

# Working At Writing

By Melissa Field Sherman '86

*Patricia Quigley '78 is assistant director of University Relations at Rowan.*

American novelist Sinclair Lewis once argued, “Writing is just work—there’s no secret.” Maybe not. After all, there are as many roads to royalty checks (and rejection slips) as there are writers. Even among authors who share an alma mater, no two success stories are alike. Below, five alumni-authors narrate their stories, from blank sheet to published book. You decide: just work or secret blend of paper, ink and Muse?

## Noelle Sickels '73

Writing came easily to Noelle Sickels: poems and stories as a child, essays and research papers as a student. But it wasn’t until she discovered fragments of a novel her mother had been writing when she died in 1981 that Sickels considered writing as a possible profession. “I had the idea that I could get my mother’s work published by taking her stories and some of the chapters from the novel and interspersing them with my nonfiction,” explains Sickels. When she finished this deeply personal project about a year later, she realized she “wanted to keep going.”

Starting with a short story, moving into poetry, and later, novels, Sickels sent her work to journals, literary magazines and small-press anthologies without much success. Then, in 1991, one of her short stories was accepted for publication in the anthology *American Fiction 3*.

Sometime during the ten-year period between her mother’s death and the acceptance of her first short story, Sickels discovered Lillian Schliessel’s *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, a chronicle of American emigration in the gold-rush inspired boom between 1840 and 1870.

“When I thought of this historical movement, which so defines our country,” explains Sickels, “I always thought of cavalry and gold-diggers — all the male stuff. But I realized [after reading Schliessel’s book] that there were thousands of families traveling west, too.” As she marveled at how women’s experiences must have differed vastly from men’s during this turbulent and often dangerous period, the character of Alice Muller came to Sickels like “a hologram” on her desk. She opens *Walking West* (1995) with a scene in which Alice is reluctantly packing for a journey only her husband wishes to make.

Describing her style as “lyrical, straightforward storytelling, with an emphasis on character over plot” Sickels points out that her novel didn’t fit into a niche.

“Booksellers didn’t know whether to put *Walking West* in fiction or Westerns.”

Similarly, *The Shopkeeper’s Wife* (1998), her second novel, eluded easy categorization. Sickels admits that she

deliberately set out to write a popular mainstream novel, “something you might find in grocery stores.” But the time period and characters interested her more than the murder mystery, and the novel evolved into a study of American women’s limitations — social, economic, even sexual — in the late 1800s. Loosely based on the murder trial of Adelaide Bartlett, *The Shopkeeper’s Wife*, like *Walking West*, was inspired by a nonfiction book, this time Mary S. Hartman’s *Victorian Murderesses*. “I just couldn’t do a potboiler,” laughs Sickels.

Her current project, an experimental novella, concerns a “contemporary love triangle.” And her list of publications has grown to include poetry, essays and short



Rowan Magazine

Volume 5, Number 1

Fall '99

Pages 17-22

Copyright ©1999

[www.rowanmagazine.com](http://www.rowanmagazine.com)

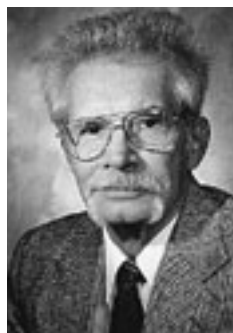
stories published in numerous literary journals, magazines and anthologies. Like many writers, though, Sickels has a second career: She is director of the Neighborhood Nursery School in Los Angeles, a parent cooperative with an enrollment of 24.

A New Jersey native, Sickels earned her MA in elementary education at Rowan in 1973. "I entered the program during an exciting time, when a handful of young, innovative professors were taking a creative approach to teacher training," explains Sickels. Since graduation, she has taken several non-traditional teaching assignments, including programs for senior citizens, parent education classes and work in a clinic for emotionally disturbed teens.

A writer, a teacher, a wife and a mother, Sickels must find the sometimes uneasy balance between work and family. "It's not always easy to write," confides the author. "My husband and son never make me feel guilty, so I have to be careful not to use 'family' as an excuse." Sickels adds, "I am my own worst enemy. It's easy to say, 'I have to do the laundry,' or 'I need to go to my son's basketball game.' If I want to avoid writing, there is always a legitimate reason."

### James F. McCloy '67

More than two decades ago, James F. McCloy teamed up with fellow historian Ray Miller, Jr., to research and write a book about one of the most enduring pieces of New Jersey folklore: the Jersey Devil. A favorite among the state's librarians, teachers and young readers, *The Jersey Devil* traces the creature's legacy from colonial times, when Mother Leeds gave birth to a "diabolic child" — the monster itself; to modernity, when, among other reports, a "ghastly night intruder" dined on a poultry farmer's livestock and dogs. Through anecdotes, news accounts, maps, photographs and illustrations, McCloy and his coauthor reveal the legend's arc and discuss possible explanations for people's encounters



with the creature, including outright fraud in some cases and mass hysteria in others.

The popularity of *The Jersey Devil* begged for a sequel, so, in 1998, McCloy and Miller delivered *Phantom of the Pines*. In the time between the two books, the authors continued gathering anecdotes about Jersey Devil sightings, including a motorist's claim that the creature flew over his car in Sayreville in 1996. The narrative attempts not only to chronicle the legend and its permutations but also to penetrate the mystery—real or hoax?

McCloy, who earned both his BA and MA in history at Rowan, first became interested in the Jersey Devil as a child learning to read. "I saw a graffiti-marked sign that said, 'Jersey Devil,'" remembers McCloy. "'What's that?' I wondered." And that simple question eventually led to his first book in 1976. "I must have it lucky," reflects the writer-historian on his remarkably easy journey from research to publication.

McCloy and Miller are New Jersey natives, but they connected in Delaware, where both teach at Wilmington College; McCloy is an adjunct professor of history. It was there that they discovered their common interest and began pursuing it in a more organized manner, leading to their first collaboration. Both agree that "meeting people and hearing their stories," particularly those of the "deeply interesting people of South Jersey," has been "one of the most rewarding facets" of their research. As to how the project was done, he and Miller "just divvied it up," says McCloy, "working on the whole thing together."

Like many writers, McCloy juggles several professions; he has worked in the Delaware Department of Labor for nearly 25 years. Factor in the many lectures that he and his coauthor give on their favorite beast—at schools, historical societies and book signings—and you have an unwieldy schedule. But McCloy enjoys it. "If it was painful, I wouldn't do it!" he laughs.

McCloy's work on his second

book (*Phantom of the Pines* is his third) reflects his commitment to doing only work that he enjoys. After years of reading aloud to his two children and years of dog ownership, McCloy wondered: How about a children's book that explains how dogs help people? "Dogs at Work was rejected 16 times before Crown picked it up," admits McCloy, adding that some writers get discouraged after only one rejection. "You have to expect rejections. It's part of the work." Like *The Jersey Devil*, *Dogs at Work* (1979) became another school-library staple.

In addition to his books, McCloy has published articles in magazines and newspapers on various topics. He also pursues two offbeat hobbies: sending messages in bottles and collecting license plates. McCloy enjoys a 20 percent return rate on his messages and has received responses from as far away as Spain. His collection of license plates includes one from every state, several from different countries, and New Jersey plates from every year since 1908.

Interest in the beast picks up in the autumn months, and McCloy is busy with speaking engagements. McCloy and Miller also have been working on a short segment for the Animal Channel's "Notorious Animal Legends."

### William V. Rauscher '54

Against the backdrop of a 36-year tenure as rector of Christ Church in Woodbury, William V. Rauscher has quietly pursued twin interests that, at a glance, seem far removed from his parochial ministry: stage magic and the paranormal. But a sense of mystery and "purposeful coincidence" has permeated his life, he says, beginning with his boyhood in the Highlands, his first performance as a magician at 13 and throughout his adulthood and ministry.

While studying to become a teacher at Rowan in the early 1950s, Rauscher acknowledged his "gnawing for the ministry" and became a postulant in his hometown's Episcopal church. He attended the Episcopal Divinity School of Philadelphia after graduation and was

ordained a priest in 1957. Following three years as the rector of a small church, Rauscher was assigned to Christ Church. He recognized that he needed relief from the “pressure cooker” of parochial ministry. His abiding interest in stage magic and absorption in the paranormal provided an outlet.



Fascinated by “the study of consciousness on all its various levels,” Rauscher began amassing a library of texts and research concerning healing, prayer, cults, comparative religion, magic, illusions, parapsychology and psychic frauds. “We’re born with a trickster mind,” maintains Rauscher. “Real psychic events are quite rare.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rauscher became “a pioneer interpreter of the so-called ‘psychic revolution,’” translating the phenomena from a Christian mindset. In 1969, he produced the first of 23 issues of *Spiritual Frontiers Journal*, which explored such subjects as prayer, meditation, healing and life after death. Then, in 1973, he coauthored Arthur Ford: *The Man Who Talked with the Dead*.

In his early books, Rauscher, a former grantee of the Parapsychology Foundation, seeks to reconcile the psychic and the religious experience, urging the Church “to rediscover its mystical and psychical roots.” In *The Spiritual Frontier* (1975), for example, Rauscher argues for a responsible connection between psychic research — including communication with the dead, possession, hauntings and telepathy — and the current, accepted teachings of Christian faith. “There are, in the church and out, some who wonder about the propriety of a man of God treading such strange paths,” writes Rauscher. “But the moon is no less a strange place to man, and can it be less admirable to explore the canyons of man’s psyche than to map the mountains of the moon?”

By the 1980s, Rauscher was busy chronicling the zaniness that passed for liturgical celebration in Christian church-

es. “Has the church gone too far?” Rauscher asks in *Church in Frenzy* (1980), as he describes beer-and-pretzel communion services, a pastor who wears clown suits “to help his congregation concentrate,” and a wedding in which the bride wears white

— a cape, stockings, shoes and G-string. Then, predicting that rational suicide would become as controversial an issue in the Church as abortion, Rauscher appeals to readers—“Don’t do it!”—in *The Case against Suicide* (1981).

Rauscher’s most recent books showcase his achievements as a historian of stage magic: *John Calvert: Magic and Adventures around the World* (1987); *The Great Raymond: King of Entertainers, Entertainer of Kings* (1996); and *Servais Le Roy: Monarch of Mystery* (due out November 1999). He has produced a number of monographs on magic, too, including “ESP or Trickery?” and “The Wand in Story and Symbol.” The retired rector has belonged to the International Brotherhood of Magicians since 1949 and is also a member of the Society of American Magicians. Inspired as a child by the *Mysto Magic Set*, the amateur magician staged “Rauscher’s Magical Wonders” for numerous community events, and closed the 49th Annual Boston *Magicale* with his act.

Rauscher has managed to align seemingly disparate interests through his writing. “Not everything can be explained,” he acknowledges. But that doesn’t prevent him from continuing his investigation of mystical subjects.

### Kathleen Stevens '72

When Kathleen Stevens first began her writing career, she was “a compass with no direction.” The retired professor jokes that her writing students knew more about how to submit stories, choose markets and negotiate rights after one semester than she did after her first five years of professional writ-



ing. But Stevens, who had been interested in becoming a writer since high school, didn’t let naiveté prevent her from getting started. “Beating on the doors of small magazines,” she collected several rejection slips before placing a humorous essay in 1964.

In the period following that initial success, Stevens often drew on her experience as a wife and mother to write personal essays for *The Star Herald*, a weekly newspaper of the Camden diocese. She also placed articles in magazines for women, parents, senior citizens and writers.

By the time Stevens decided to enroll in the master’s program in English at Rowan, she had a substantial list of published work. She had also entered the program just as the teaching of writing was being reborn as a field separate from the study of literature. When she completed her MA, Stevens was offered a coveted one-year appointment in the newly formed communications department. She spent the next 25 years guiding student writers and in 1996 was named chair of the journalism and creative writing department in the new School of Communications. “Teaching writing courses involved a staggering amount of work,” Stevens confides. It wasn’t always easy to find time for her own writing.

She did, however. Reading aloud to her children led to her interest in the children’s market, and in 1973, Stevens placed a story in *Young Miss*. A non-fiction piece for *Seventeen* followed. Then, in 1978, the text of her first picture book, *The Beast in the Bath tub*, was initially published as a story in *Cricket*. In 1982, the critically acclaimed children’s magazine also published the text of her 1983 *Molly*,

*McCollough*, & *Tom the Rogue*. According to Stevens, *The Beast* sprang from her children’s “marvelous excuses for not going to bed” and *Molly* from “the joy of Irish folk tales.” These stories, of course, differ markedly from the personal essays and “think” pieces that define her early career. Writing picture-book text is more like writing poetry,

explains Stevens. “The rhythm, word play and repetition” in each are closely related.

Two textbook publishers picked up *The Beast* after its appearance in *Cricket*. “But I didn’t like the illustrations of the Beast in either of them,” notes Stevens. “When I sold the book rights I thought, ‘Another chance to get a Beast I like.’” She was delighted with the *Beast* Ray Bowler created for the 1980 book. Bowler also illustrated the sequels, *The Beast and the Babysitter* (1988) and *Bully for the Beast* (1990). Authors in the picture-book market typically have little say in how their books are illustrated, but Stevens has been generally pleased with how her stories are interpreted by artists.

*The Beast in the Bathtub*, which was published in Australia, England, Japan and the United States, was in print for 19 years, with total sales of at least 500,000. In addition to her story credits in *Cricket* (circulation 70,000), the writer has also published biographies in *Highlights*, a children’s magazine with a circulation of more than three million. “I think of how many kids I may reach,” Stevens marvels. “A child might put down a book or a story and say, ‘How about another?’ That’s powerful.”

Stevens’ most recent book, *Aunt Skilly and the Stranger* (1994), was inspired by a cabin she saw during a vacation in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains. Stevens hopes to “stir the embers into a new blaze of writing activity.”

Asked to advise beginning writers, Stevens talks about “the three Ps: persistence, professionalism, and pizza.” Pizza? “When there’s no time to cook because you’re writing, when you need to indulge, or when it’s time to celebrate,” laughs Stevens.

### **Nelly Toll ’76**

On the day Hitler’s army entered her birthplace, Lwow, Poland, Nelly Toll began taking notes. It was June 1941; she was only six years old. Two years later, when she and her mother were hidden from the Nazis by a Christian family, she developed her notes into the diary that eventually became the basis for a memoir

of those horrific years, *Behind the Secret Window*. “If I should be killed,” the young Toll wrote in her diary, “at least my memory book will stay alive so that the whole world can see the terrible things that happened to us.”

To help occupy her during the long hours of isolation, the precocious diarist was given watercolors and paper. The paintings she created speak only of the stories of a good and normal life with which her mother cheered her during their 13-month confinement.

The juxtaposition of evil and good is at the heart of *Behind the Secret Window*, which was published in 1993. The memoir is illustrated with 29 of the



young Toll’s paintings, which depict scenes from a typical childhood: friends playing dominoes, students taking a walk with their teacher, children visiting the doctor. They are colorful, light and incredibly detailed paintings of a life she had not had a chance to live. In a *New York Times* book review, Eva Hoffman wrote that the paintings are “a kind of testimony—not to what actually happened but to the saving powers of the imagination and, undoubtedly, of love.” Conversely, the text of *Behind the Secret Window*, which is based on Toll’s memory book, narrates Nazi atrocities against Jews in Poland.

Her autobiography garnered several awards, including *Parenting Magazine* Best Nonfiction Book, 1994 *International Reading Association* Book Award, and *New York Public Library Books of 1993*. In 1997, the *Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays* and the *Netherlands’ Het Waterhuis* children’s

theater co-produced a musical play entitled “*The Secret Window*” based on Toll’s book.

An exhibit of the art in *Behind the Secret Window* and about 30 more of Toll’s paintings has been displayed in museums and educational institutions around the country. According to William Rubel, director of the *Children’s Art Foundation* in Santa Cruz, Calif., “[The] watercolors are the most extraordinary series of children’s paintings to have survived the Holocaust.”

Although the critical acclaim and acceptance of her memoir and paintings were “quite a big thrill” to Toll, *Window* was not her first book. *Without Surrender* (1978) is a collection of art, “mostly executed in camps under dreadful conditions, often under the sentence of death if the artists were discovered,” explains Toll, who has lectured widely on Holocaust art. One of Toll’s abiding concerns has been to ensure that art from and about the Holocaust is embraced as a “universal statement” about the horrors of that historical period. She revisits this theme in *When Memory Speaks*, which was published in 1998. She writes, “Leaving a trace of their presence for posterity, these Holocaust artists extracted from the ghettos and camps an historical truth that is forever preserved in their art.” Toll collected the work of artists who risked death to create their “camp art,” as well as that of contemporary artists who have struggled to depict the tragedy.

The writer-artist confides that she has all but abandoned her own paintbrush over the last decade in favor of her writing, research and teaching. After emigrating to the United States in 1951, Toll raised a family and continued her education. She has been a lifelong student, earning a B.A. in art from Rowan, graduate credentials at Rutgers and Hahneman, and, most recently, pursuing doctoral studies in literacy at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an adjunct professor of humanities at Rowan and also has taught writing courses. Toll relishes teaching more than any other professional pursuit. “I feel that it is more than a job.” ■