

Notes from Toad Hall

Issue #4 ~ 2012
Winter



Wooden Clocks and Tiny Silver Balls

When I grew up and moved away I rarely saw them. But in December of every year I especially remember my grandparents. Each December I carefully add a small collection of bubble lights to the tree, carefully placing them just so because, I admit, too many would be slightly cheesy. Their gentle movement and glow add a dimension to our Christmas tree that I must have – the memory of my grandparents' tree in full regalia.

Grandpa and Grandma Frolander made Christmas special for our family of eight. And, just as importantly, they never forgot my birthday which was December 15th, a birth

date easily rolled into Christmas. Some years on Christmas Eve they drove drifted country roads far out to our small farmhouse bringing two (Two!) presents for everyone. Grandma also brought tins filled with cookies. Tender thumbprint cookies with a dollop of apricot jam in the center, fragile Swedish rosettes dusted with powdered sugar, pressed butter-cookies in the shape of bells decorated with tiny silver balls. Every thing she did was precise and beautiful.



Bubble lights on our tree

Sometimes I went home with them and in the morning when I awoke in a chilly bedroom alone, I would creep down the stairs and climb into my grandparents' bed. Grandma would already be up making breakfast – the coffee pot wheezing in the kitchen, the air filled with the scent of bacon. Grandpa would be in bed still listening to NBC News on the radio. I would snuggle under the blankets and he would reach over, just as I knew he would, to pinch me. I would scream. He would tickle me. I would hit and kick him. He would grab my fingers and not let go until more screaming and laughing. It was a good way to begin Christmas vacation.

Say It. Say I love you

We wrote some over the years and twice they visited us in New Mexico where Denis and I lived for twelve years. The last time Grandma remembered my birthday was December, 1980. A few days after she mailed the card, they both died. Grandpa had finished lunch that day and

moved to his living room chair where he was finishing the wooden clocks he had made for his grandchildren. They were gathered around his feet ready for clockworks and hands.

After Grandma washed the lunch dishes she went into the living room to knit and found him sitting unnaturally still, his head fallen forward. She called my mom who lived thirty-six miles away to say, Dad has died. Mom told Grandma she

would be there as fast as ever she could. When she arrived in Warroad she saw the ambulance at their door and a crew carrying a body out of the house on a stretcher. She assumed it was her dad and did not, could not, comprehend the words, no, this is your mother, she has gone, too.

As the family gathered from far away places – Mom and her brothers met at the house to plan, to be together. I listened to their talk and tried to comprehend. The house was decorated. Sitting at the kitchen table drinking Grandma's coffee and seeing plates of Grandma's Christmas cookies, divinity and fudge on the counter, I remembered the loveliness of her hands as she baked and carefully decorated dozens of goodies. Now this surreal moment as we sat nibbling her sweets. How could she not be here?

I regretted that I hadn't thanked them enough for their gifts, for their

love. That I didn't take more time to write and call. I believe I will see Grandma again, and can tell her how much I love her. We aren't as certain of Grandpa, but there is evidence that in his final days he may have called to God.

Someone pointed out that I may overemphasize that the way Home to God is through love. Out of recognizing his love for you and simply reaching out for him. It seems to be a theme that appears and reappears in the way I talk, the way I write. That pushed me. I actually don't believe that other ways don't find saving grace. To the extent that I say or imply that – it is not right.

Ellis Potter reminds us: "We are each different. I can tell you how and why I came to be a Christian, but you cannot do it that way. You have to do it your own way. You are not me. You are unique. You have to come to God and God has to come to you in a way that you understand intellectually, emotionally, existentially, and morally, in ways that I might not understand. According to the Bible, your relationship to God is like a marriage. Christians often speak of sharing their faith, but I don't believe I can share my faith. I think I can share *the* faith – what is believed by Christians – but I cannot share my faith any more than I can share my marriage. I have a marriage, and I can tell you about it, but I cannot share it with you. I have a faith in Jesus Christ, and I can tell you about it, but I cannot share it with you. You have to have your own. You cannot have it by copying another person, or by inheriting it from your parents or your grandparents. We can say that God has no grandchildren. He only has children. Each one has to come

directly to him." P. 106 *Three theories of Everything* by Ellis Potter.

Amazing Ways

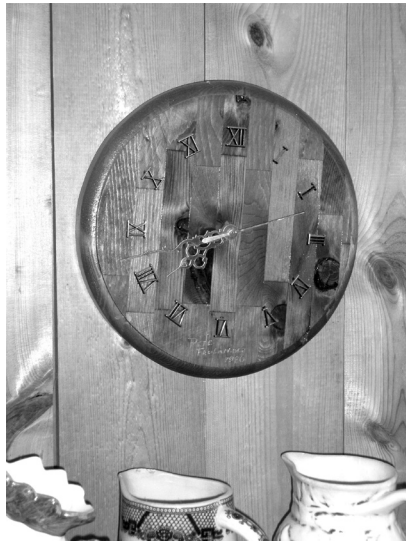
I believe he is right. Easily, easily, off the top of my head I can tell you about three people who came in very different ways. My mother – out of fear of going to hell and of not telling her children about the faith. What would she say to God when he asked her about her six children? A friend – an undergraduate when this happened: his bike had a flat tire on the way to class one day. He was beside the street moodily fixing it when a member of Campus Crusade for Christ walked past and trapped him into listening to a memorized presentation of the Four Spiritual Laws. This person was extremely annoying, but he couldn't get the "Laws" out of his head and later that night, he turned to Christ. And one more; Quentin, a young man we knew back in the day, came to our New Mexico commune, because he had been on an acid trip and saw Jesus who had spoken to him from the cross. He was deeply moved. (I don't mean this to be funny, but I can't remember what Jesus said to him.) Quinton knew nothing about Christianity, but had heard we were Christians and he wanted to become one. I'm not recommending this particular way, just saying...

I'm grateful for the differences and surprising ways people reach out to God to find, there he is, ready to meet us. Even with our doubts and unanswered questions. He operates unfathomably outside my box. But I think this may be the core Gift of Christmas; that Christ was born to bring us an amazing salvation with the power to bring us Home in a myriad of ways from a thousand places in the wilderness. So I don't care how my grandfather came to God. If he did. I just want him.

In my memoir, *The Exact Place* I included a recipe from Grandma Frolander – Lemon Angel Pie. She often made it

for holiday meals. It was always a part of Christmas and it became one of my mother's traditions, too. We looked forward to this light-as-air dessert. There was always room for it even though we were stuffed with mashed potatoes, turkey, gravy, dressing and cranberries. The lemon filling intense, lightly sandwiched between two

layers of whipped cream, resting on a crunchy meringue – is still a favorite dessert. A bite of heaven. Perhaps it will be featured at God's Table? I don't know. But for now we enjoy this pleasing bite; a taste, perhaps, of a more perfect life – one where we remember to say "I love you" on time. Where death no longer stalks us, because it's been conquered by our Friend and Savior, Jesus. For all time. For reals – a merry Christmas to everyone.



The wooden clock that Grandpa made

Grandma Frolander's Angel Pie

Meringue Crust

4 egg whites
1/4 t. cream of tartar
1 cup sugar
Beat egg whites and until foamy. Gradually add cream of tartar and sugar, beating until meringue stands in stiff peaks. Spread in a buttered 9 inch pie plate. Or shape into 9 small meringues on a sheet of parchment on a baking sheet. Bake at 275 for one hour or until crust is dry all the way through. Turn oven off. Allow crust to cool in the oven for several hours.

Lemon filling

4 egg yolks
1/2 cup sugar
1 lemon, juice and zest
In a saucepan beat yolks until thick. Add sugar and lemon. Stirring constantly, thicken over medium heat.

1 cup cream, whipped, no sugar added.

Spread 1/2 the whipped cream on top of cooled meringue. Carefully spread lemon filling as the next layer. Spread remaining whipped cream on top of filling. Refrigerate until served.



Lemon Angel Pie

Ransom Notes

Giving & Receiving

This time of year it's easy to become crabby as we attack long holiday to-do lists. I confess grumbling about everything from needing new bed sheets to writing deadlines. I should heed and apply Joy Davidman's (C.S. Lewis' wife) acerbic comment to her ex-husband: "Anybody can die with fine theological sentiments, Bill, it's the daily living that hurts." So it's good to be reminded of some foundational issues in our Ransom life: We wouldn't have the work we do without the gracious prayers and gifts from people who care about our ministry. We know there are thousands of worthy causes and that each gift to Ransom represents a choice to participate in our lives. We have been deeply blessed this and are very grateful.

Would you pray that as we face a new year full of uncertainties that we would remember that our theology is not about fine sentiments, but is designed to help us live faithfully and fully with whatever God allows into our lives? And pray we might touch others with courage for living and loving God.

Hearts & Minds Bookstore

For years *Critique* and *Notes* have pointed folks to Byron Berger's Hearts & Minds Bookstore. I want to thank them for carrying my book and emphasize our appreciation of independent bookstores. Hearts & Minds is rare among Christian bookstores, like finding a gold nugget in a vacuum cleaner bag, because they are unafraid to carry all sorts of books.

They answer questions with patience and knowledge and respond quickly to mail orders.

Byron has made it his life's calling to provide readers with books and resources that deepen understanding of our own callings and to further Christ's Kingdom on earth. I know how easy it is to go the Amazon route, so I'm asking you to support Hearts & Minds.



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Looking Ahead

November 9 & 10 Ames, Iowa, L'Abri Conference
Denis gives plenary: "Light in a Darkened Room: Film as Art." I will give a workshop: "Coming to Faith in The Exact Place."

November 24-25 St. Louis, MO, King's Gallery
I will be doing a reading and a signing at Grace and Peace Church.

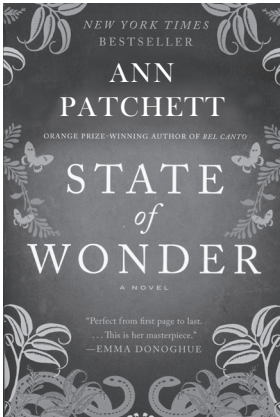
December 7 Chattanooga, TN
I'm doing a reading and signing at a local coffee house.

January 10-12, 2013
Our annual Board of Directors meeting will be at Toad Hall.

January 18-20 St. Louis, MO
We will be at Covenant Seminary where Denis will teach a J-Term class on "Music & Theology. I will find something constructive to do."

February 8-9 Rochester, MN, L'Abri Conference
Denis' plenary will be "Reconciliation in Film: Stories of breaches and bridges" "Reconciliation in The Exact Place."

2012 Christmas Gift List



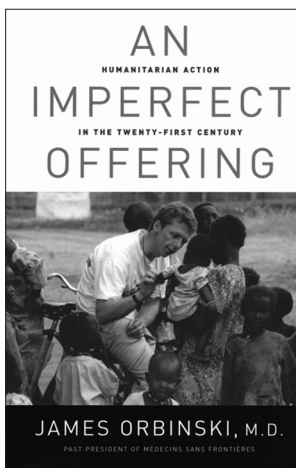
State of Wonder

by Ann Patchett, HarperCollins, NY, 2011. (Fiction)

I'm not certain this book will satisfy everyone. But the characters will not leave my head. The sign of a good book. I keep arguing with them, wanting them to change. I want to shout especially at one of them to say: YOU are SO deluded! Patchett's complete lack of romantic hyperbola about The Jungle: beautiful, poisonous, sinister, juxtaposed with the cold, freshened air of Minnesota is compelling. Her writing is powerful, luminous: "She pulled off her light spring coat and then the zippered cardigan beneath it, stuffing them into her carry-on where they did not begin to fit, while every insect in the Amazon lifted its head from the leaf it was masticating and turned a slender antenna in her direction. She was a snack plate, a buffet line, a woman dressed for springtime in the North." (p. 65)

My brief summary: Dr. Marina Singh arrives in Brazil charged with finding her former mentor, Dr. Annick Swenson, who has disappeared while working on a valuable new drug. Marina enters a mysterious world with unforgiving danger, and we do not *want* the story to also force her to face her own heart with its unimaginable losses. But we know it is inevitable.

The story is strong because it is carried by a character we know. Myself. Yourself. We all live with deceptions that must be painfully torn away if we are to become stronger, wiser, more compassionate. The ending made me want to ask someone to *please* discuss this book with me.



An Imperfect Offering

by James Orbinski, M.D. Walker Publishing, NY, 2008. (Memoir)

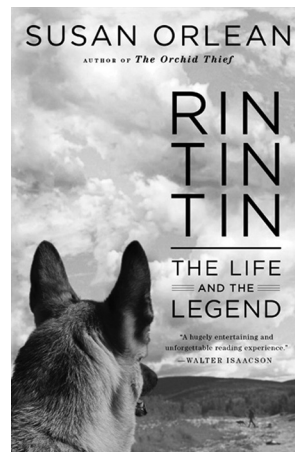
The title – *An Imperfect Offering* – tells us much about how Orbinski views the humanitarian aid projects he has led or joined. He tells the story of ministering among thousands with horrific injuries, who are famished, dying, orphaned, wounded on every level, of never having enough food, medicine, or the safety needed to administer aid. He reflects on human

limits and yet comes to believe that kneeling in the dust with one violently mutilated woman, with hundreds dying around you, is the gift you are called to give in that moment, to that one person, and that that is good. It is what you can offer. This was a hard book to read and yet I felt compelled. I had a choice to either feel hopeless about the terrifying conditions of mankind and toss the book aside or I could acknowledge these stories. I could listen to Orbinski tell what it was like, for example, to be in Kigali, Rwanda, during the genocide. There is power in listening even during the hard parts. When we hear and grieve with them, we affirm, confirm, that unspeakable, unprintable things happened to people who need justice and healing.

The last third of the book is a little tedious with many complex details. Still, I give this book four stars as he helps us better understand the enormous complexities of politics, war, and humanitarian aid.

Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend

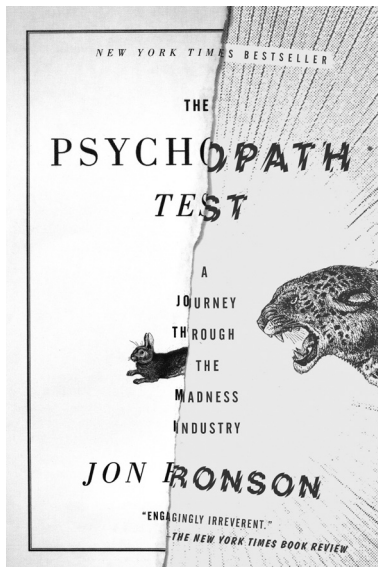
by Susan Orlean, Simon & Schuster, NY, 2011. (Non-fiction)



From his beginning as an orphaned puppy on a battlefield in France to becoming the most famous dog in the world and Hollywood's number one box office star, this is the story of Rin Tin Tin, his owner's rise to fame and his subsequent fall into oblivion. Orlean recounts fascinating details about the German Shepherd breed, for example, by 1939 the German military had a canine core of 200,000 dogs! Dogs were

recruited and trained as sentries, messengers, scouts, mine detectors and even airplane spotters. One of their most poignant jobs was to find wounded soldiers caught behind enemy lines and give the dying a drink of water and a pack of cigarettes. Orlean theorizes why we love animal legends, especially those popularized in the movies. It makes sense: "The invention of cinema came at the moment when animals were starting to recede from a central role in human civilization; from that moment forward, they began to be sentimental – a soft memento of another time, consolation for the cost of modernity. The ability to feel emotion about animals came to be a marker for being human just as humans began living apart from them, and it remains that way today." (p. 66)

Even if you didn't see movies of Rin Tin Tin, many of you will enjoy this account of a dog who really did live to please his owner.



The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry

by Jon Ronson, Riverhead Books, NY, 2011 (Non-fiction)

This was the funniest book I read this year. Parts of it, anyway. But when you are done laughing, the questions Ronson raises are disturbing. Some of the characteristics of psychopathy are: a callous lack of empathy, manipulative, superficial charm, self-aggrandizing, parasitic lifestyle, rationalizing when accused of wrong-doing, no sense of remorse. If you are a felon and score high on the Hare Psychopath Checklist, that will be your classification forever. No rehab or parole. There is also evidence that a higher than average number of business, religious and political leaders fall into this classification. After reading the list, I spotted them everywhere. But Ronson also raises questions about the ambiguities and pitfalls of psychiatric diagnoses, making me doubt after all that 75% of the people interviewed on *60 Minutes* are psychopaths. Hmmm. But think about this: Ronson told Bob Hare, the man who developed the test now considered standard, that "surely stock-market psychopaths can't be as bad as serial killer psychopaths?" Bob replied, "Serial killers ruin families." Bob shrugged. "Corporate and political and religious psychopaths ruin economies. They ruin societies." (p. 112)

Ronson says, "most of all, I suppose, I write about mysterious worlds. I write about them in as human a way as I can." So, how do we think about, live with, treat psychopaths? If you are

hard-wired with inherent characteristics and can't repent, could you ever become a Christian? Do you have choices? I would love to discuss this lively, well-written book in a group.



Baby's Hug-a-Bible

by Sally Lloyd Jones,
pictures by Claudine Gevry, Harper, 2010.
(Children)

To have this book as a companion for the Roots for Rain CD is such a brilliant gift idea for a baby or a toddler, you simply don't need to do any more thinking about

what to get all the little people on your list. This Baby's first Bible was the inspiration for the CD to the right. All the texts of these ten rhyming Bible stories became the lyrics for the tracks of this album. This is a sturdy board book with a faux lamb's wool cover that makes it special to hug and even chew. The illustrations are bright and the words are simple enough for a baby to hear and yet interesting enough to hold the attention of a toddler. The author, Sally Lloyd Jones has an incredible gift for capturing the truth and beauty of Scripture in language that does not trivialize or make me want to roll my eyes. I would have loved this for one of my babies, but since they're all grown I will give this as a shower gift over and over. Good for ages 0-4 years.

Rain for Roots: Big Stories for Little Ones

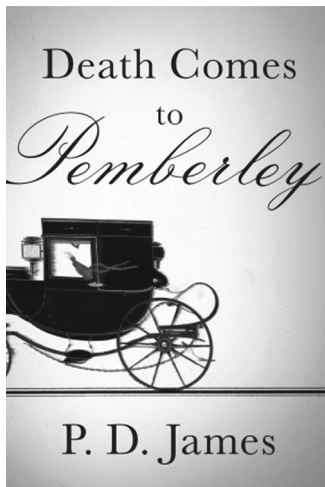
(CD) Children's songs. www.rainforroots.com. (Children)

This past year, a group of four talented Nashville singer/songwriters came together as friends and mommies to make beautiful music that takes the truth of Scripture and sets it to good lyrics with simple, sing-able melodies for their children. One of them was my good friend Katy Bowser Hutson. Out of this



collaboration came *Rain For Roots, Big Stories for Little Ones*, a cd I wish my own children had heard when they were small. I have little patience, a short attention span and a tendency to trash children's music that is overly simplistic or repetitious, but this is a lovely cd in every way. I'm sure I could listen about a million times along with my little one without kicking the daylight out of the player. For awhile it ranked

at the top of iTunes children's music chart. The message and the music are that good. The album wouldn't have worked if the musicians hadn't, each of them, been accomplished and creative. The lyrics are all from Sally Lloyd-Jones' *Baby's Hug-A-Bible* which means this cd is also a wonderful way to introduce the very young to stories of the Bible and to God's great love for them and all creation. You really should buy copies of this even if you *don't* have little ones, because you know some, don't you? *Rain for Roots* makes a great gift because that baby needs to be calmed and rocked. Or what about Christmas? It's coming right up. Order directly from <http://www.rainforroots.com/>



Death Comes to Pemberley

by P.D. James, Alfred Knopf, NY, 2011.
(Fiction)

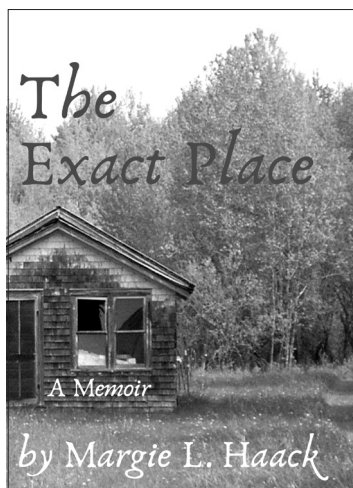
Imagine what the book would be like if Jane Austen were to write a who-dun-it. Well, P.D. James has. As if she were channeling Jane Austen, James flawlessly returns Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to life, only to make them face murder and mayhem. Haven't we wondered what became of them after they so happily married and moved into Darcy's magnificent estate? Would Elizabeth command enough respect to manage the large staff of servants?

Could Mr. Darcy bear his mother-in-law's

coarse gossiping? Did they have children? What about the conniving Wickham and the foolish Lydia? Would they find a way to destroy Elizabeth's Idyll? With Austen's wry wit and keen observations, James tells us what they're up to.

See if you agree that James captures Austen's voice: "It is generally accepted that divine service affords a legitimate opportunity for the congregation to assess not only the appearance, deportment, elegance and possibly wealth of new arrivals to the parish, but the demeanour of any of their neighbours known to be in an interesting situation, ranging from pregnancy to bankruptcy. A brutal murder on one's own property will inevitably produce a large congregation, including some well-known invalids whose prolonged indisposition had prohibited them from the rigours of church attendance for many years." (p. 137)

This was a fun read and would make a great gift for Jane Austen lovers who have wished she had written just one more book, please? Some critics scorned the book. So be warned.



The Exact Place

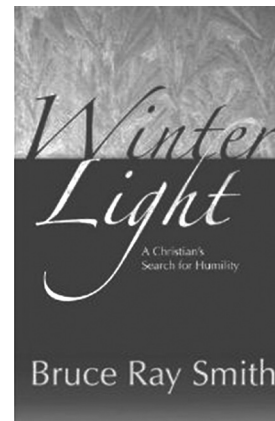
by Margie Haack, Kalos Press, 2011. (Memoir)

Margie wasn't going to include this in her gift list, but it's too good to be left out, so for the first time in history I'm writing something for *Notes from Toad Hall*. I'm not exactly pulling rank, since we co-direct Ransom, but it's sort of like that. Don't worry—she's resilient and will get over it.

I'm very proud of her for *The Exact Place*. It's a beautifully crafted memoir, well-told stories of her childhood, stories that reflect a quiet wisdom nurtured by a lifetime of placing herself within the deeper stories of God's providence and word. As she tells her stories, something happens in the background, in the hearts and imaginations of those of who read them. We find ourselves reflecting on the significance of place, the meaning of relationships, the pilgrimage of faith, the meaning of life, and the purpose of hard times. Margie is gifted in seeing how extraordinary the ordinary is, and helps us to see with greater clarity as a result.

Margie won't tell you to buy a copy, and has a tendency to want to give them all away. I would like to retire someday, however, so please buy one. Better yet, make a list of every Christmas, birthday, and anniversary gift you intend to give this year and make those gifts a copy of *The Exact Place*. You'll save time, your friends and family will receive something they'll like, and Margie will feel better about me co-opting this space.

- Denis Haack



Winter Light

by Bruce Ray Smith, Kalos Press, 2011.
(Personal Essay)

The light of winter enters our home at an angle from the south. It may seem faint and cold, but find a patch of sun pouring through a window, sit in it for awhile, and soon you begin to warm. You might even shed the sweater. *Winter Light* is

like this. Quiet, lyrical, rich prose that sends an unassuming ray that suddenly burns. In a collection of journal entries, through a season of winter, Smith excises and examines the roots of his pride and searches for humility and healing from God. It is painful, for him, for us, because if we allow, that is, admit God through these reflections, they will unravel our own prideful threads.

"Do not, I want to say to my friends, expect too much of me. I am ashamed. I am ashamed that pride, my pride, has so disrupted the lives of those who love me. How bitter it is to think about my selfishness, my outbursts of despair and anger! I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do except to pray for mercy, for a heart of mercy toward others, for the will to love as I am loved. (p. 69)

I have contemplated this wonderful book all year, picking it up again and again, reading a section, thinking, and listening to what God may be trying to say. (This book is a major reason why I'm proud, in only the best way, to be with Kalos Press.)

Final Notes

Friendly Gift of the Season

A while back I read that a *New Yorker* staff writer and best-selling author joined “the rogues’ gallery of prose practitioners who decided that because the facts aren’t good enough, embellishment is necessary . . . Jonah Lehrer admitted last week that he fabricated quotations in his latest book, *Imagine: How Creativity Works*.” Well. Well.

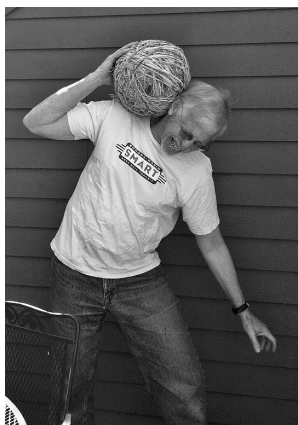
I felt quite righteous about my own meticulous standards, until I received the following after publishing the last *Notes From Toad Hall*.

Dear Margie:

Ha, ha, ha. Make public sport of your friend’s idiosyncrasies, will you?

I suppose that Denis has created an image in your mind that is so vivid it seems real. Or perhaps it is author’s license to engage in extreme hyperbole. Truth be told it is a *rubber band ball*, not a mere string ball. Rubber bands are far more demanding. I have lovingly brought the ball to its present state using rubber bands retrieved from the morning newspaper, bunches of vegetables from the market, and wherever else they cross my path. It has taken *twenty years of faithful commitment on my part* to bring it to its present size—10.5 inches diameter, weight about fifteen pounds. In spite of your assertions I can still lift it, and easily get it into the closet. And back out again for admirers. The great beauty of the ball is that it fascinates the grandchildren. Unlike some people, they admire Grampa for it.

With untarnished affection,
“Jack S.” (Be careful how fast you say that.)



Jack S. shrugged.

Jack is a long-time friend. An iron sharpening iron kind of friend. (Proverbs 27:17) A gift for all seasons, even and including ones where you make sport of them. Though I wasn’t far off.



From Toad Hall we wish you the best of Gifts.
Warmly,

Margie Haack

Resource: August 8, 2012 <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/>

About Notes from Toad Hall

Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn’t deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to them, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

Notes from Toad Hall is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom’s mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom’s mailing list also receives *Critique* magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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Rochester, MN 55902

Or contact us

www.ransomfellowship.org

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All books mentioned in *Notes from Toad Hall* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.