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ENTERTAINMENT

Authors in our midst

By Ann Rappoport

Fabulously fertile in authors, the Lehigh Valley is fortunate to reap the work and enjoy the stimulating presence of Mike McGrath, Joyce Hinnefeld, Ken Fifer, Josh Berk and Merritt George Yorgey.

MIKE MCGRATH

"I write the way people talk," says Mike McGrath, possibly best known for "You Bet Your Garden," syndicated nationally on Public Radio. McGrath learned the value of conversation in the arts during his stint at Marvel Comics under Stan Lee.

From his interview at age 18 with John Lennon he learned "to be yourself." "If I'd been an obsequious fan, I'd have been limited to the 30-min-ute press conference." But by challenging the ex-Beatle with his genuine concerns, McGrath attracted an invitation to spend the full day debating to détente directly with Lennon.

McGrath remains proudest of the "entertaining book about famine" he co-authored with then boss, the late Bob Rodale, "a brilliant guy" he misses terribly. Rodale was concerned about how to motivate readers to read to the last word on this serious, dry topic, explains McGrath. "Nobody will listen if you don't make them laugh," he says.

Besides gardening, McGrath relishes his "pinball" career history (where he bounced from entertainment to news, to comics, to television, to editing Men's Health, and lots of places in between). If you want to meet this versatile character, get yourself to Allentown's annual pinball convention and watch for the funny guy "playing until his wrists fall off."



Olaf Staroprypinski photo

Mike McGrath has authored 'Mike McGrath's Book of Compost' (Sterling: 2006); 'Kitchen Garden A to Z' (Abrams: 2004); 'You Bet Your Tomatoes' (Rodale: 2002); 'Save Three Lives: A Plan for Famine Prevention' (with Robert Rodale, Sierra Club Books: 1991) among other books and edited numerous magazines and columns.

JOYCE HINNEFELD

Critically extolled novelist Joyce Hinnefeld writes of human relationships and the complications of life for women with lyrical sensitivity suggesting the bird songs featured the-matically in "In Hovering Flight."

A faculty member at Moravian College since 1997, Dr. Hinnefeld describes teaching an art and skill that she doesn't experience in methodologically defined, concrete steps. "My own best writing comes from reading things that thrill me," she notes. Many students thrive when she throws her favorite readings at them, but she recognizes, "That kind of inspiration doesn't work for everybody."

Hinnefeld admits occasionally confronting "terrors of the blank page" when she begins a new project. And the periodic frustration when words don't match the vision in her head. She says it took some time to embrace her own identity as a writer.

She has struck an effective balance among teaching, family and her writing, somewhere between rigid discipline and whenever the mood calls. Hinnefeld feels proud that despite challenges of making literature, she persists and succeeds. One of her pleasures is creating characters so real and intense, that they beckon escape into a different life. She says, "Sometimes it's hard to shift gears and go back" from worlds she's creating on desk and on deck.



Joyce Hinnefeld, winner of Breadloaf Writer's Conference Bakeless Prize in Fiction, authored 'Tell Me Everything and Other Stories' (University Press of New England: 1998) and 'In Hovering Flight' (Unbridled Press: 2008).

KEN FIFER

The best part of poetry — for reader and poet, believes Ken Fifer — is "entering into meditation" on the subject. "It's such an intense participation sport," says the long-time Professor of English, Penn State Berks.

Dr. Fifer finds great fascination in cutting through our typical us/them or here/there survival mechanisms to reveal truths most of us try not to consider. Rather than distance himself from what may be too poignant or dull, or dismiss or categorize what's confusing or alarming, Fifer writes poetry to help process, control or come to terms with the world's disorders.

Fifer observes that poetry's potency is seldom about the largest things; rather, the "entry way is through little things that touch us daily: salt on our food, socks on our feet."

"People are the stuff of our lives, I would hope." And the work of the poet is to figure out their mysteries, he says.

Humor is an essential ingredient in the creative process, according to the Center Valley scholar-poet. "I write with a very light hand."

He calls the process of creating poetry a completely joyful endeavor, even if the subject itself is unpleasant. "Creation is intrinsically satisfying and powerful."



Kenneth Fifer has published 'After Fire' (March Street Press: 2006); 'Water Presents' (Nova House Press: 2005); three anthologies of poems by children; and numerous additional poetry collections, and was Finalist for the Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize, 2006.

JOSH BERK & BOOKS

With two librarian parents, Josh Berk could hardly escape his librarian fate. But he fought hard for a while, gaining a bachelor's degree in poli-sci, playing music in a band and traveling. After graduating and realizing he didn't like politics all that much, he acted on a tip from his father and applied for a job at the Allentown Library. Eventually moving into children's literature, Berk found his niche as well as inspiration for his writing.

"Once I started reading to the kids, I got really excited about books related to children," says Berk. "That's where my latent library DNA came out."

He pursued a master's degree in children's literature, read a lot of children's books, and started writing about his experiences in high school. All that culminated in a dream that was the germ for his first (to be published) young adult novel. Berk believes it was one thing that captivated the young, smart editor.

"It wasn't the plot. It wasn't the character. It was the 'voice' of the narrator," he says. "It's a first-person story, and as soon as you start reading, you know you are in the presence of a unique and interesting character."

Berk credits his editor with making his novel better after guiding it through almost three years of edits and rewrites.

"I grew up around millions of books, and always saw authors as these mythical creatures from another planet — books would fall magically from their brilliant brains," he says. "Now I've seen the messy process behind how a book is created. It has demystified the author as icon and the book as magic."

While getting a book published hasn't changed his life all that much, he says, "The

last year has been fun and exciting - even the day I got the book's ISBN number. My family members are giant book nerds, so that was really exciting."



Olaf Staroprypinski photo

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