

The Portal

A cool collection of short stories and poems.



Note: A nice comment about one of our regular Portal writers.

I often go to the South Regional/ Broward College Library to borrow books or attend computer classes. I picked up "THE PORTAL" pamphlet, dated March 2014 this week.

After reading all the stories, I felt that "BROTHERS" by Rick Weber on page 3 was very interesting and well written. He has a talent with writing that made me feel that this story was true life, not fiction.

Let him know that he can become a great, professional writer. He is very talented.

Lorraine F.



**Mochilla
By Rick Weber**

I heard the doorbell and got up from my chair in the parlor to answer it. The house keeper was out grocery

shopping and I was home alone. I had just moved into my son's house after my wife died and was still getting used to things. My son, Bill, and his wife, Ann, both told me that I was getting too old to be on our ranch alone outside of Sacramento. They told me that there was plenty of room for me in their big Victorian house in the part of San Francisco called Pacific Heights. Bill and Ann had the place built after their old house burned down in the 1906 earthquake. Their four kids, my grandchildren were now all grown up and on their own.

The doorbell kept ringing and ringing. This was a new-fangled device which Ann had to have when they built their new house and got on my nerves since I moved in with them. Finally, I made it to the door and saw a Western Union delivery boy who had a telegram for Bill. I tipped the young man a nickel and placed the telegram on the table in the foyer where the mail went. I figured Bill would open it when he got home from his banking job at Wells Fargo.

I made it back to my overstuffed chair in the parlor and sat down. Seeing the Western Union boy made me think of my own, if you want to call it, misspent youth. It also reminded me all the times my grandchildren begged me to write down my exploits. I figured now was the time so I have gone over to the writing table on the other side of the room and I am putting down my story. The house is quiet and I have chance to concentrate. Chances are if you are reading this, you are some kin to me whom I never met, a descendent if you will. I made up some rules when I wrote this but we can get to that later.

About my younger years, I remember reading that poster outside the hotel in Carson City. "WANTED: YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS not over eighteen. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25.00 per week. Apply Pony Express Stables...." The poster also said something about getting from Saint Joseph to California in ten days or less. I was an orphan. \$25.00 a week was a lot more than I

was making as a ranch hand. I made my way to the stables and put in for the job. I was fourteen and just over a hundred pounds soaking wet. I was told I was the type of person they were looking for. I knew that. I had no ties.

I came out to what was the western part of the Utah Territory from Ohio with my father about a couple of years earlier. My father had visions of striking it rich in the Comstock Lode like the folks did at Sutter's mill a decade earlier. My mother died in childbirth along with my little brother when I was ten. My father was never quite right after that. When the news of the silver strike made it back east, my father decided it was time for us to go out there and stake our claim. There was just the two of us. I was a smart kid and had just finished the eighth grade a year early. It was now my time to go out and work. I wanted to be a carpenter just like my father. I liked helping him on his jobs when I was not in school, but the move out west changed that.

When we got to what would be later known as Nevada, most of the paying claims had been staked out already but we found work in the mines. This did not last long. My father was killed when a mine shaft caved in. His body, along with some others, was trapped in the shaft and never recovered. It was good in a way because I couldn't afford to bury him properly. I lost any desire I had to work in the mines. I wanted to be outside. I wanted to be free. I worked on a ranch for a while and learned how to ride horses and rope cattle real well. On a trip with the ranch foreman to Carson City to look at some new horses, I saw the poster and knew that it was the job for me.

Three men, William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William Waddell, formed The Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company which made the promise to get the mail to California in ten days or less from St. Joseph, Missouri. They based this on using a series of riders going at full gallop to relay stations ten miles apart where the rider changed

horses only taking the “Mochila” which held the mail with him on the next leg of the run. After riding seventy-five to a hundred miles, the rider would hand the Mochila off to the next rider who would ride the next seventy five miles or so to the next home station where another rider would take over. This ritual would continue until the Mochila reached Sacramento its next to final stop.

I was sent out along the trail in Nevada to help finish building the relay stations. When everything was set up, I was assigned to the Buckland’s Station. On April 3, 1860, the first westbound Pony Express mail was sent from St. Joe and the mail made it to its ultimate destination of San Francisco on April 14th. I don’t know what day it was on that first relay. I got the Mochila from Deadeye Dick at the Buckland’s Station and rode like hell west. It was near dark when I started. That didn’t matter. It was a non-stop relay, twenty-four hours a day. We had to take an oath to the company that as Pony Express Messengers we would not curse, get drunk, gamble, or abuse animals. To those of us that rode we only had one code, “The mail must get through.” I was glad that I help build the relay stations because I knew that I wouldn’t get lost.

It was April. The weather was not too bad, but going through the mountains at night was another matter. At first, the going was easy, but as nightfall set in, the way became darker. A full moon helped light the way. I kept the horse at a steady gait and pushed on. I was able to get to Miller’s Station on schedule. On the way in I blew my bugle to let the station master know to get my next horse ready. I hopped off the first horse and on to the second one without even thanking the tender who had the horse ready for me. I made it to Spafford Hall’s Station in Dayton for my next horse. Again, I blew the bugle to let them know I was coming and the horse was ready for me just like it was when at Miller’s Station. The changes became rote. I spoke not a word to anyone. I jumped on to the fresh steed and pushed on galloping through the

darkness with the speed of a lightning bolt. I was on my way now to Carson City. In front of the hotel where the relay station was located, I found my next horse waiting. I moved swiftly after jumping off the last horse to continue the next leg of the trip to the Van Sickles’ Station for my final horse change. It was almost daybreak when I rode into Friday’s Station. I was so tired from riding all night that I don’t remember who I handed off the Mochila to. All I remember was falling onto a cot at the station and sleeping until almost nightfall.

When the Pony Express first started, it was once a week but later it became twice a week. The company wanted us to wear red shirts with blue pants when we rode, but that fell quickly by the wayside. For one thing, riding at all hours of the day through mountains and deserts was hard enough without being becoming a target for warriors with whom we had no gripe. I just wore the Pony Express Messenger badge pinned on my shirt and covered by my coat.

In May, some men on their way to Pyramid Lake to fight the Indians absconded with horses from the Buckland’s Station. A few days later, the survivors made their way back. That’s when Fort Churchill was built and became our new station. To be honest, the entire time I rode that route, I never encountered a hostile Indian or for that matter anyone who was looking for a fight.

People heard about the Pony Express or the Pony, as we called it, and stories went around about how brave and daring we were. Much of this came about long after the Pony ceased to exist. I don’t how the other riders felt about it, but I was more scared than brave, more by the bad weather encountered on the rides than by the thoughts of Indians waiting to ambush me. Later, when I was a lot older and had both a family and ranch to tend to, I heard some stories which I knew to be pure poppycock. I guess we could thank Buffalo Bill Cody for most of this. As the recruitment poster

laid it out, we were not more than kids but we had to grow up quick.

For those who don’t know, the Pony Express didn’t last all that long. I remember being in that first relay in 1860 as I told you already and I also remember being around in October of 1861 when the company folded. That’s when the transcontinental telegraph line was finished, and the need for our service over. America had a civil war on its hands. From what I’ve been told during that short time, we kept California, the only state west of Missouri, connected to the east and to the Union. I didn’t know much about the Civil War when it was going on, but learned a lot about it later after it was long over. When I rode for the Pony, the Civil War was only getting started and my only interest was keeping food in my belly.

Twenty-five dollars a week was a lot of money for anyone at that time, especially for young men our ages. Getting paid started out all right but as time went on, the Central Overland California and Pike’s Peak Express Company became slow to pay us our wages. The company was floundering almost from the beginning but we kept the mail going through. Heck, I was young, single, and didn’t need much except a roof over my head which the company did provide even when we didn’t get paid. To be clear about this the accommodations were less than Spartan, and the food was terrible to say the least. I made some good friends during that time, but when we went our separate ways after the company folded, none of us stayed in touch with each other. We all moved on and started new lives.

Over the years, a lot of people asked me about the Mochila. Most thought it was a knapsack which the riders wore because Mochila in Spanish means a backpack. It was actually a leather cover with four “cantinas” where the mail was stored which went over the saddle on the horse’s back, a type of saddle bag. The cantinas were padlocked and only the station masters in Sacramento and

St. Joe had the keys to them. This kept the mail secure en route. Weight was an issue because the more you put on the horse the harder it had to work. Everything was designed to be light weight, even the saddle, which was made by Israel Landis. The Mochila, the saddle, and the rest of the tack came only to about thirteen pounds. This is also why they only sought “young, skinny, wiry fellows” for the job.

My grandchildren, when they were young, always wanted to hear stories about the Pony Express. They wanted to know how many shoot outs I got into with the Indians and on more than one occasion asked if I ever killed any of them. They were always disappointed when I told them I never killed anyone. However they were very interested when I told them about the hardships I had riding on the Central Overland Route, especially the time when I had to get off my horse and lead him down a five mile stretch through the foot hills outside of Carson City during a blinding snow storm. I got a good case of frostbite on both of my feet but the mail did get through. I did not tell them that some of my friends were not as lucky as me and did have some scrapes with the Indians.

We didn't have the firepower or resources with us to hold off any Indian attack. The company expected that we could outride the Indians on our horses to get us past any attack. As far as guns, I heard stories about riders carrying a rifle and two pistols on their rides. I never saw anyone do that. I carried a model 1851 .36 caliber Navy Colt revolver with an extra loaded cylinder but never had an occasion to use it. I did carry a knife in a sheath at my side but that was more of a tool used most often to get me and my horse untangled from brush along the way. I did hear a few stories from my friends about outrunning the Indians. They were glad we had fast horses and that the Indians only had bows and arrows.

I don't mean to downplay the dangers or the things that happened when the Pony was operating. In May

and June of 1860, the Paiute Indian tribe started a war in Nevada. This was when the men I told you about before who took horses from the Buckland Station to fight the Indians at Pyramid Lake. The Pony Express was a target of some of the Indian attacks. Seven stations were raided and sixteen employees had been killed. It was during this time that Pony Bob Haslam made his famous ride. He set out east from Friday's Station en route to Buckland's Station. When he got there, he found his relief rider to be too scared to do his duty so Bob continued on to Smith's Creek Station where after only nine hours of rest he took the westbound leg back to Buckland's.

At the Cold Springs' swing station, he found out that the station manager had been killed and the horses run off by the Indians. He continued on and got chased by the Indians who shot arrows at him. One went through his jaw and took out three of his teeth but he still continued on even though he was wounded. He made it to the Buckland's Station, a 380 mile round trip, the longest ride in the history of the Pony Express. I had been at Friday's Station on a run at the time and was not there when Pony Bob came in. After that, for a short while, service was suspended until the war with the Paiutes was resolved. All of this having been said, these were the exceptions not the routine things we had to contend with which were bad weather and boredom from being in the saddle for over ten hours at a crack.

With the Indians somewhat under control, we got back to doing our runs between the stations in the Nevada Territory. I've been asked many times why we did it besides for the money. To be honest, it gave me a sense of purpose. We were doing something important. One of the first things carried out west by the Pony Express was a copy of President Lincoln's inauguration address. People paid five dollars per half ounce to send their mail by Pony Express when it started out. To me, if someone was willing to pay that kind of money to get a letter to

someone on the other side of the country quickly, it was important enough for me to get that job done. I was told more than once that we were heroes, but I didn't feel like one. I was just doing a job to the best of my ability. However, the life lessons I learned as a rider have helped me out ever since.

Sometimes, I get some practical questions about how things were set up in the Pony Express. Everyone knows that we rode like hell in all kinds of weather and had only a couple of minutes to change horses at the swing stations before riding like mad to the next station. Among the questions I get are about the riders, the horses, and the stations. During the entire time the Pony operated over 180 men were riders, no women. At any given time 80 riders were in active service of the company. About 160 stations existed. Most were swing stations where riders changed horses. Others, about 50, were home stations where riders would pass on the Mochila to the next rider and where room and board were provided between runs. Although Sacramento was the western terminus of the Pony Express, the mail actually was carried on to San Francisco by steamboat. Mr. Majors, one of the company founders, got a GOOD 400 horses for use in the Pony Express, from “California Horses” to mustangs. The only requirement was that they had to be fast. The horses each averaged ten miles an hour on their respective legs of the run. I would swear on my old Bible, if I ever found it, that they were the fastest horses I ever rode.

There is no written history that I know of for the C.O.C. & P.P. Express. Most of it is by what you call oral history, and I call folklore, not really reliable stuff. What I told you so far is one hundred percent gospel truth. We weren't around long enough to make any real history. There weren't a whole lot of people living out west at the time. The biggest town west of St. Louis was San Francisco and St. Joe was then the end of the line for the railroad. The distance between Missouri and

California was what everyone called “wide open spaces”.

Because of the problems with the Indians around the time of Pony Bob’s big ride, Buckland’s Station was closed with the building of Fort Churchill nearby. I was moved to Friday’s Station near the border with California and was there until we stopped riding. My normal run took me from Friday’s Station to Sportsman’s Hall in California but I did take an occasional run to Fort Churchill. It was still some rough riding into California, but I did not have to worry about the Indians like I did when I first started out at Buckland’s Station.

The runs to Sportsman’s Hall were rough during that winter of 1860 to 1861 and I’m glad that it was the only winter I had to ride for the Pony. There was a lot of snow that winter and I already mentioned the blinding snowstorm where I had to lead my horse just outside of Carson City on my way back from one of my occasional runs from Fort Churchill. I don’t know which was worse, the mountains or the snow. The way down through the mountains was treacherous and I could not see where I was going. That’s when I got off the horse and led him down the trail. When I got to Friday’s Station two hours behind schedule, the station manager asked me what took so long even though the snow was coming down in buckets around us. I just handed off the Mochila to the next rider and went into the station building to get warm and look at the frostbite on my feet.

It all seemed like a flash because I don’t remember how fast that time went. Maybe, it was because of I spent most of it in the saddle riding as fast as the wind. It was not too bad when the service was once a week but after it went to twice a week, it was tougher. Two rides a week may not sound like much to the average person, but when each one is over seventy-five miles long and your pushing a horse ten miles an hour over some treacherous terrain, that’s a lot. My back and my butt still ache when I think about it. I

was always eager to go when I grabbed the Mochila from the rider I was relieving, but by the time I was halfway to the next home station, I was beat. It always seemed that the last twenty miles were the toughest. Keeping the horse at a steady gait was always hardest after I left my last swing station on the trip. On those final legs the only things I could think about were getting something to eat and getting some sleep.

I also get asked a lot about what I did with the money I made from the Pony Express. The truth is that it started out all right but as the company’s money problems grew C.O.C. & P.P. Express then became known as Clean Out of Cash and Pay Poor Express. I was too young to spend my pay on whiskey and women in the cat houses but smart enough to know I needed a nest egg. I put some money aside when times were good, which got me through those times when I didn’t get paid. I was able to get some runs to Sacramento when Sportsman’s Hall was short on riders. On one of those occasions, I opened up an account at a local bank which kept me from wasting my money or loaning it to some of my friends. Safe to say, I had something to fall back on when the Pony Express folded. I also found a place to set down my roots in California.

Another thing that comes up from time to time is the Bible. Besides us taking an oath not to gamble, curse, or abuse animals, Mr. Majors made sure that all of the riders had a small specially leather bound Bibles with “Presented by Russell, Majors & Waddell - 1858” imprinted in gold on the cover. I don’t know about Mr. Russell or Mr. Waddell, but Mr. Majors was a religious man. He had previously given out Bibles to all of the wagon crews in their freight companies before they founded the Pony Express. In addition to the things we promised not to do in our oath, Mr. Majors considered Sunday, the Sabbath, a day of rest and forbade us from riding on Sundays. Mr. Majors knew the freight

business from the ground up. In fact, he helped drive the first wagons out west to supply the forts for the Army. He was a hands-on boss and was not afraid to get his hands dirty. His men respected him so when they rested on Sundays, he led them in prayer. To make sure that no one was left out, he had Bibles for everyone. This is why the date 1858 was on the cover. He even made sure he had an ample supply for future employees including us, the riders.

As far as us riding on Sundays, I handled my fair share of runs on the Sabbath because our code was still, “The mail must get through.” I don’t know whatever happened to my Bible. The same I can say for the bugle. It was a long, long, time ago. . I never missed the Bible because I never used it. No one ever got fired for carrying a Mochila on Sunday because the job demanded it. To clarify the results of our pledge to Mr. Majors, every one of us cursed. The hours we spent in the saddle would have pushed a saint to use profanity. Some of us gambled but none of us abused our animals. The horses were our livelihood.

Our loyalty to getting our jobs done made us, the Pony Express riders, stand out. Only twice while the Pony Express was operating did the mail not go through. In the first case, the rider was being chased by the Indians. This was during the war with the Paiutes in May of 1860. The rider came into a station without the Mochila, which was lost in the pursuit and not recovered. The second time was in August of 1860 when a horse arrived at a station without a rider and the Mochila. The best guess was that for an unknown reason, the horse threw the rider and the Mochila off its back. Neither the rider nor the Mochila were ever found.

The end came as quickly as the beginning. In October of 1861 the transcontinental telegraph was completed. The country was finally connected from coast to coast and our services were no longer needed, and it was then that the company announced the closure of the Pony Express. In

November of 1861, the last Mochila arrived in San Francisco and with that the end of a very short era which I was proud to be a part of. I later found out that the Pony Express actually lost a lot of money, over \$700,000 and was deemed by some to be a failed business venture. Others credit it with keeping California in the Union during the Civil War, which was then the attention of a divided nation. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad was completed bringing the mail from back east in a more efficient, regular manner than the Pony ever could have.

As for me, I got a job on a ranch in the Sacramento Valley after the Pony folded. The ranch owner saw that I was a good, reliable worker. I eventually became his foreman and had the privilege of marrying his daughter, Sadie, whom I deeply miss since she passed away a few years back. We sold the ranch last year and maybe it was for the best. The times changed. People changed. My children have their own lives, and I am proud of them. I don't dwell on the past but I do take stock of what I learned from it. I was an "expert" rider but I don't recall much about risking death daily. I do remember those days alone riding along the trail sitting on the Mochila in the saddle going as fast as conditions would allow. The hardships I endured at that time I found out to be a part of life. Had I not answered that notice looking for "young, skinny, wiry fellows", I never would have accomplished all that I had done. The Mochila for me was not just a saddle bag of mail. It carried me from being an orphan to being a successful responsible person. I learned that I had to come through.

My journey is over. Regarding my rules, I wrote this story and sealed it in an envelope with my specific instructions that it be opened AFTER my last will and testament was read as a postscript to my passing. This era is over save for the lessons of life passed on like the Mochila and this story which you just read. If you ever get a chance to go by our family plot at Old City

Cemetery in Sacramento, you will have no problem finding my grave because the epitaph on my headstone only has one word below my name and the date I died: MOCHILA.



Teddy Could Talk By Rick Weber

Dandie Dinmont is the only dog breed named for a fictional character found in Sir Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering*. Our Dandie's name was Teddy. I was at work when my wife and daughter called to tell me they found a dog they liked a lot while browsing at a pet shop.

I was busy and told them I had to leave the office for a while. I asked them to hold off so we could talk about it since we already had a dog, a Maltese named Crystal. When I got back to the office our secretary told me, "Rick, they bought the dog."

I got home that evening to find a puppy with a black over brown hairy coat. I could tell by Crystal's body language that she was not up to sharing her space with another canine, but Teddy warmed our hearts quickly becoming a member of the family.

Teddy always barked when something was not right. When he was very young he fell into our swimming pool but, I was there to rescue him and dry him off. This experience had its effect on Teddy. After that, when any of us were in the pool, he would run anxiously around it barking loudly as if he was saying, "Get out! Get out! Get

out!" When we complied with his demand, he stopped barking and was visibly pleased to see that we were safe.

On one occasion, after my wife picked me up at the airport following a work trip, we went to our local pet salon where Teddy and Crystal were being groomed. We were led to the back of the shop to get them. I saw Teddy was grumpy lying flat on the floor of the pet cage, but he perked up when saw us. When he got out of confinement, he began barking in a staccato tone trying to say, "Something's wrong" repeatedly, while the salon's owner directed me to a cage saying, "There's Crystal. She's ready." While Teddy protested, I went to the cage, and I saw a Maltese cowering at the back of it. I told the proprietor, "This is not Crystal." The store owner assured me that this dog was our Maltese. I then responded, "Crystal is a female, and this dog is a male." My wife and the shopkeeper both gasped.

After a few calls by the store owner, an au pair, who worked for the other dog's owners, brought Crystal, nonplussed by the event, back to the salon. Upon seeing his "sibling", Teddy sniffed Crystal from nose to tail to make sure she was all right. Crystal was not thrilled by Teddy's "ion scan" and let him know that enough was enough by growling at him. Crystal went home as if nothing happened, but Teddy upon entering the house sauntered to his favorite corner, laid down, and crashed into a deep sleep.

Teddy could communicate, but he was also stoic. One evening after being let outside into the backyard. He dragged himself back to the door unable to move his back legs. A trip to the vet revealed he had a broken back due to a congenital anomaly. After surgery and a period of recuperation, Teddy became his old self. Never once during this ordeal did he ever complain. This was a prelude to what would follow in his life.

Several years later, again through another anomaly, Teddy became blind in one eye. Treatment to the affected

orb did not help, and he lost that eye. This is when we became aware that Teddy was the product of a puppy mill. Undaunted by this setback, Teddy soldered on. In time, he would lose his remaining eye to the same condition. Totally blind, he did not bemoan his situation and was an example to all us. His silence spoke volumes to us. Cancer became his final battle, and the time came for us to say good bye to our stalwart warrior. Crystal had predeceased him by a couple of years. It was bittersweet. His passing left us with a void, but remembering him, he told us what true courage was. We knew that Teddy could talk.



Saab Story By DiVitto Kelly

They say people have love affairs with their cars. No, I'm not trying to sound weird or anything, but car owners can be downright peculiar and passionate about their automobiles, and I was no exception.

My first car purchase ever was a 1974 Saab 99, a tangerine orange beauty I cherished until the bottom fell out. And I mean that literally. The end of the line for my 'orange on wheels' was the bank drive through where is ceremoniously died, the transmission kaput. And after I had made a hefty deposit too! So much for my short-lived prosperity.

I wish it didn't end this way, but after four years of mostly blissful driving, all things must come to an end. The funny part is how I discovered this unique two-door automatic. I had just graduated high school when I was told

by mom and dad it was time to buy my own car. And I didn't blame them. After all, what teenager wants to drive to parties in a Chevy Caprice wagon? That's not cool . . . ever.

I had saved a decent amount of change though a myriad of part-time jobs throughout high school that I seriously started browsing the classifieds in our local fish wrap. I began scrolling through the listings: Honda Civic, Toyota Corolla, Nissan Sentra -- all good cars . . . but boring as all heck. Then I came upon the word . . . Saab. It rolled off my tongue with such mystery.

"Saab?" I asked. "What is this Saab? Not having a clue, I Googled the word . . . Hold on, hold on, this was the 1980's! No, we were still in the stone ages so I researched it the old fashioned way. I asked my dad, who had a friend that owned a newer model. So far, so good was his reply.

My dad followed up with this spirited advice. "What the hell kid, go for it."

Since I didn't have any mechanically inclined friends who knew anything about cars, I forged ahead with my gut feeling. Whatever Saab was, it sounded cool and intriguing so I decided to call the phone number listed. An elderly gentleman answered the phone.

"Hello?" he said, in a gruff voice.

"Uh hi, I'm calling about the car for sale." I did my best to curtail my naivety. This was my first stab at any serious wheeling and dealing.

The man replied it was indeed still for sale. He informed me the car was parked at a gas station in town. I knew the location. I asked a few questions. No hearty interrogating, just the basics: how many miles, auto or stick, recent oil change, did it have a kick-ass stereo system, was it in good running condition, and oh by the way, what the feck is a Saab. Stuff like that.

He informed me the car was in fact, made in Sweden, very reliable with surprisingly few miles for a car already ten years old. So far, so good, with the questioning, I postulated. Then I asked about the color. That's a normal

question to asked, right? Of course it was. The man paused, like I'd asked him something deep and personal.

"Well, it's . . ." He hemmed a little, then a hawed a bunch. "It's orange." The words came out sounding like he'd just sucked on a lemon.

"Orange?" I had to remind myself to be cool and calm, but I'd already blown it -- I was juked. The man sounded relieved that at least one caller didn't heave and abruptly hang up. Apparently, orange was not a popular color to other potential buyers. For me, it was, like totally awesome. I was from Cincinnati, Ohio, born in October -- a month synonymous with changing leaves, pumpkins, and Halloween. And my favorite football team sported those orange and black helmets that glisten in the autumn sun. Very cool.

Normally this would have been a detriment to some, but I jumped at the chance to at least check it out. I knew my cars fairly well, what most models looked like that is, but mechanically I was a Kelly greenhorn. But from the get-go, this car intrigued me. An orange Swedish car, reliable too, but what the hell did it look like?

That evening, it was freezing cold, New Jersey style in mid-February. I pulled up with a friend and there it was, located right next to the air/vacuum machine -- alone. It looked like it'd been banished, or maybe shunned. The car was blanketed in snow. Yet through all the glistening white were glimmers of orange. I got tingles up my spine. I kinda felt like Charlie Brown after he stumbles upon that spindly little Christmas sapling. I think that car needed me.

My friend thought it was butt-ugly. The gas station attendant parroted the same thing as I asked for the keys. For me, it was automotive love at first site. The shape was like an aerodynamic Twinkie. The sloped front end had a slight Ford Edsel appearance -- never a good thing, but this car had a quirkiness I immediately embraced. The hood opened up from the front windshield side with the hinge toward the bumper. And the key ignition? I

hunted around in the most logical of spots (near the steering wheel) only to discover it was nestled right between the front seats. I love quirky.

It didn't start at first. It must have been fifteen degrees out so I wasn't too surprised. The gas station manager was kind enough (and quite quick) to lend us jumper cables. (I think he was especially eager to remove the bright orange blight from his establishment). Five minutes later, it started right up.

I jumped it and got the beastly four-cylinder going, cranking the heat. It handled well coming out of the snow-filled parking lot. I took it down a winding road then uphill before pulling into a freshly plowed empty parking lot. I got out and stood there. I slowly circled the car like a hungry shark, surveying for any possible blemishes, nicks, or dents. All the lights (head, tail and brake) were in fine working order. The horn was tinny and the wipers scraped along the ice on the windshield. I popped the hood. No major ticking, I knew that was a plus. I opened both doors and the trunk. The car was spotlessly clean. I got in and notice a button for heated seats. Heated seats? I pressed the button and lo and behold, heated seats. My chilled rear end was now warm and toasty. For me, that sealed the deal.

The next day I called the gentleman. We negotiated a bit, but I stood firm on my initial offer. I knew this guy wanted to sell, and he knew I was drooling to buy. We worked it out. The Saab was mine!

Dubbed the Bengal mobile by my friends, my Saab and I traveled everywhere: From North Carolina to Massachusetts, from the Jersey Shore to Virginia. And on many side roads less traveled. Maybe it wasn't exactly a babe magnet, but my girlfriend at the time didn't seem to mind. She liked the heated seat thing too.

Unfortunately, as the odometer kept spinning, the miles churning, so did the repair costs. And by the way, repairs were, oh, twice as much as your average car. That big sucking sound was from my dwindling savings

account. I Rope-A-Doped with the repair bills, sucking up the financial beating like Muhammad Ali unique strategy against George Foreman. I got it fixed and continued to drive my orange delight, but with a little less vigor than before. Even the heated seats stopped working after a couple of years, which brings me back to the bank drive through and the transmission. By the way, Ali won that fight in Zaire, the Rumble in the Jungle, but I was down for the count.

Now the thought of coughing up \$900 for a transmission on a car nearly fourteen years old was eating at me. I loved the car, but at some point, you just gotta pull the plug. Well, I finally decided to get it repaired. I had the car towed to Rose City Transmissions.

They had an impeccable reputation. I was unpleasantly ready to bite the bullet, fork over the cash, and drive away semi-smiling, but that's not quite how it worked out. Oh, they worked on it all right, performing a mechanical version of a triple bypass. They worked on that transmission for what felt like a month -- actually twenty-four days, but who was counting. They struggled with my car like it was some alien spacecraft from the outer reaches of the solar system. The mechanic said he'd never experienced anything like it before. They could NOT fix my car.

Eventually, they got the citrus mobile running. It shifted with all the grace and beauty of a drunkard attempting gymnastics, nice and smooth like shark skin. After much inner debate and pondering, I decided it was time. I ended up selling the car for a few hundred bucks, but I was like, totally bummed. In turn, I put a deposit down on another Saab, a much newer maroon turbo-charged four-door 900 model. It was the most comfortable car I'd ever driven. Too bad it was also a total piece of dung. All I can say is I was especially grateful to have purchased an extended warranty which ended up paying for itself four times over. After I sold that two-year nightmare, I came to this conclusion:

No more Swedish cars for me so help me God!

Unfortunately, I didn't heed my own warning. In early 2011, I bought a Volvo C70 convertible. I'd driven minivans for almost ten years straight so I surmised this father of two had earned the right to drive something cool. And for a while, this Swedish silver two-door was the car of my dreams. It had lots of turbo power, full leather interior, and could fit the wife and two kids. It even had a decent-sized trunk. What's not to like? The fun lasted three years before everything started going: the convertible top, air conditioning, power steering, and the CD player. No more kick-ass sound system! At least the heated seats still worked -- but I reside in the Sunshine State so who gives a flying squirrel. I started having Saab flashbacks; that's when I knew it was over.

This time I got out while the getting was good. I traded that burgeoning nightmare for a Subaru, a car company built with an outstanding reputation. No more Swedish cars for me, and this time I really, really mean it, so help me God . . . part II.

One last morsel. What really got me interested in the Subaru brand was the XV Crosstrek. Not only does it come in orange, but deep tangerine, Cincinnati Bengal orange, not that run of the mill, bland Cleveland Brown orange. My children balked profusely, absolutely refusing to be seen in an orange car. According to my son and daughter, 'that color' is only appropriate during Halloween month.

Maybe one of these years I'll have an opportunity to buy another orange car, but I'll need to try a different tactic. Maybe I should just bide my time, wait until the kids leave home for college. I'll browse the Web, Google the words '1974 orange Saab for sale' and see what pops up. Then I'll make a few phone calls while the wife is away. I'll interrogate the sellers with a little more knowledge than I did as a teen and I will get that orange car. Yeah, just like Charlie Brown kicking that darn football.

One of my favorite authors: Avi

By DiVitto Kelly

When I was earning my Master's in Library Science, one of the first assignments I had was to read and critique Juvenile fiction novels. The first book I chose was titled, *Poppy*, by Avi. I thought that was a peculiar name for an author so I decided to do a little research.

The more I read about Avi, the more I was impressed. Here was a writer who overcame a learning disability, flunked a boatload of classes, and yet, persevered. He was also a librarian, which I can identify with. He's written plays, all types of books – from children's picture books to teen novels. Avi is who I aspire to be: a published writer and more.

Edward Irving Wortis may not be a household name, but the name his twin sister gave him at an early age certainly is. Avi, one of the most celebrated children's and young adult authors of the last twentieth century, continues to turn out successful novels, and from a wide range of genres.

Avi, which means "my father" in Hebrew, was born December 23, 1937 in New York, and raised in Brooklyn. His father Joseph was a psychiatrist; his mother Helen, a social worker. They both placed an emphasis on the arts and education, which he credits for perusing a career in education. But becoming a professional writer would not be an easy task for Avi.

Avi wasn't even certain he'd ever become a writer. While his siblings and other relatives, including his great-grandparents and a grandmother became professional writers, Avi struggled in school. Even his parents tried to persuade their son not to pursue a career in writing. **Note:** One of the reasons Avi does not use his family name is because his family discouraged him from becoming a writer.

Avi enjoyed reading as a child, though his writing was nothing short of a disaster. It eventually caused him to flunk out of school. The real reason

behind his poor writing skills was actually due to a dysfunction known as dysgraphia, a marginal impairment that caused Avi's writing abilities to reverse letters and misspell words.

"One of my aunts said I could spell a four-letter word wrong five ways," said Avi.

Even though Avi's writing skills were less than perfect, he persisted. And needless to say, it paid off. After graduating from Elizabeth Irwin High school, Avi attended Antioch University and then the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he received a Bachelor's Degree in History. He later received his Master's Degree there in drama and then earned a Master's Degree in Library Science at Columbia University.

Avi's successful college academic career initially got off to a rough start. Beginning his freshman year, he was so sick of being criticized for his writing skills that he refused to take one English class, yet he continued to read and write avidly. "I didn't know any better," said Avi.

Avi's first taste of success in writing was in college when a play he wrote won a contest and was published in a magazine. Even with this good fortune, Avi admitted that ninety-nine percent of the other plays he wrote weren't very good.

After a host of employment endeavors, Avi landed a job as a librarian, where he would work for 25 years. His first librarian position was at the New York Public Library in the Performing Arts Research Center. After his stint in New York, Avi participated in an exchange program at the Lambeth Public Library in London, England. He later worked at Trenton State College in Trenton, NJ where he was an assistant professor and humanities librarian. Even with these highly professional jobs, there was the continuing urge to become a professional writer.

Still hoping to write the great American novel, Avi had written nearly 800 pages, but to no avail. Avi married Joan Gabriner in 1963 and had two sons. It was at this point that he

stumbled upon writing children's books. His first book, published in 1970, was titled, "Things that Sometimes Happen, a collection of "Very Short Stories for Very Young Readers." It was designed with Avi's young sons in mind. Although Avi focused on children's books for the next few years, it would be historical fiction that would garner public attention and become his trademark.

The first few novels Avi wrote, including *Captain Grey*, *Night Journeys*, and *Encounter at Easton*, were set in colonial America. It was at this point Avi earned a reputation as a historical novelist.

In an interview with Booklist, Avi commented that the research required for historical fiction is rigorous, although he admitted to having an edge: "I was, however, a research librarian for 25 years, so I always have a leg up on finding out things."

The Fighting Ground, written in 1984 and a Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award winner, tells the story of Jonathon, a 13-year old boy who experiences the ravages of the Revolutionary War. The young boy is eager to fight and to thoroughly defeat the enemy. At the end of the novel, young Jonathon soon understands what war means in human terms.

One of the more intriguing novels written by Avi, and one of my personal favorites, was the 1989 novel *The Man Who Was Poe*. In it, Avi intertwined fiction and history on several levels. In the novel, a young boy, Edmund, has recently immigrated to Providence from England with his aunt and twin sister in order to look for his missing mother. When his aunt and sister go missing, Edmund elicits help from a stranger – who just happens to be Edgar Allen Poe (only he uses a different name). Avi portrays the old port city of Providence as a bleak and chaotic world in which compassion and moral order seem to have given way to violence and greed.

On opposite ends of the writing spectrum is Avi's book, *Poppy*, which received a Boston Globe-Horn Book Award in 1996. *Poppy* tells the story of

two deer mice, Poppy and Ragweed. They plan to marry when out of nowhere; the self-proclaimed king of Dimwood Forest, an owl named Mr. Ocax, swoops down and eats Ragweed. Poppy, who escapes, is later asked by her father to request permission from Mr. Ocax to move to New House, an area that has more food for the struggling family. Mr. Ocax refuses, citing Poppy and Ragweed's disobedience; they needed to ask permission to move about the forest.

Mr. Ocax also explains that he is a protector of the deer mice, which Poppy doubts. Poppy suspects there are other reasons why Mr. Ocax wants to keep the mice in one location. The determined Poppy sets out on her own to discover a new home so she can save her family.

With all the endless (and varied) subject matter Avi uses in his many novels, you might suspect he could run out of ideas, or perhaps, encounter the dreaded "writers block." In fact, a common question Avi receives is about writer's block.

In a 2006 interview, he responded by saying, "I don't know why everyone knows about writer's block, but they do." He later added, "Do actors ever get actor's block? Do mailmen ever get mailman's block?"

Avi expanded on the curiosity of the writer's block: "It happens a hundred times a day. Not knowing what to put down for the next sentence is what my life is all about."

And for anyone who thinks writing is an easy and glamorous job, Avi adds, "Writing is hard. And writing very well is very hard. Never believe any writer who suggests otherwise."

When it comes to writing skills, Avi suggests there is a general lack of genuine critiquing by English teachers in schools. He said most times, teachers simply judge a piece as a whole, and do not care to dissect it in parts.

If there is one thing that Avi greatly appreciates about his young audience is the feedback he receives. "Children identify and read better than adults;

they much more become a part of the story. They are loyal and direct," says Avi.

Not many writers are as diversified as Avi. Among the list of genres he has written about are: comedy, fantasy, ghost stories, adventure, mystery, animal tales, short stories, early reader, picture books, and of course, historical fiction.

Incredibly, Avi has published over 50 books and won over 90 awards with his stellar collection of children's and middle grade books. In 2003, Avi won the prestigious Newbery Medal award for "Crispin: A Cross of Lead." He also received two Newbery Honors for *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *Nothing but the Truth*, plus two Horn Book awards, and the O'Dell and Christopher awards.

In his acceptance speech for winning the Newbery Medal award in Toronto in 2003, Avi commented on what it means to be a writer.

"Some of us here are story makers, others are story sharers. One way or another we provide stories for kids that will entertain, move, engage, and teach, stories that say again and again that yes, life may be hard, or funny, or perplexing, always risky, but in the end -- worth the living."

Last fall, I contacted Avi, inquiring if he would be interested in signing my very own worn copy of *The Man Who Was Poe*, a book I've read at least three times and my kids as well. He happily agreed.

I'm very thankful and inspired by Avi, for all his great work, professionalism and inspiration. His writing is clever and cool, mysterious and adventurous. And when it comes to historical fiction, there is no one better.

You are a role model for children everywhere . . . and adults too. Thank you, Avi.



Influence By Jamie White

<http://www.jamiebmusings.webs.com>

Back when I was in school and big bookstores and malls were thriving, I can't even imagine how many hours I spent in them as I searched out the latest Sweet Valley books or Nancy Drews. I was pretty set in my reading for the most part, although there were a couple of other books I'd read here and there.

One day, after hearing about this particular author in school, I decided to check out the book *Remember Me* by Christopher Pike. The book told the tale of a young girl named Shari Cooper who wakes up one morning to discover she'd died the previous evening. She struggles to accept that fact for a little while, failing to even wonder how she happened to end up that way. Once the thought occurs to her, she balances learning about the afterlife with finding out what happened to her.

This book really touched me and resonated with something deep inside, sending me on a spiritual journey as well as delving further into the paranormal genre I'd always loved. After that book, I began to pick up anything with his name on it and found that I really enjoyed them. Some didn't move me as much as the first one I read, but they all cemented my love for the genre I write today.

The interesting thing about his work for me is how he seamlessly weaves spiritual concepts, supernatural creates, and entertaining characters with some occasion history and mythology thrown in. I loved finding out there was an actual Sita, learning about

Eastern concepts of reincarnation and meditation, as well as learning little details about the Holocaust that I was unaware of.

When I started writing short stories and novellas, it wasn't hard to figure out the kind of writer I wanted to be-- I'd already been given a blue print. No matter what other genres I've read since that first Pike book, those will always be my favorites and will always connect me to a part of myself I'm still learning more about each day. Each time I sit down to write I think about what paranormal creatures, new age concepts, and mythology interest me and let that fuel my muse. Hopefully, someone somewhere will read these stories and get the same reaction. It's all any writer can hope for.



**Old Lemon
By Jaime White**

"Damn it!" Sonia pounded the wheel in frustration as she heard the familiar rattle from the engine. Two months and three different mechanics had yet to solve-- or even find -- her problem.

She glanced over her shoulder and sighed in relief at the clear lane beside her. She steered the vehicle to the right and came to a stop on the shoulder. Traffic sped past, causing the tiny car to rock from side to side.

Once she was safely off the road, Sonia cut the engine and reached for the cell sitting next to her. Her hand froze in mid-air as she anticipated the welcome that was sure to follow. She'd already used up all the free calls their roadside assistance plan allowed, so this was going to cost them.

Sonia dialed her husband's number, her foot tapping the whole time. Ring after ring met her ears and she began to fear she was going to be stranded much longer than she thought. Just when she was about to hang up, the ringing stopped and a second of silence made her wonder if the cell had died.

"Hello?"

The voice that could normally calm her nerves only amplified them as she took a deep breath. "Shaun, hi."

Before another word could leave her mouth he sighed and said, "Where are you stuck?"

The reaction wasn't unexpected, but she still took offense. "What makes you think I'm stuck?"

"The fact you've been stranded three times in the past month?"

Sonia harrumphed and answered, "I'm on 95, close to the bridge."

"I'll be there soon."

Sonia could hear the I-told-you-so in his voice, but decided to let it go. "Thanks."

She ended the call and dialed the roadside assistance. To her annoyance, they said it would take about an hour before they could get there, leaving her alone on the side of the road at night. The many cars whizzing by gave her little comfort, as she kept expecting one to side swipe her.

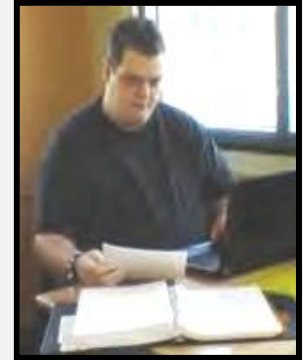
Just when she was beginning to worry he might have had car trouble as well, her husband pulled up behind the car and got out to wait with her. The tow truck arrived shortly after and made quick work of preparing her car for the ride to the repair shop. Shaun and Sonia watched as the truck pulled back onto the road, then climbed back into his vehicle for the ride home.

About a mile down the road, the pair was greeted with flashing lights and some debris from an accident that was mostly cleaned up. Officers milled about while a couple of ambulance workers climbed into the back of their vehicle, pulling the doors closed behind them. A few seconds later, the ambulance sped down the road and

Sonia's body was assaulted with cold chills as they drove by the scene.

"Maybe Old Lemon isn't so bad after all," Shaun remarked.

"Yeah," she agreed.



**Comic Books
By Edward White/CP Bialois
<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>**

Comic books. So many people flinch at the idea of someone reading them, as though they have nothing to offer. On that, I'm afraid I have to disagree.

Each of us have a someone or something we can point to and say, "That got me started", or "That's my inspiration". For me, one of the greatest inspirations is Stephen King. I've been an avid reader of his since I was twelve years old. In many ways, he is tops on my list of go to authors when I need to escape and find my way.

Sounds great, right? Guess what? He's not what this is about.

My inspiration stems from a moment long before I discovered his books. You see, when we started to learn to read in first grade, I was bored out of my mind. I hated, I mean HATED, reading about a cat walking up a hill or something like that. My teacher didn't know what to do and neither did my mom. That's where my dad came to the rescue with comic books. Yep, that's right. Some good, old fashioned comic books.

You see, by understanding that I needed to have fun to care about learning, my dad started reading to me about Spider-Man, Donald Duck, and Scrooge McDuck. By doing that, I

learned to read in a couple of weeks and was one of the best in my class at the time.

More than that, the comics opened my eyes and mind to the possibilities of the written world. Virtually overnight, I became a voracious reader, devouring anything I could find, starting with *Treasure Island*. Had it not been for those fifty cent comics and my dad's foresight, I doubt I'd be an author today.

What better source of inspiration could I ask for?



Out With the Old By Edward White/CP Bialois

I approached the bain of my morning with a breakfast pocket in one hand and keys in the other. It wasn't different than any other day, but something about that morning really bothered me. Maybe it was just my mood or the slight chill in the autumn air. I guess anything could be possible, but right then I only had visions of that skunk striped monstrosity dancing through my head.

It wasn't that my Plymouth was a bad car, it just didn't age that well. Besides the oxidation going down the center of its dark blue paint job and every idiot light coming on when I turned the ignition, I couldn't put my finger on a single thing it'd done wrong.

Still, I expected something to go wrong. I remember thinking my key would break in the lock so I wouldn't be able to drive it, but I was surprised when the door unlocked without an issue.

As I sat down, the idea of that being the day the motor wouldn't start came to me. Of all the times the dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree over the last year, I was certain that time would be the death blow.

Holding my breath, I slid the key into the ignition, pumped the gas, and crossed my fingers as I turned the key. My efforts were rewarded with the usual grinding sound of the engine. Once, twice, three times it fought against me before finally starting.

Every idiot light came to life as usual. With the yellow and red lights greeting me, I backed it out of my parking space and headed to the dealer.

The previous day the local dealer ran a promo on the radio offering to take any car for trade in, even if it had to be towed. Never a fan of change, I was reluctant to go but I eventually did and he agreed to take my car as a trade in for a Ford Thunderbird. All I needed to do was make it there and \$4500 would be credited towards the loan. At first I thought I misheard him or thought it was a dream I was trapped in until I arrived back at our apartment.

It was an odd feeling, to know something better was about to come my way and for what? An old, reliable car that had been my mom's a few months before? I was used to bad luck, but to feel like something or someone was looking out for me gave me a sense of pride I rarely felt. Over the last year my life had begun to change as I went from being a lazy teenager asking my parents for everything to an independent adult looking to make my mark on the world.

Those thoughts and more made their way through my mind during the thirty minute drive to the dealer. Things could change in an instant and I now understood I had to be ready for those changes.

As I turned into the dealer's lot, I thought about everything and smiled. My Plymouth wasn't such a bad car after all.



My New Cat Prince By Barbara Jean Kaufman

It took me about a year before I could even think of a getting another cat. I had my precious cat, "Grayson", for about twelve years. I enjoyed the closeness and companionship. He was so loving, but unfortunately very sick.

I know what this cat would be saying to me! "Barbara, I know it's been hard on us, during that last six months of my life. I was so ill and could not stop losing my weight. I did not eat well. Plus, I hated those pills and yucky tasting medicine. That's why I hid from you!"

"I had to pass away to "Rainbow Heaven". I know you did the best you could in healing me. But, Barbara, I want you to be happy again. I want you to take in Prince. My spirit will always be with you. I see you, hugging your mom's Teddy Bear. And I hear you telling him that "my heart will always be in your heart!"

Grayson continued. "Now, Barbara, when you brought home this beautiful soul home, a three-year-old Siamese Seal-Point Angora, cat on June 29, 2013. I just felt Prince's immediate love for you! It's rare in cats. But, he licked your hands and fingers. I also love watching him play ball with you too! I can't believe that, when you throw the mouse or ball. He just jumps real high. He then brings it back to you, just like a doggie. "Take care of this Beautiful Soul, With Love Grayson".

On March 12, 2014, before I left home, I told Prince I had to leave, as I had done many times before. But, this time, Prince went right on the bed, and laid on my nightgown, and pillow. He started licking his fur, and then my

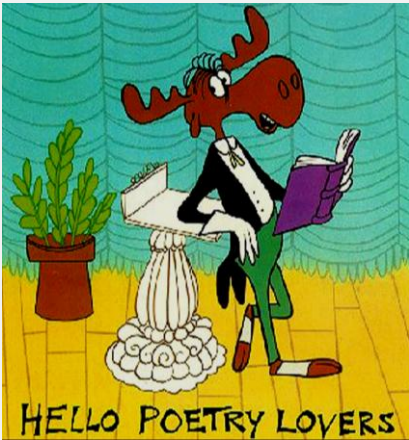
hand while I petted him. I felt that he was saying: “Don’t worry, Barbara. I’ll take care of our place until you get back”.

Now almost every morning, around 5:30am, Prince wakes me up for food and/or attention. He throws his whole body and stretches out, right on my pretty laced curtains and blinds. He has already torn up a good portion of them with his sharp claws and teeth. I clap my hands and yell, “Stop it Prince” or let go.” I use no a lot.

I must say these phrases at least three to five times. He finally stopped, especially after I get up and feed him. He loves his four-tier scratching post. Then he changes back to the curtains and blinds, as if to say, “Hmmm -- these toys are fun to play with too. The bright sun now shines right through, so I’ll scratch them open even more!”

Barbara wakes-up, not too happy about my crafty clawing, but she still feeds me and plays with me. Nice lady this Barbara.

Portal Poetry Corner



No poems this week. Sorry!

Beginning in January 2014, meetings will be held the second Monday (6-7:30pm) of every month in the second floor conference room.

Upcoming dates: April 14, May 12, June 9, July 14, Aug. 11, Sept. 8, Oct. 13, Nov. 10, Dec. 8.

From picture books to novels, stop by and discuss your ideas. Submit your short story or poem to be published in the monthly Portal to Michael Kelly at mkelly@broward.org.

All communications with the editor and all inquiries concerning this publication should be addressed to:

**Editors of the Portal Pamphlet,
South Regional/BC Library
7300 Pines Blvd.
Pembroke Pines, FL. 33024.
Telephone: 954-201-8870
mkelly@broward.org**

The **PORTAL** was designed, produced, and edited solely by the instructor and students of the South Regional / Broward College Writer’s Club for non-profit.

The opinions expressed are those of the members of the Writer’s Group, and does not necessarily represent those of the staff, administrators, or trustees of the Broward County Libraries Division.

***The PORTAL pamphlet is not to be duplicated or used for commercial purposes.**

***All copyrights revert back to the original artist and authors after publication.**

Copyright 2014 –

FEEDBACK CORNER

We want to hear from you! Let us know what you think of our stories. Feel free to email Michael Kelly, head of the writer’s group at mkelly@broward.org or call (954) 201-8870.

*Please specify the story and writer. Thanks!



News Flash! Portal writer Emiliano Moreno has a new book available on Amazon.com titled, *Cadeus*.

Cadeus Chadwick is a lonely, tortured soul cursed by an old gypsy woman during the late eighteenth century. Forever young, he is doomed to walk the earth for eternity unable to eat, feel or taste. Any female whom he kisses or that kisses him will wither and die in his arms.

Join Cadeus on his centuries-long quest for a way to end his malediction. From dinner with the devil at midnight to theories about parallel universes and alternate realities, nothing is too absurd or beyond the scope of reason for this desperate young man

Check out our website
at www.thewritersportal.yolasite.com
to view back issues and
more. Enjoy!