

# A Writing Life

BY NED STUCKEY-FRENCH

Photos courtesy of Janet Burroway

**T**HANK GOODNESS Janet Burroway hasn't found time to retire.

This woman of letters—writer of novels, short stories, essays, plays, and children's books—continues to delve into new genres and art forms. This year, as she receives the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, she is seeing her name on five books being published. Readers around the world will be able to continue reading work by this incredibly prolific woman who formally “retired” a dozen years ago—after 30 years as a revered professor in Florida State University's Creative Writing Program.

Among her latest books is her first memoir, *Losing Tim*. In it, she bravely explores the life of her son Tim Eysselinck, a husband, father, American soldier, and mine-removal contractor who served in Iraq, returned depressed and disillusioned, and committed suicide in 2004 at the age of 40. In addition, although she's written several plays in the past, she only recently began writing for musical theater and has completed the book and lyrics for a musical adaptation of Barry Unsworth's novel *Morality Play*.

Though Burroway has worked in many genres, she is best known for her creative writing textbook, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. This book, which has become a classic in the field, grew out of her work as a creative writing professor at FSU, where she began teaching in 1972. At that time, there were no textbooks for her to use in a fiction-writing workshop. She developed her own course materials, which became the basis for the first edition of *Writing Fiction*, published in 1982. This popular classic, now in its



Janet Burroway: Recipient of the 2014 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing.

ninth edition, breaks the process of writing fiction down into its parts—setting, plot, point of view, characterization, and so on. But it is also an anthology that includes stories by classic writers such as Eudora Welty, William Carlos Williams, and Flannery O'Connor as well as emerging contemporary writers.

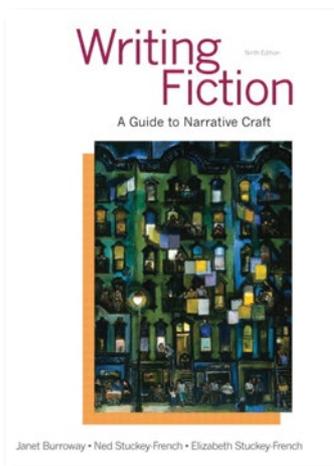
*Writing Fiction* hit the market just as colleges and universities were beginning to set up creative writing programs. Burroway and her book were instrumental in the dramatic growth of a nationwide organization, the Associated Writers and Writing Programs, which now supports more than 500 such programs and almost 50,000 writers across the country. Several years ago, the writer Mark Winegardner calculated that *Writing Fiction* had been used by enough students to fill FSU's Doak Campbell Stadium (capacity 82,300) three times.

“Until I came to Tallahassee,” Burroway says, “teaching presented itself to me as a job, not a métier.” At FSU, she not only helped found the

Creative Writing Program, she also was at the center of Tallahassee's vibrant writing community. She organized writers' groups, read countless student manuscripts, taught workshops, and gave public readings of her work.

And she hosted popular parties with her husband Peter Ruppert, a scholar of film and utopian studies. Both were known as avid players of games (Burroway the one to beat at Scrabble, Ruppert the ace at Trivial Pursuit). Their holiday parties were legend—with everyone bringing a red Christmas present for the Red Party, epic Pictionary games, favors for the kids, and bets on basketball games. For years Burroway and Ruppert were part of a dinner club with rotating themes: Italian, West Indian, French, Brazilian, and once, “white trash”—tuna casserole with potato chips on top, a Jello salad

To listen to Janet Burroway discuss her writing, go to [Digital FORUM at FloridaHumanities.org](http://DigitalFORUMatFloridaHumanities.org).



made with 7-Up, and, after dinner, a banjo-led sing-along on the back deck.

A look at Burroway's life shows where her commitment to writing, community, teaching, and theater began. Her father was an inventor and a homebuilder, and her mother was an elocution teacher and devout Methodist who coached Janet to deliver the pieces at the Friday church socials. Janet writes wonderfully and candidly

about her parents in *Embalming Mom*, her collection of essays, in which she reveals how those Friday-night performances introduced her to both stage fright and applause. The applause won out, leading to a lifelong love of theater.

Burroway's beloved older brother Stanley, who wrote for school newspapers from the time he was a child and went on to journalism school at Stanford University, helped plant the idea of a writing career in

## From *Bridge of Sand*

Karst is the name given to the limestone substrata of Florida. The porous carbonate is furrowed and pitted, pocked and cracked. Like a sponge it swells with the underground rivers it lets pass. Like a honeycomb it retains its form partly thanks to the liquid in its walls. The fullness of water upholds the fragile marrow of sand and clay on which people build, into which they dig their foundations, pipes, pumps, drains, ditches, sewers, and reservoirs... Here and there the mantle gives. A weekend gardener might buy a fifty pound bag of potting soil to fill a depression in her backyard and find that she needs another a few days later. A suburban father might undertake to bury the family dog and find the gravesides caving underfoot. The process makes for hummocky topography, annoyance, and occasional catastrophe.

—Janet Burroway

her head. In high school, Burroway began writing poems and creating sets for "The Taming of the Shrew." She also won the Knights of Pythias Oratorical Contest for the state of Arizona before enrolling at the University of Arizona.

She spent only her freshman year at UA (pledging a sorority and landing the lead in a play) before an essay she wrote about racism ("Color Blind") won her a coveted



Burroway with her sons Tim (left) and Alex Eysselinck in Westmeston Village, Sussex, England, about 1970.



Burroway's sons Alex (left) and Tim, about 1969.

guest editorship in New York City with *Mademoiselle* magazine. This famous program brought 20 young women to New

York each summer,

housed them at the Barbizon Hotel, and introduced them to the magazine business. Sylvia Plath had been there the year before; Joan Didion was in Burroway's group. While she was there, Burroway landed (and aced) an admissions interview at Barnard College. A scholarship enabled her to transfer from UA.

As she put it later, "my three years at Barnard were a watershed." At Barnard, she took writing workshops with teachers as different as George Plimpton and W.H. Auden, landed part-time jobs at the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y and *The New Yorker*, wrote and produced a play, and placed a poem in *The Atlantic*.

Next, she won a Marshall Scholarship that enabled her to study in England at Cambridge University. There she read ferociously under the tutelage of the renowned critic David Daiches; continued to act and sew costumes; contributed to the noted literary magazine *Granta*; rubbed elbows with

### From *The Perfect Pig*

I walked on not making the slightest commotion  
When Octopus tossed himself out of the ocean.  
"Your problem, O Pig, is your poor locomotion.  
Your trouble is legs, I regret to relate,  
For you only wear four where you ought to have eight."

I was doing quite well, though I don't like to brag,  
As the leggiest pig in the land—when the Stag  
Pointed out, "Well, that's all very well on the bottom.  
As far as a fine set of trotters, you've got 'em.  
But on top you're as bare as the day you were born!  
And nobody's perfect who hasn't a horn."

—Janet Burroway

notables such as Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Dudley Moore, Ian McKellan, and Margaret Drabble; and published her first novel, *Descend Again*, and collection of poems, *But to the Season*.

At Cambridge she also met Belgian playwright and director Walter Eysselinck. In 1961, the couple married in New Haven, Conn., where Janet was RCA-NBC Fellow and earned a master's degree at the Yale School of Drama. She and Eysselinck both taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton before his immigration troubles sent them back to Europe.

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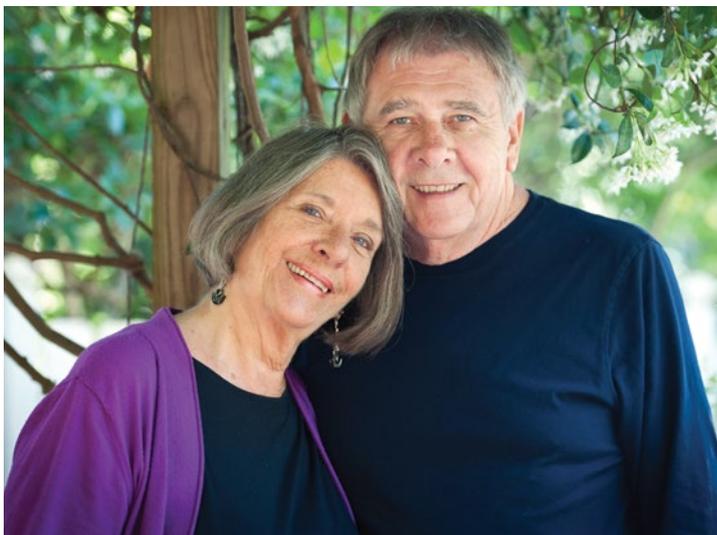




Burroway's son Tim on the Banzai Pipeline, Hawaii, in 1990.

In Belgium, Janet wrote furiously in order to complete her second novel, *The Dancer from the Dance*, before their son Tim was born. Feeling motherhood closing around her, she hurried to finish another novel, *Eyes*, before Tim began walking.

While she was beginning to gain a wider audience for her writing, she was also feeling increasingly unhappy in her marriage. She, Walter, and Tim had moved to Sussex, England, where she gave birth to a second son, Alex; wrote a political novel, *The Buzzards*, and two children's books; taught (intermittently) at the School of English and American Studies, University of Sussex; and sewed costumes for Walter's theater. Members of his company were dying of alcoholism, leukemia, heart attacks, and suicide, and it was a dark time. She and Walter divorced in 1973, and she moved back to the United States, a single mother of two who was about to begin a new life in Tallahassee.



Burroway and her husband Peter Ruppert in Tallahassee, 2011.

From *Losing Tim*:

What does it mean, "to heal?" What does it mean, "You don't get over it, you get used to it?" ... We tend in America to look for change in epiphanic moments. We want the instant diet, the meteoric success, the Ravishing, an Aha! of healing. But moving on is not a sprint, and not really a triumph of the human spirit. It is the doggedness of the world at your doorstep, doggedly knocking. One day you find you have read two consecutive paragraphs. One day you find you are angry not at the universe but at the local bank... One day a memory comes back shorn of grief, bearing only sweetness.

—Janet Burroway

Burroway and Ruppert arrived in Tallahassee on the same day in 1972 and met each other at a Ph.D. defense a few months later (where, according to Burroway, they "immediately disagreed about Brecht"). Over the next 18 years they socialized in the same group. Each had a failed marriage, which, in her case, provided some grist for her fifth and sixth novels, *Raw Silk* and *Opening Nights*. In 1991, they began seeing each other, vacationing together, and, with the publication of her next novel, *Cutting Stone*, went on a book tour together. They married in 1993

In 2005, two years after Burroway retired, her son Tim killed himself. Two years later, Ruppert's daughter Anne was killed in an automobile accident. Friends circled around, the stages of grief moved through the house, and changes needed to be made.

Burroway and Ruppert moved north, where they now split time between their house in Lake Geneva, Wis., near his family, and an apartment near the Art Institute in Chicago. But their Florida ties have not been broken: the couple returns each winter to get together with friends at a beach house on the Gulf.

Mainly, it has been the work that has helped Burroway heal. In 2009, she published her eighth novel, *Bridge of Sand*, and this year has the new flurry of titles appearing. Just as she wrote her way out of Arizona to New York and Europe, then back to Tallahassee and through the hard time of single parenting, so has Burroway continued to write through good times and bad and, in so doing, keep retirement at bay. Hers is truly a writing life.

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NED STUCKEY-FRENCH, who teaches writing in the FSU English Department, has known Burroway for 15 years. He and his wife Elizabeth Stuckey-French, also a writer and teacher at FSU, have collaborated with Burroway on the last three editions of her renowned textbook *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*.