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Bill Knutson



Why I won't do that book

"When the heck are you going to write a book?" I was asked the other day.

It's not the first time I was asked that.

Anyone who's been in the newspaper business long enough to remember using copy pencils and manual typewriters is expected to write at least one book before that last deadline in the big newsroom in the sky — or wherever.

Truth is, I have started on many, many books over the past few years.

I haven't finished any. And chances are I won't.

There's usually this problem: I think I know a lot about almost everything, and quickly find that I know amazingly little about almost everything. Believe me, that's a real handicap when it comes to writing a book of more than five pages.

Several years ago, I decided that what the world needed was a good book about growing up in the backwoods. The titles came easy. "My Brother, the Bear." "Wolves I Have Known." "Snowballs in July."

The words came much harder. It's not that there wasn't a lot to write about — grandfather the a one-armed lumberjack, one-room schoolhouse with outdoor johns and potbelly stove, bears eating out of our garbage can, snowbound for days and really not caring if the plows ever got around, into town on Saturday afternoons for cowboy matinees, sung to sleep at night by loons.

But a whole lot of the stuff that sells books was stuff I didn't dare hang out on the line. Some of the old skeletons rattling around in a few of the family closets better not see daylight, I was warned, and geez, I do need a place to stay and a brother to take me fishing when I migrate back home.

And after some of my old classmates got wind of that I was going to tell all about my school days — the teacher who was terrorized with the hot poker, the kid who pulled the knife on a teacher, the kid who went on to be an unsuccessful bank robber, the kid who wet his wool snowpants most every morning, the kids who rigged the bucket of water over the privvy door just before the county superintendent

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I do not want to be barred from class reunions. I love class reunions. Even more than I love an appendectomy.

Some day I'm going to write a book about class reunions.

But not about growing up in the backwoods.

Unidentified flying objects — UFOs, flying saucers, space ships. Believe in them or not, it's a subject everyone is interested in. I've seen some pretty strange things, especially late at night, but never a UFO. But I knew people who did. Lots of people.

I flew through the first chapter. It was about a guy up north who was given pancakes by some short, friendly folks who landed a flying saucer in his yard. They stuck around for a while. And the grass in his yard and a nearby pine tree were scorched. I believed the guy. He was the first person I had ever met who didn't say the space visitors looked like "Martians." He said they looked like Italians.

But when I got to the second chapter, I realized that most of the other people who had seen flying saucers or had rubbed elbows with alien beings were not quite as long on credibility. And even quotable crackpots need some measure of credibility, even on such matters as space visitors, my literary agent informed me.

So that book fizzled.

Someone suggested once that I publish a collection of my best columns. My mother and I were still at loggerheads over which were my 150 best efforts when what should happen — some upstart Chicago wordsmith pops up with a bookful of what he thinks are his best columns and before you can say Royko, it's on the best-seller list.

So much for that book. Mine would be just as good and sell just as well, I am sure, but the literary critics would dismiss it as little more than sour grapes.

Books by firefighters about firefighting usually burn up the charts.

After Dennis Smith wrote a best-seller, "Report From Engine Co. 82," which was about the busy New York City fire station where he risked life and limb, I hit on the idea of writing a contrasting autobiography of sorts about the life of a small city firefighter.

It would reveal how firefighters sometimes forget to put

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RICHARD W. HEIDEN

found that you really have to like to run before you can write a book about it. I hate running. Besides, there have been dozens of books written by allegedly contented runners.

Beer, beer and more beer: Now there's a subject that's near and dear and about which I know more than just a little bit. But people would think that because I know a lot about it, I must drink a lot of it. No, I decided, it's just too risky.

Middle age myths: Or, growing old with gusto: Now if ever there was a need for a book, and if ever there was an authoritative author... But sure as hell, some do-gooder would read it and think I need help and round up a couple friends willing to sign commitment papers and... Too many a well-meaning author has had to live out his days in tranquilized tranquility.

the small city fire department, and it's good reading, all of it. "Profundities From the Back of a Pirsch." It has a catchy ring, doesn't it. And I'd be plowing new ground.

So what happens — my brother becomes a firefighter in the same small city where I risked bed sores and terminal boredom and they get the courts to slap an injunction on me, stopping publication of the book on grounds of defamation and humiliation. Even offering to give the firefighters' pseudonyms did not dissuade them.

There were other dynamite ideas that went up in smoke for a variety of reasons.

The deer hunter's bible: It wouldn't take long for word to get out that I'm allergic to deer hair, and I'd wind up a goat. Running your way to happiness: I

on their pants at night before they slide down the pole. How the fire truck and the fire sometimes have to wait because you're in the bathroom. How firefighters gorge on onion sandwiches and Kool-Aid before they go to bed. How some of the trucks are so old and so slow that the dogs nip your heels as you stand on the back "racing" to the fire. How the alarm sounds so seldom that when it does you get so flustered you hook up to a hydrant a half mile from the fire and watch your truck disappear.

There's lots more that goes on in

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