**Thompson Writing Awards – 2019**

**Remarks by Finn Murphy author of *The Long Haul* (W.W. Norton 2017)**

Greetings.

You have before you a reasonably successful writer. What does a successful writer look like? Well, in this case, the writer is a truckdriver. I’ve also managed to drop out of several colleges, including this one, without coming within miles of the off-ramp leading to a degree. My transcript has more schools listed than the PAC 12 football schedule. When I do the Common Application I just hit Select All. I’ve also been a serial failure in most of my relationships too, so why The Center of the American West has asked a 60 year old slightly pudgy codger like me to address you is a mystery. Actually I’m only slightly pudgy by *Boulder* standards but am considered svelte and ripped by truckstop standards. Everything is relative.

Patty asked me here to give you all some writing advice. My remarks above illustrate how unqualified I am to do that and in any case, I sincerely doubt you wish to be harangued about discipline, probable penury, and scribbler parlor tricks, so if you’re looking for a sermon you’ll need to look elsewhere. What I’m happy to talk about though is my own experience and why I think good writing is important.

Being a truckdriver who writes isn’t as strange as it might appear at first blush. Both are solitary pursuits. Both have an essential lack of traditional workaday structure. Both jobs are completely misunderstood by those on the outside looking in. Lots of folks wonder how anyone with any brains could be a truckdriver and perhaps more folks wonder how folks without any brains can write. As someone who straddles both worlds, both categories appear to have ample membership.

I’m still a little bit in shock at being referred to as an author. Authors to me will always look like John Updike. A white male, wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, smoking a pipe, and exuding that debonair combination of gravitas and world weary wisdom filtered, as the rules seem to dictate, through a sardonic smirk. That’s a pretty good sentence right there. A white male, wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, smoking a pipe, and exuding that debonair combination of gravitas and world weary wisdom filtered, as the rules seem to dictate, through a sardonic smirk. A good sentence is one that conveys precisely the tone and timing for the image you want to invoke so I’m satisfied with that one. It’s not the best sentence I’ve ever written but it will do quite nicely to move things along which is my basic criteria.

Writing is a lot like loading a moving van which is part of my job in addition to driving big rigs. I’ve got a household full of people’s random stuff and I need to transfer it into the truck in an orderly fashion so I can fit everything in, find everything later, and not destroy things in the process. It’s mostly just work, though when I’m in the sweet spot of truck loading, it’s also sublime. For me, most of the time, writing isn’t art, it’s loading the truck. That doesn’t take anything away from it. There’s a lot of dignity in hard work and there’s also a lot of fun in it too, especially when I fit that sectional sofa in the perfect space or construct that perfect paragraph. Most of the time though, the sofa is in the way, taking up too much space and I’ve seen many drivers freeze up trying to figure out the perfect place for it. I don’t suffer overmuch from that problem on the truck or on the page. The trick is to get it loaded.

I understand there are exquisite creatures who craft each word out of marble and agonize over every clause, and I respect them, but I’m not one of them. I suspect there’s a lot of room between writing as high art and writing as pulp fiction. I’ll put myself in the middle there somewhere. Okay, maybe the upper end of the middle.

My point here is that being able to write clearly is not something magical conferred upon an anointed few by some deity of the keyboard. It shouldn’t be frightening or daunting, but simply another tool in your knapsack of skills. Writing as a career is becoming harder and harder to monetize directly, as you certainly know. If it’s your intention to make a living as a writer, well, nothing I say will turn you from that path, but for those of you who value written expression for its own sake, then I can promise you it will advance you in any career you choose, except maybe truckdriving. Writing well probably won’t make you rich but it will certainly make you more valuable in the workplace and well, it will make your entire life richer. Related to this is being a reader. Writing and reading are the Yin and Yang of self-expression and understanding.

My publishing story is a Cinderella tale that happens to be true. You hear a lot these days about how book publishing is under siege and the bygone practices of author advances, dedicated editors, and marketing dollars have gone the way of the steam engine and buggy whip. Not in this fairy tale. I was discovered by an editor at W.W. Norton, received a large advance, had that same editor hold my hand from first manuscript to galley proof, and sent on a national book tour. Apparently it can still happen because it happened to me. It’s happened to me twice actually since I signed a contract with W.W. Norton this morning for my second book with…a six figure advance.

Writing is an odd mixture of audacity and humility. Sitting down and putting words on a page is a supremely self-confident act. The nature of that act is certain proof that you believe you have something worth communicating. The humility comes when you realize that many others who came before you appear to express themselves with deeper thoughts and considerably more fluency. Well, maybe. We actually don’t know how easily that came. Like watching a figure skater perform a triple jump, we don’t see, nor do we wish to see, the effort and time behind the move.

Back to my point above, self-expression is not a gift conferred, it’s not a gift at all. It’s what separates us from flora and fauna. Frankly, it’s a duty to yourself and to those around you, like staying clean or stopping at a red light. It’s ordinary. Well it’s ordinary here. There are plenty of places in the world where self-expression can get you killed. Sometimes we get a bonus and can do something a little extra-ordinary, but it still isn’t wizardry. I thought I could write a book, even though I possessed none of the typical characteristics of a writer, because I believed that self-expression was something I was entitled to just as anyone else is. It probably helped a lot that I wasn’t in college, that I didn’t attend writer’s groups, that I didn’t worry about getting published. There wasn’t any machinery around to tell me I couldn’t. You Thompson Award winners have done the same thing and I congratulate you all.

This isn’t to say I take the matter lightly. Whether on the page or in speaking, I have always taken great care. Even in emails, it’s a rare occasion when I slack off and omit a salutation and proper grammar. No emojis or abbreviations for me, thank you very much. My time is not so valuable as to eschew proper spelling in favor of digital efficiency. (That’s another nice sentence. My time is not so valuable as to eschew proper spelling in favor of digital efficiency. I especially like the double entendre in digital efficiency. That’s a small but telling example of how much fun writing can be.)

Finally, the best thing about writing is that it’s yours. You can build any castle in the air you care to concoct, any society you can imagine, any crazy fantasy your reveries invite, any subject you wish to explore. That’s how it started with me. Hours and hours driving across America, listening to Fresh Air and reading the NYT. Maybe one day I could be on Fresh Air and reviewed in the Times. One day the fantasy took me all the way across Texas. Actually that’s two days. Then I got to work. When they called from WHYY in Philadelphia and said Terry Gross wanted to interview me, I wasn’t surprised. I was pleased for sure and excited, but I’d already been on the show in my mind a hundred times. That’s what I mean by a mixture of audacity and humility. You have to think up the dream first, which is some kind of chutzpah, and if it arrives then you have to wonder if you’re up to the task and that’s some kind of humility. It comes and goes back and forth for me but in between I keep working. So let’s all get back to work. If it’s coming too easily, you’re not trying hard enough, and if it’s coming hard, then join the ranks of the rest of us. Don’t freeze, get the truck loaded.

Thank you.