

Marilyn Johnson's book on obituaries was hardly in bookstores when I started getting e-mail from family and former students telling me about it. One of my daughters sent me *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and the Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries*, which I read immediately and then sent a fan e-mail to Johnson.

In her reply, she alerted me to the upcoming Eighth Great Obituary Writers' International Conference 2006 in nearby Las Vegas, New Mexico. It was, shall we say, a match made in heaven.

My family members know that wherever I travel, I always buy the local newspaper and read the obituaries. Former students who took editorial writing from me had to write an obituary editorial. But first they had to listen me to talk at length about why I read obituaries. Most of them thought I was weird, although some later confided that they also have taken up the habit.

Local obituaries provide historical and sociological information you won't find elsewhere in a paper. When I was doing research for my first novel, coincidentally set in Las Vegas, I read the obituaries in the town's newspaper because I wanted local Hispanic names. But I also discovered that the survivors lived in Albuquerque or Texas or California. Las Vegas is experiencing out-migration and I was able to convey that information through my fictional newspaper editor.

I know that a bartender will be in my next novel, which will be situated in Pennsylvania's Anthracite Region. The character needs not just a name, but a nickname, as all good bartenders must have. One Schuylkill County newspaper listed an obituary for a man with the nickname of "Wobble."

From that nickname, my bartender character will come to life. He will be William "Wobble" Williams, a recovering alcoholic who's been through the 48-step plan—that's Alcoholic Anonymous' 12-step program done four times before he got it right. When he got drunk, he wobbled instead of staggered, and the nickname stuck.

Like Wobble during his drinking days, the obituary writers I met in Las Vegas seemed to be suffering from a lack of respect. The stereotype of the obituary writer is that of a burned-out journalist, maybe an alcoholic, whom the company won't fire, but won't trust to do serious journalism. (The ones I met did not, with one exception, venture near the bar during daylight hours.) Never mind in newspapers, respectability in hardcover is not something most obituary writers get. When Johnson stood up during the self-introductions, she immediately received a round of applause. When she gave her talk later in the day, she said "obituaries have caught fire," which her audience was also glad to hear. Johnson strikes me as someone who, when the *New York Times* hits her stoop, checks the "Inside" listing on page one to find obituaries and turns immediately to that page.

At the conference, she deconstructed the structure of obituaries, which she calls “life stories.” Among the parts are the “tombstone” (opening paragraph), “bad news” (cause of death), and then probably the best section, “the song and dance.” That’s the part of the obituary that makes the person unique. It’s something the person did, be it racing from a bunk in boxer shorts at Pearl Harbor to fire anti-aircraft guns on Dec. 7, 1941, or having a sex-change operation and becoming a professional whistler (after having served in Hitler’s Wehrmacht as a man).

Not all of the 45 people attending the conference were obituary writers. Some, like Johnson and myself, are necrological groupies. Also attending was a librarian from the University of South Carolina, an “aspiring obituary writer” who had been asked once by a stranger to write “a tribute to his rottweiler who had just died,” a man from New York City who handed out prototypes of his new magazine devoted to obituaries, Liz Graves—“my real name”—who wants to know what makes a really good obituary because she wants to make a film tribute to her late mother, and Pam Vetter—Bellefonte born, Lancaster County bred, Los Angeles resident—a certified funeral celebrant.

Only in California, you’re thinking. Actually, Vetter was certified after 17 hours of training at the In-Sight Institute in Pittsburgh, so forget the California jokes. Funeral celebrants, Vetter explained, design services for people who don’t have a church or don’t want the generic service their minister delivers. She told the story of one generic service in which the minister kept inserting the name of the deceased—only it was the name of the deceased’s sister-in-law, who was sitting in the front row. A certified funeral celebrant, like a good obituary writer, gets names right.

The speaker of speakers was Jim Sheeler, who had just won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Although what he wrote was not an obituary, the story did grow out of an obituary. Sheeler, of the *Rocky Mountain News*, had written several stories about Marines who notify families when a family member is killed in Iraq and that inside track helped him in writing “Final Salute,” the prize winner. (The photographer who worked with Sheeler fittingly also won a Pulitzer.)

Obituaries have changed since the first newspaper I worked for in 1961 ran them as news stories on the front page. Now newspapers charge a fee and the families are free to say what they want. No longer hamstrung by some editor’s template, paid obituaries have become interesting.

For example, in June the obituary of a local man said “he was a loving father, a great storyteller, and was particularly fond of his pet mule, ‘Jack.’” It then listed his survivors. When I shared that with the daughter who sent me Marilyn Johnson’s book, she said that I’d list all of my golden retrievers (deceased and still living) and the miles we’ve walked and then I’d list my daughters.

There you have it: my song and dance.

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Related web sites:

Marilyn Johnson: <http://marilynjohnson.net/>

Obituary writers: <http://www.obitpage.com/index.html>

Pam Vetter: CelebrantPam.com

Jim Sheeler's prize-winning story:

<http://denver.rockymountainnews.com/news/finalSalute/>

Obit magazine: www.obitmag.org