

# READING BOOKS TO READ OURSELVES

By Jim Dwyer

So there they are. Abandoned cardboard boxes, a colony of them, stashed beneath the staircase in a summer house, unseen for years.

Inside are class assignments, carbon copies of articles, notes from events and lectures and interviews that took 30 place years ago: the first mulch spread across a life in writing.

"Poetic," says one comment on an essay. "But again, that clarity problem. B."

Nearly all that mulch was the byproduct of education in Jesuit institutions, Loyola School in Manhattan, Fordham College in the Bronx, plus my boyhood parish.

By the time I graduated college in 1979, I had spent nearly two decades in and around Jesuit places, and even though I had taken only one class in writing - my official college major was "general sciences" - I knew that I would try to live as a writer. It never occurred to me that I was unprepared.

In the first place, the teachers in those schools, Jesuits and lay people, taught me to write by teaching me to read. Certainly, the primal joys of reading are experienced much earlier than high school. The child learns what the human voice sounds like on a page and feels the enchantments of narrative.

The best teachers pushed on. Tom Ambrose, a Jesuit who taught English and theology in my freshman year at Loyola, naturally used different books for each class - *Native Son* in the morning session, *Night* in the afternoon - but the same tools. Take notes as you read; track the argument, the story and the characters; summarize the day's reading in a few paragraphs.

In short, interrogate the page. Interrogate yourself.

One afternoon, Father Ambrose came to class, anguished. Inmates at Attica State Prison had been holding hostages, but that morning, the governor sent in state troopers, and 41 people had been killed. In the newspapers, we would read that inmates had mutilated and killed the hostages. Some months later, we learned that virtually all those first reports were untrue.

Add to the list of Ambrose lessons: interrogate your society.

Five years later, Ray Schroth at Fordham taught a breathtaking book - *A Time to Die*, by Tom Wicker - about the events in Attica. In classes led by Schroth, a Jesuit, a journalist and my mentor, I saw that facts could become literature. And those years seemed to bring a new tuning fork every day.

A Loyola Jesuit, Vince Butler, screened Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* for the 16-year old boys in his film class and showed us how narrative could climb a ladder of images. Gerry Moylan, a layman, brought us to the Mercer Street Arts Center to see *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and tipped us off about the great columnists then writing in *The New York Post*, Pete Hamill and Murray Kempton.

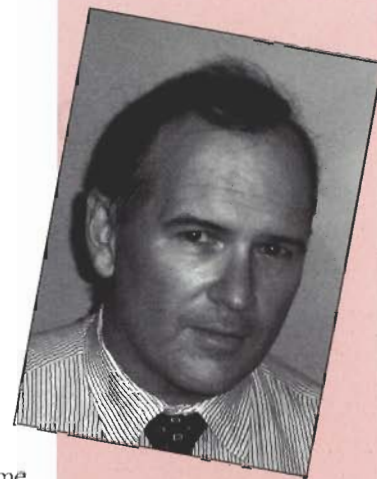
One of the most useful lessons came from a layman, Dan Tramontozzi, after he graded a social studies term paper. He red-marked a few pages, then ordered me to figure out what was wrong with the rest. It is hard to quote anyone with confidence 33 years later, but the gist of his words - "This is garbage by anyone's standards, especially yours" - were as much about expectations as they were a rebuke.

A classmate and I ran the student paper, typing stories onto mimeograph sheets then handing them out, a few hours from thought to publication. A basketball game won. A dance scheduled. A favorite teacher unjustly pushed out.

On a modified Ignatian retreat, Tom Blessin told us about the "plus sign" - shorthand for the precept that we ought to assume the best of people when we are not sure. The idea that you could be liberated by doubt, not manacled with suspicion, was the most purely exhilarating fragment of Catholic teaching to penetrate my head.

Those men and women taught us to give books the same moral scrutiny - and to find in them the same delight - that they urged for our lives. They questioned received wisdom, they urged us to be self-critical without being self-destructive, and they gave us freedom to make mistakes.

They passed on a discipline of temperament that transcends craft or career. By reading books, we read our minds. ■



Pulitzer Prize winner Jim Dwyer is a graduate of Loyola School in Manhattan (1975) and Fordham College in the Bronx (1979), where he majored in general sciences and was editor of the *Fordham Ram*. He served as a campus stringer for the *New York Times*. He attended the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Since then he has been on the staff of six newspapers, the *Hudson Dispatch*, the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, the *Bergen Record*, *New York Newsday*, the *New York Daily News*, and now *The New York Times*. He has written or co-written four books, *Subway Lives: 24 Hours in the New York City Subways*; *Two Seconds Under the World*, an account of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center; *Actual Innocence: Five Days to Execution and Other Dispatches from the Wrongly Convicted*; and *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers*. He was a Ferris Professor of Humanities at Princeton University in 2003. Jim grew up in Manhattan and lives there with his wife, Cathy, a professor of computer science at Pace University, and their children, Maura, a junior at Oberlin College, and Catherine, who is in her first year at Stuyvesant High School.