

A few days ago a writer came to my door to talk about a story he's perfecting. After our discussion of the work, as a regular reader of State of the Art he made some suggestions of how I could improve the column. I realized that he didn't understand the column's mandate. I've clarified this before, but I'll do it again. When--ten years ago this month--the first editor of the Salon asked me to write a column titled State of the Art, I wrote a few to show him what I thought it could be. It definitely was not to be a column of reviews. I certainly would never have agreed to that. For one thing, I couldn't write reviews of visual art, music, crafts, or poetry because I don't know enough about the subjects, but I do love learning about them. The only art I'm an expert on in any way is prose writing.

I thought however that I could write, as honestly as possible, about my experience in these arts. "State of the Art" evolved into "My Life in New Brunswick Arts." I am, in the original sense of the words, an amateur—from the Latin, a lover of the arts--; and an aficionado— from the Spanish, inspiring affection.

My friend suggested I should be more critical, less sunny. But I usually ignore what I don't like, believing that there's enough negativity in the world.

Coincidentally a few days later another reader of the column said to Stephen May that Nancy Bauer sure liked his work. Stephen wondered if this was a complaint about my favouritism. Maybe I do write about his paintings too much, but he is a big part of my life in the arts. He visits me frequently, we talk about art incessantly, I've read many versions of his arts manifesto, I've nine of his works on my walls, he was the best man at my son's wedding, he's my granddaughter's godfather. The first Stephen May I owned is a self-portrait, in payment for my babysitting his first born child for 53 hours 31 years ago. I'm hoping I can understand why he thinks one of his paintings is more successful than another, even why he likes one patch on a painting.

A year ago a stranger, Chuck Bowie, brought me a copy of his first novel, *Three Wrongs*, along with Christmas cookies he'd made. We talked about creating. I wrote about the novel and the talk. I also ate the cookies. Later I bought a copy of the second novel in the series and will buy his third one, *Steal It All*, when it comes out in a few days. We became friends. I usually buy my own copies of books, pay for my own tickets to plays, concerts, and don't require people to bring me cookies to persuade me to write about their work. I'm not in the bribery business although I suppose, to be above reproach, when a handsome young man came to my door bearing cookies, I should have turned him away.

I would nevertheless like suggestions on how to improve. I do like to get emails, letters, phone calls or off-the-cuff comments when I am out and about, any response that indicates I'm not writing into a void.

I was reassured by a book my son recommended *Why Write: A Master Class on the Art of Writing and Why it Matters* by Mark Edmundson. It's probably because I agree with so much of what Edmundson says that I like it so much. He writes, "But maybe the best thing about writing in old age is that you can write as yourself....Old age is as Schopenhauer and others have told us the time of self-acceptance. We've become who we are going to be and that's pretty much that." Over the ten years, I've become more relaxed in writing as myself, in using the personal pronoun. I'm not quite as worried when I push the "send" button. After the death of my husband, I ceased to become a part of someone else. I did love being "no more twain, but one flesh", but gradually I have accepted my solitary self.

Edmundson says, "The writer who seeks personal truth almost always seeks something along with it. He seeks something that might be called a writer's beauty. By that I mean he not only wants to unfold his

vision—his truth—but to convey the *feelings* that are part of the seeing the world as he does. He is not detached but immersed, not authoritative but questing, not godly but human, as the sage says, all too human.” This expresses so precisely what I wish I could do. The columns are like weekly journals, I’ve come to realize.

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My column buddy has broken her shoulder; get well soon, Millie Yeomans. I miss your messages of encouragement.