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Thirty-one years ago, a handful of Jackson Hole Writers offered their first conference. Since then, the JHW Conference has steadily grown in recognition and renown. The Jackson writers cancelled their conference in 2020 due to Covid-19, but by 2021 they had rallied; they offered a conference experience via Zoom.

This year, participants had the option of in-person or Zoom attendance. I chose the latter. More on my experience later, but let me add here, I regret I was unable to socialize with invited speakers, JHW faculty, and participants from all over the States—you have to attend in person to be able to benefit from the social venues provided: breakfasts, dinners, readings with snacks and beer, and so on.

The conference draws eminent poets, fiction writers, essayists, and memoirists from JHW faculty and speakers. Its "students" are writers serious about their craft. One of this year's poets to read as "student" was Lori Howe, an Assistant Professor at University of Wyoming, who holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction/Literacy, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing/Poetry, an M.A. in English, and a B.A. in English and Spanish. Howe garnered this year's Wyoming Arts Council Frank D. Nelson Doubleday Memorial Award in Poetry, a sought-after honor among Wyoming writers.

In 2018, Howe edited a collection of poems, essays, and stories by Wyoming writers, "Blood, Water, Wind, and Stone," that included my personal essay, "Windy Acres." This essay is so flawed, the anthology's readers should have been spared the piece. Later, when a Beta Reader evaluated it, I realized that, writing well is a skill akin to learning to sing on key, or play a musical instrument. People may think your writing talents come naturally—but they take practice, patience, and regular involvement with coaches and peers who know what the craft is all about.

This year's JHW Conference kicked off on Thursday, June 23, with Keynote Speaker Willy Vlautin, who treated us to a humorous exposition of the "wrong turns" he took in putting together his latest novel. Vlautin is an accomplished fiction writer and musician and, as his keynote address attested, a savvy entertainer. Needless to say, his workshop later that day was well attended. There, Vlautin stressed the use of dialogue in fiction and nonfiction. Skillfully written dialogue, he said, reveals things in a subtle, engaging manner. When he read pertinent scenes from other writers to show how dialogue moves a story forward, sometimes the dialogue went on for pages and pages.

Like singing or instrument-playing, good writing requires developing an ear, said another Conference writer, who urged us to read our writing aloud to ourselves. “Hear yourself speak the words. Do the sentences roll off the tongue, the passages flow together? Listening to your work helps you identify its strengths and weaknesses.”

As a creative-nonfiction writer I was, of course, interested in speakers specifically addressing the craft of nonfiction writing. I had submitted a fifteen-page and a 40-page manuscript for critique (participants may do this for an additional fee) and so, was anxiously awaiting the times set aside for critiques. My critiquing readers all contacted me early in the conference by email to set up times to meet by phone or Zoom.

Before that came speakers and workshop leaders I’d looked forward to meeting virtually. Among them were Friday’s Andrea Barnett, who reminded us, in any narrative, there exist moments of tension or drama that should be explored for all they’re worth. “Go very slow” in these pivotal scenes, she advised us, provide details that will sustain reader interest.

On Saturday we heard author Kathi Appelt on how she broke away from writing children’s books in rhyme, which she had pursued with great success. She doubted she’d be able to move beyond; hence her talk was on “Write What You Think You Can’t”—which was how a trusted friend framed her challenge. The time and effort she invested in trials and errors were ultimately worth it, she said, leading to a whole new venture.

Katherine Standefer followed on the theme of “Write the Book that Threatens to Kill You.” Again we had an author who invested herself wholeheartedly to let us know how difficult personal writing can be. At times she had to swallow hard to avoid breaking out in tears. Her audience appreciated the courage needed to write out her truth—and, more so, her willingness to share her struggles.

Many other sessions were offered, equally as interesting as the few mentioned. I missed some because of appointments with my critiquing reviewers.

Three separate conference faculty critiqued my 15-page submission, which consisted of two personal-experience essays that began as Cheyenne Post columns. The first wove around the pediatrician who cared for our children after we’d moved to California’s central coast. The other focused on a San Luis Obispo friend and her husband, with the friend accorded the fictitious name of Constanze.

My first reviewer was a Jackson Hole writer who, some months earlier, had spoken to my Zoom discussion group about her book “Taking Back Our Lives,” a collection of meditations for survivors of childhood abuse. She also discussed her short story, “Mother George,” a reimagining of the life of a midwife who died more than a hundred years ago, leaving behind an Idaho community’s consternation, which was expertly rendered in dialogue and monologue.

This writer’s kindness manifested by first focusing on my manuscript’s strengths and only gradually suggesting cutting this or that passage. “There is so much here,” she said, “that you could use elsewhere. Here, you want to stay with the essentials of your story.”

The second reviewer was gentle and friendly also, while the third said, frankly, she did not think the pieces were publishable in their current form. The disappointment was hard to swallow, but the three opinions motivated me to rework the essays before submitting them again. In my eagerness to expand on the column material, I had added too much extraneous stuff.

With the forty-page manuscript I wanted to put my best foot forward and so, I submitted two recently-published essays, one in *Syncopation Journal*, which describes itself as “An online journal for musicians who dabble in prose and writers who love music.” *Syncopation* published “Chaos and Consolation” on January 1, 2022. *Tint Literary Journal*, a venue that publishes writers for whom English is not the first or primary language, included “Oxygen, ah Oxygen!” in its Spring 2022 issue.

My third essay in the 40-page collection was a work-in-progress. The editors of a medical-literary journal, “Blood and Thunder,” wanted to run it provided I tweaked certain passages. This manuscript, a personal essay on the mental-health challenges in my family of origin and, later, in the family I created in the United States, was critiqued by one reader only, and she made no bones about the weaknesses of the essay: long passages of exposition where I should “show, don’t tell,” and quotes from mental-health experts that, my reviewer said, would make readers yawn. I’d emailed my writing knowing critiques are no hand-holding, feel-good conversations; still, my ego came away a bit bruised.

Ever since the conference finale I’ve pored over the “Blood and Thunder” potential, working along the lines recommended. It isn’t anywhere near ready. This is a tough nut to crack. By the time I get the essay where it needs to be, my window of opportunity may have slammed shut.

Fortunately, the many fine speakers and workshop leaders taught us well. Not only will recollecting their insights and confessions of failure help me get past my disappointments, but also I’ll be able to return to the sessions repeatedly—the conference management just emailed vimeos (for participants only) of every talk, reading, and workshop offered during the three conference days. The vimeos are good for three weeks before they’re shut down—time enough to catch what I missed on the first go-around.