

The Dilemma Of A Writer's Golden Years

When the golden years come upon a writer he eats less, and most everything he eats seems to turn to fat. He feels the world as close as water on his skin, he looks at pretty young women with as much interest as ever, but with less aggressive thou

ghts, and he guzzles his booze with more care.

It's his stage in life when he begins to wonder if he ever should have taken up the craft of writing to earn his living. And he tries to recall how it all began.

It began because a boy had a constant dream of being a foreign correspondent in the days of typewriter-toting Quentin Reynolds and John Gunther, attired in the ubiquitous trenchcoat and wide-brimmed fedora. But when the boy grew to manhood and entered journalism there was no longer a shadowy, fog-shrouded world of midnight trains, wars, intrigues, deadlines, romance and interviews with film stars and royalty, dictators and diplomats.

That fictional caricature was never totally correct, but it was a grand illusion to have as a boy. It intrigued me so that I wanted to be one of those world-traveling, adventurous foreign correspondents who reported on great events and wrote books. So, when a writer reaches his golden years it's the time in his life, in most cases, where he begins to wonder if he's accomplished what he set out as his goal.

But has he, in fact, reached the point where his closest friends think they're doing him a favor by reading what he has written? And when someone asks him what he's currently working on, he usually responds with, "I'm writing the same old stuff."

The Dilemma

His periods of depression come more frequently. And he wonders what his future – if any – holds. It's the dilemma of the writer in his golden years. He is the fellow you see these days on college campuses lecturing, often for free, to classes of journalism and creative writing students. He's on another ego trip.

Instead of producing at his computer (typewriter in my case) he's out telling college kids what a great writer he is, what a fascinating career he's had, and how they can learn so much if they'll just listen to him tell the secrets of his craft.

Some golden years writers even become "writers in residence" on university campuses. In that way they justify not writing and at the same time salve their egos by pontificating to any and all students who will listen.

But there just may be a solution to the dilemma of the writer in his golden years. It would be a law that required the writer, on penalty of death, to stop writing at age 65. The writer could then pursue a hobby, such as becoming a full-time talker. And since the state stopped the writer from writing, he'd be provided a government pension, which would take care of his economic needs.

On the last day before his 65th birthday, the writer would be certified by the state as a "writer emeritus." Perhaps a university or two could confer a doctorate and these certifications would make make him or her a "distinguished man (or woman) of letters" with documents and seals to prove it.

With his government pension he'd be protected from having to work in public relations, or having to turn his hand to ghost writing or writing press releases for politicians. It would be a proper climax for writers in their golden years, most of whom having been Depression Years kids.

Driven To Write

The Great Depression of the 1930's taught me the importance of work and study. In my efforts to become a professional writer I learned the purpose of writing is to affect rather than convince the reader. Writing technique is the writer's mastery of ways by which he stirs the reader.

It took me time to learn this, but the dream to be a writer was there and it wouldn't go away. And all the while, whenever I could find the time, I was pounding a typewriter. It was a compulsion. I didn't seem to be able to keep away from the idea of becoming a professional writer.

Ultimately the time came when newspapers and magazines began to print what I wrote. Later, came the books.

But was it worth it? It's an unanswerable question because I had no choice. I had a drive to write and there wasn't anything I could do to change it. Perhaps I never wanted to.

My writing has brought me world travel and the company of the great and near great; it has at times kept me in a good supply of martinis, and it occasionally impressed an attractive woman.

And now that I'm in my golden years, the trees seem greener, the brook tastes sweeter and the mountains appear more majestic. But has the time come to put myself out in the green and lush pasture, to begin to dream of past achievements, by-gone adventures and lost romances? I think not.

Instead, I'm reminded that some of the world's greatest writers – Victor Hugo, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw – did some of their best writing when they were in their seventies and eighties.

So I'll continue to endure my occasional depression, my infrequent writer's block, my decreasing appetite, and my

caution about booze. I'll pound my typewriter until the great pincher closes around my heart and chokes off life. Nature will have told me conclusively it's time to quit.

A writer can end no other way.

Hal D. Steward, of San Diego, says he's semi-retired at age 91. He was born in East St. Louis. In World War II he was an army combat correspondent and a major on the staff of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. He worked on a number of newspapers, traveled extensively on foreign assignments, and has written numerous magazine articles and books. He recently won a first place award from the San Diego chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists for a column he wrote for SJR earlier this year, "A Tribute To The Verable Underwood No.5."