
Love, Death, and the Writer

by Dennis Briskin

Like many STC members, Janice Heiss has another life beyond technical writing. In her day job she writes documentation for Helios, the employee on-line encyclopedia at Sun Microsystems. Nights and weekends she is a performance poet with a theater degree who writes to gain love and recognition.

"I want to affect people profoundly," she says of her goal in writing from her inner experience. "I want to touch people's hearts and minds, to communicate and connect, sort of like having a love relationship."

"I also want to find out if my perception and experience of life are like their's. It's exciting if I say something they've always felt but haven't articulated to themselves. And it's a moment when we come together."

But now that she has a more tangible love relationship with a man who lives in Oakland (she calls it her "bi-bay relationship") she has only enough time to write creatively on Sunday afternoons.

"We have so little time on earth," she sighs. "To be a creative writer you absolutely cannot work a full-time job. If I didn't have to make a living, I would quit to write."

"Why does it seem like the theme in my life is running around in circles faster and faster? That's my biggest concern in the last few years."

In years long past she had an even bigger concern: the inevitable reality of her own mortality.

"I always wanted to grow up to be a famous actress," she says. "When I first understood death, at about 2 years old, to establish my immortality. Which is not a very good reason for doing art."

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In high school in a Chicago suburb she performed in school plays. "Putting on greasepaint and being with egotistical actors, I felt oppressed by the group art aspect. I stopped doing theater and became more solitary. That's when I started writing."

She wrote poetry for 10 years, went through the creative writing program at San Francisco State University and has appeared with several small performance groups in the Bay Area. One Thursday night in November she read and was interviewed on KPFA's "Evening Theater" program. As a poet, she's on her way up.

She got into technical writing because a friend said it was a way to do something with writing.

"I was afraid of computers, but I took a course in word processing. As a writer, I went ga-ga. I just loved it. It's the first machine I ever fell in love with. I had a romantic relationship with my computer."

What about the difference between "writing inside the lines" for a technical corpora-

tion and "writing outside the lines" for personal expression and theatrical performance?

"They are very different worlds," she agrees. "I'm in the technical world because I want to make a living. But you

can learn about writing in both the creative and the technical worlds."

"Technical writing has been humbling, because it's shown me how *hard* it is to tell someone accurately how to use a toaster oven. If people can't communicate at the level of telling each other how to run devices, then how far are we in communicating? Writing is hard because communicating is hard."

On going to work each day in the world of technical writing, she says, "There's this hard survivor instinct in me that I inherited from my family, who are very cheerful. I think we live in a pretty mean-spirited culture and they just taught me to look after myself."

"Part of it is turning off who you are. It's sort of an act, and I'm a pretty good actress. Sometimes it's fun because you know you are (acting) and it works."

"Corporations don't allow too much for the artistic sensibility," she adds, describing a common work stress. "I'm a purist about creativity.

I'm not saying scientists and engineers in Silicon Valley aren't creative. I liked working in engineering, because I was around people who were inventive scientists. Corporations definitely have creative people, but it's not the same. That open, unconventional way of being is censored around a corporation."

But aren't many technical writers and corporate employees *not* suppressing themselves? Aren't many comfortable and doing what they want?

"Yes, many technical writers are straighter than I am. But there are less-straight technical writers, too."

Yet, she hasn't done a corporate piece of poetry. "I never came up with anything that was a response to work. It's not what my poetry is about," she says. "I'm not a prose writer or a fiction writer. Others would find a treasure trove among the people I've met. I was a stockbroker for 10 years and met all sorts of characters. It was a 10-year accident that shows what a hypocrite I can be."

Still, writing in that careful, technical way must work its influence. "My biggest concern is I might start writing poetry the way I write a chapter in the Helios manual," she says. "One has to be so precise that one loses the elements of accident and looseness. Maybe the tightness (at work) would make you tighter and tighter. That concerns me."

Fortunately, writing, whatever it is, happens away

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from the keyboard as well as at it. "I always carry a tape recorder with me. I write in the oddest moments, while I'm walking around dusting my house or eating breakfast. A lot of it is observational."

"I don't consider myself a fine creative writer, nor a brilliant writer, although I would like to be." She recently published a love poem to her late grandmother, "my Jewish bubbe," that she wrote in 1975. "To me that's more important than anything I've done in technical writing."

Among her undone, "percolating" pieces she has a

40-page memoir she wants to get published and several performance pieces. She is also working on a "long piece" about her 76-year-old father, a prose description of him.

"I really want to get back to that."
—AV

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