

A Reason to Be Here

Tales from the Writers Convention

A collaborative novel by authors from the
Off Campus Writers Workshop

Conceived and Edited by Jay Rehak



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We dedicate this novel to the pioneering women
who created Off Campus Writers Workshop in 1946.

In so doing, they made possible a great many books, poems,
memoirs, and short stories that have been authored by people like us,
who found in OCWW a vehicle to pursue their writing dreams.

Here are the founding members we have been able to identify so far.

Louise Christopher (Chairman)

Rita Turow

Laura Nance

Alice Strauss

Carol Spelius

Fern Brown

Virginia Wilcox

Mary Farnum

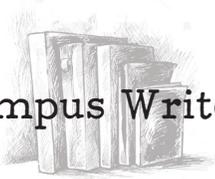
Prentiss McKenzie

Mildred Main

Louise B. Buck

Gail B. Burket

Priscilla Chapin



About Off Campus Writers Workshop

Off Campus Writers Workshop is Metro Chicago's Premier Writing Group and the longest continuously running program of its type in the United States.

It was founded in 1946 by a dozen wives of Northwestern professors who sought to establish a haven for themselves to enjoy communal writing and socialization separate from their husbands' work interests.

Many of the founding members were accomplished journalists, short story writers, memoirists, and essayists, while others wrote purely for personal pleasure. Each desired to build upon and improve their craft. Rita Turow, an accomplished writer in her own right, and mother of Scott Turow, the *New York Times* best-selling mystery author, was one of OCWW's founding members.

OCWW offers author/teacher-led instructional writing workshops on Thursdays from September through May. Most sessions are held in the morning at the Winnetka Community House, 620 Lincoln Avenue, Winnetka, Illinois, from 9:30 am to noon. OCWW also conducts some evening sessions at alternate locations.

Summer programming is limited to members only and consists of informal "prompt" and "critique" sessions.

OCWW speakers address writers on topics ranging from craft, to publishing options, to the business of writing. Many of our speakers offer professional manuscript critiques for a nominal fee. Members and guests can achieve their individual writing goals while enjoying the camaraderie and support of fellow writers. The organization's writing programs serve writers of all genres and all levels of accomplishment, from those just learning the craft to published authors of many books.

Learn more about OCWW at our web site, <https://ocww.info/>.



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Foreword

In the early days of 2013, the Chicago Writers Association recognized a collaborative novel written by a class of high school seniors as its book of the year in the Indie fiction category.

Thirty Days to Empathy is believed to have been the first-ever collaborative novel written by high schoolers, and it was the first such book to be honored by CWA. It tells the story of a brilliant and arrogant high school senior who is challenged by the only teacher he respects to develop a little empathy for his classmates, some of whom must overcome severe challenges just to get to school each day. Through a bit of magical realism, the student subsequently awakens each day thereafter in the body of a different classmate and spends a day living that classmate's life.

One of the judges who read *Thirty Days to Empathy* was Renee James, a member of the Off Campus Writers Workshop. James found the novel powerfully moving and has recommended it to many friends and colleagues in the years since. James works with OCWW's Susan Levi to recruit and schedule the group's weekly lectures on creative writing, and they discussed approaching Jay Rehak, the Chicago public school teacher who spearheaded the *Empathy* project, to lead an OCWW team in a collaborative novel venture. They brought the idea to the OCWW board, which approved it, and here we are.

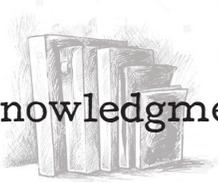
Jay Rehak's impressive biography appears elsewhere in this volume, but suffice it to say, he has literally written the book on collaborative novel writing: *How to Write a Class-Sourced Novel* by Jay Rehak is available on Amazon.

While Jay's inspiration originally focused on high school students, the concept proved popular and fulfilling for the adult writers who populate the Off Campus Writers Workshop. In this, our first such project, twenty-five

members stepped forward to make the commitment to this project. Not a single one dropped out. No one missed a deadline. The enthusiasm for the project has been high from the start.

Our twenty-five authors comprise a full range of fiction-writing experience. Our numbers include everything from award-winning authors with many publishing credits to those who have finally found moments in their demanding lives to begin learning the arts of story-telling and creative writing. Our stories deal with the kind of conflicts that help to shape a life. Some are dark, some triumphant, but they are as varied as the authors themselves.

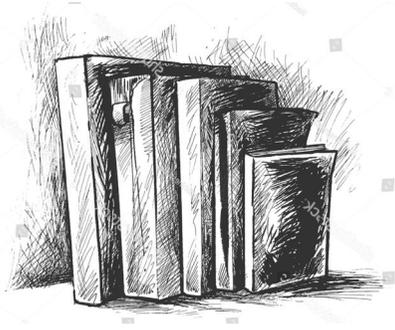
Along with our mentor, editor, and leader, Jay Rehak, all twenty-five of us invite you into the pages of *A Reason to Be Here*. We hope you enjoy our stories.



Acknowledgments

Books like this aren't possible without help from many volunteers. In addition to the people who authored pieces for *A Reason to Be Here*, we thank those who stepped forward to do the grunt work involved in publication: Jay Rehak, for his brilliant editing of every story; Renee James, for her initial edits on every story; Fred Fitzsimmons, for his research of OCWW's founders and book launch planning; Lise Marinelli and Dawn Wiebe of Windy City Publishers, for producing this book; Della Leavitt, Thomas Sundell, Emmet Hirsch, Melissa Weidner, and Tonya Coats, for proofreading our breathless prose; Jason Lavicky, for his help with production oversight; Hollie Smurthwaite, for her research on titles and cover images for the book; and Paco Aramburu, for his cover ideas and book launch planning.

The authors of Off Campus Writers Workshop would especially like to thank the many dozens of brilliant teachers and authors who have shared their time and expertise with us for the past seventy-three years.



Dr. Edgar Hochstein

by Emmet Hirsch

The brilliant and arrogant Hochstein isn't all
he appears to be.

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More than an hour had passed since the award ceremony ended, and still the old woman found the energy to engage each needy soul clamoring for her attention. *Should I just let her be?* Jennifer Mason mused. *No way.* Not after driving all the way from Iowa City, not after staying in a hotel that was too expensive by half because it was around the corner from the conference center, and not now that her turn had finally arrived.

Half a dozen people crowded Alice Bainbridge's table. Jennifer was certain it was as clear to all of them as it was to her, that after an hour creeping forward half a step at a time she had earned her place as next in line. She stepped forward and opened her mouth to issue the salutation she had been rehearsing since the eastbound entrance ramp on I-80.

But what was this? The man standing to her immediate left moved forward at the very same moment!

What an ass! She jostled him to regain her position, but he had already commanded Alice Bainbridge's attention, a charlatan in a two-hundred dollar tie and two-thousand dollar suit. A Rolex rattled conspicuously on his left wrist as he reached over the table to seize Alice's right hand in both of his. Jennifer glared at him. His brows were raised as though in perpetual surprise, an unmistakable sign of a lift. Perfectly aligned veneers, so radiant they might have ruptured the old woman's cataracts, were perched in a too-wide grin. And before Jennifer could open her mouth in protest, he opened his.

"Hello, Ms. Bainbridge, my name is Dr. Edgar Hochstein."

What kind of a person introduces himself to a stranger as "Doctor so-and-so?"

Alice squinted at the doctor through her thick lenses, no doubt bewildered by the sudden materialization of this mannequin out of thin air.

Jennifer fumed. *What an outrage!* Alice Bainbridge should not be forced into prolonged exposure to this Dr. Homberg or Huckleberry or whatever-his-name-was. He hadn't come to share anything meaningful. He was seeking to supplement an overabundance of self-importance with a little more validation from the great novelist.

Alice spoke softly. "Thank you for coming to see me..." she began.

The doctor interjected, "I am a full professor at Northwestern University Medical School and have been listed fifteen consecutive years in *Chicago's Top Doctors*. I hold three U.S. patents and have over one hundred fifty scientific publications in leading plastic surgery journals."

What breathtaking arrogance this Doctor Hoggleton possesses!

"How nice for you, Doctor Hinklestein."

Hah! Vindication! The legendary author was obviously irritated. Not only that, but Alice Bainbridge and Jennifer Mason were revealed to be sisters in derision. They had chosen the same subtle and ironic literary device, the mangling of the interloper's name, to express their disdain!

Alice ran her hand over her forehead and closed her eyes, an unmistakable demonstration of her fatigue. When she opened them the man was still there.

Why am I not surprised that he can't take the hint that it's time to leave her alone? Evidently, the good Doctor Humperdinck had an abundance of patience to call upon in the service of his vanity. Jennifer doubted he waited for much else.

"Is there something you would like to tell me?" Alice asked.

He swallowed hard but didn't respond.

"Doctor?"

Still hopeful, the poor darling!

After another pause he spoke: "I thought you might be interested in hearing how all that success is insufficient compensation for my failure of thirty-five years ago."

Alice was quiet.

Jennifer held her breath.

“I graduated high school as valedictorian and was captain of the math team. I was popular and even, believe it or not, had a pretty girlfriend.”

Oh, we believe it!

“Everything I set out to do came easily to me. And everyone told me, wherever I went and whatever I did, that I was a leader. So I volunteered for the Marines. I knew serving in the military would be challenging, but I was woefully unprepared for what happened. Everything I tried fell apart for me. I couldn’t march in time...couldn’t even swing my arms in rhythm with my own feet. In training I couldn’t disassemble and assemble my weapon like the other soldiers. I got disoriented on field exercises and found myself facing in the wrong direction. I had an accidental rifle discharge that killed a goose in flight. Soon I was the laughingstock of the company.”

He grimaced and his eyes welled up.

“The other soldiers tormented me. They called me a...a...fag, and accosted me in the shower with words and acts that I couldn’t bring myself to say out loud even if you asked me to. My intelligence, my verbal skills, all the things I had previously relied upon, were of absolutely no use to me. Had I been a street-fighter I might have made it, but I wasn’t, and it didn’t take long for hurtful words to be augmented with fists and kicks. The bullies who were atop the social hierarchy in that setting, like alpha wolves, could smell weakness. The other soldiers feared them, and no one came to my defense. Not a single one.

“Anyway, on April 18, 1983, I was stationed at the U.S. embassy in Beirut, one week before I was to return Stateside for discharge, the most miserable period of my life finally approaching its end. I was standing guard outside the front entrance when a suicide bomber detonated a van packed with TNT and ball bearings. It was as if the whole world had suddenly turned to dust. I was struck blind and deaf for I don’t know how long, probably half a minute, but it seemed like hours. When my sight came back to me, the first thing I saw was the body of the soldier who had been standing two feet away from me outside the embassy door. His head had been blown fifty meters away and wasn’t recovered until the following day. He was one of sixty-three people killed. I had been shielded by a building column. It was a miracle I was spared.”

Alice continued to gaze at him in silence. When he hesitated, both Alice and Jennifer nodded.

“I came to my senses pretty quick and understood what had happened. Some of the wounded were screaming and others silently dying all around me. I had been taught a bit of first aid, and I knew that I could start to help save some of them. Instead, I ran.” He gulped. “I was afraid the building would collapse onto us, so I headed out into the city. People were streaming toward me—firemen, American and Lebanese and UN soldiers, regular citizens, all coming to help, and I was hobbling as fast as I could in the opposite direction. I didn’t realize until later that a piece of shrapnel had shredded my right quadriceps, but I didn’t feel the pain and the bleeding wasn’t too bad.

“At one point an officer—I think he was a lieutenant colonel—yelled at me as he ran toward the destruction: ‘Where are you going, soldier? About face, and do your duty!’

“I ignored him and staggered away, crouching behind some cars that had been upended like matchboxes by the blast. Finally, I stopped shaking enough to stand, and I returned to the embassy. In the confusion no one saw me crawl to the spot in the rubble where I had been positioned, and there I waited to be rescued and treated for my injury.

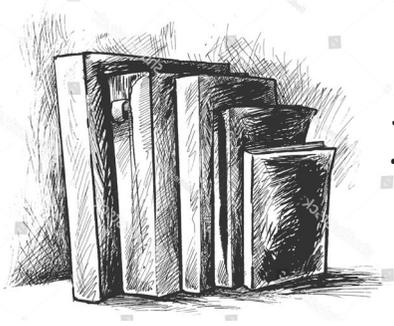
“After rehab I was honorably discharged and awarded a Purple Heart, an award I can’t even bear to look at. I decided to become a doctor, but the truth is, it wasn’t to make amends for what I had done—it was to prove to myself that I was more than a coward and a failure. Once I was back in school, the old confidence and success slowly returned. I graduated at the top of my class and had my choice of the best residencies. And I have already shared with you a short version of my résumé since then.

“But it’s done no good. It’s all a sham. I am, in fact, a coward and a failure, a divorced plastic surgeon whose kids won’t talk to him, a man with no friends, lots of material things and not a single possession worth having.”

Jennifer felt like she hadn’t breathed in minutes. Alice stared at the man and then heaved a deep sigh. Finally, she said, her ancient voice quavering: “What did you say your name was?”

EMMET HIRSCH

...is an obstetrician-gynecologist and research scientist in Evanston, Illinois, and a Clinical Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Chicago. He is author of the novel *The Education of Doctor Montefiore*.



Persistence of Memory

by Joan Naper

Kathy's childhood friendships come alive
in her stories.

JAY C. REHAK

...created the storyline for *A Reason to Be Here*. He is the co-author of numerous crowd source novels including: *30 Days to Empathy* the world's first high school class sourced novel. His comedic plays have been produced around the world; his *10 Short Plays You Need to Read Before You Die* is available on Amazon or by visiting www.sidelineinkpublishing.com. Jay is currently writing *Sideline & Company* the third novel in his middle grade *Sideline* series. He invites everyone to visit his website www.laugh saver.com and record a bit of their laughter.