

Altogether Now

*Essays on
Poetry,
Writing,
and Teaching*

Also by Chuck Guilford

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Essays on Poetry, Writing, and Teaching

by

Chuck Guilford



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Foreword

This book collects several articles, talks, and essays written over my academic career—a 30-year span—and includes pieces intended for both general and academic audiences. In preparing them for this collection, I’ve rethought and revised their style and substance.

Though the subjects range widely, if pressed to identify a common thread, I would say that they all celebrate the beauty and power of words, the power of language. A friend, and mutual admirer of the poet William Stafford, once said that many of Stafford’s deepest and most meaningful experiences involved reading and writing. We looked at each other and smiled as though to say, “Yeah, I can relate.”

“Back in the Classroom,” the first piece, looks at how I got caught up in this profession and why I continue to labor in the vineyards even after retiring. As confused, rebellious, and stubborn as any teenager, I disliked much about school, but mostly the sense of regimentation, of being molded into W. H. Auden’s “unknown citizen”—or even worse, Frank Stark, as played by Jim Backus in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Though the subjects range widely, if pressed to identify a common thread, I would say that they all celebrate the beauty and power of words, the power of language.

Growing up in Michigan, I was often “at risk,” in school and out. Nevertheless, I loved to read and was fortunate to have many talented and caring teachers who changed my life more than they will ever know. Most, but not all, were English teachers. A biology teacher, Lucille Paslay, taught me more about life and learning than was in the curriculum,

and a Sunday school teacher, John Gilray, ignited a curiosity about issues of faith and ultimate purpose that remains unextinguished after more than 50 years. This collection is dedicated to all of them—too many to list here. And especially to my friends and family for their patience, support, encouragement, and love.

“Words, words, words,” said Hamlet, pacing the stage, himself a creation of words built by Shakespeare’s imagination from bits of fact and legend, those pieces themselves made of words—patterns of sound representing some human awareness encoded in written characters—printed and read, spoken and heard. Words and language, these have been my chosen tools for exploring issues and questions raised so many years ago. And I may have found some answers, but the greatest rewards have come in the process of discovery.

*How is it that our days
come down to this
perpetual present
like a vanishing storm
until for an instant
each gesture is sacred
each small sound an echo
in a temple of bone?*

Back in the Classroom

As a child, I never dreamed of being a teacher, never even imagined I might become one. That's not to say I had any aversion to teaching, just that compared to playing professional baseball, writing best-selling novels, or working at the corner gas station, such a career didn't look attractive.

I mean, did you ever see kids collect bubble gum cards with pictures of teachers on them? Would Mrs. Briggs, my long-suffering geometry teacher, ever see her lesson on the Pythagorean theorem made into a major motion picture starring Natalie Wood and Kirk Douglas? What teacher could install dual quads and a three-quarter cam in a '57 Chevy, then open the soft drink machine and pass out free root beers and orange sodas to a gawking crowd of 13-year-old boys?

Certainly, at 16, I would have said that I learned more from Woodward Avenue than I ever did from a teacher.

Wally Bitterle could do that, but he wasn't a teacher. He was a mechanic at the corner Speedway 79 station. Bruce Springsteen would have written a song about Wally if he'd seen him peel out of Maverick Drive-In onto Woodward Avenue, vanishing into the night through a veil of thin blue smoke, leaving behind just the smell of burnt rubber.

Springsteen once claimed that he learned more from a three-minute record than he ever learned in school. I think I know what he meant. Certainly, at 16, I would have said that I learned more from Woodward Avenue than I ever did from a teacher.

In the world of Woodward Avenue, teachers did not exist. They had their own world—the world of school, a kind of self-contained, separate reality. Though I understood even

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then that teachers left school at day's end and went home like other people, some to wives or husbands, others, even more remarkably, to children, I seldom saw them "off the grounds."

If I did bump into a teacher, say at Quarton Market or the Mills Pharmacy, I would immediately revert to school behavior—no more laughing or talking, watch the grammar, try to look interested but avoid all eye contact. Once the encounter was over, a cloud had passed. My mood grew warm and light. I might peel the paper from a fresh toothpick,

What I loved most about those lines, more even than their riddling irony, was their bold and beautiful ungrammaticality.

slip that wooden stick between my lips and savor its minty taste as I shredded the sharp tip between my teeth.

Teachers liked toothpicks even less than they liked short pants. Shorts took our minds off our studies and focused them on the human anatomy. Toothpicks, I supposed, were considered dangerous. "That could put someone's eye out. You'd better leave it with me. I'll keep it here in my desk with my collection of combs, nail files, and Bazooka gum."

Away from school, relishing my freedom, I'd hum a few bars of my favorite Chuck Berry song:

Back in the classroom, open the books.

Even the teacher don't know how mean she looks.

What I loved most about those lines, more even than their riddling irony, was their bold and beautiful ungrammaticality. They were so un-school, so gloriously superior to the whole drab institution. Chuck Berry reminded me of Huck Finn. I liked their attitudes.

I learned about Chuck Berry from Rockin' Robin Seymour, a disc jockey on WKMH in Detroit. I learned about Huck Finn from Mrs. Kinnison, my eleventh grade English teacher. She

liked Huck, too, I could tell. And that sort of puzzled me, what with Huck being like he was, somewhat less than a model student. Mrs. Kinnison was supposed to like Tom Sawyer's well-behaved brother, Sid. Nevertheless, Huck and Jim and I floated down the Mississippi along with Mrs. Kinnison and about 20 other kids.

Together, we slit a pig's throat and spread its blood around Pap's cabin. We entered the big frame house that floated downriver, the one with the mysterious corpse that spooked Jim so. We listened as Jim told about how he hit his daughter 'Lizabeth one time for not shutting the door, then realized she had just gone deaf.

Mrs. Kinnison*—Mrs. K, I had come to call her—had a way of making us feel right there in the novel, trying to figure out why the characters acted the way they did. Why did Huck treat Jim like a child when Jim was the adult? Was this a sign of prejudice? How could that be? Huck and Jim were friends. Huck wasn't prejudiced. "Why don't we look up 'prejudice'?" she might say.

We entered the big frame house that floated downriver, the one with the mysterious corpse that spooked Jim so.

This could lead to a broader discussion of whether there was such a thing as unconscious prejudice and a debate on whether racial tension could be a good thing if it eventually brought greater awareness of social injustice. Such debates were spirited, sometimes intensely emotional, and feeling my adrenalin flow, I joined in eagerly, often taking a stand less on the basis of personal conviction than on the chance of teasing out new thoughts and further discussion.

* Betty Kinnison, a truly gifted teacher, is used here in part to represent the many generous, inspired, brilliant teachers I have been blessed with at all levels of my education.

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“How,” I might wonder aloud, “can anyone in this class even claim to like Huck at all? He’s a liar, a hypocrite, a coward and a social misfit. He’s not even very smart, yet everyone

“Well, Huck,” I imagine her saying, “if you think getting civilized means having your spirit broken and becoming a mindless conformist, you’re sadly mistaken.

talks about him like he was the all-American boy. Heck, Mrs. K would have kicked him out of class the first week.” Of course I didn’t believe that last part. Mrs. K was no mean teacher. In fact, she was starting to remind me of the Widow Douglas.

“Well, Huck,” I imagine her saying, “if you think getting civilized means having your spirit broken and becoming a mindless conformist,

you’re sadly mistaken. On the contrary, it was the Persians, whom the Greeks called ‘Barbarians,’ who were the prisoners of their own fear and ignorance. But in Athens, individuality flourished. Study Aristophanes, Huck. Read Plato.”

“This Socrates guy,” Huck might say a week later, “Tom says they killed him just fer speakin’ his mind. He says they had slavery in Athens. Now if that ain’t the civilized way!” Huck would think he had scored a point, but Mrs. K. would know she had him hooked. He was reading. He was thinking. Just as I was getting hooked, and not only on reading or Betty Kinnison.

I wanted to write books, but not just best-sellers. I wanted to write like Mark Twain or Charles Dickens or J. D. Salinger or Albert Camus. My books would transform people’s lives, shape the future of the planet. People would get lost in them for weeks at a time and emerge wiser, stronger, more fulfilled. I also wanted to learn . . . something. I wasn’t sure what. I needed guidance and direction—teachers, more than high school could offer. And I needed people to discuss and debate with—college students and then graduate students.

I still need these things, which may explain why 40 years later I'm still in school. Now, though, after years as a student, I walk to the front of the room, step behind the lectern and sort through my notes, watching a last few reluctant learners claim seats in the room's far corners.

I've obviously become a teacher, but this becoming happened gradually, almost unconsciously as I moved from student to teaching assistant to professor. Even now, I eagerly shift roles as I ask students to explain how their writing influences their thinking, or ask them to teach me what Wordsworth means in "Tintern Abbey" when he speaks of "something far more deeply interfused / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns." More deeply infused than what? Why is "suns" plural?—I want to know.

Because I see how much I still have to learn, even in areas that are my specialties, I keep asking and answering questions.

Because I see how much I still have to learn, even in areas that are my specialties, I keep asking and answering questions. And because I see this same hunger in so many of my students, I want to offer them help and support. Being a university professor permits me to do these things, which I enjoy immensely and believe to be worthwhile, though I no longer dream of seeing my picture on a bubble gum card, and my achievements with automobile engines over the years have seldom gone beyond jumping dead batteries.

These days, I do still write—poetry, essays, fiction. But my dreams of literary fame have been tempered by a sobering recognition of what I can reasonably hope to accomplish. And each year I find growing satisfaction in teaching, in the thought that I may be as helpful to some of my students as Mrs. Kinnison, and so many others, have been to me.