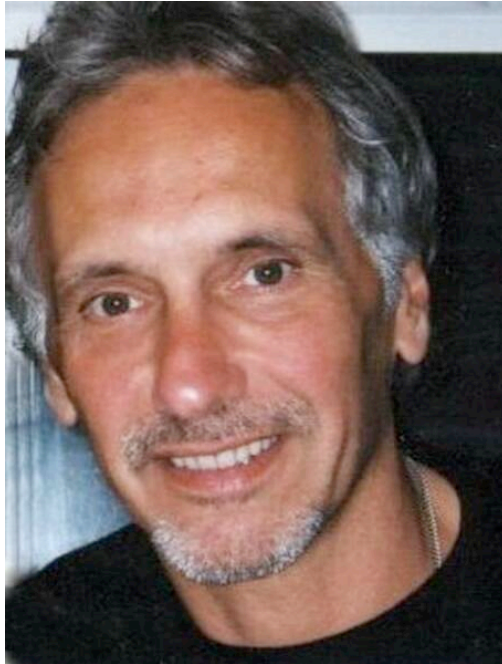


Spotlight: *We're Pleased to Present...*

Rick Skwiot



LECTURE SERIES: "Structuring the Memoir"

**Thursday, September 21, 2006 from 7 to 8 pm
at Barnes & Noble-Ladue, 8871 Ladue Road, Ladue 63124**

Click here for [map and directions](#). For lecture details, visit our [Lectures](#) page.

All are welcome. This event is FREE. Please register in advance. For complete details and our online advance registration form, see our [Calendar](#) page.

Note: Barnes & Noble will have copies of Rick's books at this event and the author has kindly agreed to autograph them for attendees. Bring your Sharpie!

RICK SKWIOT is a former newspaper reporter and editor who has also published short stories, essays, book reviews, and feature articles in magazines and newspapers. He's taught creative writing at Washington University, Old Dominion University, the University of Missouri-Columbia, and the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he served as Distinguished Visiting Writer for 2004.

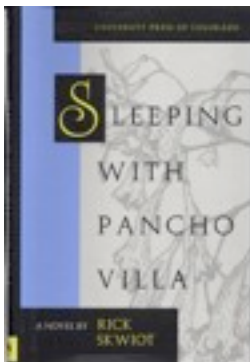
He is the author of two novels set in Mexico:
Flesh, which won the Hemingway First Novel Award,

Flesh, the passionate mystery of a son's compulsive search for his father's bones--a quest that draws him into an exotic Mexican underworld of sex, mysticism, drugs, and sudden violence.

Sensual but gritty, vibrant but darkly poignant, *Flesh* exposes the simmering passions --fired by jealousy, vengeance, love, lust, and greed--when Anglo and Hispanic cultures



and *Sleeping With Pancho Villa*, a finalist for the Willa Cather Prize.



"A thoughtfully layered backdrop of Mexican culture...an impressively crafted labyrinthine setting...Snappy and often funny dialogue."--*Publishers Weekly*

"Life in a Mexican town ...laid out beautifully...A skillfully written portrait of an entire community. Highly recommended."--*Library Journal*

"This book alone heralds the arrival of a great new writer."
--*The Colorado Springs Independent*

Rick also authored the critically praised childhood memoir *Christmas at Long Lake*.

The compelling true story of a young boy's efforts, at Christmas 1953, to preserve his rural Midwest home, depicting a bygone era of uncomplaining and frugal self-reliance.

Critical Praise for *Christmas at Long Lake*:

"Skwiot's vivid descriptions of the physical and emotional landscape ... are poignant, entertaining, and instructional...There is magic in this depiction of a setting and a way of life that can be described only as Edenic."--*Library Journal*

"Rick Skwiot works his own magic...As usual, Skwiot's writing is sure...And his tale has a gritty, blue-collar cachet...This is good reading." --*Kansas City Star*

"A heartwarming, thoughtfully recalled, highly recommended memoir...memorably told, with reader engaging descriptions that evoke a yesteryear world of simpler times."
--*Midwest Book Review*

"Rick Skwiot has harvested his rich years of



Rick's currently at work on a new novel set in Key West and Havana.

Purchase Rick's books through the St. Louis Writers Guild website: [Our Books](#).

A Few Words from Rick Skwiot About His Memoir...

While writing *Christmas at Long Lake* I re-read José Ortega Y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*, which helped me clarify what I was writing about in my memoir: depicting the last vestige of a folk culture as mass culture attained supremacy. In my edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, with foreword by Saul Bellow, of all people), the translator, Anthony Kerrigan, writes in the introduction:

Though the 'folk' tend to be sound, the 'masses' do not. These two distinct words evoke a robust distinction. Ortega wrote essays probing the 'aristocratic' nature (in the sense of preservation mostly) of the folk and their lore...How often in democracies has not the sound instinct of the folk proven more viable than the elitist machinations of the politicians?

In *Christmas at Long Lake* I write of an American family but one still very much European, a first-and-second generation American family yet ruled by folk traditions and values, with old world dignity and self-sufficiency, a benevolent monarchy unto itself. But looming over it is the neurotic mass culture—in the first TV I see as a boy at a neighbor's home, in the lurking migration of my father from manual work to paperwork, and of my family from bucolic and esthetically rich rural America to denatured and sterile suburbia. I view *Christmas at Long Lake* as a microcosm of the final days of folk culture in America, documenting the death rattle of family life, independence, and freedom.

Along with that, I think I was influenced intellectually by my sociological reading (I have a B.A. in sociology in addition to my later graduate degrees in English and creative writing), particularly C. Wright Mills *The Power Elite* (1956 or thereabouts, I think). In it he posits that a fundamental power shift had occurred or was occurring in America,

from power being vested locally in the family, the church, the community, and the school, shifting to large institutions: the government, the economy, the mass media, the corporations, etc.

I think that one thing that makes *Christmas at Long Lake* poignant for many readers is that it dramatizes that loss of power for one family, it being uprooted and twisted because of these larger institutions, particularly the post-war economy, and losing its own dominion. I think readers understand that loss of power, because it has happened to most families at one time or another, in one generation or another, the forced moved from self-sufficiency and control over the ruling aspects of their lives to powerlessness and dependency on larger institutions.

But intellectual considerations aside, what drove me to write this book was a visceral feeling of that loss for my family.

Following are Rick's answers to a few questions:

What sparked your desire to write this memoir? Was it something you'd been contemplating for quite a while?

I think one of the first short stories I ever tried to write, years ago, attempted to capture the ongoing sense of loss I feel for that place and time. The beauty and mystery of my early childhood still haunts me and guides me. And I think my mother's death prompted me to write this, too, for while she was still alive that history was still alive...My parents, like many, lived largely anonymous lives and left little mark in the larger world—except perhaps on me. I wanted to write this book not only to honor them for what they gave me, but also so I could travel back to that time and place, and to be with them again as they once were.

I think of you primarily as a fiction writer ... how was writing a memoir like this different than writing a novel. In what ways was it more challenging?

First, writing a memoir is like writing fiction in that you want to structure a narrative around scenes and to write or recreate dialog that shows character and to layer in the sensory detail that will bring the reader into that time and place and the world of your book. (I'm sounding like a writing instructor here.) It is more challenging in that, in a memoir, you are limited to what you are given. You can't concoct new characters or events to make it work better. So you have to dig deeper to mine better whatever riches you have...

How did you research this book? Did you primarily rely on your own memory, or did you find yourself talking with family members and other folks from your childhood for their take on the events, too?

The greatest research I did was to dig down into myself, to go into my memory and commit it to paper. It was at the same time a gratifying and a wrenching task, for the whole book is about loss—loss of a way of life, of innocence, of family, or the irretrievable past. Often, as I sat at my desk writing the manuscript, I would be overcome with it, with the loss and the beauty of it, the warmth and goodness and solidity, and literally tears would be coursing down my face as I relived the sweetness of my early days. The only research I did was for broader historical and municipal background.

The beautifully described setting of this book was one of the most impressive parts, for me. How difficult was it for you to put the pictures in your mind of your childhood home into words?

The whole book was a labor of love, for the place and time as well as for the people. It was a pleasure to try and craft the sensory depiction of the physical world there, to recreate it so the reader can see it and smell it and taste it and hear it and feel it. That, for me, is the pleasurable part of writing. The structuring and architecture and such are agony, trying to figure out what your work ought to be. But the wordsmithing and layering in the sensory stuff and making it come alive—that’s great fun. I would put myself back there, for example, on the frozen lake with my father, and I could bring it all back: the smell of burning leaves, the sting of the cold air, the feel of the ice on the soles of my shoes. Then it’s just a matter of selecting the right details that make it vivid for you—they’ll make it vivid for the reader as well.

Did the final book end up as you expected, or (like often happens in fiction) did the “story” change and evolve from your original conception?

It evolved a lot, mostly in terms of structure. I wanted to write a book that captured the place and the time but also wanted a compressed narrative that would keep readers with me. As it developed, my challenge was to compress the memories of four seasons over six years into a narrative that spans only 36 hours. To do that I used a variety of rhetorical devices, such as flashbacks, and “essays,” such as the chapter on my first-grade experience, or the chapter on the rustic nature of the house itself, as interludes within the narrative. That was the most demanding aspect of writing it, that structuring, to keep it moving while still getting in everything I wanted to say about the place, to paint the picture while still telling a story.

Visit Rick Skwiot’s website: www.rickskwiot.com