



Interview with Kay Hoflander

author of several books and a weekly column about "the reluctant aging of baby boomers" for the *Independence Examiner*.

Conducted by Vic Trevisanut
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First, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Before I begin, indulge me for a moment as I “thank the band”, as the saying goes.

This first question gives me the opportunity to introduce the interviewer who is posing the questions. You may wonder who that is as you take a look around this website. I am happy to tell you he is Full Circle’s web designer extraordinaire, Vic Trevisanut—writing coach, teacher, and all around creative genius. No one better! A tip of the hat to you Vic with my sincere thanks.

Now back to the first question at hand.

I am just a little bit confused about describing myself right now because of an online survey I recently took. The survey’s categorization of me leaves me completely bum fozzled.

For example, one question asks, “Are you a NASCAR fan” and is followed by “Do you consider yourself part of the investor class”. It is as though if one loves NASCAR one could not possibly invest in the stock market. I like both.

“Do you shop at Wal-Mart often” is followed by the question, “Are you a college graduate” as though if you shop at Wal-Mart you could not possibly be educated. Once again both apply to me.

Are you a resident of your town, state, America or Planet Earth? Are these mutually exclusive? What if I answer yes to all of them?

Finally, the survey gets around to asking age, sex and income data and wonders if I go to church or own a gun.

Based on this survey, I would have to describe myself then as a weekly Wal-Mart shopper who invests in the stock market but does not own a gun, goes to church, has a college degree, likes NASCAR, and considers myself a resident of America.

As Tweety Bird said of Sylvester, “I guess he don’t know me very well do he?”

Seriously rather than bore readers with my bio which can be found elsewhere on this website if one chooses to read it, I prefer to give readers a snapshot view of my generation.

I could describe those in my age group as baby boomers, empty nesters, or those who are rediscovering ourselves as we journey into our later years. We are not alone in this life experiment. There are massive numbers of us.

Meet some of my friends who are finding new interests or rediscovering old ones just like I am.

Julie is making metal jewelry that is simply breathtaking. Cassie is training dogs for competition and has started a business related to that hobby. Harold is making pine furniture. Gloria paints watercolor masterpieces and exhibits them. Vicky runs an art gallery featuring her works and those of others. Harvey is seeing the world from cruise ships and becoming a geography expert in the process. Helen became a minister. Jan shows horses. Don designed a website featuring his exceptional photography. Peggy is a sought-after vocalist. Dennis rides a motorcycle with a group of friends who are 60-plus in years. James prefers a trail bike and may even enter a race soon. Dennis climbs mountains, and he and his wife Geri ride a bicycle built-for-two on long road trips. I try to write.

All of us agree that these late-found joys are absolutely worth the wait. Rock on boomers!

When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

The summer after 8th Grade.

Before then, I daydreamed pretty much nonstop about being in the movies or becoming a singer, certainly not a writer.

Once I even asked my mother to change my name to Phyllis. I wanted so desperately to be just like Phyllis McGuire of the storied McGuire Sisters that I asked her to please, please change my name. Oh, if my mother would only let me, I hoped. She would not and thought I lost my mind! Young readers will have to Google the McGuire Sisters, as I am sure they have never heard of them. Incidentally, I also wanted to be Lucille Ball or Carol Burnett. Since a hit record and a standup comedic stint or a starring role in the movies appeared unlikely, I turned my attention to reading and writing.

That particular summer after 8th grade, I attended the Missouri State 4-H Convention at the University of Missouri in Columbia. I was thrilled to be a delegate from my home club in Holt County, Missouri. It was the first trip away alone for this 14-year-old country girl. I am not counting Girl Scout camp and church camps and family vacations because I had supportive friends and family around for those. Not this time. I was on my own. While there, we were asked to choose which college at the university we would like to tour. Since I loved reading and writing almost as much as the movies, I checked the Journalism School's box. I almost checked the box for theater!

At Mizzou that pivotal summer, I fell in love with J-School and newspapers, and yes, a cool guy I met at camp as well. My summer crush on him lasted just one week, but the love for all things journalism never left me.

I marveled at the presses, the linotype machines (yes, I am that old), and the ink on the shop foreman's hands as he placed the type (upside down and backwards) in the page boxes. I admired the award-winning articles and the displays of profound and story-telling photographs on the college walls. I absorbed the energy of a daily newspaper and the frantic pace of its deadlines. I was hooked.

Ink would eventually "run in my blood" as newspaper folks say about newspaper reporters. Ink in the blood never leaves by the way.

Walk us through the writing process, as it happens for you.

Mine is uniquely my own as it should be except for one habit I stole from Ernest Hemingway. Not his style mind you, it was his preferred practice of standing at the typewriter rather than sitting while he wrote. Once I toured the Kansas City Star where he worked as a reporter and asked to see his desk. They said they did not know where his desk once sat and besides he usually stood. I am guessing I know why, too. Arthritis! Sitting too long is tough for baby boomer arthritic writers. Hemingway must have been one of us. So, I stand while I write just like he did.

But I digress.

My writing process for my newspaper column begins with collecting notes, articles, interesting tidbits, and anything that might pique an idea. I keep them in a large tote bag in unorganized folders on the floor in the kitchen for all to trip over. I sincerely plan to organize these paper scraps one day soon. I collect quotes and do have them organized in some fashion, mostly by topic—children, writing, travel, gardening, aging, etc.

Each week, I look through my idea tote bag and pull out possible topics for a column. Then, I leave the thought alone for a while and put in a load of laundry or pull weeds. Generally by taking my mind off my impending deadline and doing repetitive or rote tasks, my imagination begins to kick in. One can never force ideas, as any writer knows. Better to walk away than push it.

When I come back to it, I type out a few paragraphs and walk away again. Sometimes it may be a day or two before I revisit my column. I almost always hate it by then and may start over from scratch.

Sometimes I will call my sister, friends or grown children in a complete panic begging, "Give me an idea, quick. Did anything funny happen to you this week or anyone you know? Anything at the checkout counter, an online funny story, a gaff someone made, a silly mistake, a ridiculous story, an animal story? Anything? Help!"

I have decided that I push myself to deadline panic because of the thrill of it all. How exciting to be near the jaws of death, a deadline without a story, and somehow pull it out of my psyche at

the last possible second. It is my Olympics. I make the point at the buzzer, touch the wall ahead of the swimmer in the next lane, make my beam routine without a flaw, and stick my landing!

It is an elixir and that is undoubtedly why I do it.

All the preparation, collection of ideas, and stepping away to let the universe send me an idea really doesn't help much when it comes to deadlines. I "push the envelope" because, honestly, I think I love doing that.

What inspires your writing or really makes the creative juices flow?

Sheer deadline panic and Frank Sinatra CD's!

I enjoy playing "The Rat Pack" CD's while I write; that would be Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis Jr. to the younger generation.

If not on deadline, then hearing anyone's life story of perseverance, victory, or defeat or tales of humor, tears, laughter, fear or ridiculous moments.

How do you deal with writer's block?

I really do not think there is such a thing as writer's block; rather, it is our stubborn perfectionism. One can start to write any time by just stringing a few words together. They do not have to be good. We just have to begin, that's all. Anyone can do it. Perfecting and editing can come later. We call it writer's block only because our writing is not as perfect as we want. I have a plaque in my office that sums up my philosophy on this nicely, "Throw enough spaghetti on the wall and some of it sticks!"

Tell us about Full Circle.

Full Circle is the title of my weekly column published in The Examiner (a daily newspaper) in Independence, Blue Springs, and other points in eastern Jackson County, Missouri.

From its inception in 2005, the core of the column is about aging of baby boomers. Or, as I often say "the reluctant aging of baby boomers."

This arena left me a wide range of story possibilities—empty nesting, retirement, travel, memories, children and grandchildren, pets, food, exercise, health, politics. More importantly, I wanted to write columns that entertained or inspired. I figured that if I had fun with it so would most folks.

Getting the most out of life or out of writing can really be that simple!

For example, here is what I refer to as one of my Laws of Life—if we love what we do, and I mean really get a kick out of it, then before we know it we are doing the job better than we otherwise would.

Who are your favorite authors? Do you find yourself imitating them?

Erma Bombeck. Yes, I try to imitate her with my own column always remembering there is only one Erma and that there will always be only one Erma. I am happy to study at her feet.

Peggy Noonan. Although I agree with her politically most of the time but not all the time, I continually appreciate her poetic wordsmithing. Her warm and entertaining style would be exceedingly difficult to copy in my humble opinion. However, I would be honored to write a political column some day modeled after hers.

J.K. Rowling. For the sheer enormity and brilliance of her Harry Potter works. Cannot be imitated.

Stephenie Meyer. The new J. K. Rowling perhaps? Maybe so. At any rate, I love the way she tells in her Twilight series the preposterous yet mesmerizing story of a teenage girl who is in love with a vampire and has a werewolf for a best friend. Try these books; you will be bitten, too.

John Grisham. I learned more about the law through his books than through any textbook I studied.

How about your first book about Al Fike?

The saying that a promise is a promise has everything to do with why I wrote the book about Al Fike. I promised him that I would!

First, before I talk more about that, let me introduce you to Al Fike. He was a Missouri schoolteacher, fine arts director, and superintendent of schools who decided to give up his career as an educator to become a nightclub entertainer. Al performed vocals, ragtime piano, and vaudeville-style comedy for years in northwest Missouri, but he longed to take his talents nationwide. During the summer of 1948, Al attended graduate school at the University of Colorado and played piano part time at the Glory Hole Saloon in Central City. Faye Emerson of Broadway and television fame was entertaining at the Opera House in Central City and discovered Al one summer evening when she wandered into the Glory Hole. Faye literally opened the door to Al's remarkable show business career. Al continued to perform until the age of 86 earning legions of fans along the way. He died quietly at his home in 1996.

In 1994, he asked me, his shirttail cousin, to write his memoirs, and I promised I would. We collected some materials and photos for the book but he died before we could begin the project. Al's "big box of memorabilia", as he called it, remained in my basement for nearly 12 years. About then, I became an empty nester and found the spare time needed to bring Al's story to life.

His book is a collection of memories, keepsakes, and photographs and is designed to keep Al's memory alive for his fans and family, a promise finally fulfilled.

How did Fuddy Duddy Daddy come about?

Fuddy Duddy Daddy, a children's chapter book and a tale about pancakes and baseball, happened a little bit differently than the Al Fike biography. Sometime in the early 1990's, my husband and I were busy raising a houseful of energetic boys who loved to play baseball and eat pancakes. They were a noisy lot, too. So, in the afternoons in order to keep my sanity and center myself from the daily chaos, I tried writing. Thus, Fuddy Duddy Daddy emerged. It, too, was soon relegated to a box in the basement and forgotten. Last year (2007), I stumbled across Fuddy Duddy Daddy while sorting through some of those cluttered boxes in my basement.

What kinds of books would you like to write in the future?

First on my list is the book I absolutely must write one day. To do that, I will have to forego most every other type of writing because this one will be all consuming. The tale is a true story of unrequited love that took place in northern Italy and Yugoslavia at the end of World War II. In that locale sometime between 1946 and 1948, a third world war almost broke out along what was called "The Morgan Line." There my mother, a captain in the Red Cross, crossed paths with a formidable Army colonel as they dealt with spies and impending war at a place and at a time where no one else in the world was paying much attention. Just about the only one taking note of the volatile region was none other than England's Sir Winston Churchill who warned the world of this regional conflict in his Iron Curtain Address. I think of the book as a combination of "Saving Private Ryan" and "Bridges of Madison County," and it begs to be written.

Tell us about your readers and how they have reacted to your writing.

To my surprise, readers seem to react exactly as I do to the stories and tales I tell. Their comments have been uplifting and gratifying and convince me that all things are indeed universal, especially within a generation. I am well aware that my college-age and twenty-something kids do not grasp all the nuances of which I speak. My baby boomer peers certainly do though. I am honored and grateful for their kind and helpful feedback.

What has been the most surprising aspect of writing for you?

How difficult writing is even though I love it. As Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) once wrote, "Easy reading is damned hard writing!"

And what has been the most challenging aspect?

Clearly for me, it would be pulling a creative thought out of my head in time to meet my deadlines.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Do one thing if you do no other—always sleep on your story before you hit the send button. Sometimes, I do not take my own advice, and I invariably regret it.

Secondly, read everything you write out loud. Sentences that are cumbersome will stand out and mistakes will glare. This is an easy way to catch them assuming you are home alone because otherwise your housemates may think you are crazy.

Finally, above all else, what would you like all of your readers to take from your writing?

The idea that there is humor to be found in all of life; never cease to look for it!