

FROM THE Editor's Desk

BY SARAH NIGBOR



War on blue jays

Happy Thanksgiving! I wish you a year filled with hope, blessings and prosperity. As we're sitting down to dine on roasted turkey with all the fixings, I can't help but think of a story that involves another type of bird: The nefarious blue jay.

In my family, my grandpa's hatred of blue jays was legendary. It will forever live on in stories passed down through the ages. While the birds are beautiful, all bedecked in their blue and white feathered finery, my grandpa couldn't stand them. He made it his mission to eradicate them from his property. Them and moles, but that's another story.

My grandparents always had multiple bird feeders outside the big living room picture window, and in the backyard near the clothesline. It infuriated my grandpa to see blue jays bullying and chasing away the other songbirds so they could get their fill of the tantalizing seeds and nuts. They can be very aggressive to other birds, which he did not appreciate. They are intelligent creatures and loyal to their kind, but have been known to raid nests of other birds. They are also talkative, loud and somewhat obnoxious, a trait my grandpa didn't like in people, let alone birds.

Whether you agree with it or not, the fact is my grandpa shot blue jays. He had a .22 propped by the back door just for that purpose. It was not uncommon for a gunshot to suddenly crack through the air as my grandpa scouted for blue enemies out the back door or a window. For a time, the .22 could even be found behind the toilet in the bathroom. When I used the facilities one day, I turned around

and there it was, tucked against the wall. While surprised, I also found it hilarious. My grandma always said that would be a terrible way to go, if the gun went off while she was on the toilet. The safety was always on, to avoid such a mishap.

Since gunshots echoing through the house were relatively common, so was my grandmother being startled. One time she was doing dishes and all of sudden "BANG!" The gun went off from the bathroom. My grandpa luckily didn't meet his maker on the toilet. He had seen an enemy blue jay on the backyard feeder, slid the bathroom window open quietly and eased the .22 barrel out the opening. CRACK! The blue jay's feathers fluttered on the breeze and its raucous squawking was replaced by my grandmother's shriek. I literally laughed until I bawled when I heard that story.

My grandpa died in August 2013 and I miss him every day. My mother had given him a desk calendar featuring songbirds, one for each day of the year. The day we buried him was Sept. 7. And wouldn't you know it—the featured bird that day was a blue jay. Coincidence? I think not.

I know cardinals are allegedly the messengers from Heaven. But whenever I see a blue jay, I can't help but think of Grandpa and the .22, the window sliding open and the crack of the bullet leaving the chamber. I let the blue jays be in my yard and I certainly don't allow anyone to keep a gun behind the toilet. I hope Grandpa understands that those "dang blue jays" remind me of him.

WOODWORKING Again

BY DAVE WOOD



Encounters with Vonnegut

In English departments across the nation the saying goes that many students major in literature because they like to read good books, so they go to graduate school and read TONS of good books, only to finally get a teaching job at a worthy institution of higher learning, where what they do for the rest of their myopic lives is read dull essays written by freshman enrollees who don't find the time to read any books, let alone good ones.

A typical load would be four sections of 25 students, who are required to write 500-word essays. That adds up to about 500,000 words to stumble through, each semester, while all those great books lie gathering dust on the professorial mantel.

That was my personal story as I traveled from Bowling Green to Augustana College to Illinois State University, UW-Stevens Point, Ball State University and, finally, Augsburg College in Minneapolis. That was when I left the groves of academe to work at the Minneapolis Tribune and to eventually become the book review editor of its Sunday books section. It was a big deal, because the Tribune sported one of the biggest book sections in the country, and this old English teacher got to read novels and poetry that was not yet published by writers like Judith Guest, Jon Hassler, Jon Updike, Garrison Keillor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I also got to meet them and know them as human beings.

As it happened, however, I had had opportunity to meet Vonnegut himself when I was one of those beleaguered assistant professors at the undistinguished institution of Ball State, Ind., located a few miles from Vonnegut's birthplace. Back in the 1960s in those dissident times Kurt Vonnegut was on everyone's list for his incisive novels like "God Bless You Mr. Rosewater," "The Sirens of Titan," and his most famous, "Slaughterhouse Five," inspired by the World War II firebombing of Dresden, while he was there as a prisoner of war.

What a blast to meet a witty satirist like this in person and slip away from grading yet another dull freshman essay! One autumn day, Vonnegut showed up at Bowling Green and stayed a week to be wined and dined by a grateful Hoosier public. He was a pretty shaggy looking dude, with a mop of curly hair. At one of several

cocktail parties thrown for him, a Ball State faculty member approached him and said that he was the department's Science Fiction specialist. "If you're suggesting that I'm a science fiction writer [because of the "Sirens of Titan"] you're full of Bull..." He flopped down on his host's sofa and fell fast asleep.

In the following year, stunned by Vonnegut's performance, the faculty voted to invite Richard Nixon's cousin, Jessamyn West, the author of "Friendly Persuasion." A safe bet if ever there was one.

As Vonnegut's fame grew and mine remained obscure at Augsburg College, I had an officemate, Douglas Ollila, a religion prof who knew Vonnegut well. "When I was a seminary student at NYU I sat next to Kurt almost every morning on the train into town. As I recall he was working at a PR job at General Electric, and he was one depressed young man. But very witty."

The 80s rolled around and in my new role as Books Editor, I was traveling around the country interviewing folks like George Plimpton, Calvin Trillin, Louise Erdrich. One stop was the American Bookseller's convention in Las Vegas. I was happy to hear that I'd be seated next to Vonnegut, as his publisher threw a dinner for him to promote his new novel. Unbelievably, he recognized me from the sofa episode and wondered if I still taught at "Fruit Jar U," a name sometimes used to describe Ball State because it was donated to Indiana by the Ball Brothers, who manufactured canning jars. And then he arose to promote his book. "There's not much to say about it except I have here my publisher's catalog for this year, and I'll read

the blurb from the catalog." To the great amusement of the audience, he proceeded to read the entire fulsome description. He ended with the comment: "I wrote it myself. 'Twas the hardest thing I ever did since I worked at General Electric."

Locals still jaw about Kurt Vonnegut's huge convocation at UW River Falls back when the University college featured blockbuster appearances by the likes of James Dickey, Alan Ginsburg and Kurt Vonnegut, which elicited a huge crowd.

Here's the backstory.

My friend Charles Loney was scheduled to haul Vonnegut from the airport to Emma's Bar and then on to the auditorium for his speech. Something came up and Charles couldn't make it to the airport. So he sent one of his favorite students, who had recently read Charles's Ph.D. dissertation, in which Charles wrote about authors who had one successful novel, followed by a bunch of duds, F. Scott Fitzgerald for one, and Vonnegut for another. On the way back to River Falls, the favorite student mentioned the dissertation to Vonnegut.

Vonnegut had a drink at Emma's as was the custom back then (oldtimers remember when they had a difficult time getting James Dickey OUT of Emma's!)

And then it fell to Charles Loney to introduce the speaker of the night. Vonnegut arose, thanked Loney for the fulsome intro and said, "I was told on the way here to River Falls that there's at least one person in town who thinks it might have been better if I'd died before I wrote the book I'm here to talk about tonight."

Dave would like to hear from you. Phone him at 715-426-9554.

LETTERS to the Editor

Seniors will remember

To the editor:

As a Medicare Advantage member, I urge our members of Congress to protect the Advantage program and oppose ideas to use the program to fund other government spending.

As Washington debates various spending ideas it is concerning that media reports have indicated that some in Congress have considered the idea of making cuts to the program that over 500,000 Wisconsin seniors rely on to provide quality and affordable healthcare. Providing the same benefits as original Medicare, plus added benefits like an out-of-pocket max, vision, fitness memberships and preventative care, Medicare Advantage is the type of program Congress should be supporting, not looking to cut.

Seniors not only like our Advantage plans, but we vote, and we won't forget those in Congress who don't support our healthcare.

Rae Cuykendall
Mondovi

Library Gala thanks you

To the editor:

Last month's "Once Upon a Library" Gala, and the immense gratitude we felt for the support of community members and local businesses is still fresh in our memories. What a special evening it was!

Thank you to all who supported this fundraiser for the new Ellsworth Public Library including the businesses who sponsored, individuals who attended, silent auction bidders, and all those who donated cash and silent auction items.

From the onset of the project's fundraising campaign, the generosity of the community has been overwhelming. As we continue to inch ever closer to our \$2 million goal, and the project is closer to becoming reality, we wish to remind all those who have given so generously of the immense

gift and legacy they are giving our community.

Please continue to watch the fundraising thermometer located in front of the future home of the Ellsworth Public Library. For those inspired to support the effort further, there is still time. Specific Fund-a-Need items for the library can be purchased to furnish the completed space. For families interested in a permanent and meaningful way to support the Ellsworth Public Library building project, special naming opportunities are available, and pledges and estate gifts are also being accepted. Visit www.friendsofepl.org/gala to learn more.

Once again, we thank you for your ongoing support.

The Friends of the Ellsworth Public Library and "Once Upon a Library" Gala Committee

Wisconsin values fair maps

To the editor:

I am grateful this week for a couple of Wisconsin traditions. One is hunting. Around me I see groups of families and friends dressed in blaze orange gathered to talk after spending the morning in deer stands studded around the countryside.

These individuals do us all a favor by harvesting in a safe, legal and humane way our large deer herd, thus preventing diseases and starvation caused by overcrowding—and keeping at some of us from car-deer collisions.

I'm grateful also for the Wisconsin tradition of fairness. We value giving each other a chance. We expect our leaders and representatives to be evenhanded in applying rules, law and legislation. And we expect fairness in our voting-district maps.

The 2011 maps were not fairly drawn. We've been using them for 10 years and the result is politicians who care more about party than constituents. They don't show up for candidate forums and they ignore the overwhelming support Wisconsinans have shown for a nonpartisan way of drawing the maps.

Now the even-worse 2021 maps are in the hands of the

Wisconsin Supreme Court and we can only hope they uphold the will of the people, our traditional values, our earnest desire for actual representative democracy: Fairness. It's a bright light in our state's values, like blaze orange in late-autumn woods. Please ask your representatives to pass the legislation (AB 389 and SB 395) that will require a nonpartisan method of drawing the district maps.

Leslie Watschke
River Falls

Panthers: You represented spectacularly

To the editor:

Congratulations to all our coaches and the valiant Ellsworth High School football team. Last Thursday our beloved Panthers competed for the Division 4 state championship at Camp Randall Stadium.

With an uncharacteristically shaky start, this team—which had not lost in two years—found themselves behind 21-0 in the first quarter against another also undefeated team.

Most teams would have been so demoralized they would have given up. You glance over to the sidelines, and without even looking at the scoreboard, you know who is winning. The heads down and hunched shoulders tell the story. But not our Panthers. This resolute team fought back and scored twice before the half. They did not let the other team score the rest of the game. With shoulders back and heads held high they never stopped giving their best.

As the honorary team medical support, Kurt Helmrick and I have been walking the sidelines since 1994. We were prouder of the way this team dealt with loss than with any of the dozens of team victories we have witnessed. How a team handles adversity reveals its true character. And this team showed poise, class, and sportsmanship as only the finest players and best coached teams can. Winning in life is about much more than the scoreboard. It's about doing your best, never giving up, encouraging your teammates when they are down and playing with integrity.

Congrats to the coaches, players, and their families. You represented our community of Ellsworth spectacularly.

Dr. Chris Tashjian
River Falls

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