

1-1-2017

Soudbites from Dialogues with Michael Spooner: A Happened, Happening, Then Retrospective on a Career in Publishing, Writing, Reading, and Responding

Stacy Kastner

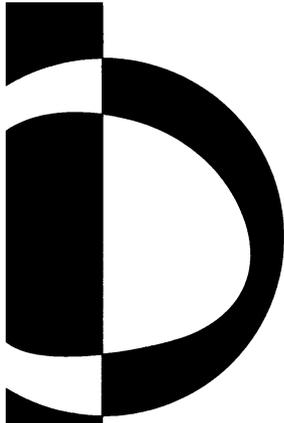
Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Kastner, Stacy (2017) "Soudbites from Dialogues with Michael Spooner: A Happened, Happening, Then Retrospective on a Career in Publishing, Writing, Reading, and Responding," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1823>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



Stacy Kastner

Soundbites from Dialogues with Michael Spooner: A Happened, Happening, Then Retrospective on a Career in Publishing, Writing, Reading, and Responding

Born in Fairbanks, Alaska, Michael Spooner, like many of the young people in his generation did, like many academics and alternative types do, turned 17 and moved along. Editing found him in Illinois in the 1980s, luring him with the promise of windowsills with pots of violets, scotch-laced lunches, Chesterfield straights, and the opportunity to be positioned as a friend of texts-in-process, manuscripts before they're neat and clean and bound, manuscripts when they're writers who are working through ideas. He was coaxed by the mountains and Joyce Kinkead to head to Logan, Utah in 1993 where he breathed life into Utah State University Press, increasing annual acquisitions from three books a year to over twenty, providing the opportunity for some of our most important and foundational texts to shape our community and field. Though he made a career out of shepherding writing studies scholars, folklorists, and poets to print, in his own writing life, Michael Spooner often performs a wonderfully graphic exploration of textuality

The Writing Center Journal 36.2 | 2017 19

and continues to offer a brilliantly playful, experimental, and sharply critical voice that cuts across fields and traditions of knowing, of telling, and of being. In this spirit of alternatives and a forward-looking perspective at a backwards-looking moment in one's career, what follows are insights for the field offered by Michael Spooner following his "retirement" from the life of the editor—a lyrical liminal liaison of sorts— that took place on Friday, September 29, 2017.

BUZZFEED-INSPIRED INTRODUCTION

What's in your go-bag as you head into the wilds when the zombie apocalypse happens?

Only the basics for me. Opera, mostly: because zombies fear a soprano. Antibiotics, of course. Sausage and cheese. Whiskey. Something to write with. Machete and baseball bat. The children's book *Outside Over There* (Sendak). Two dragon eggs. And a hunting rifle (for deer, not for zombies, although if needed . . .).

If your life were an opera, which one would it be and why?

Ha ha, I'm sure my life is an opera. And it's probably *Les Troyens*—the six-hour marathon about insufferable Aeneas, blessed by the gods, who swans around the Mediterranean, leaving a string of suicides in his wake, and who ends up getting credit for founding Rome.

If you were to share a night cap of whiskey/bourbon and cigars with any group of people, who would you invite and why?

The question reminds me of CCCC 2017, where Joe Harris and Michele Eodice arranged a rich, chaotic couple of hours for me at the Multnomah Whiskey Library with about fifty of my heroes from writing studies. Author/friends whose work and conversation have amazed me, enlightened me, and whom I've been grateful to publish over the years. I've published some of them more than once, but you don't get evenings like that more than once.

Who's Uncle Jerry?

Maybe an alter ego? He's about that space where you need an object to bring you out of where you are and take you across to where you're going. I don't know. Jerry is that kind of object for me. He started as a character created by a character in one of my novels for young people—a very sassy, cynical high school girl named Annie—who used him in her blog. After the book was done, I decided to keep using him in a blog

of my own. So he's an invented persona who kind of liberates me. He allows me to play in that space between who I am and who I might be.

INSIGHTS FROM AN EDITOR

Leveraging liminality, writing without risk or reward: What are your annual review hacks for the alt/acs and non tenure tracks (just keep writing)?

We are all a bit liminal, of course. It's just that for some of us, being on the threshold becomes more our center of gravity. This is one of the things I often found rewarding in the career I had—although also weird and discouraging. You ask yourself questions like: are you an academic or not? Do you dare to do scholarship? Your positionality is very different, so who's your reader?

On the other hand, I think the liminal nature of my work gave me the liberty to take some chances in print that I might not have felt from other positionalities. Like, I haven't had to write with a promotion committee in the back of my mind. So I could build in a Cheyenne folktale if I wanted to; I could make smart-ass comments in the sidebar; I could tell jokes. This is like an inside out version of what Beth Boquet (2002) says in *Noise from the Writing Center*. There, reward comes from risk; for me, it didn't feel like risk, because there was no reward either way. Ha.

The real downside came up in one of my annual evaluations. In accounting to a new Provost for what I'd done over the previous year, I said something like, "in addition to the impact of the Press, there was my article on this . . . a contract for a novel, . . . a presentation, . . . this class for the English Department." He said to me, "Why are you writing this stuff? Why are you teaching?" The chief academic officer of a research university actually called these kinds of enriching intellectual pursuits "not a good use of your time." Those were his words. Of course I didn't stop doing this stuff; I just stopped putting it in the annual review. But I think maybe academics in contingent positions take the same approach: they want to participate in the intellectual life of their discipline, and they're going to do that even if it doesn't result in career rewards. The academy is full of people who are just driven that way.

One thing I know is that writing is a skeptical sort of fun for me. I love the craft of it, the structuring, the creative joy, and I also love the "go deep" mandate of academic work. Also, like everyone, my writing draws on all of me. So, there's a side of my family who are Anishinaabe folks, and from them I learned about traditional folktales and ways of telling. I also used to write a lot of poetry—my alt pieces are kind

of concrete poems written for academic journals. So I tend to do my academic writing with a creative writer's sensibility. The attention to voice and pace, for example, and the sense that whatever your genre, you are always dramatizing.

This is why you can't really trust a writer. I mean, it's kind of Plato's complaint, isn't it? A writer creates a neat little world on the page and then populates it with characters and citations that speak and move and represent just the way this writer wants them to do. That person is not to be trusted. And that includes me. So, like a lot of people, when I'm writing anything as well as when I'm reading anything, it's from a part of my mind where this hyper-rhetorical consciousness lives. I keep a skeptical eye on the choices being made.

“Bringing manuscripts to their audience. That really seemed like exactly the kind of job a person should have—just the greatest job in the world”: What's it been like working three decades in scholarly publishing?

Editing kind of found me. After I did my Masters in English, I was on hold for a little while. It was my (then) wife's turn to go to grad school, so we moved to Urbana, where she would do a Masters in French at University of Illinois. I was kind of the captive spouse in Urbana. To occupy myself, I enrolled in the MATESOL program there. I really enjoyed that work, but near the end of my program, there were some administrative hassles with the department, and I was not a very patient person in those days and so I just went (throws hands up) “to hell with you guys, I'll take my genius elsewhere.” (laughing)

So I sulked for a while. NCTE headquarters was also in Urbana, and I applied for a job as administrative assistant to the Deputy Executive Director, Charlie Suhor, who became a wonderful mentor to me. In those days (1984) there was a Senior Editor—essentially an Editor in Chief—for the NCTE book program. He had his own office with actual walls and a door, and I was over here on a 5x8 brick slab sharing with another staff-level person. Carol had a brutally noisy machine for typesetting and for printing out galleys. (PDFs were 15 years in the future.) Not her fault. She would whack away at the keyboard all day long, typesetting NCTE books and journals, and then she would print out galley pages on long scrolls of shiny paper, and everything would rattle and dance on our brick floor. I would look over at Editor Paul, who was in his office smoking his pipe beside his violets and his window, and reading through his manuscripts, and going out for a lunch of scotch and Chesterfield straights with some of the old-timers, and I thought, boy, that is the life (laughing).

Aside from just my mistaken impression—my silly misapprehension of the comfort that he actually lived with, I was interested in the work that he was doing: that kind of learning work, engaged intellectual work, bringing manuscripts to their audience. That really seemed like exactly the kind of job a person should have—just the greatest job in the world. A few years later that position was open, and by then I was older and smarter and able to get it, so there you go. I worked with lots of really great people (authors and others) and I was able to stay in touch with them over the years, even after I left NCTE.

There were several things that made me move to Utah. One was the location—because I'm a guy from the West, and I was never really at home, let's say geographically, in Illinois. So the chance to get back into the mountains had serious appeal. More important was that I was invited to apply by Joyce Kinkead. Joyce had been on my editorial board at NCTE, and I trusted her judgment. Also, to be among more local colleagues was an appeal; a university campus is a different vibe, even when the work is very much the same.

World Englishes, language variation, multimodality, research methods and intellectual visibility, social justice, ethics: The future of writing centers?

It was easier back in the last ice age when writing, especially student writing, just seemed like a simple problem. Before we understood what we now understand about audience, genre, process, postprocess, agency, transfer, etc., it was easier to conceive of what a student should do, what a writer should do. Anyone can do it, we thought, with a little instruction and a little discipline. But it's a much more interesting project these days.

To put it maybe over-fundamentally, I think we (in many corners of literacy scholarship) could be gradually reaching a new place in our relation to language. We're beginning to grasp more concretely how fluid and emergent language is, to see that diversity/variation in language is the norm—not an aberration. (As sociolinguists [some of them] have been saying for 50 years.) And this in turn implies a range of adjustments in our relation not only to convention in language, but also to culture, identity, ideology—to the political and material business-as-usual of education. So what I've been seeing in book proposals and manuscripts in writing studies these last few years is amounting to a collective argument that our job is to come to grips more fully with language diversity. The U.S. academy hasn't had to do this with a great deal of focus before, but sociocultural momentum is building. We can no longer responsibly insist that the prestige dialect is the one that should be taught to all students. That logic, that reasoning, is losing

credibility. It's quite strange to make this case to people who are not specialists and people who like a more concrete view of what is normal and orthodox, what is alt and what is proper. That's a really interesting and daunting part of the work I do/did, and it may become more of what writing center folks will do.

Because if we think about “diversity” as a conceptual anecdote, we might see the story of the future writing center and the future academy there. My guess is that, on U.S. campuses generally, the number of international programs and students will continue to grow over the long term, making multilingual issues ever more important. Multilingualism among U.S. students should gradually increase, too, because this is happening in public schools right now. And who knows? The professoriate may lose its monolingualism over time. Ha.

And writing centers will respond, I assume, with diversity in how they do their work. I wonder if they'll find themselves ever more often situated outside the writing program, as they are asked to collaborate with libraries, student services, learning centers, L2 programs, “fellows” programs, faculty development, and so on. And many international students are graduate students, so I would think writing centers will begin to enrich their service to grad students as well as multilingual undergrads.

The narrative of diversity implies plenty for multimodal and digital composing, too, I expect, and writing centers and writing programs will increase efforts to address and exploit more of what this implies for student and professional writing. In recent years, people have moved the field toward a more diverse scholarly profile, for example in regard to methodologies in research. I'm not a researcher, obviously, but I think this could change the narrative that the institution tells itself about WCs. Formalizing that diverse research output—how writing centers generate knowledge and contribute to the intellectual capital of the institution—will make them more visible and institutionally valuable.

Diversity means that issues of social and economic justice will not go away, of course, because it is an anecdote that challenges master narratives of all kinds. As we are seeing in the politics of 2017, there is a shocking number of Americans invested in an openly white-supremacist master narrative. Those folks just aren't on board with this whole “created equal” idea that we thought was already a consensus. I'm sure that writing center scholars will respond with further work in radical praxis in several quarters. I'm seeing an upsurge of work on ethics and ethical subjects currently, and I wouldn't expect that to drop off soon.

An editorial pedagogy for the writing center: A master lesson with Michael Spooner¹

Frequently people in the field think of “editing” as mechanical clean-up done, say, after the final draft. To me, that’s not editing; it’s proofreading. Proofreading is very important work, but editing is a step prior. And editing is totally compatible—or at least my vision of editing is—with writing center pedagogy. Writing centers are sympathetic to the writer’s purposes, they’re trying to help the writer get where they need to go. Me, too.

A good place to start would be with Louise Phelps on response to writing (my fave is her “Cyrano” piece). Or even Louise Rosenblatt. One really important thing that Rosenblatt taught us was that the text doesn’t exist until it exists in your mind—in the reader’s mind. Yet this does not authorize every possible interpretation of the text—even the editor’s—and to know which reading is most persuasive might just take more than a “gatekeeper’s” subject position. If we understand ourselves in the transactional terms that Rosenblatt and other reader response critics described, then we see our job much more as negotiation and much less as arbitration. We don’t necessarily get to stipulate the authoritative reading. It’s not just given to us by the gods. Understanding this puts us in the right frame of mind to work with somebody on the text that they’re composing. That’s where I am. I don’t come at editorial work from the view that our job is simply and always to make the text conform to Yankee conventions. It’s one of the things I’ve always admired about writing center pedagogy as well—that sort of tutorial exchange, negotiation over meaning first, then convention. Good editors—like good WC consultants—learn to read in full awareness that they are a ghost: a reader but not the audience. Ha. We live in a really interesting layer of response theory.

Now we can talk about sympathy for the text. We want the text to become what it wants to become; we want to help the writer take it there. If that means violate some conventions, then do that; the editor’s competence with conventions can help the writer *transgress* in an intel-

1 In his 2015 keynote address at the International Writing Center Association Conference in Pittsburgh, Ben Rafoth noted that “Consultation and collaboration will remain a key part of writing centers because these qualities are in our human DNA; in the future they will take forms that may seem a little strange now” (p. 27). I remember distinctly that it seemed (to me anyways) like a hush came over the audience when he nodded to editing as one of these once-seemed-strange characteristics of the writing centers of the future. In the spirit of (r)Evolution, if we are to take on editing in the Writing Center, could there be a better pedagogical guide than Michael Spooner?

ligent and effective way. And if it means the opposite; if it means the text needs to observe the conventions really rigidly, then fine. Is this APA? Great—let’s fix these ellipses; don’t make claims without citations; indent if you quote more than forty words. All of those pieces relate to the rhetorical situation of that text and the purposes of the writer when composing. The point is, first understand the *writer’s* purposes (not yours), and then think about how the text needs to behave to reach those purposes.

Editors and editing textbooks sometimes surprise me with how content they are to imagine writing as transparent or neutral. A text should be “clear and concise,” right? But for whom – a 19-year old? I always wanted to unteach this with my interns, so I would have them read the “Sympathy” piece (see below), along with the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and a good book on copyediting.² We’d have these long chats about how the “true” job of an editor is to help the writer achieve the *writer’s* purposes and *not* to stifle the writer in favor of what we infallibly imagine “clear and concise” might mean to the reader. I mean, we may end up negotiating, but we have to begin at least provisionally in the belief that the writer has a better sense of their audience than the editor does—especially a novice or student editor (who tend to be overconfident, frankly). Editors are not gods, heroes, nor even teachers. For some, this is news.

The pedagogical is where I disagree with Louise Phelps (in “Cyrano”). To me, the relation between editor and writer is way different from that between teacher and student. There may be an expert/novice thing going on, but only in a very limited range. Nor do I see editors as writing collaborators, as some do. It is *so* 4Cs to go there, but really, the editorial purpose is significantly different from collaboration, too.

Not that my views on this are especially authoritative (a little unique, maybe), but what I think about editing I’ve written up in a few different places:

- “Sympathy for the Devil” (1997): I think I was struggling at the time to discover what I think, and working from ethical impulse more than from writing theory, beyond a sort of grounding in Winston Weathers’s “Grammar B” stuff. Wendy Bishop (editor of the collection this piece is in) was a big fan of his. I mean, me too, but she knew *a lot* more about him.

² Recommendation: At least the first few chapters of Amy Einsohn’s (2011), *The Copyeditor’s Handbook: A Guide to Book Publishing and Corporate Communications*.

- “An Essay We’re Learning to Read” (2002): There you can see that I’m thinking the same ethical/editorial thoughts, but I had found in Louise Phelps a workable anchor in actual grown-up response theory.
- “Too Many Books” (2004): This is sort of a spoof and experiment and critique of publish-or-perish, which I shouldn’t have been criticizing in the first place, given how I was making my living. Ha. But it was so much fun to write. The Cheyenne folktale I included had been haunting me as a critique of white culture, and it was awesome to find a way to pull that into an academic piece. (Publish-or-perish is such a white world problem.)
- “How Everything Happens: Notes on May Swenson’s Theory of Writing” (2006): Here I’m working from the aesthetic side of response. Candidly, reading it later, I was surprised by how this chapter gathered so many scattered fragments of eclectic me: writing, history, folklore, Native Americans, the visual, philosophy, the personal, and poetry, of course. (Thank God I didn’t drag my family into it.) I think the section on her poem “How Everything Happens” is worth a look.

Coda: What are two things you know about writing that you’ve never told anyone?

May Swenson was an extraordinary poet of the mid-20th century. There are now eleven volumes of her poetry, I think, plus a collected works. From the 1960s through the 80s, lots of her poems landed in *The New Yorker*, among many other places. She was mostly self-taught, but when May was young and starving in Greenwich Village, she got a job working for James Laughlin (famous New York publisher who discovered Ezra Pound). Along with him, she hung with some of the best-known New York writers of her day, spent months at Yaddo and other writers’ colonies; she had a 30-year correspondence with Elizabeth Bishop and others. Everyone loved May. She became a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, a Macarthur Prize winner, etc. Truly, she had a wonderful pen.

But May Swenson was born and raised here in Utah—in this very town—and although she was well-published, she was not well-known. Over the years since she died, some of us at Utah State University have been working to raise her visibility in both the state and nation. My part of this effort was to establish the May Swenson Poetry Award, which ran for 20 years through USUP.

References

- Boquet, E. (2002). *Noise from the writing center*. Utah State University Press.
- Einsohn, A. (2011). *The copyeditor's handbook: A guide to book publishing and corporate communications*. University of California Press.
- Phelps, L. W. (2000). Cyrano's nose: Variations on the theme of response. *Assessing Writing*, 7(1), 91–110.
- Rafoth, B. (2016). Faces, factories, and Warhols: A r(Evolutionary) future for writing centers. *Writing Center Journal*, 35(2), 17–30.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Spooner, M. (1997). Sympathy for the devil: Editing alternate style. In W. Bishop (Ed.), *Elements of alternate style: Essays on writing and revision* (pp. 149–159). Boynton/Cook-Heinemann.
- Spooner, M. (2002). An essay we're learning to read: Responding to alt.style. In C. Schroeder, H. Fox, and P. Bizzell (Eds.), *ALT DIS: Alternative discourses and the academy* (pp. 155–177). Boynton/Cook-Heinemann.
- Spooner, M. (2004). Too many books: Sampling (on) publish-or-perish in composition studies. *Writing on the Edge*, 15(1), 21–30.
- Spooner, M. (2006). How everything happens: notes on May Swenson's theory of writing. In P. Crumbley and P. M. Gantt (Eds.), *Body my house: May Swenson's work and life* (pp. 157–180). Utah State University Press.

Stacy Kastner is the Associate Director of the Writing Center in the Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning at Brown University. Her work and her research explore counter-classroom, research-responsive, and cross-disciplinary writing pedagogies and the political, ideological, and personal dimensions of academic literacy acquisition.