

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

Mary Menke



Writer, Editor, Trainer, Business Owner

**SLWG Newsletter Editor since 2002
2006 St. Louis Writers Guild Member of Distinction
SLWG Member since 2000**

Mary Menke considers herself a square peg in the round hole of the St. Louis Writers Guild—she’s one of a handful of nonfiction writers in the organization, and she wants them to stand up and be counted. “I’m going on record as saying that journalists and other nonfiction writers are *real* writers, too!” she says. “We’re like the Rodney Dangerfields of writing: ‘We get no respect ... no respect at all!’”

Mary’s love of writing began with a love of reading. “One thing I remember from earliest childhood is my mom and dad reading the Post-Dispatch comics to me every Sunday afternoon. I couldn’t wait till I went to school so I could learn to read them for myself,” she says. Back in those days (mid-1950s), schools didn’t teach reading until the first grade. Once she made it through the Dick and Jane series (“I was really sick of seeing Dick run, run, run,” she says), Mary couldn’t be stopped. “I was reading seventh grade

books in third grade. I remember one Saturday afternoon at the bookmobile with my dad. I picked up a book to check out, and the librarian asked me how old I was. When I told her, she said I probably wouldn't be able to read that particular book because it was for junior high students. My dad asked her to let me read a page out loud, and when I did, she said, "Well, I guess you really can read it."

Reading just naturally progressed into writing. "Writing came easy to me, but I wasn't really aware of it until high school. I'm so naïve, I thought everybody liked writing," Mary says. "I found out that wasn't the case early in ninth grade English class, when the teacher assigned us to write an essay. I was the only one who didn't groan."

Mary took Advanced Composition in her junior and senior years of high school and Honors Composition in her freshman year at Meramec Community College. She then quit school to get married and start a family. A year after her fourth (and last) son was born, she went back to school part-time. She finally earned a bachelor's degree in Communications/Journalism in 1990, and then went on to get an MBA in 1997. In the meantime, she worked full-time and was a stringer for the Suburban Journals for ten years.

After working for many years in corporate America (in both writing and non-writing positions), Mary started her own writing and editing business, WordAbilities LLC, when she was laid off from a marketing position with Beech-Nut Baby Foods. "This is absolutely the best job I've ever had. I really love my boss," says Mary. Her only regret: "I should have done this years ago, when I had more energy."

Mary joined St. Louis Writers Guild in 2000, shortly after losing her job. In 2002, she took over as editor of *The Scribe* when the previous editor moved away. In 2003, she won second place in the James Nash Memorial Essay contest for *Jenny's Blessing*, which she wrote about her son's wedding. She has been Vice-President of the Guild since June.

In January of this year, SLWG began publishing *The Scribe* quarterly instead of monthly, which Mary says relieved some of the pressure of a monthly publication. She'd still like to turn the editing responsibility over to another member next year, however. "I've enjoyed *almost* every minute I've worked on the newsletter," she says with a laugh, "but I think it's time to let someone else have fun."

Mary has seen some major changes in the Guild over the years. "For one thing, we've grown from about 50 members to more than 200. We've had some really exciting workshops and lectures over the past year, too, including a workshop with Pat Corrigan, former Post-Dispatch writer and my personal idol." Mary says she's particularly excited about the critique groups that are forming, even though she probably won't be able to participate right away. "I've got too many other irons in the fire," she says. The great thing about the critique groups is that a new session starts every eight weeks, so she hopes to be able to get involved in the near future.

Over the summer, Mary published her first book, *The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Coming Back to Life After a Spouse Dies*, a collection of stories from people who have survived the death of their spouses. She was inspired to write the book after her son's wife and her best friend's husband died suddenly. "I tried to offer them advice, which turned out to be things that I might do under those circumstances, but that were completely out of character for them. I learned that grieving isn't a one-size-fits-all process and decided there was a need for advice from people who had been through the process and did it their own way."

Her next project is *The Ten Commandments of Business Writing*, a how-to book which she plans to complete early next year. In the meantime, she's working hard to promote *The Light at the End of the Tunnel* and to build WordAbilities into a profitable business. "I want to make my boss proud," she says.

Read "[Jenny's Blessing](#)," Mary's essay which won second place in the St. Louis Writer's Guild's 2003 Essay Contest.

Visit Mary's website: <http://www.writeupuralley.com>.