

WEEK 29, 2019

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ARTS & TRADITION

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin and Child With Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist."

LEONARDO

and the Strength of Meekness...4

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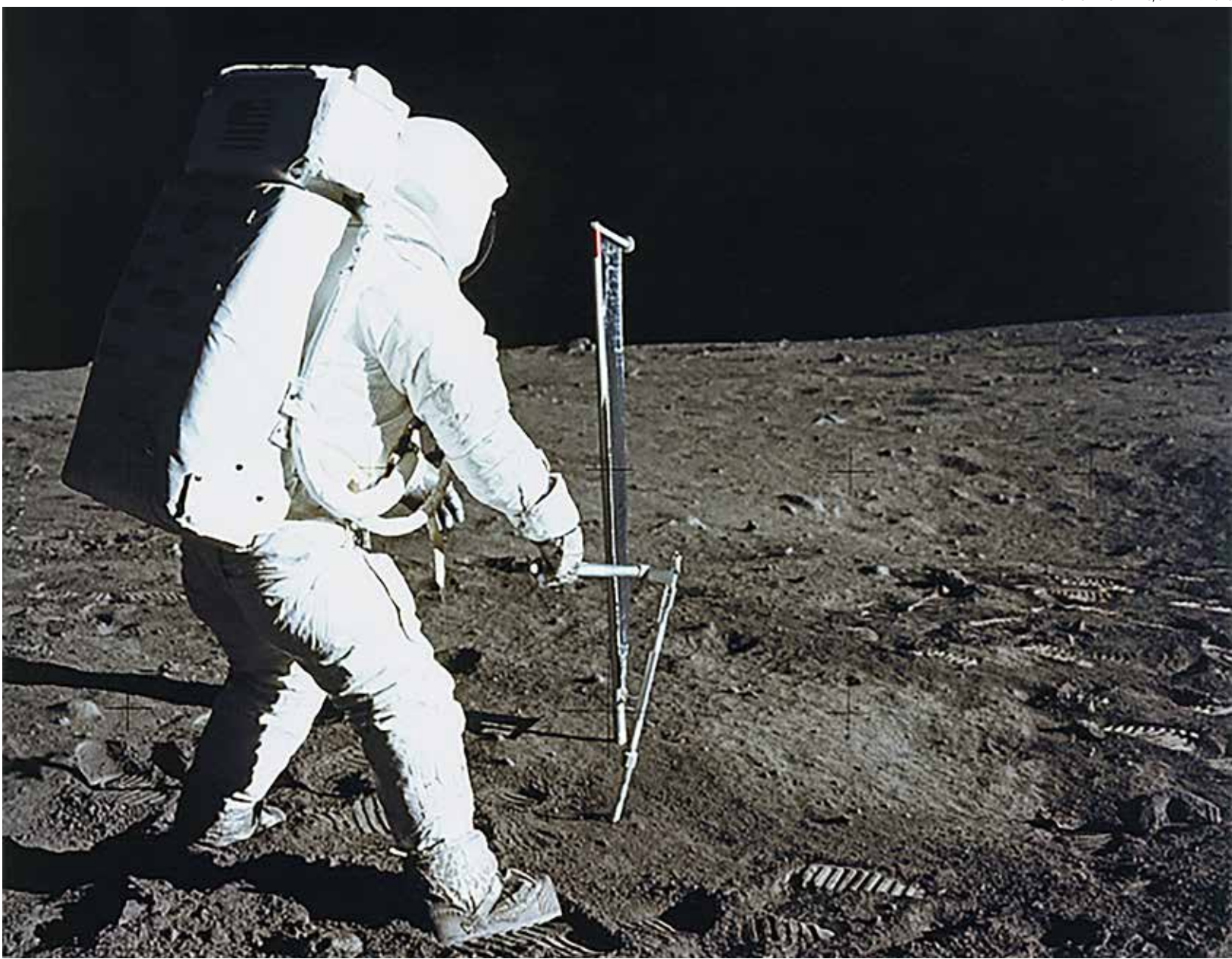


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TRUTH AND TRADITION



This summer features many events celebrating the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11.

Lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin deploys the Solar Wind Composition experiment, as part of the Apollo 11 lunar landing mission.

Astronaut Neil Armstrong inside the lunar module on July 20, 1969.



boggle the imagination. In 1969 alone, NASA launched three manned Apollo spacecraft. Supporting them on the ground were men and women, thousands of them, pushing hard as a team to make a lunar landing a reality.

The technology available to the astronauts and engineers half a century ago bring smiles of incredulity. The computers used to get Apollo 11 from the shores of Florida to the Sea of Tranquility and home again had 4 KB of memory, a horse-and-buggy antique compared to today’s laptops and phones.

Slide rules—for younger readers, this was a hand-operated instrument that looked like a ruler and could be used to multiply, divide, calculate logarithms, and perform other functions—were also a vital part of the engineering behind these flights. An example: African-American Katherine Johnson, a college professor and mathematician, calculated the trajectory of Apollo 11 to the moon with a slide rule and a pencil. Nine months after Apollo 11’s landing, when an emergency forced the crew of the ill-starred Apollo 13 mission to abandon their mission and return to Earth, engineers and astronauts used slide rules to quickly calculate information that had not been programmed into the computers.

Yet another technological triumph was the live television footage of the moon landing. Some 600 million viewers around the planet, approximately a fifth of the world’s population, were able to watch history in the making. Innovative engineers like Stan Lebar and Dick Nafzger helped create the cameras and transmitting stations that permitted NASA to provide



The full moon during NASA’s Apollo 11 lunar landing mission, on July 21, 1969.

HISTORY

FLY ME TO THE MOON

Time to Celebrate Engineers and Astronauts

The 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon walk

JEFF MINICK

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. ...” Charles Dickens wrote those lines thinking of the years prior to the French Revolution. I write them thinking of the summer of 1969.

That summer, our country was mired in the war in Vietnam. In the streets of Greenwich Village, gays and police duked it out in what became known as the Stonewall Riots. Senator Ted Kennedy drove his car off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts, leaving his passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne, to drown. Charles Manson and his crew of wing nuts committed murder in hopes of sparking a revolution. In August, more than 350,000 people listened to rock music, played in the mud, and some cavorted naked at Woodstock, New York, leaving behind tons of trash.

And the best of times? At 10:56 p.m. EDT on July 20, 1969, American astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped from the lunar module onto the surface of the moon and famously proclaimed, “That’s one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Fifty years have passed since Armstrong uttered those immortal words.

Most people who witnessed this televised event will never forget looking at the grainy pictures and listening to the static-filled transmissions from 240,000 miles away. All over the world, in the middle of the night and the middle of the day, they watched in fascination as Armstrong, followed by fellow astronaut “Buzz” Aldrin, took that giant leap for mankind. Meanwhile, the third astronaut on this odyssey, Michael Collins, controlled the main spacecraft orbiting the moon.

What I Remember

An aside: Like millions of others, I viewed the event via television but have only the haziest of memories of the astronauts bouncing on the lunar surface. On that day, I was three weeks into Beast Barracks at the U.S. Military

Academy at West Point. The pace was exhausting, the hazing intense. After someone decided that we plebes should witness the moon landing, the cadre of upperclassmen who had charge of us marched my classmates and me into an auditorium, where we spent the next few hours fighting to stay awake.

Those commanding us strode up and down the aisles like caged lions, prodding us awake and shouting at anyone whose eyes were closed. My main memory of that historic evening is of my exhausted classmates seated in the semidarkness, their heads, like those of newborn babies, bobbing back and forth, up and down.

On July 20, 1969, American astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped from the lunar module onto the surface of the moon.

All of the manned space flights were feats comparable in their audacity and execution to the voyages of such daring explorers as Zheng He, Christopher Columbus, and Ferdinand Magellan. Like their predecessors on land and sea, the astronauts understood the risks involved in space exploration, and some paid for their adventures with their lives.

When we consider the sacrifices and courage of these men and women, we might find deeper meaning in that line from “Star Trek”: “To boldly go where no man has gone before.” All of our astronauts on all space flights have certainly gone where no one has gone before.

This summer, as we honor the golden anniversary of Apollo 11’s moon landing, we may well marvel at other details about the space program of that time.

Technology in 1969

First up is the rapidity with which we reached the moon. On May 5, 1961, Alan



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REACHING WITHIN:
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

Leonardo and the Strength of Meekness



“Holy Family with Saint Anne and the Infant John the Baptist,” 1503, by Bernardino Luini. Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.

SHARON KILARSKI

Art has an incredible ability to point to what can't be seen so that we may ask “What does this mean for me and for everyone who sees it?” “How has it influenced the past, and how might it influence the future?” “What does it suggest about the human experience?” These are some of the questions we will explore in our series Reaching Within:

early as 1499 to 1500 and others as late as 1506 to 1508. Some just throw up their hands and say a range that encompasses the extremes of those dates.

The drawing is not a typical cartoon, which most often was a preparatory work for a painting or fresco. It bears no pricked holes along the sketched lines that would have been dusted with charcoal to transfer the image onto a canvas or wall. So it may be that Leonardo intended it as a completed work.

It is similar in subject matter to his painting “The Virgin and Child With Saint Anne,” now in the Louvre. But little St. John does not appear in that painting. Instead, the toddler Jesus is playing with a lamb, meant to symbolize the sacrificial lamb he is destined to become.

Bernardino Luini, who is said to have worked with Leonardo, certainly based his own painting “Holy Family With Saint Anne and the Infant John the Baptist” on Leonardo’s cartoon but added Jesus’s father, St. Joseph, as well.

composure, innocence, and compassion? The longer I look, the deeper I feel these qualities have been immortalized.

Mary, who exemplifies feminine virtues such as gentleness, modesty, deference, and nurturance, has long been a symbol of meekness, characterized, for example, in the Christmas carol “Silent Night” as “tender and mild.”

But while meekness can mean submissiveness, its synonyms include patience and forbearance, and even adjectives like long-suffering and resigned.

Anyone who’s been a mother or has closely watched a mother knows that patience is crucial to the role. But unless a child has turned wayward, we don’t often think of mothers as long-suffering.

But aren’t they? In the course of rearing a child and even in the years beyond those early ones, mothers are likely to endure the pain that their children do, whether it’s a cat scratch, doing poorly on a test, a romance turned sour, or bouts of chemotherapy. Every trial the child faces, the mother, in some measure, does as well.

What tremendous strength this requires! How strange that we should see these attributes as weakness. In the attributes of patience and forbearance, we can see in Mary the wisdom to gracefully submit to a power greater than her own. This, however, takes strength of character.

Leonardo makes just this point. Taking another look at Mary and Anne, we see that these women are not meek in the sense of weakness. Irrespective of the soft expressions on their faces, Leonardo embodied them with tremendous strength: These legs are more than sturdy. These laps are solid and can bear the weight of the world.

Of course, this is not just a painting about motherhood and children. Not only are these biblical figures, but St. Anne’s index finger points to heaven.

of these faces share the same three-quarter perspective.

Anne and John, who both face and mirror Mary and Jesus, are slightly shaded, likely because the master artist wanted to acknowledge the lack of their spiritual status in comparison to that of the Madonna and child.

Baby Jesus seems to be wriggling out of Mary’s arms as she patiently watches him give a benediction to St. John, who one day will baptize him and set him on his journey as savior.

Taken together—in a visual arc moving from Anne to Mary to Jesus to John—this is an image of human love meeting God’s compassion as it pours forth, beyond the family, to the world, as represented by Jesus’s benediction to John.

Strength and Compassion

The image of Anne’s finger pointing to heaven seems almost out of place in this intimate scene. As Anne gazes at her daughter, why is her hand telling us something else? It seems unconnected to the story of family love and God’s compassion.

I believe Leonardo shows us a way to better ourselves spiritually. The finger is pointing to heaven for our sake.

How can what is depicted in this drawing speak to us? First, of course, we can understand that Anne and Mary represent more than mothers. It is not only mothers who can empathize with the pain of their children; fathers can as well. And, going one step further, the ability to show empathy and compassion is not reserved for parents alone.

Since every life in its course must submit to troubles, illnesses, and death, on this point, all humanity is one family. And we can, as all traditional spiritual paths remind us, treat each other with compassion as we suffer through life together.

But doing so requires patience to endure insults, disregard faults, and allow ourselves to feel each other’s troubles as our own.

How well Leonardo’s drawing reveals that enduring for others is the same thing as compassion. When we reach within for the strength to endure, we approach the sublime, and rest there in perfect composure and peace.



Mary exemplifies feminine virtues such as gentleness, modesty, deference, and nurturance.

“The Virgin and Child With Saint Anne” by Leonardo da Vinci. Louvre.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

The New Asia Chamber Music Society

Blending classical Western music with Asian culture

ANGELA FENG

The performance has come to an end; the musicians’ bows remain fixed in the air as their last note rings into the awed silence of the chamber hall. Then, all at once, the trance is broken as the audience snaps out of its dazzled stupor and breaks into spirited applause.

The New Asia Chamber Music Society, or NACMS, has hosted dozens of concerts over the years, bringing together top musicians from all over the world. Among the talented artists are Wei-Yang “Andy” Lin and Nan-Cheng Chen, the association’s co-founders. Andy currently holds the position of artistic director, while Nan-Cheng is the executive director. Together, they have set the stage for a new generation of young and gifted virtuosi.

Twenty-two years ago, Andy left his home in Taiwan to come to the United States and study music at the Idyllwild Arts Academy in California. At the time, he was only 13 years old. He went on to pursue his undergraduate and master’s degrees at the prestigious Juilliard School, where he majored in piano and minored in viola and the erhu. Afterward,

he received his doctorate degree in musical arts from SUNY Stony Brook.

Nan-Cheng also received his undergraduate degree from Juilliard. He and Andy met back when they were in high school. The two were quick to bond over their shared experience as Taiwanese immigrants and their passion for music, striking up a friendship that has lasted nearly 20 years (and counting). Together, they have accumulated numerous awards and are widely recognized as top musicians in the industry.

In 2010, Andy and Nan-Cheng founded the New Asia Chamber Music Society together. They started out with two additional co-founders; however, one ended up returning to Taiwan, while the other got married and quickly became busy with other responsibilities.

All four of the original members happened to be from Taiwan, but they didn’t want to limit the organization to just Taiwanese musicians. Therefore, the name “New Asia” was conceived. “We came up with the phrase ‘New Asia’ because we want to showcase a new generation of Asian musicians, as well as the integration of Asian and Western culture,” Andy explained.

Andy Lin believes that through playing music, one can cultivate self-discipline, concentration, and endurance.



Andy and Nan-Cheng founded the organization with relatively low expectations. In the beginning, they were mainly looking to have fun and meet other musicians. In the first few years, they would do three or four concerts a year at most, with a few smaller, local performances in between. It wasn’t until three years ago that Andy and Nan-Cheng really picked up steam and began taking NACMS more seriously.

The reason for the initial lull was Andy’s involvement in the award-winning Amphion String Quartet, which took up most of his time. The group was very successful, and it had contracts with various record companies



as well as a three-year contract with Lincoln Center. However, due to personal issues, the group ended up disbanding.

Following the disbandment, Andy decided to focus all his energy on NACMS. He and Nan-Cheng began by holding a fundraising dinner for the organization. It was massively successful and raised over \$80,000, thus kickstarting NACMS’s subsequent success.

To Nan-Cheng, “music is a special language.” Classical music training has not only taught him to truly understand music but also to appreciate all the behind-the-scenes workings. “I feel very grateful that I was given this opportunity to pursue my

passion,” he said.

Both Andy and Nan-Cheng were trained in Western classical music, but their Eastern identity remains an important part of their career. In addition to recording classical Western music, NACMS has invited composers to create melodies that use traditional Asian instruments, as well as combinations of Chinese and Western instruments.

Over the years, NACMS has faced many challenges. Its status as a nonprofit makes it reliant on volunteers, which often makes things difficult. However, both Andy and Nan-Cheng are grateful to have the opportunity to build community and bring people

ALL PHOTOS BY NEW ASIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY



(Left) Wei-Yang “Andy” Lin, one of the founders of the New Asia Chamber Music Society, was a member of the renowned string quartet Amphion. He is a master of Western instruments such as the piano and viola, as well as the traditional Chinese erhu.

(Middle) Three of the New Asia Chamber Music Society’s directors—(L–R) violinist Tien-Hsin “Cindy” Wu, cellist Nan-Cheng Chen, and violist Andy Lin—perform on the same stage.

(Right) Nan-Cheng Chen, co-founder of the New Asia Chamber Music Society, graduated from The Juilliard School of Music in New York.

together. The organization has grown from a small group of friends with a shared passion into a world-class association that has performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and more.

Looking back, Andy definitely recognizes the positive impact that music has made on his life. “Musicians dedicate countless hours to practicing an instrument or learning a new song. When you play an instrument, you aren’t just mindlessly repeating the same motion over and over—you have to have coordination and concentration,” Andy said. “There are so many little details you must pay attention to.” He believes that through playing music, one can cultivate self-discipline, concentration, and endurance.

Nan-Cheng says that even as a top musician, he has yet to have a “perfect” performance. “You will never have a perfect day; you need to accept that there will always be imperfections,” he said. To him, music is a never-ending journey of refinement and self-improvement.

Over the years, Andy and Nan-Cheng have grown from passionate teenagers to esteemed artists at the top of their field. Through establishing NACMS, they have created a platform for young musicians all over the world to come together and share their talent and passion. While being a musician is often demanding and challenging, the two have never regretted their choice. “For me, work is my life because I love what I do,” Andy said.

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Writing Matters

5 Books That Can Help Us Become Better Writers

JEFF MINICK

Some writers and teachers among us, praise be to all of them, are obsessed with writing, grammar, syntax, and our English language. They argue for concise diction, debate the use of “like” versus “as,” condemn sloppy usage, and are horrified by misspellings. Recently, for instance, a reader of one of my book reviews chastised me for spelling Mary Chesnut of Civil War fame as Chestnut, a mistake that brought an immediate “mea culpa” from me.

If I learned just one new trick or technique from the book, that advice was worth much more than the few dollars I’d spent.

Many bookstores devote several shelves to these books on writing and composition, ranging from such classics as Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style” to the recently released “Dreyer’s “English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style.” (Some guardians of the language would shoot down “utterly,” arguing redundancy.) In these works, we find writers who love the English language with the fondness of children for their mother.

A score or so of these guides share a home on the shelf above my desk. Robert Hartwell Fiske wrote four of these volumes: “To the Point”; “The Best Words”;



HANNAH OLINGER/UNSPASH

Just about all of us could stand to improve our writing.

“Silence, Language, and Society”; and “Elegant English.” Fiske was the founder and editor of Vocabula Review, an online site devoted to the encouragement of clear expression. I am proud to say that several of my articles passed Fiske’s discerning eye and appeared on Vocabula.

That Fiske was obsessed with writing and composition is evident in the prepared statement he wrote before his untimely death from melanoma in 2016:

Robert Hartwell Fiske, owner and editor of the Vocabula Review since its genesis in September 1999, has died. Vocabula, I am sorry to say, will die along with him. My apologies. I have taken great pleasure in getting to know you, my readers. And I will miss you mightily. I wish you all an auspicious fate, a long-lived life. (Even though many people pronounce long-lived with a short i sound, the long i is correct. Long-lived derives from the word life, not the word live.) Now there, my friends and readers, is a man who departed this world displaying courage, wit, and class.

Here are five other books I frequently examine or else have used when teaching composition to students. In purchasing these books, my reasoning proceeded as follows: If I learned just one new trick or technique, that advice was worth much more than the few dollars I’d spent.

5 Winning Resources

Constance Hale’s witty “Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: Let Verbs Power Your Writing” reminds writers that verbs are the engines of a sentence. She begins by quoting the verbs used by Julius Caesar, Saint Matthew, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Saul Bellow, and even her dog Homer, who “understands the commands sit, stay, heel, and fetch.” Dull verbs, dull writing.

Next up are two books by Stephen Wilbers: “Keys to Great Writing” and “Mastering the Craft of Writing.” The

first I used with upper-level high school students in my final years as a teacher; the second I bought because of the pleasure the first book delivered.

Wilbers addresses the fundamentals for constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays, all with exercises designed to underline the lessons taught. In “Keys to Great Writing,” Chapter 4 “Music” with its emphasis on beat, rhythm, and composition, along with dozens of practical tips, is particularly valuable both to the novice and the veteran writer.

The fourth edition of “Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace,” written by Joseph Williams and revised in this edition by Gregory Colomb of the University of Virginia, offers excellent lessons in sentence and paragraph cohesion, emphasis, and concision. On page 58 of my copy, alongside six principles of concision like “Replace a phrase with a word” and “Change negatives to affirmatives,” a note remains from the days I taught style in the classroom. “Drum these into students,” the note says. After reviewing these six points, I hope I beat that drum good and loud.

Gregory Roper’s “The Writer’s Workshop: Imitating Your Way to Better Writing” harkens back to the practice of copying the style of other writers, or sometimes literally copying their work, until you find your own voice and rhythm. My Advanced Placement Composition students often undertook Roper’s exercises, often with productive but hilarious effects, by modeling passages from such works as Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s “Poetria Nova,” “The Ten Commandments” from the book of Deuteronomy, and Charles Dickens’s “Great Expectations.”

Roper enrolls his readers in a true writer’s workshop, with many well-constructed exercises, which, for those willing to pitch in and do the work, can help boost composition skills.

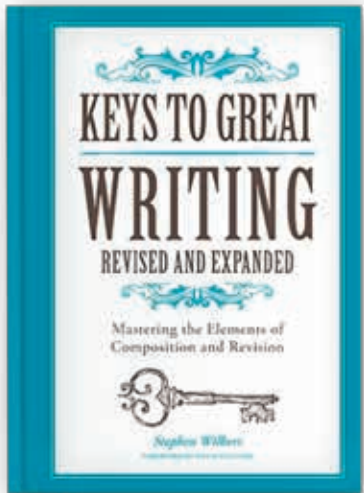
Finally, let me recommend “Style: The Art of Writing Well.” Here F.L. Lucas, a British classical scholar and writer who died in 1967, left us a book that bestows the twin pleasures of fine writing and excellent advice. Though I have not read “Style” cover to cover, I have returned to it again and again, drawn in particular by the charm of Lucas’s writing and by his stress on “Courtesy to Readers,” that duty owed by all writers, from the poet to the CEO, to write as clearly and as truthfully as possible for their readers. Lucas’s self-deprecation, his many examples, his humor, and his deep knowledge of literature make him a joy to read. A grand treat, but too advanced for most high school and college students.

In the Information Age, as some have labeled the 21st century, our ability to communicate via the written word is vital. Good writing is important not only in commerce—poor communication costs businesses billions of dollars per year, according to Inc.—but also in our personal affairs. Which of us has not sent an email or text we regretted, or misinterpreted one sent to us by a friend or family member?

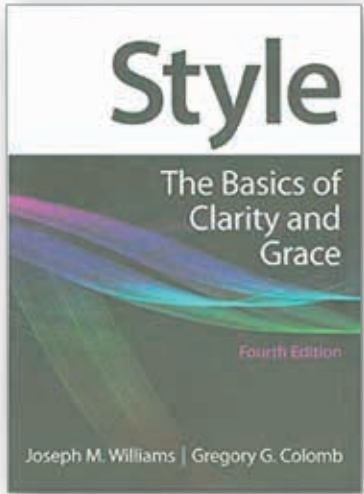
Many bookstores devote several shelves to these books on writing and composition.

Few of us possess the talents of a Leo Tolstoy or a Jane Austen, but through practice and diligent revision, and through the study of such books as those reviewed here, all of us can become better writers.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



Stephen Wilbers’s “Keys to Great Writing” addresses the fundamentals for constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays.



I relied on “Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace” in the classroom.



“The Writer’s Workshop: Imitating Your Way to Better Writing” harkens back to the practice of copying the style of other writers.



The Marvel Cinematic Universe Cranks Back up Again



MARK JACKSON

I’d thought we’d finished the Marvel Universe storytelling marathon with “Avengers: Endgame.” Twenty-two movies! It was done. Cooked. Iron Man had died. Thor got fat. Gone was the little tidbit of a post-credit-roll scene we’d all gotten so used to.

But no! Here we are right back at it again! I was about to walk out of “Spider-Man: Far From Home,” when the movie usher whispered at me, “You should stay for the post-credit-roll scene.”

What was I thinking? The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) had merely pulled a James Brown type fake-out stage exit, where they’d throw a cape over James and he’d be escorted, limping, off stage, too tired and beaten down to continue, only to shake it off and dash back to the microphone for another encore! The MCU is the Hardest Working Man, er, Franchise, in Showbiz: the Godfather of Soul, er, Superheroes.

Now, you knew 2017’s “Spider-Man: Homecoming” was going to be hard to beat. Not to mention “Far From Home” arrives on the scene six months after “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,” which actually won an Oscar. So along with “Avengers: Endgame,” that’s not one, but three hard acts to follow. Not to mention one risks Spider-saturation.

Teen Romance

This Spidey flick is a very entertaining transition: the emergence of Peter Parker from the shadow of his mentor Iron Man. What will it ultimately transition to? I’ll muse more about that later.

“Far From Home” picks up where “Avengers: Endgame” left off. It’s been five years since the great, purple, bald god Thanos finger-snapped the cosmos into disarray, and Iron Man finger-snapped it back into ordered existence again. Which was so immensely cosmic.

So to counteract all that bombast, the franchise has to start small again. Basically, “Far From Home” is a comedic high school romance, with Peter (Tom Holland) and MJ (Zendaya) pining for each other, Peter’s chubby buddy Ned (Jacob Batalon) pining for prim, cheerleader-looking Betty (Angourie Rice), and even Jon Favreau’s avuncular Happy hilariously crushing on Peter’s Aunt May (Marisa Tomei).

It’s young, geek love to the max, all of which can be summed up by that favorite millennial word: “Awkward!” But it’s delicious awkwardness with great payoffs of

dissonance-resolution.

Speaking of awkward, it also gets a lot of mileage out of Aunt May cluelessly calling Peter’s “Spidey sense” his “Peter Tingle,” which will make all boys in the audience resonate with mortification memories, where one had to holler, “Mom!?! Stop!!”

Shirking Responsibility

Peter’s now famous, but fame is not his thing; he’s not feeling it—not feeling the heavy mantle of Iron Man-type world saving-ness. No. He and his classmates go to France, hilariously chaperoned by teachers Mr. Dell and Mr. Harrington (J.B. Smoove and Martin Starr).

All Peter can think about is the lovely MJ, again played with great awkward quirkiness by the deeply charismatic Zendaya.

However, this is summer blockbuster season, not to mention a July 4th weekend opening; therefore—blockbuster writ large—and that means some ‘splosions need to happen. Many ‘splosions.

Are you familiar with how the term “blockbuster” came to be? A blockbuster was an illegal 1970s firecracker that kids managed nevertheless to get their hands on. It was a quarter of a stick of dynamite. Can you imagine kids playing with such a thing in this day and age? Blockbusters blew many a (male) teenage digit to kingdom come. So like I said—blockbuster-sized ‘splosions.

While Peter and class are on their European class trip (hence, “Far From Home”) along comes former S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) with some depressing news about an imminent, dire attack and an “Are you going to step up?” challenge.

Peter pretty much has no choice but to work with Fury and a new superhero named Quentin Beck, aka Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal), who has the most ridiculous superhero costume ever seen in the Marvel-verse (there’s a good reason for that)—a mix of something like Thor’s bodysuit with a helmet that looks like a big snow-globe.

Apparently, Mysterio’s here from another planet (maybe another universe) to fight these new monsters called Elementals, which are basically earth, wind, and fire swirled up into anthropomorphic form by some uninspiring CGI. Tidal waves rise up out of canals and smash the lovely Venetian architecture with big water-fists. And such.

Karmic Ripple Effect

Gyllenhaal as Mysterio is quite good. But is Mysterio really a good guy? He might be the



Spider-Man (Tom Holland) trying to save the world.

‘Far From Home’ is a comedic high school romance.

disgruntled former employee of someone we all know quite well, and therefore, in a sense, “Spider-Man: Far From Home” is the story of the karmic ripple effect of a former superhero rolling out: how his bad side affected some and, conversely, how his good side affected others. Gyllenhaal makes Mysterio both likable and dangerous at the same time.

So, as mentioned, this is the story of Peter Parker transitioning out of the shadow of his mentor. What will it ultimately transition to? Hopefully, to a maturation story where Peter becomes a man.

I’ve personally never been a fan of skinny, teenage Spider-Boy. Young Tom Holland is great, but I’m wanting to eventually see Spidey morph into a full-blown, 6-foot-4, mean, stacked, ripped, deep-voiced, grim superhero you don’t even want to think about messing with. Spider-Man. Not boy.

Spidey’s quippiness has always been his schtick, but I imagine, rather, a mash-up of Deadpool’s dark quippiness and Batman’s nocturnal taciturnity.

This is my personal Spidey vision. Allow me to paraphrase myself: But as a former trainer, this reviewer feels that the Spidey producers should consult a fitness coach about specificity. The spider-bod should be rockclimber-ish. All that pulling and hauling and grabbing that Spidey does should result in some truly epic lat muscles (latissimus dorsi).

Spider-Man should also have Popeye forearms, with all the grip-strength requirements in his line of work. Build a better body for Spidey! Put a sinewy bodybuilder like 1970s Frank Zane, or a svolse Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter like Cheick Kongo, in the Spidey suit.

They can keep the newest iteration of the Spidey suit though, which has X-Games type, wing-suit capabilities. Anyway, we shall see.

‘Spider-Man: Far From Home’

Director
Jon Watts

Starring
Starring: Tom Holland, Samuel L. Jackson, Jake Gyllenhaal, Marisa Tomei, Jon Favreau, Cobie Smulders

Running Time
2 hours, 9 minutes

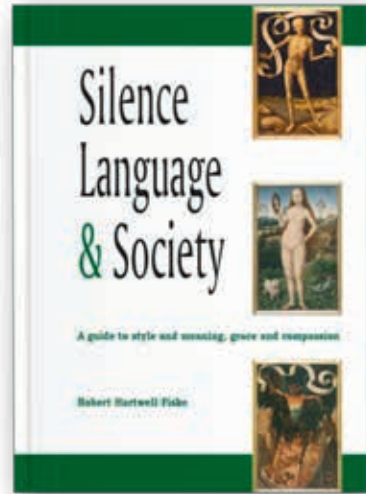
Rated
PG-13

Release Date
July 2

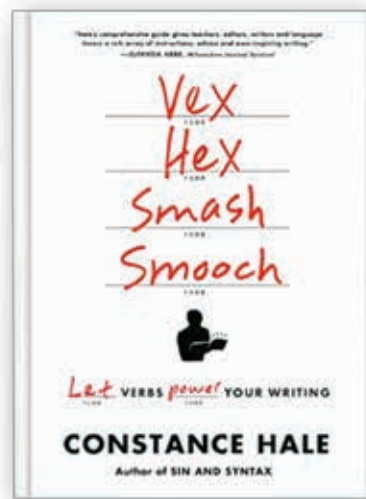
★★★★★



Strunk and White’s “The Elements of Style” is a classic text on the subject.



Robert Hartwell Fiske’s “Silence, Language, and Society” is one of the four volumes of his I own.



“Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: Let Verbs Power Your Writing” reminds writers that verbs are the engines of a sentence.

FILM REVIEW

An *Indie Thriller* With an Interesting Premise

IAN KANE

When it comes to movies, there are certain elements that can engender a viewer’s sense of immersion. Sure, character development, motives, backstories, and so on, are all factors that lend to building up our immersion. However, an often overlooked item that is usually only perceivable to very discerning moviegoers is characters making believable decisions.

Think of a typical horror or thriller flick in which people make totally incomprehensible decisions when faced with obvious danger. We’ve all witnessed these types of movies where people walk directly toward potential threats (such as foreboding, dark closets, or something clearly hazardous) instead of away from them. This can terminally derail any good setup a movie has built up to that point.

Director Kyle Schadt’s (“Sunland”) new indie thriller “Silent Panic” certainly has a great setup. Ex-con Eagle (Sean Nateghi, “Me, You, and Five Bucks”), Bobby (Joseph Martinez), and Dominic (Jay Habre) are a trio of buddies who are wrapping up a camping trip. As the chums get back to Eagle’s car, they get a nasty surprise—there’s a dead woman in the trunk.

“Look, I’m not comfortable callin’ the cops, and I think we all know why,” Eagle says right away, having served prison time for crimes he purportedly never committed. He believes he’ll be the first one to be blamed by overzealous detectives. The others are also confused and fearful of the repercussions of their recent discovery. Ultimately, they agree to remain hush-hush about the corpse, but that fateful decision eventually comes back to haunt them.

Scenes that may have seemed good on paper fall completely flat on the big screen.

‘Silent Panic’

Director
Kyle Schadt
Starring
Sean Nateghi, Joseph Martinez, Jay Habre
Running Time
1 hour, 36 minutes
Not Rated
Release Date
July 5

★★★★★

Schadt wrote the film’s script, and I found the premise simple yet relatable, at least at first. The dead body doubles as the film’s plot device as well as the main hook, begging the audience to consider what they would do in such a situation. It’s entirely believable, since this kind of tragic event is within the realm of possibility given a confluence of bad, bad circumstances.

But, as the saying goes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” That certainly holds true for film plots. In this case, a group of friends discovering and then trying to decide what to do with a corpse isn’t exactly an original plot. It’s been done before in films such as “The Loft” and “The Upper Footage.” However, coming across a random body that (spoiler alert) none of them had any involvement with, is a new twist on things.

The second act starts off strong, mainly powered by the reasoning of Eagle’s bad-boy past and his reluctance to contact the authorities. Soon, however, things begin to devolve into what resembles a melodramatic, made-for-TV movie. Scenes that may have seemed good on paper fall completely flat on the big screen.

One example of this is when Ea-

gle’s girlfriend, Robin (Constance Brenneman), takes the corpse-car out shopping. From there, we are treated to back-and-forth cuts of Eagle cycling to the local stores in order to find her, and shots of her shopping. He’s got to get to her before she opens the trunk to store her shopping bags. What transpires is so mind-drubbingly unbelievable that it garnered some “yeah, right” guffawing from the audience.

As Eagle’s character becomes annoyingly unbelievable, his two cohorts don’t fare much better. Bobby and Dominic appear to be slightly more sensible than Eagle. But then one of them suddenly turns to drugs in order to deal with his stress, and things spiral out of control. This turn of events not only felt contrived and clichéd, but it also gave the impression that the filmmakers were becoming self-conscious of their rabidly disintegrating script and had to inject something “edgy” in order to prop it up.

The plot soon deteriorates from unbelievable to downright ridiculous when Eagle starts to go to totally irrational lengths to try and cover up a crime he never committed. Meanwhile, his egocentric nature and lack of compassion

for the victim make him—as the main character—utterly unrelatable. I found myself rooting for his demise.

Following the Female-Victim Trend

Unfortunately, “Silent Panic” falls into the ideological trap of promoting the idea of perpetual female victimhood. Why don’t we ever see any films that feature women finding dead men? It would be interesting to explore how they deal with similar circumstances. Now that would be original!

Or, as one reviewer wrote about “Silent Panic”: “Make the corpse male and go for laughs? Could have worked.” (“Weekend at Bernie’s” comes to mind.)

To the film’s credit, it does feature some solid cinematography by Jordan Rennert (“The Perfect Dose,” “House of Demons”), which captures the quiet sense of desperation (at least when Eagle isn’t blabbering) and eventual isolation that the characters find themselves in.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To see more, visit [DreamFlightEnt.com](#)

INDIE RIGHTS



What can you do when the police pull you over and you have a corpse in the trunk?

FILM REVIEW

‘Stuber’ Kumail Nanjiani as Dave Bautista’s Nagging Wife

MARK JACKSON

Stu + Uber = “Stuber.”

Who’s Stu? Stu’s a narrow-shouldered, effete, meek, mild, polite, fastidious Indian man, living in America (played by Kumail Nanjiani). He works as a retail clerk at a sort of Home Depot and Costco mash-up, but drives an Uber to supplement his income. Stu’s also viciously sarcastic, with world-class, passive-aggressive, comedic timing.

Stu has a highly unintelligent, bullying boss who calls him “Stuber.” Stu does not like his boss, or his job. Stu also, unfortunately, doesn’t love his Uber gig because the endless stream of messy, rude people who enter and exit his leased, electric Uber car is constantly putting Stu’s star rating in jeopardy.

Enter Vic

Vic (former World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) wrestler Dave Bautista) is an enormous, blind cop. Blind? Blind because he just had LASIK eye surgery. But when he hears that a dangerous drug dealer (Iko Uwais) he’s been tailing for a lengthy period of time is on the loose, Vic jumps in his car, runs over a mailbox and a small tree, and lands in a ditch. Vic must therefore call an Uber.

So “Stuber” is kind of buddy-cop movie combined and an odd-couple movie: a cop reluctantly teaming up with a regular Joe, like “Rush Hour” and “48 Hrs.” Vic’s a bull in a china shop, and Stu’s

an Indian version of Tony Randall from “The Odd Couple,” except upgraded with millennial-speak and 2019 potent sarcasm, and lots of man-screaming (because Vic does dangerous things).

Vic and Stu’s Excellent Adventure

So, we already talked about Vic’s LASIK, but I didn’t mention that Vic scheduled his LASIK appointment on the same day as an art-gallery sculpture debut by his estranged daughter (Natalie Morales). So Vic should attend that, but he’d rather chase his drug-dealing perp. This kind of thing is, of course, the reason they’re estranged.

Now Stu, years before, managed to friend-zone himself with Becca (Betty Gilpin), the love of his life. But he never told her how he felt, so she started dating a poor man’s Dwayne Johnson, who then dumped her. Now she’s depressed and needs comforting; this is Stu’s chance. He desperately needs to drive over to Becca’s and say nice things.

But then rude, messy Vic gets in his car. As mentioned, Vic, after blindly landing in the ditch, has to use the Uber app that his daughter installed on his phone for him.

Dave Bautista, the former WWE wrestler who plays the character of Drax the Destroyer in the “Guardians of the Galaxy” franchise, is a little bit of a poor man’s Dwayne Johnson, aka The Rock—that other former WWE wrestler turned actor.

Dave’s not as funny as Dwayne. He’s got potential, but his talent hasn’t blossomed yet. All that

highly predictable flattening of small trees and running into ditches—Bautista can’t really make it work. This movie would have hit the stratosphere had the exceedingly funny Rock teamed up with Kumail Nanjiani, because Kumail Nanjiani is a very, very funny man. But Dave might eventually catch up to Dwayne.

All in All

“Stuber” is basically a 93-minute commercial for Uber, and as such, it’s rather entertaining. It has loads of cartoon-y hyperviolence, but it’s really the comedic chemistry of Dave Bautista and Kumail Nanjiani that charges this movie, in the same way electricity charges Stu’s Uber car.

It’s Vic’s hypermachismo, hulking muscle, and stoicism being

Vic, a cop (Dave Bautista, L), takes Uber driver Stu (Kumail Nanjiani) on a night of chasing bad guys, in “Stuber.”

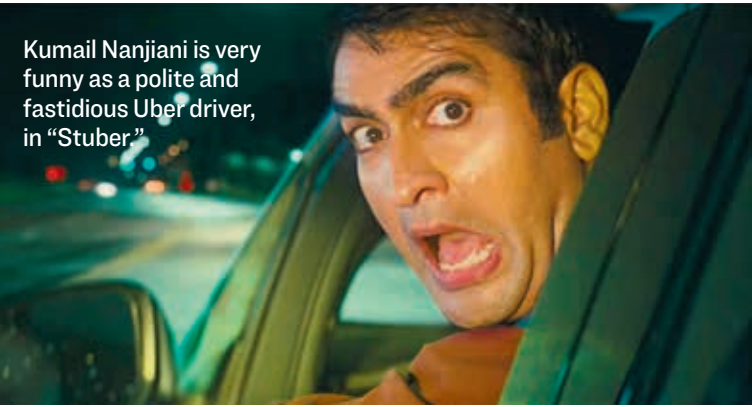
‘Stuber’

Director
Michael Dowse
Starring
Kumail Nanjiani, Dave Bautista, Iko Uwais, Natalie Morales, Betty Gilpin, Jimmy Tatro, Mira Sorvino, Karen Gillan
Running Time
1 hour, 33 minutes
Rated
R
Release Date
July 12

★★★★★



Kumail Nanjiani is very funny as a polite and fastidious Uber driver, in “Stuber.”



ALL PHOTOS BY TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX/DISNEY

constantly at odds with Stu’s ... well, let me see—how would I describe Stu? He sort of uses the so-called gay voice, but he’s not gay. But his sarcasm and observational “read-out” ability, combined with a talent for verbally dressing-down opponents might also appear to derive from gay culture. So where does this not-exactly-effeminate, not-exactly-gay character come from?

He’s not exactly a weak man. He has no problem whatsoever speaking his mind, even knowing his larger cohort might pound him to smithereens (which is great for supplying an endless stream of conflict). He can stand up to Vic verbally any day; he gives Vic a piece of his mind at a moment’s notice. He does have problems telling Becca he loves her. OK, here it is: Stu sometimes functions as Vic’s nagging wife.

And so this persona conflict between the two naturally progresses to their becoming friends. Chasing a death-dealing drug dealer, with shoot-em-ups, car chases, and the bleeding and puking that accompany all that, will make all involved feel like they went through a war together, and this is always very bonding for the menfolk.

Stu, meet Vic.