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# Dutchess

## LOOKING for JUDITH ROSSNER

*Finding the author of  
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in Millbrook was easy.  
Discovering the private  
person behind the novelist  
was a challenge.*

**The real Vanderbilts:  
What you won't hear  
on a tour of the Hyde  
Park mansion**

**Diversifying the  
county's economy**





A writer's reflections on finding  
her own literary voice

# Hearing Voices



By Juliene Osborne-McKnight

I sit on the deck and I read Annie Dillard. I read when I know that I should be writing this column. I read *The Writing Life* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I mark my favorite passages with a yellow highlighter pen and I read on. By the end of the day, I have made a discovery. I want to write like Annie Dillard.

This is not a new discovery. I have read Annie Dillard before. I always want to come away with her voice. Annie Dillard's voice is lean and uncluttered. She speaks directly, even in metaphor. When I picture Annie Dillard, I picture her in jeans and an oxford shirt. She looks thin and purposeful. I can see the absolute clean line of her jaw.

I have no jawline. I am one of those people on whom life has softened the edges. My mind is a filing cabinet of largely useless information I have stored away during my travels and my teaching. My heart is a cluttered cupboard of all the people I am carefully keeping there. I am a humpback whale of many voices singing.

This question of voices distracts me and I leave my computer to think about it. I walk to the landing stairs. Outside on the front porch steps my husband and my daughter are sitting side by side. She is telling him some tale of the neighbor-

hood, throwing out her arm and pointing in the direction of her friend's house. He is nodding, listening intently to every word. He is not at all distracted. They are not aware of me, so I watch for a long time. Never once does his attention falter while he listens to her tale.

I find myself amazed. My entire writing career is a litany of the distractions I have followed. I am distracted all the time, distracted by everything. I can be reading a book when other voices interrupt the characters to speak to me. Sometimes when I am driving the car, the voices are so insistent in their tale-telling that I pay no attention to my driving companion and little to my driving.

Are these storytellers my real voice? I think that they cannot be, for the small child who tells me the tale of her Lenape grandmother has a voice much different from the irascible, thoroughly British voice of St. Patrick who is telling me his tale in the current novel I am writing. I think of Alice Walker, thanking the spirits who come and tell her the stories that become her novels. These tale-tellers in my brain have their own voices, voices who have discovered that I have a rapid, handy way with a keyboard and have decided to make use of that fact.

All right, then, I think stubbornly. My real voice is the voice in my poetry. I have published precious little of that and have sent out even less. I keep my poetry tied up with a metaphorical white ribbon in the filing cabinet drawer. It must be my true voice because I am obviously jealous that the world might hear it — or afraid that the world might not like it.

But Annie Dillard has her true voice out there. Was she afraid? How did she come by the courage to write directly down into the bones? I want to think about this idea of courage and writing. I go for a walk. I clap my headphones on and walk contentedly until I reach the forest trail below my road. Then I drop the headphones beneath my chin and listen. Two birds call out to each other. Their call is plaintive and clean, but I do

not know their names. If my husband were with me, he would know. He would know who they were and why they were calling in this fashion and when he told me, I would be delighted. Good, I would think. This is a good practical knowledge to have for my writing.

By the next time I heard the birds, I would not remember their names. Oh, there are things I do remember. Useless, impractical, indirect sorts of things. I remember whole chunks of Shakespeare's plays, irrelevant for use in my writing unless I am doing a theater review. I remember that the Lenape Indian name for God is Kischelemukong. Some days, my brain says the name over and over like a litany, like a Lenape Gregorian chant. Eventually, my mind will tell me a story about the hounds of Kischelemukong.

Standing in the darkening forest, I think about the writer's voice while the two unknown birds continue calling back and forth. I realize that the voice I have been given will reject every straight line it is offered. It is a river, this voice. It gives me the deep water of poetry, the glittering rapids of children's writing, the long run of novel writing, the mirrored consideration of columns.

Before I go to sleep, I read Annie Dillard again. I read about shutting out distractions, about creating a working space where you think about work and nothing else. I remember a little snatch of ancient Irish. "Seotho a hoil," I whisper to my inner voice: "Hush darling." Let me sleep dreamless and wake ready to concentrate on the column-writing task at hand. But my voice does not obey. All night long I dream bright dreams in my tongues and when I wake, all of them clamor for me to tell their tales.

Exasperated with all the brain noise, I pick up Annie Dillard again. "Right now," she says in *The Writing Life*, "you are flying. Right now, your job is to hold your breath."

I can do that, Annie. I can hold my breath. I cannot fly direct and straight to the point as you do, but, like the singing humpbacks, I can swim. I have been submerged in this river for as long as I can remember. I can hold my breath and let the current of voices carry me on my own long, circuitous route to the sea. ■

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