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## A Writer's Life in A Household of Children

(This is the original version, including more entries than space in the magazine permitted to be published.)

A number of years ago, before I had children, I witnessed a friend using the telephone in his office. His office was really a breakfast nook in the small family apartment, but he had plugged it full of computers, printers, telephones, and maps. He sat, as I watched, with a sickly smile on his face, cramming a telephone receiver against his lowered head, his shoulders hunched and his free hand pressed against his right ear, attempting to hold up his end of a business conversation while his small son and daughter charged back and forth laughing and screaming, one bouncing a basketball, the other scraping along on plastic preschool roller skates. The moment they exited through the hinged doors, they turned and roared back through from the other direction.

“Hold on one moment, won’t you?” inquired Simon gently of his client. He tenderly placed the receiver against his chest and bellowed — red face contorted, teeth sharpened, knuckles white, altogether a changed man: “HANNAH! GET THESE KIDS OUT OF HERE!”

“Heaven forbid, “ said his tall serene wife, herding the young ones toward the back bedroom. “Heaven forbid his clients should find out he has children! Why, they’ll probably revoke their contracts! They’ll demand refunds! Children! Can you believe it? The man has children! The very idea!” and so forth, while she betook herself, her children, and her melodious outrage down the dark hallway. Simon waited until he heard the door to the back bedroom dramatically slam before removing the phone from his chest. He resumed the conversation in the kindest of tones.

“Yes, isn’t she right!” I thought at the time. “Suppose the client did suspect there were children underfoot as Simon outlined the contract, what then?” And I maintained this attitude up to and through the time that my husband and I produced children and I worked from home at a desk in our bedroom.

Now, there were advantages to working at home. For example, in 1985, after months of negotiations, I was granted a telephone interview with former President Jimmy Carter. I was told to expect the call at nine a.m. First I drove carpool. When I got home, I went upstairs, changed my clothes and shoes into something nicer, made the bed, and sat on it. What do heads of state do while waiting for the President to phone? I rolled matching socks into balls. Then he called.

But that was easy, because my children weren’t home. Even if they had been home, at nine in the morning they might have been playing nicely in the yard. The killer phone calls are the ones which come after four-thirty in the afternoon. Small children go from happiness to the brink of starvation with a turnaround time of five seconds between 4:30 and 5:30 in the afternoon, which in many parts of the outside world are simply late middle workday hours.

The major phone call of my career rang at 4:45 on a January afternoon in 1987.

I should know better — I keep telling myself — I should know better than even to answer the phone at that time of day. I have a perfectly pleasant and businesslike answering machine which has no hungry little answering machines to distract it. But I do, I leap for the phone at that time of day, eager for any sort of adult contact. Perhaps, I think, it will be one of my full-time working friends without children calling to say, ‘Hey, haven’t seen your kids for awhile, why don’t I swing by and take them out to supper and give you some time to yourself?’ Or perhaps it will be my trial attorney husband calling to say, ‘The jury came right back today, I’ll be home early.’

There are no such phone calls. My friends are busy. Juries are always ‘still out.’ But I answer the phone anyway, just in case.

Two-year-old Seth crossed the border into starvation the moment I said hello and learned that the caller was William Whitworth, editor in chief of *The Atlantic Monthly* and he was not calling to offer to swing by from Boston and take my children out to dinner. He was calling to say he had some questions about an article I'd proposed, questions which might stop him from commissioning the work. This was to have been my first article in *The Atlantic*, my first feature article in a national magazine; I'd been hysterically happy for 24 hours prior to this phone call and suddenly my brilliant career breakthrough was in jeopardy. It appeared that I needed immediately to defend the thesis of the article.

"More beans!" called Seth. He was seated at the breakfast counter enjoying a dish of baked beans while waiting for his hamburger.

"Mr Whitworth!" I enthused, with precisely the same sickly smile I'd seen on my friend Simon's face several years earlier. "You know what?" I said, as if he'd caught me in the outer office at the receptionist's desk, "let me change phones."

I jogged out of the kitchen, across the livingroom and up the stairs, leaped onto my bed, grabbing the phone as I flew past, and said, "Now then" into it.

"More beans?" came a lonely little voice through the other end of the phone. The downstairs phone lay off the hook on the breakfast counter.

"One moment again, please," I said in a sort of elevator attendant's voice, masking the beginning of tremendous anxiety.

I sprinted out of the bedroom, hopped down the stairs four at a time, darted into the kitchen, slid across the linoleum sideways in my socks — "More beans?" asked Seth, brightening when he saw me — I hung up the phone, tore back across the house, clawed my way up the stairs, picked up the upstairs phone and panted for breath into it.

"Is this a convenient time?" asked Mr. Whitworth.

"Oh yes," I said, gasping. "Marvelous time! Magnificent time!"

"BEANS!" came the piercing little voice, beginning to despair, up through the floorboards of the bedroom.

"Well we have some issues to hammer out," said Whitworth and I was forced to deliver a lengthy and intelligent monologue, a sort of credo and soliloquy, invented on the spot, in defense of my proposed story, while a toddler downstairs alternately wept and shrieked for baked beans.

"Hold on one moment, won't you?" I gently inquired, and then vaulted down the entire flight of stairs, fortunately not breaking both legs on impact, hobbled into the kitchen, ripped open the cabinet, seized a can of baked beans, all but ripped the lid off with my teeth, dumped the beans into a bowl, shoved them into the microwaved, watched 30 seconds take an hour-and-a-half to transpire, spun the bowl and a spoon across the counter to my tear-stained but cheered-up son, and worked my way up the stairs rapidly while crawling. I picked up the phone and huffed loudly into it and heard from downstairs, before I could begin to speak, a full little mouth yelling "JUICE!!"

The magazine did ultimately commission and publish my article, but not as a result of that conversation.

I have heard, since then, of a cassette tape that may be purchased which plays office background noises: typewriters typing, file cabinets banging, phones ringing. It is marketed toward home office types like myself, to shut out the noises of pillow fights and dinosaur impersonations in the

background. I'm going to invest in one of these tapes the next time I see it advertised. I'd probably even purchase a tape of airport background noise as superior to children. Even the background noise of a bowling alley would, I think, somehow make a better impression. Heaven forbid they should find out you have children.

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Before I had children, I spent many hours each day gearing up to write. I read Homer and Chaucer and Robert Browning while the coffee brewed, a stack of notebooks beside me and a set of fine-point pens on the table beside me. At a certain moment, immersed in the poetry, I rose and poured the coffee, and warmed my hands around it, and soon took a sip and then, almost trancelike, laid aside the Keats or the Villon and began to write. I could write until dusk, until midnight.

I think I can safely say I don't follow that schedule anymore. Up at 6:50, wake the high-schooler, wake the middle-schooler, wake the 4th-grader, run downstairs, turn on the heat, let out the dog, dash down and back up the basement stairs with fresh socks, wake husband, wake the 4th-grader again, wake the kindergartner, listen for honk of high-schooler's ride, feed the cats, wake the 4th-grader, discuss the merits of stuffed bear versus plastic puppet for kindergartner's show-and-tell day, wake the 4th-grader, help middle-schooler get out the front door with back-pack, lunchbox, and trombone, read and sign the 4th-grader's permission slips which should have been signed the night before, walk up hill to school with two youngest, wait at top of hill while 4th-grader runs home to get lunchbox, say goodbye at school, jog home, jog into office, gulp coffee, write deathless prose, watch clock, time's up, hike back up the school to meet two youngest, and so forth. Occasionally I speed-read a verse of William Butler Yeats while waiting for the coffee to drip but there's really not time for anything more.

And very young children destroy office supplies, making them a sort of occupational hazard for a writer. My husband snapped a photograph of Molly at 6 months, blithely eating a page of a magazine article I'd labored over, half of it still sticking out of her mouth like the legs of a public television documentary frog swallowed live by another frog. My precious fine-point pens, when I can find them, under the beds or outside in the grass, have been ground down to nubs and their caps are missing; my paper-clips have been strung together by the yard, like a bicycle chain; and I turn the page of my private journal and discover that 5-year-old Lily has filled the rest of its pages with wobbly ABCs and shaky versions of the names of all her siblings and pets.

A few years ago I interviewed Erma Bombeck and found, at the last minute, that because the children preferred to use my plain black tape recorder for their Disney cassette tapes, the only tape recorder in the house with working batteries was their red-and-white Fisher Price tape recorder. I grabbed it and flew to Ohio. Later that day I set it up the table between us without a word and Erma Bombeck, to her credit, did not even flinch. I then removed the "Baby Beluga" song-tape and snapped it with a professional flick of the wrist into my briefcase. I later discovered that I'd conducted the entire interview while wearing a nursing bra with its nursing flaps down. But hey, if you can't do that with Erma Bombeck, who can you do it with, the President?

For a few years, as babies and baby gifts kept arriving, I felt mournfully that I'd never write again. I unconsciously poured my writer's soul instead into thank you notes for the baby gifts. Small thank you notes of the sort with happy bluebirds on the cover grasping baby rattles in their beaks, or happy clowns holding colorful balloons which spelled out T-H-A-N-K-S, I crammed with densely-worded single-spaced long-winded paragraphs in tiny hard-pressed black letters. I used irony, foreshadowing, limited point of view, narrative collage, and other modernist techniques. I sat up in bed long into the night squeezing stream-of-consciousness sentences onto the two small halves of hinged thank you cards. A friend reassured me that there certainly would be a posthumous volume: Melissa Fay Greene: The Collected Thank You Notes, but recipients of the thank you notes must have experienced, chiefly, chagrin, asking one another "Do you think she actually received the crib sheets?"

It can't be denied that one reaches heights of creative fantasy with children that one might not otherwise attain. I remember an evening in the children's room when my oldest kids were five and two years old, when both had enlisted me in separate make-believes. Molly had cast herself as a beautiful Russian-Jewish ballerina named Galina and I was a mean Russian soldier who refused to allow her to emigrate to Israel. (This was pre-glasnost.) Seth, meanwhile, was fascinated by the question of what would ensue if his hand-knit green yarn Kermit-the-frog were to become trapped in the pajama drawer of the bedroom dresser. In his drama, Seth was the voice of Kermit and I was cast as Kermit's anxious mommy.

The dialogue went like this:

Mean Russian guard (me): "You're never leaving this country, never."

Kermit (Seth), muffled voice, as if from under pajamas in closed drawer: "Help! Help! Help!"

Galina, the beautiful ballerina, tossing her hair: "We just want to be free! Why can't you understand that?"

Kermit's mommy (me): "Kermit! Kermit, honey! Where are you? I can't find you."

Galina, ballerina, tossing her hair: "You can't stop us anymore. I'm not afraid."

Kermit: "Help! Help! Help me! Help me!"

Mean guard: "If you try to escape, I'll shoot!"

Galina: "We want to worship God in our own way!"

Kermit [muffled]: "Help! Mommy, help! Help!"

Living with children keeps at bay any idea I might have about my own self-importance or literary indispensability.

I've twice endured the publishing world experience of soliciting blurbs for my forthcoming book: glowing remarks given by well-known authors for promotional purposes. With my first book, soliciting the blurbs involved the somewhat humiliating experience of writing letters to famous writers and urging upon them a gigantic unsolicited manuscript, in the hopes that they would respond with high praise and permission to use their names. I hadn't thought this made any impression on my children until an early evening one spring when I was caught in a vast gridlock of rush-hour traffic on Buford Highway with three Brownie Scouts in the backseat. We sat bumper-to-bumper for two, five, ten minutes, in a sea of motionless traffic, while a traffic light went from green to red, to green, to red on the horizon, and a rush-hour pan-handler began working the lanes of cars. This man had a plastic bucket and a bunch of brochures with him he was obviously trying to sell to trapped drivers, as he tapped on drivers' side windows and showed his wares. The three little girls in the backseat followed his progress.

"What is that man doing?" asked one of the Brownies. I opened my mouth to explain "panhandling," but before I could get a word out, my daughter Molly, then about seven, observed, "It looks like he's trying to get blurbs for his book."

I like working at home in the midst of children. I find that living with children — four of them all the time, and large numbers of their friends when the yard sprinklers' on and at mealtime — is a rich source of metaphor...absolutely none of it usable for any story or article I have ever written. For example: when the children sit and play with their Playmobil people or Construx building sets, the house is quiet except for a very pleasant light clicking noise, the clicking of small pieces of plastic coming together to a child's satisfaction. The brightly-colored hard plastic Playmobil people click when you seat them on a horse, or in a jeep, or place a hard-hat or knight's helmet on their shiny small heads, or swords in their mitten-like hands, or hook them up with any of about a thousand intricate

accessories. The K'nex pieces click as they telescope out under the childrens' nimble fingers into spacecraft or weaponry or dinosaurs. The snug little pieces of plastic, selected out of the depths of a rattling shoebox, snap into place with just the right child-size amount of effort.

And when I sit and write on a good morning, when the house is quiet and the children are at school and I have a hot mug of coffee and sit looking out the window into the woods behind the house with my notebooks in my lap, it seems to me that the words snap together with just that same deft clicking noise. I place a hat on a character's head, I seat a general on a horse, I add shutters to a house, and the words feel like shiny bits of plastic in primary colors and I hear in my mind's ear that most pleasant sound: click! click!

I understand, from watching children, and from my own childhood, that writing (or any act of creation) when it goes well, takes place heedlessly, willy-nilly, with the pell-mell energy of children flooding into a room and taking every toy off the shelves and dumping the buckets with 500-or-more small pieces in them, including marbles, so that the contents crash and scatter and roll.

Complaints would arise from the play-room that Lee, for example, as a toddler, was throwing the puzzle pieces. But I am not a strict disciplinarian when it comes to throwing the puzzle pieces.

When you create, when you write, you simply have got to throw the puzzle pieces sometimes. You can't constantly pick up after yourself as you go. The force of the writing — caring only for what lies ahead? what's next? what will this feel like? — draws you onward, leaving a chaos of dangling participles, misplaced modifiers, and misapprehended historical facts in its path. The children — distracted from the playroom by the sound of the doorbell, or of the ice cream truck — make a sudden exit, stumbling over toys as they careen out. The rushing is the thing, the breathless curiosity; the playroom — and the prose — can be tidied up later when one is in a domestic frame of mind. Later I will sternly dispose of an excessive flurry of adjectives and will fluff historical facts into shape, and the children obediently will kneel and sort and sweep.

But the fun, the creative spark, cannot be ordered to appear or to depart; it is a rare and unpredictable moment always to be treasured. On a good day, although you may appear to be sitting quietly scratching with a pen, inside you are lifting great baskets of toys off the shelves and overturning them to discover what treasures lie within and which way and how loudly they will bounce and scatter.

I've concluded that my part-time hours are, in the long run, beneficial. My work invariably feels like something I escape to rather than from, and I never write so long that I grow weary of it. I can't beat a subject to death because it's always nearly carpool time or dismissal time and, by the next morning, I'm on to new topics. I wrote *Praying for Sheetrock* during Cliff Valley Preschool Hours: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, nine to one, Wednesdays, nine to noon. I've virtually never experienced "writer's block." It sounds like a luxury I don't have time for. Instead, it feels as if it is constantly, suddenly, 2:45 and my work time is over. I dash away from my manuscript late and guilty, like a kid tearing herself away from a playground at dusk. I believe it keeps my prose livelier. It doesn't matter how magnificently expressive my morning has been: if I'm not at school on time to meet the kids, and don't have cookies and apples waiting for them at home, the children are not going to be impressed.

There are days when all of life and work feels and looks like a stack of overdue library books, a stack of unpaid bills, stack of unreturned phone messages, and a sink of unwashed dishes, and every morning tumbles rapidly and unrewardingly downhill toward 2:45; but occasionally, there comes a morning when the words are clicking smartly together, the plates stand shining in the dish drain, and it's still only 10:15.

Meanwhile Molly thinks he may want to be a writer. I think she could very well be one. Maybe someday, when she's a writer, she'll have a baby, and maybe one day that baby will look up at her and smile while munching and drooling on Mommy's masterpiece, and I'm quite certain she won't want to trade that baby for all the literature in England.

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frog, and I know for a fact he won't want to trade that baby for all the literature in England.

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