

MARCH MEETING

Got the Writer's Block Demon in your Keyboard? We're Having an Exorcism!

BY BECKY MAGINN

You are about to read one of the most beautiful sentences ever written in the English language. Wait for it . . . it's coming . . . it's . . . *not coming*.

What was that look? Like you've never had writer's block? Well, as a matter of fact, I think I see your tire tracks in this ditch too! I'd lay odds that all of us have, at some point, found ourselves in this spot. That's why there's only one spot to be on the evening of Tuesday, March 9, and that's in a good seat for the IWOC March meeting. The presentation? "Professional Skills that Make Writer's Block Go Away."

Much more than just a push out of a one-time predicament, this month's program promises to provide tools we can use to keep ourselves moving forward whenever our wheels start to spin. (Now there's a sentence that is beautiful to a writer's ears!)

Our speaker will be former IWOCer Robert Knight, a longtime freelance writer, journalist, and professor who writes about writing. Many of us, when facing a deadline, says Knight, will throw some words and phrases at a project just to get something down. At such times, he



points out, the fear of deadline can obscure the benefits of writing it right the first time. His pointers will help us work our way through the writer's block dilemma.

The talk will include discussion and exercises that emphasize some of the basic rules of good writing, as well as the exquisiteness and history of the English language. For seasoned professionals, the meeting will be a welcome back to basics. For beginning writers, it will give a structure that will allow them to meet project requirements as it frees up the creativity that lends itself to excellence. For both, it will provide a refreshing antidote for the demon known as writer's block.

Knight's career has taken him from United Press International to newspapers

and broadcast, to freelancing for more than 40 publications and news services. He has been a frequent contributor to *The Chicago Tribune* and its Sunday magazine, and to *The Christian Science Monitor*, Reuters, and *The Washington Post*.

Knight taught journalism in the Evening Division of Northwestern University and journalism and English composition at Gettysburg College. In addition, Knight was an editor at the late, greatly lamented City News Bureau of Chicago. He is author of *The Journalistic Writer: Building the Skill, Honing the Craft*, to be published May 1 by the Marion Street Press.

The meeting will be held in Room 5008 at National-Louis University, 122 S. Michigan Avenue (across from the Art Institute) in Chicago. Networking with snacks and beverages begins at 5 p.m., followed by the business meeting and the program at 6 p.m. The meeting is free for all IWOC members. Nonmembers pay \$15. Plan to stay for a buy-your-own dinner at a nearby restaurant afterwards, where we'll continue our networking over dinner. 🍴

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

Of Orange Juice and Supreme Court Cases

I would do a lot for a glass of orange juice, this morning. I wouldn't kill, and apparently I'm not willing to get in my car and wend my way through rush hour traffic to the grocery store to fetch a carton and bring it home. But the desire remains—for something at this moment unobtainable. And so I pine... and have the urge to play something by Edith Piaf.

On Monday, I travel to St. Augustine, Florida for almost a week. It's only in the '60s down there, right now, but 60s are a better than '30s... and if you care to read that as a metaphorical statement about age, feel free.

I'm with you. I'm making the trip, fiancée in tow, to see a new play of mine that opened last night, apparently to good reviews. The play is called *The Imperative*, and it deals with issues ranging from natural selection and its implications for human meaning to professorial academic freedom on the modern college campus. In the play, the main character, Michael—a professor of evolutionary biology at a small liberal-arts college—finds himself on the bad side of a powerful man whose freshman daughter is offended by Michael's classroom manner and teachings. Owing to the father's power and position with respect to a foundation that keeps the college alive, Michael ends up faced with an ugly choice... apologize in

public (and mean it) or take responsibility for setting in motion a sequence of events that will destroy the school and see its physical plant co-opted by a spanking new fundamentalist Christian college focused on law.

I wrote the play in early 2008, when Bush was still in office, FOX News had yet to suffer its post-Obama loss of market share (which I'm given to understand is coming back), and even though John McCain had yet to fill his ticket with Sarah Palin, the This-Is-a-Christian-Nation zeitgeist seemed to permeate the news.

When Obama won the election in November and the Democrats took majority control of both houses (but not true super majority control... thanks to Joe Lieberman), the nation seemed to breathe a great sigh of relief, and I breathed with it.

Maybe its citizens will lift the veils and begin to see these public charlatans for what they are, I thought—the kind of people who ignore the fact that Thomas Jefferson was a deist, not a Christian. The kind whose faux-pious acts, like starting a government meeting with a prayer and having yourself photographed while doing so for the press, as Bush did with his first cabinet, stand in harsh violation of Jesus' own teachings: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed



by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 6:1) and "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men." (Matthew 6:5).

Maybe things will ease up a bit, I thought—and the evangelical Christian church, to which I belonged in my youth, long before it morphed into the slathering, ravenous political monster that it is now, will focus its money and efforts on helping people instead of fighting to impose its narrow interpretation of Scripture on the world at large. And so maybe, I worried, *The Imperative* will lose its relevance and become, even before its premiere, a quaint artifact of a terrible bygone era of intellectual tribulation. Silly me.

One of the cases currently before the Supreme Court dashes those thoughts to smithereens. The case, *Christian Legal Society v. Wu*, pits a Religious Right group called the Christian Legal Society (CLS) against Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. CLS is a national organization of lawyers, judges, law professors and law students whose stated purpose is to "inspire, encourage and equip lawyers, and law students... to proclaim, love and serve Jesus Christ through the

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Tweeting the Classics to Fame and Fortune

BY KAT VALENTINO

Our cold, imprisoning Chicago winters have led many a sane person deep into his psyche and onto paths of discovery that can reveal new forms of art and communication. Couple our winters with the confines of a college dormitory and all types of insanity, genius, utter foolishness, grand delusions, or moments of clarity can arise. For roommates comparative literature major Alexander Aciman and English/philosophy major Emmett Rensin, such a venue led to their book *twitterature*, “humorous reworkings of literary classics for the twenty-first century intellect, in digestible portions of 20 tweets or fewer.”

“It was like a tennis match, a constant back and forth.” Like so many who live together, one started the tweet and the other would jump in for the finish. The two well-read freshmen included in the book such ancients as Lord Byron, Shakespeare, Homer, and Dante yet did not forget our more modern authors such as Salinger, Dan Brown, and the Beatles.

While lots of strange and dangerous things have come out of U. of C., literature lovers need not fear that the classics will disappear from society due to the paring down of hundreds of thousands of words into 140-character tweets. Any negative responses to the book have seemed to come from those who “reject the

premise without reviewing the material.”

“If someone uses this to write a review of a book, they deserve what comes to them.” Their purpose was not to replace or to



make the classics easier to understand. *Twitterature* is the opposite of Cliff Notes as, “we take everything that is boring about a book and take it out.”

“It’s kind of like the Snuggie; we knew there was a small window of time before someone else does this. Or, the fascination with Twitter just might fizzle.”

Over about a six-week time-frame, the first twenty translations from book to *twitterature* and the book proposal were completed. The remaining entries were completed after Penguin UK

bought the proposal. At one point, their plan consisted of completing ten tweets per day. By the end of day seven they were okay with three tweets a day.

They found their agent, Brian DiFine, the old fashioned way: they asked

Rensin’s father (a writer) for a recommendation. Several publishers passed on the proposal due to the influx of Twitter-related books and the possible questionable sustainability of Twitter. Fortunately, Penguin UK was the right publisher at the right time for this venture.

Penguin gave them a list of ten additional books to tweet but mostly remained in the editing arena, allowing Aciman and Rensin to control the creative aspects. The authors also found it helpful that their editors were young and familiar with Twitter. Still, Penguin made some difficult demands: though Aciman and Rensin arrived in England on a Wednesday, they were told to have a rewrite completed by Friday. After that initial deadline, an additional month was spent on editing.

Once Penguin UK picked up the book, Penguin USA was persuaded to publish it. While the two editions are similar, the U.K Fair

Use Law for parody is very different from that in the U.S. The most popular distribution market? Surprisingly, Australia. Will there be a sequel?

“If there’s money, there will be a sequel.”

As a former English/philosophy major who has been away from the classics for far too long, I did indulge in purchasing a copy of *twitterature*. I must say that there are several books that are pretty dead-on. I recently read *Jane Eyre*, one of my favorites, last read over twenty years ago, and found the condensation, while vulgar at times, very true to the book and quite funny. Dante’s *Inferno*, perfetto! Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*? Truth be told, I’m still so traumatized by being forced to read that blasted book five times for school that I can’t even read the *twitterature* version.

It also reminded me that there are many books, like *Catcher In the Rye*, that I love but recall very little of the actual plot. I think it is time for some more reading. Though I may just do something more modern than curling up with Gracie in my chair. I drive one hundred miles a day, and these are the classics after all. Look out library; I’m coming to download the best of them.

Yes, Aciman and Rensin can be found on Twitter, and they have 1011 followers. You’ll find them at <http://twitter.com/AcimanandRensin>. 🐦

study and practice of law, the provision of legal assistance to the poor, and the defense of religious freedom and the sanctity of human life."

In 2004, Hastings denied official recognition and public funding to its student chapter of CLS, because the chapter requires its members to sign a statement of evangelical faith and excludes students who practice "unrepentant homosexual conduct." Hastings is part of the University of California and, as such, does not recognize or fund groups that are not open to membership by all students. Although Hastings would not fund or recognize the group, they did offer that, "if CLS wishes to form independent of Hastings, [the university] would be pleased to provide the organization the use of Hastings facilities for its meetings and activities."

But that wasn't good enough for CLS, which promptly took Hastings to court, demanding to receive an exemption from the non-discrimination policy (even though other groups on campus, including religious groups, abide by it). Hastings won the battles in both federal court and the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals... so CLS appealed to the Supreme Court, which agreed last December to hear

the case.

The outcome at this point is uncertain, but the implications are profound, because the decision has the potential to change legal precedent protecting church-state separation—first in higher education, then, by extension, to American society as a whole. CLS knows this and has partnered with the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF), a well-funded Religious Right legal group committed to breaking down the church-state wall. And the pair recently received an anonymous donation of over nine million dollars, for which it plans to obtain more-than-matching funds, giving it a \$20 million war chest.

Will they prevail? Who knows. But keep in mind that the case will be argued before the same conservative-majority court that just last month dumped a century of legal precedent and opened the floodgates for corporations to fund political campaigns.

It sounds like Hastings needs to be ready to rumble.

Man, I could really use that orange juice, right now. And maybe something in it. ☘

Editor's Note: This column was originally written for the February Stet, but we did not have a newsletter last month because the program was cancelled.

Calendar

March 9

IWOC Monthly Meeting. Welcome back former IWOCer Robert Knight, whose presentation "Professional Skills that Make Writer's Block Go Away" promises to help us rev up our ability to get off the blocks and start writing. The meeting will be held at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847/855-6670 or visit www.iwoc.org.

The monthly food and networking get-togethers listed below meet at the same time and place each month unless otherwise noted, but call ahead in case of cancellation. The groups welcome nonmembers. If there's no group in your area, why not start one? Contact webmaster@iwoc.org.

March 23 (4th Tuesday)

IWOOP Monthly Lunch. Join near-west suburbanites for a noon lunch at Poor Phil's, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park. For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065. Check before you come. This lunch is monthly only if there are enough people who can attend. Note: The lunch is now on the 4th Tuesday, not the 4th Thursday as it has been in the past.

April 1 (1st Thursday)

IWORP Monthly Breakfast. Join the Rogers Park IWOC contingent for breakfast at 9 AM at the A&T Grill, 7036 N. Clark St., Chicago. For more info, call Esther Manewith at 773/274-6215.

**IWOC Welcomes New Member
Jennifer Burke
&
Returning Member
Sylvia Alston**

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