchs (novel) by [Zenju Earthlyn Marselean Manuel](#)



Summer Reading

With all the summer reading lists out there, as if people can't pick their own books, we thought we'd come up with our very own list of unusual books for adventurous readers, based on familiar summertime themes. Click on the links to read excerpts. Click on the covers to open each book's web page.



Painting Lessons

by Dmitry Zlotzky, author of [Monster, Oil on Canvas](#)

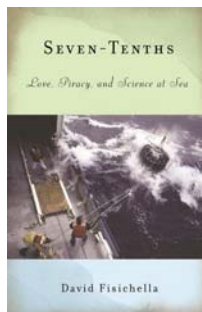
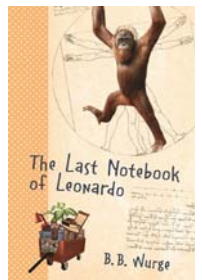
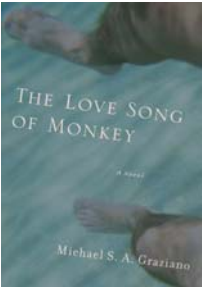
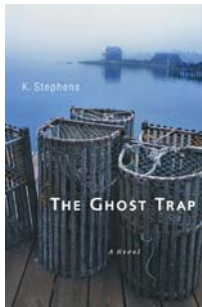
Shoveling driveways is a fitting metaphor for winter labors. Disregarding a teasing image of mowing a backyard, one is tempted to counter with an equally visual representation of summer joy like a lazy Sunday on a Cape Cod beach, or a plein air art class. For twins Alex and Alex, art is a means to an end.

Maine Vacation

For those East-Coasters who spend time down east, sailing the foggy coast and eating lobster, we recommend K. Stephens' [The Ghost Trap](#), a realistic novel of psychological drama in a small lobstering community.

Love

Summer and love go together like...well, like a busty woman goes on the cover of a cheap romance novel. If you're not into that sort of thing, try [The Love Song of Monkey](#), an extended riff on Love that came out of two



lines from The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/scuttling across the floors of silent seas." What would it feel like to actually be those claws on the bottom of the ocean? What psychological state of love and desperation would lead you down there?

For the Kids

How many times have we parents said, "why don't you read a book instead?" It's a poor statement on society that TV is thought to be more engaging than most books. The kids might discover otherwise when they set out with Jem and his father on the ultimate quest: to find the last resting place of Leonardo da Vinci. Let [B.B. Wurge](#) raise their eyebrows and stretch those laugh muscles. You might even try him yourself.

Sailing and Solitude

by David Fisichella

author of [Seven-Tenths: Love, Piracy, and Science at Sea](#)

I have heard it said that going to sea has all of the benefits of suicide with none of the inconveniences. Far from being a morbid reflection on the human condition, the phrase was used by sailors to describe the liberating effect of being beyond the reach of life's pressures ashore. In the middle of the ocean, there is no grass to cut, no traffic to sit in and no telemarketers that need a receiver slammed in their ear. Aboard ship the daily routine is comforting, and with the exception of the weather, highly predictable.

Professional sailors of years past didn't look at embarkation as an adventure, but rather an escape into a world where everything was orderly and existed solely for the purpose of conveying the ship safely from point A to point B. I've met some of these men (at the time it was almost exclusively men) and sailed with them. I've heard their stories, and through these stories learned how the narcotic effect of isolation factored into their lives. I even experienced it myself, sailing on research cruises with my oceanographer wife, and to a lesser degree when sailing the coast of Maine on our sloop. I felt the liberating effect of being cut off, disconnected, if even briefly, from the rest of the world. While at the same time experiencing the strange freedom that comes with an absence of news from home, there's a certain resignation to fate and abandonment of any sense of control over what is happening beyond the horizon

Sadly, in a period measured in one or two decades, the seemingly endless boundaries of the ocean cocoon have been breached by technology. First, by satellite phone, then by email, and now broadband Internet with streaming video and on-line shopping. Sure, an individual can sail his own boat out of cell phone range and savor the quiet and uninterrupted peace, but how many of us will do that willingly? Certainly not the professional sailor. The cries of the crew that ring about the steel walls of today's ships are not those of a mob looking for their grog ration, but of mariners complaining that the internet connection is down.

It is only a matter of time before the phrase at the top of this page will be doomed to obscurity, made obsolete by technology and left to join other noble sentences such as; "Wench, fetch my chain mail," and "I couldn't call. I didn't have change for the phone."

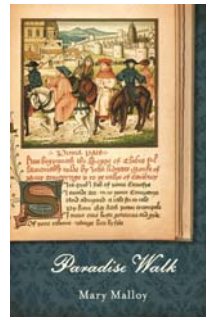
With solitude at sea fast becoming an endangered species of human experience, the best method of escape may still be to lie on a warm sandy beach with a good book that will mentally transport me to that place of seclusion in the middle of a vast ocean. The only problem is, where will I recharge my Kindle?

David Fisichella is Manager of Shipboard Scientific Services at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Woods Hole, Mass.



Upcoming Titles

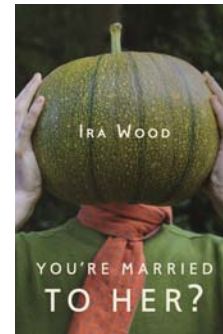
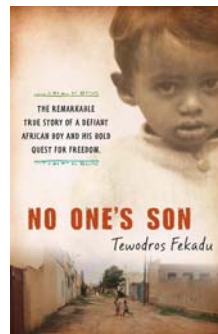
Check out our forthcoming books. The first three can now be pre-ordered online or from your local bookstore.



How to Stop Loving Someone by Joan Connor fiction, October
These stories about love and loss range from somber to lyrical to laugh-out-loud funny.

Paradise Walk by Mary Malloy fiction, November
In the second Lizzie Manning mystery, an ancient manuscript and the hidden bones of St. Thomas Becket lead to unexpected danger.

Riding on Duke's Train by Mick Carlon children's fiction, Dec/Jan
Hitch a ride with 9-year-old Danny as he joins Duke Ellington and his band, who play their music across America and Europe in 1939.



No One's Son by Tewodros Fekadu memoir, April 2012
The remarkable true story of a defiant Ethiopian boy and his bold quest for freedom.

You're Married to Her? by Ira Wood memoir, August 2012
Self-skewering, hilarious tales in which an unknown writer, married to a famous one, looks back on his wildly idiotic mistakes.



Readers' Say

This section will include one or more comments from our readers. To respond to something you've read in our newsletter, email leapfrog@leapfrogpress.com. Let us know if you'd like your comments published, and if we can use your name.

I'm pleased to be on the mailing list for "The Treefrog Tattler," and I'd like to add a few thoughts to Michael Graziono's piece objecting to the old advice about writing what one knows. I agree with him that it is advice to play safe and stifle imagination. Narcissism and self-absorption aren't in short supply among young writers, and advising them to stick to what they think they know only encourages those qualities. The young writer often needs to be taught to move beyond herself and to encounter the larger world. Writing what we know is good advice only if it is accompanied by the proviso that we should always be trying to know more.

I was impressed by Robert Olen Butler's story collection *Had a Good Time*. Butler collected postcards from junk stores, yard sales, the attics of friends, etc., postcards that had been written on and sent. These constituted small glimpses of our American past, going back to WWI. Butler then selected 12 or so and wrote stories in which he imagined the lives of the senders or recipients. In the book, each story begins with a photo of the message on the actual card. This is a writer who does not gaze in the mirror or dwell on his own sorrows or triumphs. He imagines the world as others have seen it.

The ability to imagine other points of view is an ethical imperative in any society that aspires to peace and harmony. It is a skill that can be taught, and it is something that our best writers demonstrate time and again.

--Bruce Henricksen

We welcome news from our authors and contest winners. Please let us know of your upcoming book events, new reviews, publication news, and anything else writing related.

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