

THE VOICE

MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 21 2012-06-01

Tweet Verse

Poetry in 140 characters

All in Your Head

Carnage

Soda Bottle Blues

Pop and the price of veggies

Plus:

This World

From Where I Sit

and much more!



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and
comments to voice@voicemagazine.org, and please
indicate if we may publish your letter.



EDITORIAL

Christina M. Frey



Pop Stop

Shocking news: sugary pop is unhealthy!

Well, maybe not so shocking. What might come as more of a surprise, though, is a proposed law banning the sale of oversized cups of pop at New York City sporting events, restaurants, and the like.

The move is part of an ongoing campaign against the obesity epidemic. But while some herald the measure as creative and forward-thinking, others are more critical—and with good reason, because once again the health policymakers are on the wrong track.

As I've written before, banning food and denying people the freedom to choose what they want to eat and drink, whether it's good for them or not, can only negatively impact their mental health and critical thinking skills. Worse, restrictive laws and even educational initiatives are ignoring the larger problem at work: food economics.

As this *Atlantic* article suggests, policies that ban bad foods instead of promoting or subsidizing healthier options smack of a certain elitism. After all, while obesity is widespread it's particularly a challenge faced by poorer families.

The fact is, healthy food costs more. Much more. In fact, it's really hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle on an extremely tight budget. While a bag of chips will run you more than a single apple when you're in need of a quick snack, groceries in general are far more expensive when you're choosing lean meat, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables instead of the fattier, saltier, chemical-laden alternatives the store's always got on sale. Why purchase a \$5 block of cheese and spend an hour making mac and cheese when you come home from a 12-hour shift when you can open a 50-cent box of Kraft Dinner and feed your starving kid?

Educating people on healthy choices and requiring food manufacturers to act responsibly is only going to go so far, and banning large servings of pop—which customers can easily get around by ordering two—is a grand gesture that's ultimately ineffective and insulting.

"[The push to ban] large servings of pop—which customers can easily get around by ordering two—is a grand gesture that's ultimately ineffective and insulting."

The mayor of New York City may mean well, but he's missing the point. Before we start focussing on limiting the ability to choose between healthy and junk food, we need to make sure the choice actually exists in the first place.

THIS WORLD

Wanda Waterman



Tunisian Travels, Part IV

Recently Wanda Waterman spent several weeks in Tunisia, where she crossed half the country, visited several cities and villages, and stayed with a traditional Tunisian family. This travelogue series chronicles her adventures and experiences in the Maghreb. Read the rest of the series here: [Part I](#), [Part II](#), and [Part III](#).

Café Life

Nearly every street has at least one café, a place where mostly men gather to talk, play cards, smoke, eat, and drink coffee at all hours of the day and night. They're usually so packed that sometimes chairs and tables will spill out onto the sidewalk and pedestrians will have to walk out into the road to get around them.

If you order *chicha* (a smokable, non-hallucinogenic herb), the waiter brings a large, ornate water pipe and sets it on the floor behind you. He then gives you a disposable mouthpiece, wrapped in plastic for sanitary purposes, and you place this at the end of the pipe's hose. I tried some pear-flavoured *chicha*, which had a lovely aroma, but because I'm not a smoker it was rather wasted on me.

The café is a beloved social oasis, maintaining social ties, information networks, and the level of camaraderie needed for survival and well-being in an exacting environment. Conversations here carry a sense of ambivalence; there's a natural desire to explode with personal opinion and at the same time the necessity of restraint, perhaps due to a lingering sense of inhibition left over from the rampant spying and repression of the Ben Ali regime.

Bourguiba's Daughter

My host family tells a story from the life of the mother. When she was a little girl, Habib Bourguiba, the first president of Tunisia after independence from France, came on a visit to their town. The family loved Bourguiba because of his liberal stance on women's rights and other reforms (which later made Tunisia into one of the most progressive among Middle Eastern countries). They put their daughter in a pretty dress and got flowers for her to offer the president's wife.

The daughterless first lady was so struck by the little girl's charm that she asked her father if she could take her home. The father agreed, and the woman put her in the car. When the little girl began crying, though, the president's wife returned her to her dad. Now the family likes to joke about what might have happened to their mother had she been an adopted daughter of Bourguiba when Ben Ali was in power, knowing how paranoid Ben Ali had tended to be toward friends and family members of his predecessor.

Intergender Solidarity

It was a bit of a surprise to see women and girls holding hands with each other in the streets, but even more so to see straight male friends holding hands, kissing each other's cheeks, embracing, and calling each other *habibi* ("my beloved"). In Tunisia, men frequently keep the same friends all their lives and quickly make new ones. This relaxed physical closeness is an especially beautiful thing to witness if you come from a society in which men carefully avoid displays of excessive warmth in their friendships.

Here also family members sprawl over each other like puppies, perfectly comfortable with physical intimacy. I feel a mild sense of shame when I think of how my own supposedly liberal culture frowns on such innocent expressions of love and tenderness.

"These children aren't smothered with toys or kept entertained the way children tend to be in the West; they do, however, receive a great deal more tenderness and positive attention."

Home Life

At home during the day, the women help out with housework and cooking, taking naps on the daybeds when they get tuckered out and sometimes relaxing by watching tennis or a beloved Turkish soap opera (a family saga in which nearly every scene involves reproaches and tears). Other family members visit and we sit on the veranda to talk. The children are quiet and polite, but I'm told they've been exhorted to behave well in front of the guest. These children aren't smothered with toys or kept entertained the way children tend to be in the West; they do, however, receive a great deal more tenderness and positive attention.

A Poetic Turn of Mind

One thing that makes life among Arabs so delightful is their love of metaphor and their appreciation for a good turn of phrase. Speed bumps are called "donkeys' backs." A thin man in a *djellaba* says that he feels like "a mouse drowning in a glass of milk." Over and again I hear ideas and feelings explained in images.

When I employ such expressions myself I am met with the exclamation, "What beautiful words!" I begin to think I've been born into the wrong ethnicity.

Hard to Leave

By the end of my stay I'm thoroughly smitten with Tunisia. I love the elegant appearance of the Tunisians and the way they dress, the men donning a Western sporty look that flatters them and the women layered in flowing, jewel-toned fabrics. I love the climate, the lack of humidity, and the generous wind. I love the lush, green north and the arid, golden south. I love the way the people in public spaces are constantly moving



Making good use of Tunisia's generous winds.

and shouting. I love being greeted by acquaintances as if I were an old friend. I love the way the physically disabled are included in everything. I love the way the dancing women try to get me to swing my timid Canadian hips. I love the way Islam is expressed, applied with reason and forbearance to daily life and to relationships with a tender mindfulness.

But I'd better stop—the memories are just too sweet and the distance too great.

Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.

CLICK OF THE WRIST

Dirty

How does your garden grow?

If agricultural experts are right, then *how* it grows is going to largely depend on *what* it's grown in. The "dirt" that you use in planting—the soil—can profoundly affect plant health, crop yield, and even taste and nutrition. Click through this week's links to learn more.

Better Taste

It's common knowledge that the soil in which grapes are grown affects the taste of the wine. According to some claims, there's something similar going on with vegetables, too. This *Globe* article explains how it works—and what you need to do to ensure your soil gives a tasty harvest.

All about Nutrition

Are the vegetables our parents and grandparents ate the same as the ones we consume now? Studies agree that modern crops are comparatively nutritionally deficient, and according to this *Scientific American* article the culprit could be as simple as soil that's been depleted by harsh agricultural methods.

Compost

It's no secret that compost can improve the quality of your soil. Read through to discover what compost can do for your particular soil type (and click back to the main page for a wealth of information on composting and gardening with compost).

Air

No soil, no problem—for a certain growing trend known as air planting. Air plants lend a modern air to a room and make a great hostess gift, too!



THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

Film: *Carnage* (Sony Pictures Classics 2011)

Director: Roman Polanski

Screenwriters: Yasmina Reza, Roman Polanski

Cast: Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz, John C. Reilly

Genre: Drama, Comedy

"Conflict cannot survive without your participation."

Wayne Dyer

Young Zachary wants to join Ethan's gang, but Ethan's unwilling to let him in. Zachary is enraged. He responds by treating Ethan to a smack in the face with a stick, damaging two teeth.

This means war—but only for the boys' parents, as they try to respond to these acts of hostility. Peace talks are attempted, the cards are laid out, and everyone exhibits the best of intentions. Negotiations roll along nicely until one side doubts the other's sincerity and refuses to bend.

Each side pays lip service to the same postmodern values, but opinions differ as to how these should be applied. On the surface this is what leads to the eventual catastrophe.

It's obvious that the more the members of this loopy pantheon cling to their ideologies, the less they understand the truth about their circumstances. It can't be determined, for example, whether Ethan was the bully or whether it was Zachary, or which boy is a snitch (or the worse snitch). Each parent disputes the location of the moral high ground and bristles when scruples or motives are questioned. It's excruciatingly important that they be *seen* as good and wise and compassionate, whether they are or not.

Penelope, Ethan's mom, is a cultured liberal with an uncompromising sense of social justice; the fact that she's written about Africa grants her a self-righteousness that gives her an illusory sense of identity within the meaninglessness of her staid upper-middle-class existence. This false identity is what buffers her against perceived offenses.

Her husband, Michael, is an easygoing, insensitive slob who deals with his angst by being both sparkingly agreeable and horribly callous.

Nancy is a glamorous trophy wife who actually turns out to be more authentic than world saviour Penelope.

Nancy's husband, Alan, is clearly a psychopath willing to stop at nothing on the way to his next million. Acquisitive and pragmatic, he shows no interest in defending his son *or* his wife from insults and accusations. He displays a deep attachment to his cellphone, which he rudely answers again and again, loudly and lengthily helping a client in the pharmaceutical business defend the sale of a potentially deadly medication. He's only too happy to air his money-grubby laundry for this couple he's just met for the first time. The cellphone is a phallic appendage on which Alan is utterly dependent; witness his state of shock and despair when the phone is suddenly snatched and drowned in vase of tulips. At this point he instantly wins the support and sympathy of Michael, who understands well the meaning and significance of this flashy little tool.

"And so we have . . . superego, ego, libido, and subconscious, all engaged in intense mutual conflict in response to an external threat."

Halfway through this drama the couples no longer present a united front; Penelope and Nancy attack their husbands (in one fit of pique the pacifist Penelope actually starts hitting her husband), whose only defense is malicious comebacks. The game no longer involves opposing teams but rather each player vying for dominance.

And so we have the liberal Penelope, the Friedmanesque Alan, Nancy the consumer product, and Michael the everyman—or, to take it one step further, superego, ego, libido, and subconscious, all engaged in intense mutual conflict in response to an external threat.

These roles are borne out in the film. It's apt that it's Penelope (superego, superbly portrayed by Jodie Foster) who experiences the greatest emotional pain. Nancy (subconscious) experiences a visceral physical reaction to the conflict; she vomits early on and constantly threatens to do it again. Alan (ego) is utterly self-absorbed and at odds with both Penelope and Nancy, and Michael (subconscious) has absurd phobias that contrast beautifully with his relaxed amoral geniality.

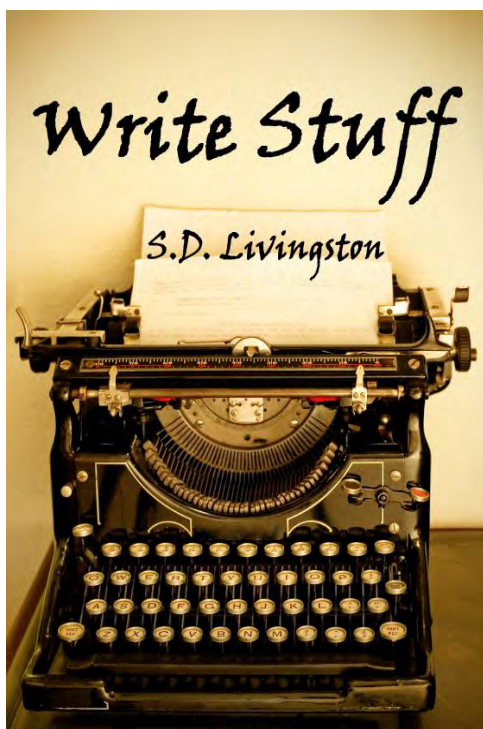
"It behooves a father to be blameless if he expects his child to be."

Homer

As the tension mounts, so does the sense of futility; the boys themselves are far more capable of resolving their own kerfuffle than are their well-meaning but neurotic parents.

Carnage belongs to that body of literature that portrays events serving as catalysts for wars between nations—like Helen of Troy's capture in *The Odyssey* or Medb and Ailill's pillow talk that sparked the war in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or even the mention of the absent son in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* These simple events are nothing in themselves, but held against the tension rumbling beneath the surface of a seemingly pacific existence they can blow it all to shards.

Carnage fulfills four of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 3) it stimulates my mind; and 4) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.



Twitter Me This

I've got to admit that I've never been a huge fan of poetry. Give me a long, winding adventure with Samuel Pickwick, Esquire, or an escape into historical detail with something like Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*. But sit down and lose myself in a book of poetry? Perish the thought. Oddly, it's taken the 140-character limit of Twitter to make me appreciate poetry's condensed form.

That's not to say I don't appreciate the beauty in poetry. I do. But I've always found it hard to truly immerse myself in words that don't let me maintain the flow of a single story. Now, several Twitter users have started a trend that combines the best of both worlds.

One of them is Jennifer Egan, whose novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Egan is telling a story, "Black

Box," one Tweet at a time, and the results read like a series of tiny, self-contained—and beautiful—poems.

Here's one example from *The New Yorker*, where her Tweets also appear:

*"A small table and chairs carved into a
spindly clifftop promontory are doubtless
designed for private conversation."*

Reading through her stream of Tweets has got me eyeing a couple of books of poetry that have long languished on my shelf.

Another user whose Twitter stream has tweaked my interest in poetry's condensed form is an art and history buff who's tweeting historically accurate messages in the guise of Tom Thomson. Yes, that Tom Thomson, the one who died a mysterious death back in 1917 in Ontario's Algonquin Park.

Unlike most who use the service, this Tweeter (a Canadian) chooses to remain anonymous. In this *Globe and Mail* article, he notes that the Thomson-based Twitter stream "is about Tom, honouring his memory, the people who loved him and his art."

And there's a surprising beat-poet feel to some of the entries in a recent *New Yorker* callout for Tweets to celebrate the 35th anniversary of George Lucas's *Star Wars*. The winner?

"He killed your dad!' 'But he is my dad!' 'And you're my sister!' Beep beep bloop."

I can practically see the guy in the black beret slouching up to the mic to read that one.

The interesting thing is that Twitter started out as the most bare-bones of platforms for social media. You can link to photos and to longer Tweets, but in essence it's just about those 140-character messages in your feed. There are no walls or games or other distractions to get in the way.

It's true that in the beginning, the service did lend itself to the "Guess what I had for breakfast?" type of conversations that led many to dismiss it. But Twitter—and Twitter users—have evolved, seeing the possibilities beyond telling the world that you've just washed your hair.

"The interesting thing is that Twitter started out as the most bare-bones of platforms for social media . . . in essence it's just about those 140-character messages in your feed."

These Twitter streams, and other similar ones, have been a good reminder that it's about the power words hold, even in highly condensed form. Maybe it's time to dust off those poetry books after all.

S.D. Livingston is the author of several books, including the new suspense novel Kings of Providence. Visit her [website](#) for information on her writing (and for more musings on the literary world!).

DID YOU KNOW?

Connexions



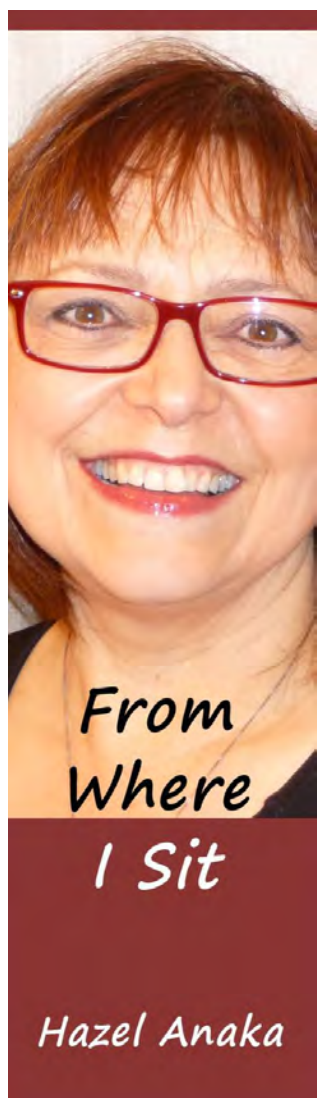
Whether you're in need of supplemental material for a course, want to hone your skills or brush up on the basics over the summer, or just have a keen interest in pursuing a subject a little further, be sure to check out the customizable learning modules at Connexions.

Connexions, which describes itself as "the textbook equivalent of Wikipedia," is really a lot more. The innovative resource is an open education "dynamic digital educational ecosystem" with two components: a huge content repository and a customizable content management system. The repository is made up of over 17,000 quality-controlled learning modules, short lessons that include multimedia as well as examples, problems, and text. Subject matter ranges from math to copyright law to disaster management to business and finance—and everything in between.

If you want to put together your own studies, you can use the content management software to copy modules and group them into a personal collection—which you can save and view online or download for working through at your leisure.

Overwhelmed? The repository also includes ready-made collections, which are sets of modules that have been grouped according to subject matter and specific level. There are over 1,000 collections currently available.

The resources at Connexions are freely available to all, and content can be accessed and downloaded via mobile devices as well as over the Internet.



The Garden Whisperer

Traditionally, this is a very busy time of year for me. I'm in the end stages of planning a large event that happens at the beginning of June. Planning begins in January and has been quietly humming away at the back of my mind since then.

In addition, this is crop seeding time. While I don't actually run any of the equipment, I do help psychically: I worry. I question purchases and tactical decisions. I act as a sounding board when Roy worries. It's a worry until the seed is in the ground, at which time we can switch to worrying about the weather.

This year I also spent several hours getting ready for the multi-family garage sale. I re-organized the storage container we have, and sorted the boxes, bins and ephemera from Hilary's event company. Much of that was stored "at the farm" because we've got the space and she doesn't. Room for an eight-foot Mardi Gras mask, anyone? Or how about a dozen or more Christmas trees?

Not surprisingly, my flowerbeds have been neglected again this spring. I created the beds when I was young and foolish, and the years have brought challenges. Our stupid farm cats think the beds we haven't yet mulched with gravel are a handy, dandy toilet. We are being invaded by ants. The quack grass problem is epic, despite our having sprayed it with Roundup last year.

It's getting to be too much. I'd rather play with my grandson, Grady, or my new best friend Mac (a.k.a. the computer). I'd rather read a book or go for a drive. Like a spoiled brat, I want the fruits of a beautiful yard without all the stinkin', back-breaking work. I want it maintenance-free.

My mom and aunt toured the yard a week or two ago and clucked about all the work and how they wish they could help. Two 80-year-olds to the rescue? Not. They suggested I call a local fellow who loves gardening, and try hiring him to help.

The idea was a good one. Except that I had to make things presentable before he arrived, but not so perfect that he couldn't see the full extent of my dilemma—like scrubbing the house before the cleaning lady comes. I started clearing out the beds, trimming the dead foliage, and checking to see what survived the winter.

On Saturday Eugene and his wife arrived to have a look. According to him, I've got some good plants. The soil could be improved with well-rotted manure. Shouldn't be a problem, since we used to raise cattle. The biggest issue is quack grass. He suggested either painting pesticide on with a brush or pulling a soaked rag across the individual blades. But he said no when I asked if we could hire him for more than just a consultation; working his own yard and waiting for a hip replacement was enough for him right now. It looks like it's all me again this year, from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka's first novel is *Lucky Dog*. Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS DESK



At Home: White Deer

Deer passing through farmland are a common enough sight. But not all deer are created equal, as one Canadian farmer recently discovered.

As the *Toronto Sun* [reports](#), a pair of white deer were spotted crossing the London, Ontario farm. The farmer, who first mistook the pair for “lost goats,” later realized that he’d seen something extremely rare.

White deer are often the result of one of two genetic conditions: leucism and albinism. These deer appear to have been “likely leucistic because the pigment in their face and eyes [wasn’t] consistent with albinism.”

The odds of a deer exhibiting these characteristics are low, “about one in 10,000, according to wildlife officials.” Additionally, white deer often have a reduced lifespan; their colour can make camouflage difficult, making them “easy targets for predators.”

According to legend, white deer are rare and are “symbols of good luck, the spirit world and peace.”

Around the World: Tears and Truancy

Students playing hooky: the bane of teachers for centuries. And it’s still a problem, although modern kids “skip classes” and are more likely to sleep in than go fishing like Tom Sawyer. Some school districts, discouraged by the trend, are cracking down on the practice. Unfortunately, one overzealous board may have gone a bit too far.

As the *Huffington Post* [reports](#), a Texas student was jailed overnight recently “after missing too many classes.” Board policy, yes, but here’s the catch: she’s an honour student who’s working two jobs to help support her siblings.

Diane Tran, 17, is no academic slouch: she’s taking “AP Spanish, college level algebra and dual credit English and history classes.” After school she heads to work—one of her two jobs is considered to be full-time—and is doing homework until the wee hours every morning.

Her exhaustive schedule has caused Diane to miss enough classes to get the school district involved. Under Texas law, “if a student has ten or more unexcused absences within a six-month period, the school district may refer the student to a juvenile court.”

The issue is now under the court’s advisement, but there are petitions circling to have her case dropped.

AUSU UPDATE



AU Students urge candidates to improve university funding

AU students are concerned about the financial health of Athabasca University and the effect of recent news stories on the reputation of the AUSU membership.

A recent CBC report notes that in recent years the university has made a series of reserve draws to cover budget shortfalls, draining the once \$30-million reserve fund.

Tuition and fees at AU, meanwhile, continue to increase despite the concerns of AUSU that education is becoming increasingly unaffordable in Alberta.

“I’m very concerned about AU’s financial situation,” says AUSU President Bethany Tynes. “AU is increasing student fees, observing hiring freezes, denying sabbaticals, delaying projects, and downsizing their offices due to a lack of available funds. We don’t want to see the quality of our education diminish.”

“At the same time,” Tynes continues, “I am confused by AU Board Chair Barry Walker’s comment to the CBC that AU is ‘in a very sound financial position,’ as the concerns we’ve noted do not support the notion that we’re financially sound.”

Chronic underfunding of public post-secondary education is a factor in AU’s financial stress. AU students have lobbied Alberta in recent years to address the shortfall; our members call on the candidates in Alberta’s provincial election to make post-secondary funding a priority in their platforms and to ensure that all Alberta universities are funded equally and sufficiently. Public post-secondary institutions need a reliable, predictable funding model that provides sufficient base operating funds to support a world-class education.

Athabasca University Students' Union is the largest students' union in Alberta, representing nearly 40,000 undergraduates annually.

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CLASSIFIEDS

Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact voice@voicemagazine.org for more information.

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