

Writing Prompts

by Larry Strattner

When you begin to write seriously you may reference promotional issues of writing magazines specializing in telling you how to write. I wrote this whole sentence you are reading without learning how to do it from a writing magazine. The sentence may be good. It may not be good. But here it is.

In an issue I recently received of the same How-To Writing Magazine was a little box containing ten writing prompts. Writing prompts are used by teachers to stretch out a student's creative juices and accustom them to think freely about posited situations, and create situations capturing potential readers with thought-provoking propositions. So I looked at these particular writing prompts and decided to see what fresh thinking they might pry from my atrophying brain.

The 10 questions comprising this prompt stacked up in no particular order. Each began with a boldface, "**write about...**" Each proceeded from there and so did I. I could see no logical progression within the questions, so addressed them in order, from the top down; as follows:

Write about, 1. My earliest memory involving ice cream?

Began with Ken Pine, a man's man I knew because I was friends with his son Chilly. I first met Ken on the day we were up at their summer cabin in the woods that had a wonderful little pond to swim in. The pond was protected, fecund, clothed with life. Little fish and frogs abounded. One big frog lounged on a lily pad and bellowed his dominance across the still water, until an explosion comparable to the Big Bang split the air and a giant waterspout rose up where Mr. Frog had been, among the reeds. Only Mr. Frog's chubby legs were left. But those were all Chilly's Dad, Ken Prine wanted for his dinner anyway, and he walked down from the house to collect them.

Ken made various noises of appreciation while eating Mr. Frog's legs for dinner. When he finished he pushed his chair back from the

table and said to me and Chilly, "Well, men, now would be a great time for little ice cream, wouldn't it?"

There was no need to answer. Both Chilly and I knew we were talking about the little ice cream parlor down by the river. Only open in summer, it served the greatest sundaes in the known world. They were huge and were called "the Bald Mountain special" Chilly and I had eaten frozen waffles and packaged sausage for dinner, greased to go down easy with plenty of local maple syrup. I already felt a bit queasy.

We drove downtown and consumed our bald Mountain special amid many groans and sighs of pleasure. So my earliest memory of ice cream is when Ken pulled over on the side of the road so I could watch my Bald Mountain special go the other way out of my stomach and into the roadside ditch before we continued home. I still can't even think of that ice cream parlor without a bit of a roiling feeling in my stomach. I learned two things: One. Take it easy when ordering anything with the word "special" included in its menu listing. Two: Buy at least eight boxes of Thirty-aught-six shells if you think you're going to learn to shoot a bullfrog croaking by a pond from up near the house using a Savage lever action rifle after drinking a couple of rye whiskeys with crushed mint leaves.

Ken's dead these days. Billy's been in jail. Whenever I see an ice cream sundae in one of those tall, tulip-shaped, glass things my stomach goes a little queasy.

Write about, 2. My Favorite Summer of All Time

Had to be the year I met Jack Vader and he taught me to love motorcycles. Jack was over the top from the first I met him and was not given to chaste love affairs.

He treated his bikes like he treated his women, all over them. Always greasing and oiling them. Getting ready to ride with the outcome clear to everyone, well before the engine was fired up.

Jack loved the night and soiled women. Maybe I thought he would pass me one of his harlots in the darkness where I could get friendly with her in the murk without opening me to ridicule for my lack of expertise.

I've learned to ride a motorcycle well, but never a woman. I've had marriages, affairs, and messy mistakes. I've come through it all with a few superficial scratches, a couple of psychological bruises and a recurring sense of inadequacy. But there must be a reason when prompted to pick my favorite summer, I dog-paddle back to Jack and his swirling darkness. I think he's a constellation by now, pasted on the sky over twisty mountain roads where every third turn is a deathtrap and The Man with a Scythe sits in a folding chair sipping a cocktail, waiting for his next recruit to climb out of the rock-strewn ravine and sit down in the empty lawn chair beside him, to talk, perhaps to dream. Behind all this a four-stroke engine, idles, suggesting with emphatic thumps, we take another bite of the world, and maybe a dirty damsel or two while we're at it. So without any icky detail...that's what I've done.

Write about, 3. I was the happiest I've ever felt

When fishing with my good friend Johnny from my neighborhood. We went down to the bridge and threw worm-baited hooks into the river. I never ate the slow, bottom feeders we caught, but John's Grandpa, or nonniccio, as John called him affectionately, loved the eels and other ugly fish. He made them into soups and stews. I tasted an eel soup by mistake once and it was outstanding by any measurement. Regardless how good though, an actual vision of what I was eating would pop up in my head and I'd be done, the visual always overcame the umami by a length in the homestretch. Happiness associated with fishing was like happiness associated with meditation. Something heavy washed away. You might remain a little stinky but you felt good about it. People who didn't like the odor could relinquish a bit more space.

Write about, 4. My first encounter with grief

Was when Scruffy died, a small Dog, named for his looks. Scruffy hung around my Grandmother's house and on occasion, ran around with me. He liked that we were pals and I figured neither one of us had ever had a friend like the other. I snatched him an occasional treat from the house and he appreciated these although he swallowed them without a lot of chewing. I sometimes wondered

how he knew if he liked one treat better than another after he scarfed them down so fast it didn't seem like he would have been able to taste one of them.

One morning I came out of the house and Scruffy was lying under a tree in the backyard, eyes open and sides not moving the way they did when he lay down to rest after playing. When I brought Grandma's housekeeper out to see Scruffy she made a little noise like she had choked on a bit of food. He had always been deferential to her, verging on friendly, and I thought they liked each other. She took me into the kitchen and cut me a piece of chocolate cake. While I was having the cake with a glass of milk I heard the Gardener's voice out in the yard. When I went back out Scruffy was not there anymore. Once in a while, I got tears in my eyes when I thought of some of the fun times Scruffy and I had. But eventually, he slipped to the back of my memory to be with the other things I loved that have gone.

Write about, 5. My most memorable trip

Had to be when I ran away. I quit college and hitched a ride down the road. Not really running away, I suppose, but certainly throwing in the towel. My Dad and I never got along so I made an ungraceful exit. I saw weird places and met weird people and suppose they thought the same of me. I worked on a ship, worked in a ditch, worked in the desert and worked in danger. I worked with some roughnecks and learned to set up explosives for seismic exploration. When I was finished working I went back to college. I never liked college but I graduated after learning less than I had when I ran away. When I got out of college and got a job I traveled all the time. Traveling sat well with me and I was pleasant enough and did my job for the people who counted on me.

Write about, 6. My earliest memory involving water

Was watching my Aunt MaryJane dive into the lake we swam in summer, and with a small number of powerful strokes swim over to a floating raft we kids used as Action Central in summer. MaryJane was my favorite aunt, a lifeguard, a college professor, an ex-intercontinental-airline stewardess and one the smartest and most

empathetic women I've ever met. I would have married MaryJane but she married some other guy first and he was a good pick. I was too amateur to have it bother me much. But I always cared for her in some Sir Lancelot way that never abated as long as she lived.

Write about, 7. My very first album purchase

Wasn't an album, it was a box of 78rpm, very breakable records, I saved from my grandparent's attic and played over and over, forever. These 78s were, as my father would say, "real music." And I agree. These records got me started listening to every type, flavor, and lyric you can imagine. And this is a habit I have never broken, much to my benefit. We may like the same music and songs and dislike others but we will always find common ground in music, I can promise you that.

Write about, 8. The last time I was truly surprised

Was never. I will be truly surprised if I die and some part of me goes to a place new to me. If so I hope to be allowed to remain. And if I remain I hope I can offer something of value to the new place. I don't wish to be rewarded, I would merely like to be engaged.

Write about, 9. A vivid storm from my youth

The Cataclysm happened around me in Bergen County.

It had flashing and crashing and falling trees. It had water and mud and automotive debris. It went on all night and the following day. When it was over I was glad to be alive. In retrospect, having lived through such a scene, I was glad I didn't live in downtown New Orleans

Write about, 10. My first crush

Was a wonderful girl. And I assume she is wonderful still. I am the fool I always have been when it comes to the mind of a woman. Who knows who she is, what she wants, and why ask me this at the end? I brought what I could to our heart-rending union. I tried to make sense of it all. I wondered what happened when it stopped but I can blame my precipitous fall from my crush upon the blue and white Ford convertible a new guy drove to school. Before I knew it I was without my crush, and she had grown to be the extra cool chick in the convertible.

