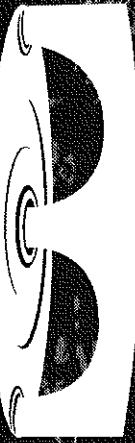


Schuykill Valley Journal



Photograph and Cover Design by Peter Campbell

Contributors

Doug Arnold
Ginny Baumbach
Brad Belair
Amanda Bernstein
Tim Blau
Sharon Blank
Dave Blanchard
Tally Breman
Laurie Byro
Alice Caffin
CTE Chair
Susan Rice Clarke
Barbara Crooker

Robert DiMaree
Markie Ellington
Mark Fine
Molly Fisk
Alan Gunn
George Helm
Joe Horngie Hauser
Collette Herz
P. E. Kahn
Daria Tavana
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Duane Vorhees
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Robert Zadler

Marilyn Lockie
Maribeth Lysen
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Harold Quinn
Tree Riesener
Julie Schiltack
Eric Sellen
Anne Kaiser
Autumn Koneopka

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W Dallas

Julie Schlack

is the only poet I've ever heard who can get away with stopping in the middle of a poem to chat or talk about the poem, then finish it and still have his audience's rapt attention. A true entertainer.

We then drove to San Francisco to meet A. D. Winans, another small press icon and long-time friend of Foxy's. We arrived early, and while waiting, Foxy shimmied up to many a female bystander listening to street music and asked her to dance. The only one who would have accepted, he didn't ask. I was becoming a friend with whom he treated with no pretense, as he did also A. D. Their meeting was a pleasure to see, like watching two bull elk from the same herd come to terms after locking horns. (After a thirty-year friendship, the two had a recent falling-out over contents in Fox's most recent book.) Foxy asked first thing, as we all sat down for coffee, "So do you forgive me?"

"I'm thinking about it," came from A. D.

It was clear to this observer, though, that things are copasetic with the herd leaders once again. Honesty and, yes, affection that goes way back was unmistakable, albeit disguised behind a mask of maleness. Besides, staying mad at Fox might just be impossible for anyone.

He and I had only one confrontation. It happened right before his formal interview of me, which he had wanted to film with his new camera to be on a DVD that would accompany *Portraits*. I had told him previously that I wouldn't allow the interview to be photographed. He reluctantly agreed but then changed his mind as the interview in my living room was beginning. There was a fierce display of willfulness on both our parts. Readers will have to wait for the book/DVD set to see how it was resolved.

Leaving for the airport on day eight held a sadness for both of us, lightened only slightly as we were going out the front door when Foxy said, "Wait, I forgot my cane."

"You don't have a cane, Foxy." I said.

Starwood's "W" brand boutique hotels are all the rage, so the recently opened W on Victory Road apparently created a massive shiver of anticipation within the Dallas business community. Or at least that was the sense I got when my invitation to participate in a "Research Odyssey" had far more detail about the venue than about the event.

"Market Research" is the term most frequently used to categorize my profession, though I like to think that this is an inexact and incomplete description. My job is to bring people together in online communities, ask them questions, seek their feedback, and virtually "listen in" on their conversations — so that my largely Fortune 500 clients can better assess what consumers want, what they're likely to buy, what they're willing to pay for it, and why. Most of the time, doing this job doesn't feel as mercenary as it sounds. The experience of being in these private communities seems to offer their members an oasis, a useful idea exchange, and an empowering sense that they are engaged in dialogue with the human beings behind the brands that populate their lives.

But I didn't want to go to Dallas. On my one prior visit, the city struck me as every bit as soulless as my stereotype of Texas in general: miles of chrome-coated office buildings — some boxy, some tall, but all of them ugly — dense traffic, franchise restaurants, and no city life on a human scale.

The city met my expectations. When the fifty-dollar cab ride deposited me at the entrance to the W at about 9:30 at night, we'd driven through what felt like half of downtown and seen not a single person on the sidewalks. But I wasn't prepared for the W, or rather, simply *W*. Young men dressed entirely in black surrounded the taxi as I stepped out of it, with one emerging from the pack to place my single suitcase on a cart, another to escort me to the front desk. Loud trance music pulsed in the tiny lobby; the check-in desk on my right was barely visible in the dim light. All of the action appeared to be to my left, in a black-lit room that I took to be the bar where chrome or platinum stalactites hung and hovered like fractured, displaced mobius strips. Young men with moussed hair escorted bosom-boosted, spaghetti-strapped female colleagues in and out of the martini den; an occasional older man whose fashion sense had been informed by

Miami Vice—the television show, *not* the movie—strode past while speaking in urgent masculine tones into his cell phone.

The black-clad check-in clerk was friendly, so comfortable in this, *her* milieu, that when she addressed me as Julie I momentarily panicked that she was a former colleague or neighbor that I, so obviously old and out-of-it, had quite simply forgotten. But no, this was W, where titles like Mr. or Ms. were so not cool as to be beneath contempt. I too had little use for formalities or false gestures of respect. Still, the cloak—the pashmina, as it were—of self-satisfaction smoothly wrapped around the quivering, barely repressed thrill of working, drinking, text messaging in a place where *everything cost so much money*—created a vibe that I found almost toxic.

Her Hipness behind the desk offered me a bottle of water to take to my room. I gratefully accepted the tall glass cylinder labeled “W”, (for the hotel? For “water”? Or, in a stunning feat of clever branding for both?). Thirsty from my flight, parched from my shame at being badly dressed and over fifty, I began drinking while still in the elevator. This was simply tap water in a heavy bottle.

The room—well, it was hard to hate the room, with its excellent flat screen TV; its Eurasian contours, all black woods and burnished pewter-like moldings. The half-bottle of red wine, the honor bar that thoughtfully catered to one’s hankering both for a Snickers bar *and* a Power Bar—they were just the thing for a cranky, creaky traveler like me. But other than the bed, which was sublimely comfortable, the room was a triumph of form over function. The bathtub sat out in the open, the showerhead suspended from the ceiling, as if inviting the bather to rotate under it like poultry on a vertical spit, for the viewing pleasure of whoever reclined on that fabulous bed. The stops in the bathtub and sink were tapered, seductive, and flimsy, keeling over instead of perching upright whenever I tried to drain out the water.

And the Guest Services book was not a book at all. No, it was a collection of long, thin cards on a giant ring containing 4 point type in some indistinguishable color, like the paint samples you can flip through in building supply stores, only not as useful. I eventually discovered that the first card in the collection was a table of contents, but the “chapter” titles—with archly Gen Y names like “Gather” “W2Goo,” “Bliss and Tell,” and “Whenever”—were wholly uninformative, requiring me to fan through the deck several times before finding the card that told me how to call room service and the one instructing me in how to access the Internet.

Whatever.

While waiting for my Wonderful, Winsome Caesar Salad, I noticed that absolutely everything in this room was in some way branded and purchasable—the bedding, the pillows, the impossible-to-set clock radio, the CDs with their remixes and anthologies of carefully chosen mood music and clever titles like “W Hotels Warmth of Cool—Overture” and “W Hotels Rhythm and Muse.” It was as if the experience didn’t count unless it could be commoditized, but in that mass customization sort of way, giving me the illusion of choice, the patina of identity by letting me choose the pillow firmness or music genre or shampoo scent that uniquely defined me (and the tens of thousands of other people who presumably made the same choices).

I felt ridiculously homesick, slept badly, and awoke eager for the day to be over so I could fly home that evening. But first I had to pay \$6.75 plus tip for a cup of mediocre coffee and a bagel, then listen, schmooze, and dazzle at the Research Odyssey.

This event was convened to get some ostensibly innovative companies together first to listen to the market researchers and brand plannars from some major corporations share their challenges and wishes; then to present what my company is doing with and for the event’s sponsor and explore ways we might collaborate to reach new heights—or was it depths?—in consumer insights.

And what is a consumer insight?

If’s the unmet need.

The decision tree.

The nostalgic attachment.

The influential recommendation that, if properly understood, could drive the engine of commerce towards a brand, a store, a purchase.

Our insights into female potato chip buyers with at least one child aged 6-12, for example, illuminated the fact that chips are not primarily about potatoes. They’re not even about salt. They’re about tamping down road rage when stalled in traffic on the way home after work, about turning the shameful predictability of another evening in front of the television into an intentional, festive event; about indulging themselves and placating their children for pennies, by the ounce. Our brainstorms about flavors or scents with female Millennials (aged 20-26) reveal a nostalgia for products that smell like bubble gum and cotton candy, for the sweet pink sensations that remind them of earlier years when they were hopeful and easily pleased. Their mothers, in contrast, are past nostalgia, drawn to

shampoos and detergents and deodorants that smell of burning citrus or violent rain, of musk and wildness. But for all of them—the Style-Leading Gen Y males and the Tech Savvy ones, the Health-and-Wellness-Focused Boomer women and the Food-as-Labor-of-Loves—consumer products are prompts and markers. They are both a feature and a symptom of their lives.

There are times when I actually feel that I am doing something of value in using the anonymous intimacy of the web to enable people to connect in ways that start out superficial and safe but evolve, their relationships taking on greater meaning and depth.

The rest of the time I feel as I felt when the working session began and our client Arlene, a perfectly nice and smart Dallas soccer mom and Ph.D in quantitative sociology, shared what she'd been working on for the past six months. It was this: How would consumers respond if, instead of getting two large bags of potato chips for \$3.99, they were offered two large bags, each containing 20% more chips, for \$4.99? All of the data indicated that they'd take it in stride. Our community members perceived this new approach as still offering value; large scale quantitative studies suggested no decline in intent-to-purchase scores. And in virtual 3D simulations of the shopping experience, focus group members would, after scanning the shelves, quite readily click their cursors on the bags containing 20% more chips. Based on these six months of research, the snack food company was poised to make the change, and while Michele felt this was the right thing to do, it was still a little scary, given the financial consequences if consumers turned to a cheaper brand.

It was only then that I realized just how much money depended on pedestrian, just-shoot-me-now-rather-than-discuss-it decisions like this. And yet, *six months*? An entire team of people had spent countless hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars on this?

During the break, instead of chatting with potential new prospects, I instead went out into the hallway, walked briskly toward the panel of multi-colored lightbulbs that flashed in time to the Europop-beat infusing the dim hallway, and turned right into the granite and steel bathroom. I stayed in the stall as the other attendees re-applied their lipstick and speculated about what would be served up as a W lunch.

They left and I remained, enjoying the solitude, wondering not for the first time how I'd gotten there, when I became aware of the bathroom muzak. Unlike the wall of musical exhortation in the hallways, this was a recognizable tune. What I was listening to was a highly processed and flanged techno version of "Sound of Silence."

And in the naked light I saw, I sang to myself, Ten thousand people, maybe more. This was too rich. I found myself grinning a fatuous grin. People talking without speaking. People hearing without listening. People writing songs, that voices never shared. This was the step aerobics version of the song; I wondered if it was also playing in the fitness center, where one could no doubt purchase a W leotard – a Wcotard? – and mindlessly step up and down in rhythm to it, going nowhere. *No one dared, disturb the sound of silence.*

I was cast back to the front seat of my mother's turquoise Dodge Dart. It was winter of 1966, we were parked illegally in front of the Kroger in the Maplewood Shopping Center on West Stadium Boulevard in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and I was staying in the car while my mother ran in for a few groceries because, she believed, my presence would somehow discourage a cop from ticketing her. I was eleven and a half years old, listening to the radio. I'd heard this song before – I think it may have been number one on the charts for a time – but this was the first time I'd really listened to the lyrics. *And the people bowed and prayed, to the neon god they'd made.* Paul Simon's voice quivered with reproach, and though I didn't know what he meant, as a bookish, friendless, pubescent newcomer to the United States and to the cruelties of middle school, I *felt* the song's meaning. *And the sign flashed out its warning, in the words that it was forming. And the signs said, The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls. And whisper'd in the sounds of silence.* These American kids were not just mean, I'd realized in that moment, they were hollow and blind, shallow and trite. Unlike them, I had a soul. And I finally believed what my parents had repeatedly told me as I'd cry about how left out I was, that *my people*—sensitive people who got no joy from cruelty, who believed that the world should have art and creativity and meaning and kindness—were somewhere out there, and it was just a matter of time before we found each other. Surely there were other kids like me bending close to the radio, bored by Sonny and Cher, who shared that sensibility, who believed in something bigger. I leaned into the radio, listening to Simon and Garfunkel's wrath and hope, hugging myself against the cold that seeped into the car, feeling my nose and cheeks warm from the faint but brave churning of the tiny defroster, hearing what in that moment I believed to be my future.

Whatever Happened to the Novel?

Robert Zaller

And then I was back in the W stall. I waited for the familiar surge of self-reproach that came with every reminder of how I'd abandoned my youthful dreams of healing the world through politics, literature and altruism. But it didn't come. I was feeling my age without shame. Like the harried moms, the overweight women, the heartburn sufferers — like all of the research subjects whose words I elicited, examined, synopsized, and laid down onto PowerPoint slides—the path to my present was a rough trail of steep hills, tedious flats, dead ends, bent branches, and surprising vistas. The gap between the pure Princess of Principle I thought I'd be and the ambivalent, jaded, well-paid performer I'd become felt neither vast nor inexplicable.

In that granite-floored, teak-walled cell, with my head cocked, right ear facing up to the discreetly placed speaker in the W-ashroom, I was relieved that I could see the irony in this situation, that I had not traveled so far from myself as to be inured to its absurdity. And my mother was right—I *had* found “my people.” I could call my husband later and tell him this story, share it with friends and know they’d get it.

But first, I had work to do.

I emerged from the stall into the now empty bathroom and applied a new coat of lipstick. I touched up my lashes, blinked rapidly a few times to make sure they wouldn’t smudge, made a futile effort to pat down my stubbornly wild hair, and walked briskly back to the meeting, ready to share my insights.

The question posed by the title above may seem an odd one, since there is surely no quantitative shortage of novels and novelists today. Indeed, the success of the novel as a literary form has never seemed so universal. Once a more or less strictly Western genre, it has now migrated around the globe. Its prestige, too, is undiminished. While poets and playwrights are occasionally given the Nobel, it and other literary prizes are usually reserved for those who have distinguished themselves primarily as novelists.

Yet we all know that something is deeply wrong with the novel, and that it is somehow imperilled. This would not necessarily be a bad thing; literary forms evolve, and the novel itself first satirized and then replaced the genres that had preceded it. The problem is that the novel has no apparent successor; that is, no emerging form that can do something like its work, or, if a different kind of work altogether, one of comparable value and significance. If the novel is waning—I won’t say dying—then it is taking a part of what was once our shared world with it.

The golden age of the novel, it’s now clear, lasted roughly from 1800 to 1950. There were superb solitary examples of it before, and many have argued that the greatest of all novels was the very first, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. By the eighteenth century, it was an established genre, and even merited an article in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. Somewhere between Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, though, the novel’s supremacy among literary forms was acknowledged, and by the time of Stendhal and Balzac, that supremacy was unquestioned.

What gave the novel such distinction, and what was its significance? The novel arose from the bourgeois world, as it may be said to be passing with it. Marxist criticism observed this to the point of tedium, though it incorrectly anticipated what the post-bourgeois world would be. The matter is more complex, however. Art is a dialogue with life, not a mere precipitate of it. It arises as a *voice*, an individual’s voice, and how that voice is moved to speak is always a mystery.

The novel is a case in point. Cervantes stumbled upon it quite by accident. Literature, in his day, was defined by epic and romance. These forms, like the novel, revolved around a hero confronting a