Syracuse University Veterans’ Writing Group – August 20, 2011

The following is an excerpt drawn from a chapter entitled “Gathering the Threads of History,” from the book *Tell It Slant*, by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola:

I’m working on a short essay about a strange summer I had, when my brother worked for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, running tests on water samples that had been held up for years. He drove a tiny, two-seater Fiat Spyder, the car of choice that year. My start:

It’s my brother’s Spyder summer. Not dog days but spider days. My brother has a blue Fiat Spyder. It has no back seat but I ride in the back anyway, rolled up in the ten inches or so under the rear window. Spysers aren’t much more than human-sized tins so this is risky but it doesn’t matter. Let me be a bottle rocket.

What follows is the revised beginning, after a quick search on major news events of the year (1974) and surrounding years. I did this search primarily on the Internet, using www.historycentral.com’s “This Year in History” service:

It’s my brother’s Spyder summer. Not dog days but spider days. It’s 1974 and things have been crashing. Nixon has resigned or is going to, and a few years ago Apollo 13 crash-landed when an oxygen tank blew (astronauts in there like Spam in a can, Chuck Yeager said). Karen Silkwood’s about to crash. My brother has a blue Fiat Spyder. It has no back seat but I ride in the back anyway, rolled up in the ten inches or so under the rear window. Spysers aren’t much more than human-sized tins so this is risky but it doesn’t matter. I am a lost person. Let me be a bottle rocket.

What happens when I add these historical details—the space program, the death of Karen Silkwood—is that my story becomes enriched and begins to expand outward: Connections move back and forth, between the closeness of the car and of space capsules, the sense of questing and uncovering, and yet the danger that marked that time. The reference to Karen Silkwood adds a reference to those who ask difficult questions, particularly environmental questions, as this book goes on to do. The imminent resignation of President Nixon captures the sense of chaos and rebellion, embodied in these teenagers and so prevalent in our country at that time.

--Suzanne

**Our Historical, Universal Selves**

Each of us, as this experience shows, exists in both a private and a public way. We’re all at once son or daughter, lover, sister, brother, neighbor—the person who must have chocolate cereal in the morning and who absentely puts the milky bowl down for the cat to lick. We’re also a piece of history. We’re the people who witnessed the turn of the millennium; we’re the first wave of the world’s citizens to see their lives transferred more and more onto computer chips. We’re also people who saw the Berlin Wall dismantled; experienced the Monica Lewinsky scandal; and lived through the tragedy of September 11. [As] citizens of the United States, our country is, for better or worse, the most powerful political entity human civilization has ever made. Our votes, our race, our gender, our sexual orientation, our spending habits—[and, of course, the ways in which the military has touched our lives]—all these things make us political and historical creatures, as well as the quirky individuals we are.

**Writing Prompt:**
(also from *Tell It Slant*, p. 98)

At a writer’s conference, the writer Leslie Brody talked about living through an unpleasant divorce at a time when the marriage of Diana Spencer to Charles, Prince of Wales, dominated the news. She talked about the irony of seeing these two events juxtaposed and how the memories of each came to fuse together: the painful sundering of her own marriage and the artificial romance of the royal wedding.

Consider the ways in which your personal experiences have intersected with major historical events. Begin this exercise by writing a paragraph describing a specific memory in time that you’d like to further explore in an essay. Then, visit the web site, HistoryCentral.com, and add in references to the cultural atmosphere of that historical moment to alter or enrich your essay.

*** Note: When you go to HistoryCentral.com, glance down the left panel, and choose the option for “20th Century Almanac.” Then, click on the year of your choice for a reminder of major events, winners in sports, and top movies, music, books, and TV shows of the year.