

## Note from the Editor

by *Tricia Currans-Sheehan*

***"Writing is like farming. You cultivate a manuscript, and, like a farmer, you need discipline. A farmer farms soil, writers farm brain cells." - Frederick Manfred***

In the seventh issue of *The Briar Cliff Review* we remember Frederick Manfred, author of 31 novels, who died September 7, 1994. We remember him for his contribution to literature, especially the literature of our region. He created the term "Siouxland" in his novel *This is the Year* published in 1947, and today the Sioux City phone book is filled with businesses that begin with "Siouxland." Our magazine, since its founding in 1989, has had a section called "Siouxland," focusing on the history and the people of the area of the Big Sioux River basin in South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska. Born near Doon, Iowa, Fred wrote under his birth name Feike Feikima from 1944 until 1951; then he changed his name to Manfred, which meant "man of peace," and published *Lord Grizzly* under his new name.

Joseph Basile in "A Day at Roundwind: Memorializing Fred Manfred" says that Fred was a "wearer of many hats: Fred the farm boy with dreams expanding to match this growing physical frame. . . Fred the explorer of landscapes (physical, intellectual, spiritual); Fred the mentor; Fred the inspirer. . . ." For me, he was Fred the mentor and inspirer.

My writing life was shaped by Fred Manfred, whether he knew it or not. In 1974, at age 23, I took a teaching job in Luverne, MN. I first saw Fred walking past my classroom on a September afternoon on his way to visit Gordy Gits, the chair of the English department, whose classroom was next door. Gordy introduced me to Fred, a huge man, standing six foot nine inches with hands the size of baseball gloves. He was a writer, a man who made his living with his pen. Writing was his life, his career.

I remember seeing one of his manuscripts in Gordy's office. The typed manuscript was on yellow paper in a deep box that might have held large envelopes. I stared at all those pages and tried to imagine how they'd look in a book one day. I stood above that box and touched it. A real novel. The mystique of publishing filled me with excitement. At that time in 1975 Fred had written a dozen novels. I began reading them - *Lord Grizzly*, *Scarlet Plume*, *Ace of Spades*, and *The Chokecherry Tree*. As an emerging feminist I had trouble with Fred's portrayal of women and the relationships between men and women, but still I read on.

In Luverne I'd run into Fred in the late afternoon coming out of the coffee shop or drug store. I watched him, studied him, wondering if I could pick up tips on what it was like to be a real writer. I lived in a house on the edge of Luverne on the blacktop that led to Blue Mounds State park. Every time I'd head out to the Mounds I would see Fred's house up there in the hills. It was the perfect place for a writer to live.

It was Fred who encouraged me to go to grad school in Vermillion, SD where I took his writing classes. At that time he was writer-in-residence at the University of South Dakota. One day a week he'd arrive in Dakota Hall, his head almost touching the ceiling of that hallway. I was a beginning writer and had so much to learn. I remember thinking that I could never write a novel --I'd never have the stick-to-itiveness to write all those pages. One day in our seminar he said, "Can each of you write one page a day?" His eyes searched

the room. We nodded. I nodded. "Then go write a page a day for a year and you will have 365 pages - the length of some novels." We knew that 365 pages did not necessarily mean you had a unified, coherent novel that anyone would even want to read, but that wasn't important. What was important was that he demystified the act of writing the novel. If it were broken down into a page a day, it was possible.

In my writing classes I have passed on to my students some of his stories and advice. I remember what he told our class about creating characters in fiction. Fred said that the Frisians made their coffee on the stove. When the coffee was poured into a cup, the grounds settled to the bottom -- these settlings were called "drek." He said you needed that "drek" to have that wonderful cup of coffee. "Characters in a novel are like that cup of coffee. They must have some drek in them," he said. They can't be too perfect -- they must be real and believable.

When I write today I sometimes see Fred's image. Because he was the first real writer I knew, he is the person who comes to mind when someone says writer. He was a teacher, a mentor and an inspirer.

In our magazine we have themes of Siouland in many of our works. We see the isolation and ruggedness of this "strange, troubled land" in Ron Johns' "Three Trees," "Ice Storm" and "Nevada" and see the simple beauty in "Bailey's Sunflower."

The spirit of the people and their struggle to live in this land is reflected in - "Anna" by Louis Gregory, "Leaving" by Kate Flaherty, "Grasshopper Plague" by Sheeree Seemann and Richard Danielson's photo of a decaying house on the prairie. We are pleased to introduce to you many new writers and artists who live beyond our region, and we welcome them as they join the voices of our Siouland community.

"Note from the Editor." *The Briar Cliff Review*. Vol. 7, Spring 1995. Inside front cover.