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The Treefrog Tattler

from Leapfrog Press

May 2011

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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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A View Through the Window by Michael Lee

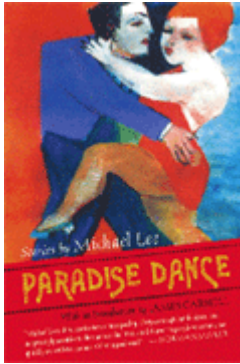
As writers have their own style, so too do writing instructors. Some are dictators, some are cheerleaders, while others look longingly out the window during class. I've taught writing over thirty-some years in every venue from college to small adult education classes (I almost never look out the window) and discovered that each class has its own personality and takes its own direction.

At the beginning of each class, no matter the skill level, I give my "what-you-can-expect-from-me" speech. One of the promises is that the criticism of their work will be just that -- focused on their work. Nothing personal is ever intended nor would be allowed. Still, criticism is the one hurdle many neophyte writers can't get beyond. They'd better because the writing life is fraught with rejection.

My other promise is that I will teach them craftsmanship. You can't be a carpenter without knowing how to use your tools, and craft is most certainly teachable.

"I can't teach talent, though," I say to them and then watch a few faces drop. What kind of flimflam is this guy running, they seem to say. But it's true and if you can't supply a student with the truth, well, you might as well go look out the window.

Michael Lee is the author of two books: [Paradise Dance](#), a collection of short stories published by Leapfrog Press; and [In an Elevator with Brigitte Bardot](#), a collection of humorous essays published by Wordcraft of Oregon. Lee is a book reviewer for THE BARNSTABLE PATRIOT, and a member of PEN International, the Writer's Guild, and the National Book Critics Circle.



[Paradise Dance stories by Michael Lee](#)



Leapfrog News & Reviews

See our next newsletter's article "[Talent Is Learned, Not Taught](#)" for a discussion of how writing talent is developed.

Michael Graziano ([God Soul Mind Brain](#)) is now a "religion and science" blogger for the Huffington Post. Read "[The Spirit Constructed in the Brain](#)" and "[The Darwinian Evolution of Religion](#)."

Articles on Jazz musicians by Mick Carlon, author of the forthcoming *Riding on Duke's Train*, can be read in *Jazz Times*: Read "[Jack Bradley, Spreading the Gospel](#)," "[Ruby Braff, the Beauty in Music](#)," and "[The Everlasting Duke Ellington](#)."

[In the Lap of the Gods](#) by Li Miao Lovett (November 2010) was one of four novels to receive an Honorable Mention in the Green Book Festival, which honors "books that contribute to greater understanding, respect for, and positive action on the changing worldwide environment." One winner and one runner up were also awarded.

Read four interviews with Helen Phillips about [And Yet They Were Happy](#): [The Huffington Post](#), [Nylon Magazine](#), [The L Magazine](#), and [She Writes](#).

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

Below, see our books' latest reviews in *Chronogram*, *Vanity Fair*, *Electric Literature*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

The [Leapfrog 2011 Fiction Contest](#) is now closed for entries. We will be reviewing 545 manuscripts over the next month. Our July newsletter will feature the winners and their manuscripts.

New Reviews

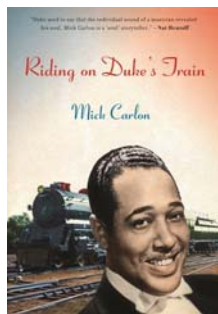
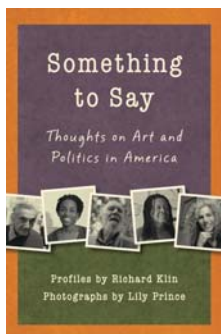
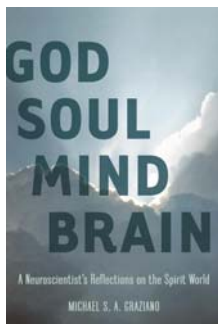
SOMETHING TO SAY by Richard Klin and Lily Prince (LeapSci, April 2011) Read the introduction [here](#). Visit the author's website: [richardklin.com](#).

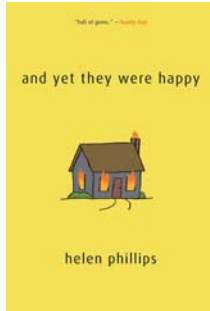
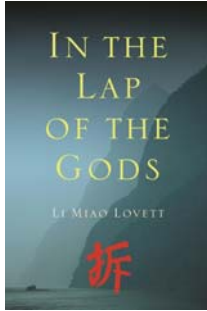
Robert Shapiro, poet and art critic

"This new book is filled with a progressive humor. Zinn is here and Yoko Ono. No one can read this book without coming to a fuller taste for resistance in our culture. The photographs are intent and human, the secret themes of this volume. It is clear and beautiful...and instead of being melodramatic or sentimental, the book is tough and compressed, condensed and full of good stories. The book is part of the fight of our time."

Chronogram

"Physically slender but conceptually expansive, the new book





Writers on Writing
**Write What You
 Don't Know**
 by Michael S. A.
 Graziano

What is the most common advice to aspiring writers? "Write what you know." Write about your own life, disguised so that you don't get sued. Write about the world that is actually around you -- you in specific. Write the details and the moods of your own experience. Wise advice if you want to play safe. It is an insidious mediocretizing influence on today's literature. Especially in a world in which everyone, everyone is steeped in the same information culture, in which everyone knows the same base material, the dictum to write what you know leads to a rather bland commercialism.

Something to Say reads like a speed-dating experience: We meet several personalities in quick succession -- in this case, 15 artists currently creating and thriving across the country.

Thanks to the judicious selection of Richard Klin, who has written for the *Forward*, *The Bloomsbury Review*, and *Parabola*, your "dates" are far from duds; they are poets, authors, painters, and filmmakers. What unifies them is the objective of their body of work, meant to undercut social injustice and heal the world. Their ongoing struggle is to strike a balance by which their art is not subsumed by political rhetoric, an occupational hazard of trafficking in this realm.

Didi Emmons is a chef and food activist, teaching Boston gang members to choose a spatula over a switchblade. Chinese-American poet John Yau explores the challenges of multihyphenated ethnic identities. Painter Freddy Rodriguez's canvasses celebrate his native Dominican Republic's culture, which survived decades of dictatorship. Palestinian comic Maysoon Zayid fights the entrenched struggles of her homeland with pitch-black humor. Sheryl Oring's street performances send up McCarthy-era conformity while reminding us of the need for citizens' vigilance of the government. Franklin Stein, lead singer of Blowback, proves that music born of uncompromising leftist politics can still have a groove. Klezmer musician Alicia Svigals uses the Eastern European village music, alternately raucous and mournful, as a springboard for issues of Judaism and progressive politics.

Most of these people may be unknown to mainstream audiences, but Klin recounts their life stories vividly, offering insight into that quicksilver phenomenon known as the creative process. Among his subjects are three legends: Pete Seeger, Yoko Ono, and Howard Zinn, the latter interviewed two months before his death."

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.

Vanity Fair

"Surreal miniaturist Helen Phillips's debut collection is full of gems."

The Los Angeles Times

"This constellation of prose-poem pieces resists the kind of categorization required to sell books. Perhaps it is a kind of Bible -- a couple's Book of Genesis; perhaps it is a catalog of human endeavors. Floods, fights, failures, far-flung families -- these are a few of the subjects covered, always from more than one perspective. "I drank from a china cup painted with roses. I sipped tea from a distant continent; and suddenly my parents started to seem real to me." It's all vaguely familiar, the "orange lichen growing on tenements," the benevolence and compassion a narrator shows to Noah, who is forced to leave so many beautiful, mysterious creatures behind in the flood. Adam and Eve, Bob Dylan, Snow White, Jack Kerouac and Anne Frank all make cameos; the reader sits on a carousel horse and watches familiar people and objects whirl by. Helen Phillips uses the simplest objects to create suspense, the merest whisper of plot to make her readers care about these tiny planets."

Electric Literature

"*And Yet They Were Happy* by Helen Phillips can be likened to a magical kaleidoscope. Every time you turn the page the colorful crystals rearrange to form a new beautiful, fantastical scene that is both familiar and alien, quite real and yet also entirely fictitious. The book is a collection of vignettes, if they may be so called, each of which takes up exactly two full pages. Together they form a kind of impressionistic

Writing, at least some of the time for some people, should be an act of imagination, a magnificent risk, a reach *outside* of what you know. To tell an ambitious young writer to narrate what she knows is like telling a young sprinter with Olympian dreams, "Hey Dude, walking is easier." It is. You are less likely to fall and break something. But the few people who actually bother to run are going to beat you. If you're a writer, your most difficult challenge and most important asset is your imagination.

collage depicting the life of a young couple in New York (or some parallel universe version of it) as they date, become engaged, marry, and live together in a state that may not quite amount to marital bliss but that does not, as the title suggests, preclude the possibility of happiness.

However, this fairly cut-and-dried summary does little to convey the beauty, inventiveness, humor, heartache, and love which imbues nearly every piece in this collection (which is actually billed as a novel of linked fables). Whether she is riffing on the 'the nature of the beast,' imagining the apocalypse, recounting a raging rodent party at their apartment, or re-inventing the story of Adam and Eve, Phillips does it her own way, unpredictable, imaginative, but above all fiercely truthful. And the allegorical nature of her storytelling proves tremendously, almost eerily, effective at communicating the indescribable essence of existence. Resist it as I might, the word adorable comes to mind, without a trace of sarcasm or derision. **For these stories, individually and as a whole, deserve adoration for their honesty, mischievous and lively spirit, creative fearlessness, the humanity they capture and reveal, as well as the sheer level of literary skill with which they are executed.**

With her compact, precise, frequently and subtly humorous, and visually evocative language, Phillips makes the whole thing look easy, like a world class ballet dancer or gymnast that seems able to defy gravity without effort. Or perhaps a trapeze artist or prestidigitator would make a better comparison. Because Phillips's is a high wire act, a fabulous magic trick, which delights and surprises and even frightens you a little, as you wonder whether she might not fall, whether the magical powers might not fail and abandon her. But the performance is wonderfully successful, and the performer safe. And when it is over, it is with further surprise and wonder that you realize that these disparate, short, often outlandish sketches, have coalesced, like the crystals in a kaleidoscope, into a complete and wrenching portrait. An odd, lovely, surrealist portrait which says more about our true longings and disappointments, failures and terrors, pleasures and pains than perhaps any 'realistic' depiction could hope to do."



Chaos and Constraints: An interview with Helen Phillips by Jana Robbins, publicist

Q: Do you have any particular story to tell concerning the writing of this book?

A: My husband Adam Thompson is an artist, and some years back he was feeling bogged down in the process of creating a painting; the original excitement would get lost in the execution. He gave himself the constraint that he would simply make pencil line drawings on 8 ½ x 11 paper. The idea and the creation became simultaneous. Around the same time, I found myself similarly bogged down in a novel. Adam suggested that I set some constraint for myself-say, writing a 340-word piece every day. And so began the project that would become *And Yet They Were Happy*. Incidentally, Adam's drawing project also bred a book, *#1359-#1458* (Regency Arts Press, 2010).

Q: So you consider this book a formal experiment?

A: The constraint merely served as a sort of scaffolding that enabled me to explore central themes and concerns from many different angles. While it was helpful to have one thing to cling to amid all the chaos of creation, ultimately it's not so important. Its primary role was to set me free, to make me feel that, as long as I held to my little word limit, I could do absolutely anything, could draw any bizarre parallels, bringing together history and mythology and Snow White and Bob Dylan and my own experiences in one breath. I wrote this book while I was engaged and during my first year of marriage, which was an intense and transformational time for me. The idea of a book comprised entirely of 340-word stories sounds rather mathematical and formal, perhaps even gimmicky; but this book is flesh and blood and mess and life.

Q: How would you describe those "central themes and concerns" you mention above?

A: The sections of the book (The Fights, The Weddings, The Apocalypses, etc.) were created fairly late in the process, after I'd written all of the pieces. But because I'd found myself continually returning to explore repeated themes in different ways, it wasn't too hard to name and craft the sections of the book. I think of the fables in each section as various manifestations of the same experience. Here's the wedding ceremony where the bride and groom drive their guests away by laughing too much; here's the wedding ceremony that's performed by wooly mammoths. Ultimately these are a series of metaphors, many attempts to describe milestone experiences that evade description.

Q: What advice have you received concerning writing? What advice would you give to young writers?

A: Beckett: "Fail again. Fail better."
Advice to young writers: Show up. Have fun. Embrace rejection. Be daring. If you're feeling bored as you're writing, introduce a lion attack or UFO into the scene.

Q: How did you find the publisher for this book?

A: My agent sent *And Yet They Were Happy* out to all the big New York publishers. Unsurprisingly, none of them was willing to buy it, due to its somewhat experimental format. So I started to send the book out on my own to small presses. I cannot speak highly enough of Lisa Graziano, managing editor of Leapfrog Press. I'm extremely fortunate that my debut book is being shepherded by such insightful and generous hands.

Q: What books have changed your life?

A: The books that have helped me realize that certain conventions one tends to associate with fiction don't necessarily need to be upheld. Michael Cunningham once lent me *Maps to Anywhere* by Bernard Cooper and one of Lydia Davis' books. Reading those books made me brave. *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Amy Hempel—all of these writers have made me feel courageous; you can create your own rules.

Q: Do you laugh out loud when you read some of the funny passages you've written? Does the writing affect you the same way it does any other reader, once it's actually out there in book form, or do you remain the editor/self-critic whenever you read it (Or do you never read it again!)?

A: I've agonized so much over every single word (one of the benefits/burdens of having a strict word limit) that on any given page I could point out a word about which I've flip-flopped; as I read the pieces in book form, my reading is deeply affected by knowing the history of

their development. I'm too distracted by all that to ever find myself laughing out loud! Maybe years from now, when I've forgotten the layers. Because my own experiences are woven in here alongside myths, fairytales, etc., I do feel somewhat vulnerable, my various anxieties and struggles on display in a pretty raw and honest way. That said, I hope the emotional urgency that powered this book will come through to the reader.



How Do I Look?

Queries set a tone in the review process

by Sarah Murphy, acquisitions editor

The expression "You only get one chance to make a first impression" may be a cliché, but it's also the truth.

At Leapfrog Press, we receive about a thousand queries a year, which is why we created submission guidelines; they make the process easier for everyone. Here are a few points to remember when putting together a query for any publisher or agent. Although they may seem self-explanatory, they are commonly overlooked. Adherence to them will enable editors to review your query efficiently and even eagerly.

Just the facts

A query should be written in proper letter format. Be sure to address the appropriate editor and state your name and intent before giving your bio and a synopsis of your work. Do not forget to provide the title of your manuscript. Avoid attention-grabbing gimmicks such as irreverent humor or overt self-confidence. In the end, the sample will speak for itself.

Avoid laundry lists

Use the same consideration for your synopsis that you use for your manuscript. Allow yourself time to think it through, and craft it instead of merely listing whatever comes to mind. The synopsis should complement your work rather than itemize it. However, keep it succinct.

No attachments need apply

Although it might seem easier to attach your manuscript to your message, most publishers cannot accept attachments simply because they receive so many queries, not to mention that they are wary of viruses in unsolicited email. Instead, publishers that accept online submissions ask that you paste a short sample in the body of your message. If we want to see more, we will request additional chapters. Do

not provide a link to a Web site in lieu of a sample. Many publishers ask for hardcopy queries, and will not accept email queries; Leapfrog accepts only email queries. Do follow the publisher's instructions on this so that your manuscript can be considered. It is one of the sadder things for us to receive an unsolicited express-mailed manuscript of 500 printed pages, which probably cost the author \$50 to print and another \$30 to overnight mail. We have no mechanism for storing such a package and no process set up to put it through a review in printed form. If a publisher's instructions say "query first," that means send a query letter only. Nothing else. If a short sample is asked for, send a short sample. Never mail an entire manuscript unless you have been asked to.

Review, review, review

So much time is spent writing and revising your manuscript that it's easy to overlook the query. Spellcheck doesn't always suffice. Send yourself a copy first to see how it will appear to the recipient. Be mindful of your operating system by making sure that certain symbols, such as apostrophes, show up in the message. Be sure to enlist a second set of eyes, and even read it out loud to yourself. The mistakes we most commonly overlook are those we make ourselves.

One message, one query

If you have multiple submissions, do not put them all into one query. Although it might be easier for you, it makes it harder for reviewers. Since editors will review the works separately, each one deserves its own query.

Utilize our Web site

Leapfrog's submission guidelines and up-to-date contact information are clearly stated on our Web site. Always look for a publisher's submission guidelines on the Web before submitting. Utilize this information to answer your questions. We also offer a description of what we seek to publish. Check out some of our publications to familiarize yourself with who we are. Do this when submitting to any publisher. Many presses accept simultaneous queries (queries to multiple presses); however, the actual query must be tailored to each publisher and follow that publisher's guidelines. A mass email to a swarm of publishers in the "BCC" line will be deleted by every publisher on the receiving end.

We really are friendly people

Finally, remember that editors want to help you and want to read your sample; that's why they do what they do. Each and every query is read with the excitement of knowing this might be something very special. If in doubt, don't hesitate to send an email asking for advice on even the smallest concerns. Editors are often more easygoing than they are popularly portrayed to be. Don't sweat over the use of "Dear Editor Murphy" versus "Attn: Ms. Sarah Murphy," or whether the title "Ms.," or the lack of paragraph indents, or a boring typeface will annoy someone and result in rejection of your manuscript. Be relaxed and courteous, use common sense, and your query will get the attention that your hard work deserves.

Sarah Murphy, in addition to reviewing submissions for Leapfrog, writes for several Cape newspapers.

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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