

Creative Nonfiction

Writers on Writers:

Which Writers Most Influenced Other Writers?

We continue our occasional series asking local writers, and writers tied to San Antonio, to tell us which teachers, mentors, and writers have influenced them most. In this issue we hear from two accomplished authors, Nan Cuba and David Bowles.

Witness

Nan Cuba

Like all artists, I was born a witness. I watch and listen. I notice. In photographs and videos of my four brothers and me as children, I am usually standing to the side, staring, sometimes glancing at the camera like a spy. When a brother now retells a story about flooding a neighbor's basement or sneaking a refrigerator up two flights of stairs into the attic, he doesn't remember I was there. That's what artists do. We take the incident in and then share it like a big surprise.

Everyone in my family told stories: jokes, anecdotes, gossip, memories, secrets, and parables emphasizing a point we wanted to make. We didn't have computers or video games. Besides *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Gunsmoke*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Have Gun Will Travel* (we called it "Paladin"), and Perry Como, Dinah Shore, or Nat King Cole, we didn't watch much on the console TV that usually had our Siamese cat curled on top. In my house, you were taught to play bridge and football (softball, in my case), and all of us could capture an audience with a hilarious or suspenseful story that ended with a satisfying punch. Seven of us sitting at our kitchen table—Mother at the end nearest the stove, Dad at the other, five kids on benches along the sides—we'd take turns entertaining each other, but my father was the expert.

The dapper Southern writer, Peter Taylor, who seemed like my father's older brother, once said he wrote his stories to discover embedded truths in his family's myths. Every family has them. They are coded messages carrying our combined DNA. My father, a stoic, self-disciplined man who treated injured soldiers during WWII, loved telling convoluted jokes that ended with a jolt of recognition about human nature, precursors, I see now, to *Saturday Night Live* skits. But my favorites are myths about his youth and a story he told his children and then our children. Like all good stories, they reveal who we are.

My father and his two brothers were rambunctious sons of my grandfather, who was a surgeon and hospital cofounder, and my grandmother, who had a degree in elocution and visited people at the Rotary Club and Carnegie library to tell tales she'd clipped out of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Parents Magazine* about talking crickets or mice. When I was in what we then called junior high school, she was named the National Mother of the Year, an award the committee gave without knowing about certain incidents.

As teenagers, one son had bet the other two that they wouldn't dare put Gran on top of the living-room fireplace mantel and leave her there, which, of course, they promptly did. She stayed, swinging her stockinged legs and calling for help, until the bet was paid and she was finally brought down, irritable and

exhausted, hairs in her plaited chignon coming undone. If present whenever Dad later told the story, she sat, lips pursed, listlessly blinking her sunken blue eyes, never adding whatever she'd said or done after her black leather pumps had touched the floor. She must have been achy and humiliated. Who wants to be the butt of a joke? His intended lesson: My dad and uncles were once audacious rulebreakers, and my grandmother loved them enough to play along, encouraging their gutsy spirit. But they enjoyed repeating this story, in effect hoisting Gran up there each time like a sack of turnips, laughing at her authority being replaced by a reliance on her sons. In their defense, she never objected when they told it, allowing them their guilt-free prank. Now that I think about it, this story is probably more about her than the boys.

Dad never told the second myth. My uncle did, or later, my mother, and it was a favorite because everybody thought it perfectly captured my father. Granddaddy was a stern, rigid disciplinarian, a Calvinistic patriarch who demanded total obedience. He had hated his childhood farm life and escaped to attend medical school in Galveston when the profession was just being established in Texas; then he cofounded what is now Baylor Scott & White. Even Gran called him Dr. Brindley. On a farm he leased to tenants, he drove his Cadillac at full speed over gullies and bushes like it was a wild stallion loosed on the prairie. He was a respected, tough pioneer, and I was scared of him.

The story goes that when Dad was young, let's say twelve, after dinner one summer night, Granddaddy announced what Dad had to do the next morning, which was Saturday. They all knew about Granddaddy's Saturdays. For years, that's when he and his three friends played a round of golf on the modest course at our town's country club. But one of the men was sick and had to cancel. "So, you'll take his place," Granddaddy said. Dad's brothers had plans. "You can use my old set of clubs." He angled his silverware across his plate and scooted back from the carved mahogany table. "We leave the house at 6:30 in order to be the first to tee off. That's how we beat the noon heat."

Dad stared into the mirror above the buffet. "I'd rather not," he said, resistant as Bartleby.

Granddaddy leaned back, facing Dad. "Did I ask if you wanted to go?"

"No, sir, but I don't like to play golf. I don't know how." He peeked at Granddaddy then stared at his lap. He ran a palm over his parted hair.

Gran and my uncles left the room. Even the kitchen was quiet.

"Is that right?" Granddaddy said.

"Yes, sir. I'd just mess up everything."

"Then here's what we're going to do." Granddaddy folded his arms. "Look at me," he said, and Dad did. "I'll give you a choice. You can either spend the day with us on a beautiful course practicing golf, or you can walk five miles to the farm, chop cotton until 4:00, then walk home again." Granddaddy shoved his plate away and leaned forward. "Which is it going to be?"

Dad sighed and shrugged. "I guess I'll go to the farm." And that's what he did, getting home about 6:00, just in time for dinner, which he ate, afterward excusing himself and heading for bed. Lesson: Dad had the fortitude (hard-headedness?) to defy his father, and to accomplish that without getting in trouble. He did

what he said he'd do, even though the expectation was unfair. Mother used to tell me privately that Dad had a martyr complex. At that time, he was a surgeon working in Granddaddy's hospital, and each Saturday he met his three friends at the same golf course to play a round. Maybe there's a reason my father didn't share this family myth.

My favorite of Dad's stories he told throughout my childhood to me, my brothers, and other children, then later, to my own. He'd usually be sitting at his place at the end of our oak kitchen table, a picture window to the backyard on his left, a small bookshelf above on the blue wall. He'd raise his eyebrows and say, "Have you ever heard the tale of Red Turtle Medicine?"

What child could resist a name like that? The word "tale" suggested spirits and someone overcoming evil. We'd stop fidgeting and look. "No, sir," we'd say, wondering what would come next, certain it would involve buffalo and magic.

"Red Turtle Medicine was a great Indian chief," Dad would say, then cross his legs and light his pipe, the Walnut tobacco smoke making us think of campfires deep in a limestone canyon. Maybe the chief was sending signals. Maybe he was in danger. We pictured his face streaked with red and white paint. We'd found arrowheads at the farm and imagined him using strips of deer hide to tie one to a shaft, making a spear. A chief would wear a long headdress of many feathers. Were they all from eagles?

"I can tell," Dad would say, turning sideways in his chair, not looking at us, "you're not really interested." He puffed his pipe. In the backyard, limbs waved, flickering sunlight through the window, across our polished table, climbing the blue wall.

"Yes, we are," we'd plead. "Please tell us, PLEASE." We'd nod at each other, determined to convince him. We were certain the chief's story was scary and included hatchets and blood. Why else would Dad hesitate to tell us? Maybe Red Turtle Medicine spoke to his gods and could tell the future.

Dad lowered his pipe and faced us. "Okay then," he said. "Red Turtle Medicine was a brave Indian chief."

So, we were right, we thought; there was fighting. We pictured Jim Bowie with his long knife at the Alamo and then the Lone Ranger. The sidekick, Tonto, was a lot smarter than that fancy pants cowboy. We liked the Indian's silence while he tracked the villain, the fact that he didn't wear a mask, his ramrod back when he sat in the saddle on his pinto-spotted Paint. Our mouths hung open, our eyes and ears hungry for what would come next.

Dad would sit back, look at his watch, and shake his head, sighing. Then he'd make up an excuse: either we were expected someplace, or he had to do something, but whatever the reason, he'd add, "I'll have to tell you some other time," and we'd moan and plead again. "But you're going to want to hear this because Red Turtle Medicine, well, he was a brave Indian chief."

He never told the story, of course, which was the point. Instead, he ignited our imaginations. We each created our own version, which was far better than any someone else could tell.

Besides teaching me how to shape a story, my family showed me how to listen. I spent many hours sitting with Gran on her backyard swing, underneath a trellis covered in winding wisteria, the purple blooms like feathery fans. Her voice was warbly and off-key, but she'd sing about Texas—"The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You," "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "Texas Our Texas"—and I learned the words along with her clear message that each song was a pledge of allegiance.

My parents were products of the 1940s, and they liked jazz.

Mother would stack 78s on the console record player in the library, sending music throughout the house, bass rhythms throbbing like electrical currents. Favorites were Duke Ellington's "Take the 'A' Train," Count Basie's "Fly Me To The Moon," Peggy Lee's "Fever," Lena Horne's "Stormy Weather," Dinah Washington's "Mad About the Boy," Nat King Cole's "Autumn Leaves," and Benny Goodman's "Stompin' at the Savoy," but my favorite was Nancy Wilson. Dad, who adored my mother, loved Sarah Vaughan's "Tenderly," but he'd half-talk half-sing along with Nancy during "When Did You Leave Heaven."

Sometimes, I'd put the record on, our glass-fronted bookshelves covering the wall opposite, and curl into Mother's wicker chair she'd said Huntsville prisoners made at the turn of the century. A tinkly piano introduced Nancy starting timidly, bluesy with a tremor, complimenting her lover, hoping he'd like what he was hearing. Confident she had his attention, she got saucy, sassy, backed up by a shuffling drum brush. Her voice, exquisitely precise, whiskey smooth, oozing honey, slid into questions while the piano tinkled an octave run. The horns, xylophone, and piano counterpointed like back-up singers, and Nancy held notes, building, expressing devotion until her questions got louder, pleading—she couldn't believe he was responding—then she picked up speed, pitch bending, easing into a trill, sliding to a high note, then gloriously, orgasmically dropping down.

Later jazz favorites included Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Nora Jones, Diana Krall. These artists taught me how to listen for rhythm, intonation, pacing; they showed me how to improvise while various parts, sometimes discordantly, synergistically spun a work of art.

My mother loved to read, and our library held hundreds of books: novels, story collections, and among the poetry collections, I found *Not so Deep as a Well* by Dorothy Parker, with an inscription dated December 25, 1938: "To Sis from Daddy with Love"; *Memories* by her friend Pearl Owen Gentry and published by a Dallas company; another friend, Betty Dean Wright had written a tiny red collection, *Scrap Irony*, that had on its last page a poem by my mother in her handwriting, some words crossed out, some written in: "I wanted the moon/ I cried for the moon/ When you brought it, I found/ It was just a little too white/ It was a trifle too round." There were also books about travel, science, history, religion, along with the twenty-one volume children's encyclopedia, *The New Book of Knowledge*, whose pages we'd smudged and dogeared.

One summer when I was in fifth grade, I bought a spiral notebook and a packet of pencils and sat each day at the kitchen table copying in my best handwriting favorite passages, the volume's facts and photographs speaking like an oracle. After filling a notebook page, I turned it over and ran my fingers across indentations made by my pencil's sharp lead point. In the end, I'd written a book, and the pressure of those backward words proved it.

The next summer, I used fifty dollars I'd saved over the year to buy a turquoise Royal typewriter I'd seen for months in Woolworth's window. Back on my bench at the kitchen table, I pressed a key that descended into the machine's belly, barely leaving a mark on the piece of notebook paper I'd inserted on the ribbon spool above. I pushed the key again, my finger stretching low, the metal arm rising slowly, then stopping like a warning flag. This time, when I pounded, the black letter announced itself on the white paper. I tried more keys, using other fingers, the

mess of letters appearing, some smudged or faint, the result a coded message about my clumsiness. After days of practice, I pulled out the encyclopedia, deciding to type a favorite passage. Even though I pecked diligently, glancing between the slick page and keys, wanting with a dedicated heart to play it like a piano, I gave up, the process too slow, too confusing, and shoved the typewriter back into its turquoise case then onto a closet shelf. That was my first lesson that writing was not easy.

I loved *The Wizard of Oz* and the *Nancy Drew* series, but my favorite was *Green Mansions* by Argentina-born ornithologist William Henry Hudson. Its publication in 1904 started the national conservation movement. About the author, Joseph Conrad said, "You may try forever to learn how Hudson got his effects and you will never know. He writes down his words as the good God makes the green grass to grow."

The story concerns a Venezuelan revolutionary who escapes police by traveling to the unexplored territories of Guyana where he meets Rima, one of the last members of a reclusive aboriginal race. The tropical forest is described as nature "binding tree to tree in a tangle of anaconda-like lianas, and dwindling down from these huge cables to airy webs and hair-like fibres that vibrate to the wind of the passing insect's wing." Rima speaks in trills and warbles, "a voice purified and brightened to something almost angelic." He compares her to a hummingbird flitting between flowers, or when she's angry, she's like a bee. He says that "through that unfamiliar lustre of the wild life shone the siritualising light of mind that made us kin."

I pictured the lush, exotic landscape while lying on the green corduroy sofa in our living room. As the only girl with four brothers, I became Rima the wood-nymph, independent, gifted, mystical, and I learned that characters could transport a reader.

Ezra Pound said, "By good art I mean art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise." He meant literary art must honestly depict the human condition through a linguistically perfect recreation of inward and outward consciousness. That talent begins with an innate curiosity about people and language. My father used to stare, then as though he'd figured something out, say, "From you, always the questions."

I'm still asking.

Why I Write Stories

David Bowles

My parents, aunts, and uncles told fascinating stories about their ancestors who came to Texas during the early days of the Republic. Some of those stories were so far-fetched it was difficult for a young boy to believe. I heard stories of Indian raids and buffalo herds roaming the banks of the Colorado River.

My Aunt Edna, the oldest child of my grandparents, told me the story of a little boy captured by Indians. "Right down yonder," Aunt Edna pointed toward Bouldin Creek that ran behind our house in Austin. I was sure she was just trying to scare me. Then, I heard a similar story from my father about the abduction. He said the boy's father was killed and scalped by Indians during the attack on Shoal Creek, not Bouldin Creek. Somehow the stories were never the same. Uncle Elmer told the story of his great-great grandfather being scalped by Indians but didn't know any details. I asked the name of the boy who was captured by the Indians. No one knew. They didn't know names, but they

remembered the stories.

The story that impressed me most was the one about my great-grandfather when he worked on the U.S. Capitol, that beautiful granite building that stands at the end of Congress Avenue. Some family members even claimed he built it. Whoever *he* was!

In the seventh grade, I told my Texas history teacher, "The Capitol was built by my great-grandfather." She asked, "What was his name?" I assumed he was a Bowles. My teacher didn't seem impressed. She suggested I research it and write a report with sources of my findings. After several hours in the library, I found no mention of a family member. When I learned prisoners from Convict Hill were used to build the Capitol, I forgot about the report and hoped my teacher did too. What I did learn was the value of a public library.

In the eighties, I started my family genealogy work and interviewed my father, aunt, and uncles. They told the same stories, but still couldn't remember names. I was given my grandmother's papers and the Bible of my great-grandmother, Elnora. She made meticulous notes about her family. Her father, Lorenzo Van Cleve, was born in 1806 and died in 1858. I began my search for Lorenzo Van Cleve in the Austin History Center. This was long before personal computers and digitized documents.

Lorenzo's marriage to Margaret Smith was one of only six marriages in Travis County in 1841. Their child, Elnora, turned out to be the first female born in Austin. Margaret's father, Thomas W. Smith, was the first county treasurer; her brother, James W. Smith, the first county judge. I found the handwritten marriage license and a letter from her father giving his consent for Margaret to marry Lorenzo Van Cleve. He served eighteen months in the Texas Army and received a pay voucher on September 21, 1838 for \$120.80. For his service Lorenzo was also given a bounty of 1,280 acres of land in Robertson County, which is on the Trinity River bottom south of downtown Dallas. He patented the property August 25, 1845 and sold it a few years later. Today, a part of it is Cedar Crest Golf Course.

More research found a payment request in the Texas Archives signed by President Mirabeau Lamar. It authorized a sixty-dollar payment to Lorenzo Van Cleve for a table for the president's office. Further research showed Lorenzo had worked on many of the new federal buildings in Austin. Grandmother didn't make up a story. Her grandfather did build the Capitol building. It just wasn't the Capitol we thought it was. It was a wooden structure built from hand-hewn logs—not very impressive, but it served its purpose. It stood at West Eighth and Colorado overlooking Congress Avenue. There, Anson Jones, the last President of Texas, lowered the Flag of the Republic of Texas on February 19, 1846. He handed the Lone Star Flag to James Pickney Henderson, the first Governor of The State of Texas. Jones said to the gathered crowd, "The Republic of Texas is no more." The American flag was raised, and Texas officially became the twenty-eighth state.

Christy Costlow, Travis County Archivist, made the first records of Travis County available to me and took a picture of me holding Volume I in the County Archives building. The recently rebound leather volume was written in the cursive hand of my great-great-great grandfather Thomas W. Smith and his son James W. Smith. In August 1841 their entries stopped. Neither completed their terms of office; both were killed in separate Indian attacks seven months apart. I held in my hands the earliest records of Travis County—what an awe-inspiring moment that was for me!