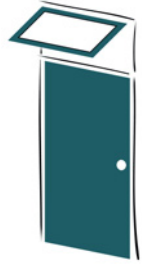


# the transom review

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Edited by Sydney Lewis

## Gwen Macsai's Topic

### About Gwen Macsai

Gwen Macsai is an award winning writer and radio producer for National Public Radio. Her essays have been heard on All Things Considered, Morning Edition and Weekend Edition Saturday with Scott Simon since 1988. Macsai is also the creator of "What About Joan," starring Joan Cusack and author of "Lipshtick," a book of humorous first person essays published by HarperCollins in February of 2000.

Born and bred in Chicago (south shore, Evanston), Macsai began her career at *WBEZ-FM* and then moved to Radio Smithsonian at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. After working for NPR for eight years she moved to Minneapolis, MN where "Lipshtick" was born, along with the first of her three children. Then, one day as she tried to wrangle her smallish-breast-turned-gigantic-snaking-fire-hose into the mouth of her newborn babe, James L. Brooks, (Producer of the Mary Tyler Moore Show, Taxi, The Simpsons and writer of Terms of Endearment, Broadcast News and As Good As It Gets), called. He had just heard one of her essays on Morning Edition and wanted to base a sitcom on her work. In 2000, "What About Joan" premiered. The National Organization for Women chose "What About Joan" as one of the top television shows of that season, based on its non-sexist depiction and empowerment of women.

Macsai graduated from the University of Illinois and lives in Evanston with her husband and three children.



## Intro by Jay Allison

Public Radio has a little chip on its shoulder about comedy. It's perfectly comfortable being clever and witty and charming, but a bit awkward around funny. How does being funny fit with what we do, our mission and service? We don't mind sneaking in attempts around car advice, news quizzes, and general story-telling... but we rarely stand right up and declare our intention to make you laugh.

Trying to be funny is scary, because it's agonizingly clear when you fail. Are we scared, or is it just not what we do?

Gwen Macsai is funny and she means to be. She started being funny on public radio, which swept her into writing a television sitcom, and now we're hoping she's coming back.

You'll like her manifesto. It's funny. And smart, and full of heart. Come on, it's public radio, after all.

NOTE: Look for the audio links from this topic at:

[http://www.transom.org/guests/specialquests/gwenmacsai\\_audio.html](http://www.transom.org/guests/specialquests/gwenmacsai_audio.html)

and listen to Gwen's work. You won't be sorry. Also,

NOTE 2: It appears that Gwen, to supplement her biographical information, swept the contents of her desk and bulletin board into a manila envelope for us, because these artifacts had scotch tape and gummy stuff on them, which had to be removed before scanning. We will return them better than we found them.

# Gwen Macsai's Manifesto

Gwen Macsai - December 6, 2002

## LESSONS LEARNED: A JOURNEY FROM OBSCURITY TO NPR, PUBLISHING, A SIDE TRIP TO HOLLYWOOD AND BACK TO OBSCURITY



### LESSON #1:

***Ignorance Isn't Always Bliss, But It Does Come In Handy Sometimes***

Despite taking two years off between my sophomore and junior years of college, I still had no idea of what the hell I wanted to "do" as graduation came careening around the corner about to slap me in the face. But I did know one thing: I loved community radio. Bingo! I knew there was no community radio station in Chicago but, I thought, public radio is the next closest thing. I'll look for a job there. So I called up the program director and told him my plight and begged for an interview (for what I had no idea). Cheerily, he agreed. Great, I thought, that was easy. What's all the fuss about getting a job anyway?

"Do you have a demo tape?" he asked.

"No." I said

"Can you get one?"

"Sure." I said.

"Great," he said, "see you Monday."

Okay!

What the fuck is a demo tape?

Immediately I called an acquaintance-who-dated-a-good-friend-of-mine-thereby-making-it-possible-to-call-him-in-a-panic. Why? He worked at the Chicago public radio station.]

"Here's what you have to do: interview someone interesting, use three or four cuts of tape, write a script around it and have someone else read an intro. Four minutes tops. Don't forget the intro."

"Okay!"

I had never recorded anything, interviewed anyone, edited tape or mixed a goddamn thing. And I had four days to get this done.

I begged the program director at the community radio station to help me, and if I owe anyone in this field anything, I owe him my firstborn. He lent me a tape recorder and a mic and told me he would teach me to edit. So I went about finding someone "interesting." I came up with William Warfield, a famous singer who was best known for his rendition of "Old Man River" in the movie "Showboat." He had just won a Grammy for a record he'd done and he taught voice at my school. I called and asked for an interview. He said yes. So, I got all dressed up (purple corduroy tent dress, boots - it was the late seventies) and went to his office. I had spent the entire day before at the library checking out every recording he'd ever done and Xeroxing every Who's Who Warfield bio I could find. I had my questions all written out. I smiled at him, I asked my questions, I thanked him profusely and left, elated.

While walking across the quad on my way home, I rewound the tape and played it back. Nothing but silence. I fast forwarded it. Nothing. Rewound it. Nothing. I frantically pressed the buttons, trying to find the interview. It wasn't there.

I burst into tears.

And while I am not a religious person, I believe that some kind of angel was looking out for me that day because at the moment I burst into tears, I ran into a guy from my Shakespeare class who happened to be a professional DJ. I explained what happened. He said, "Here's what you do. You go home, call him and tell him there was a technical problem, which there was so that's not lying (I had pushed pause while setting up the tape and forgotten to release it) and then you tell him you only need ten minutes of his time, ask your four best questions and get out of there. In a four minutes piece you'll use three or four cuts, some music and script. You'll be fine."

Okay?

I called Mr. Warfield. He agreed to meet me at two o'clock the following day. I went to the station that night and the program director taught me how to cut tape.

At two o'clock the next day I arrived at Warfield's office. Two-ten. Two-twenty. Two-thirty. No William Warfield. He'd forgotten. Despondent, I walked out one of the many doors in the music building. Warfield was walking in the same door. Indeed, he had forgotten. But there I was. I got the tape. I went home. I was up all night. In a blitz of concentration the likes of which I haven't experienced since that day, I went to the station Sunday morning and left Sunday night, with a mixed demo piece in my hand. When I finally go to my interview, I was walking tall.

"Oh!" the program director said, looking over my resume. "I thought you'd graduated. We won't have any jobs until August. Call Ms. X in August, she's the producer of the show you would work on."

Okay?

I called Ms. X in August.

"Do you have a demo tape?" She asked.

"Yes!!!! Yes I do!!!! Mr. Y has it." I said.

"Great. I'll get it from him."

She called me back two days later. "He lost it."

She went on to tell me that I could do another demo for her with their equipment, and if it sounded good enough, she would air it on her show. I did, she did and I got my first freelance gig as a reporter, then assistant producer, then talk show producer and blah blah blah.

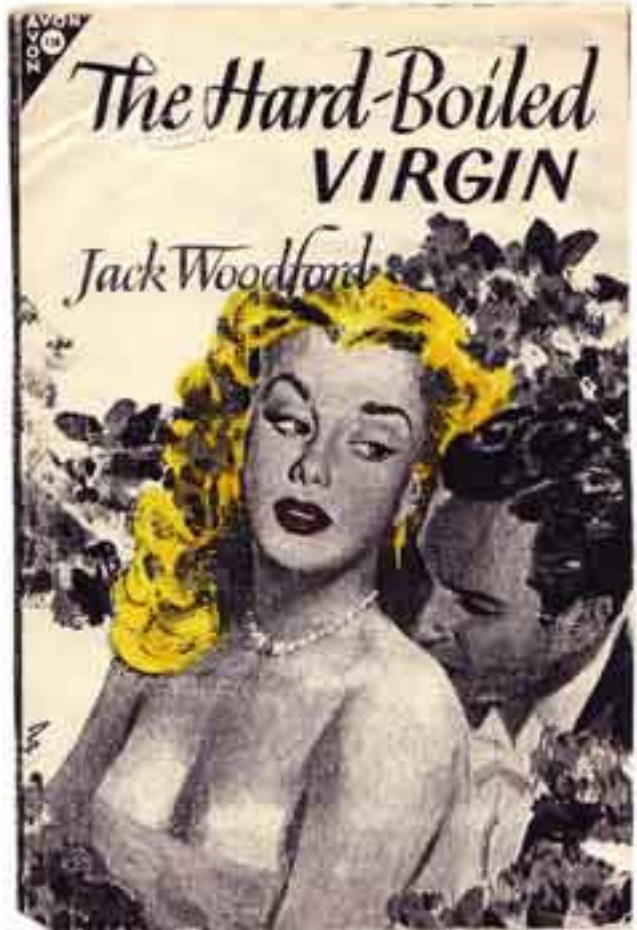
And I learned more in those four I-didn't-know-any-better panic-stricken days than I have in the entire rest of my career.

After working at WBEZ in Chicago for three years, I got a job at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, which leads me to...

## LESSON # 2:

***Don't Bother With The Smithsonian Astrophysical Laboratory If What You Really Want To Do Is Talk About Chin Hair, Or Find Your Voice***

I wanted to plan a trip to Boston. Actually, there was this guy I was dating who lived in Boston and I was looking for an excuse to go. Fortunately for me, my boss at the time, the very gracious, talented and amazing Mary Beth Kirchner was happily in cahoots with me. At that time in our lives, romance came along seldom enough for us both to wholeheartedly encourage it in the other. So when this thing happened with this guy, we knocked our heads together to see what Smithsonian-related story could be found in Boston. Which wasn't hard considering everything under the sun is related to the Smithsonian somehow. Dorothy's Ruby Slippers, Teddy Roosevelt's pelts, the space program, flesh eating beetles, world-class performers, trips all over the world, folk life records. Nice work if you can get it, I tell you.



However, I ended up at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory at Harvard. Let me just say here that for years I thought that a quark was a small migratory bird. So I wasn't entirely confident about my ability to eke four stories out of the SAO. But, I persevered. I drove nine hours to Boston, found the observatory, found my first interview and set everything up. Within fifteen seconds, I knew that the entire trip was going to be a complete and total bust (except for the guy part, which of course eventually ended up as a total bust as well, but that's an entirely different story).

I didn't understand one word of what this observatory guy was saying. It was all Sanskrit to me. By this time, I had done enough pieces to feel that you can almost always squeeze something out of an interview, even if you have to write circles around each actuality just to hold it up. But this was truly hopeless. I explained my plight to Mary Beth and in her oracle-like wisdom she said "I don't know what we were thinking anyway, sending you to the SAO. Here, see what you can do with the flesh-eating beetles."

In the following two years of working with her, I would check in with her after every interview and tell her all about the funny parts of it. Then I would write a script and read it to her and play her my tape.

"What about the funny part?" She'd say.

"I can't put that in the script!"

"Why not?"

The thought would never occur to me.

Slowly but surely, she encouraged me to use the voice I used to talk about the story, to tell the story. To become a part of the piece, to include myself or my commentary, to use the first person, to make the piece not always about the subject but about my thoughts as I encountered the subject. So I stopped thinking of tape as intakes and outtakes and started thinking of anything on tape as being fair game which opened up a whole new world of ideas.

A note: Finding one's voice is a long journey that, in my opinion, depends on a few key things. Working with very supportive and kind editors and producers, working with talented editors and producers, figuring out what it is you have to offer that is different from what every other reporter out there has to offer and doing a shitload of pieces so that osmosis and confidence can go to work? Some people are born with a voice so strong that it is obvious from the start. But even those people need to learn how best to take advantage of it, hone it and make it work for them. Again, a shitload of pieces is the only road in.

After working at the Smithsonian for a while, I started sniffing around NPR and had an idea to pitch, which leads me to...

### LESSON # 3:

## ***Never Date Someone Who Is About To Become A Famous Essayist Unless You Can Write About Them Before They Write About You***

Not that I'm competitive or anything.

While in Washington, a friend of mine introduced me to Ira Glass. And even though he had yet to attain rock star status, I was still intimidated. He: Producer on All Things Considered. Me: lowly hayseed. Nevertheless, I had a kernel of an idea.

The Oscars were coming up and the statuettes were made in Chicago. I was going home for a visit and wanted to do a story. He agreed to produce it. While I was at home he called me and told me he'd thought of the perfect angle.

"You have to go in there and try to buy one."

He, Producer. Me, hayseed.

We agreed that I would be relentless in my quest for an Oscar. The factory owner was an old Jewish guy who was, without trying, hilarious ("I don't watch the movies. I get the shpilkes.") And I came back with tape in hand.

Over the next few days Ira listened to the tape, we picked cuts, I wrote a script and he made suggestions on how to improve it. His style and sensibility were unmistakable. I saw how rhythmically he wrote and how rhythmically he used the tape. Short, punctuated, funny. I was fascinated and flabbergasted. For the tracks, he coached me in the studio as though he were Cecil B. DeMille. It was a ball. People liked the piece. I was high as a kite. He was too. We started dating.

We stopped dating.

Not much time passed in between.

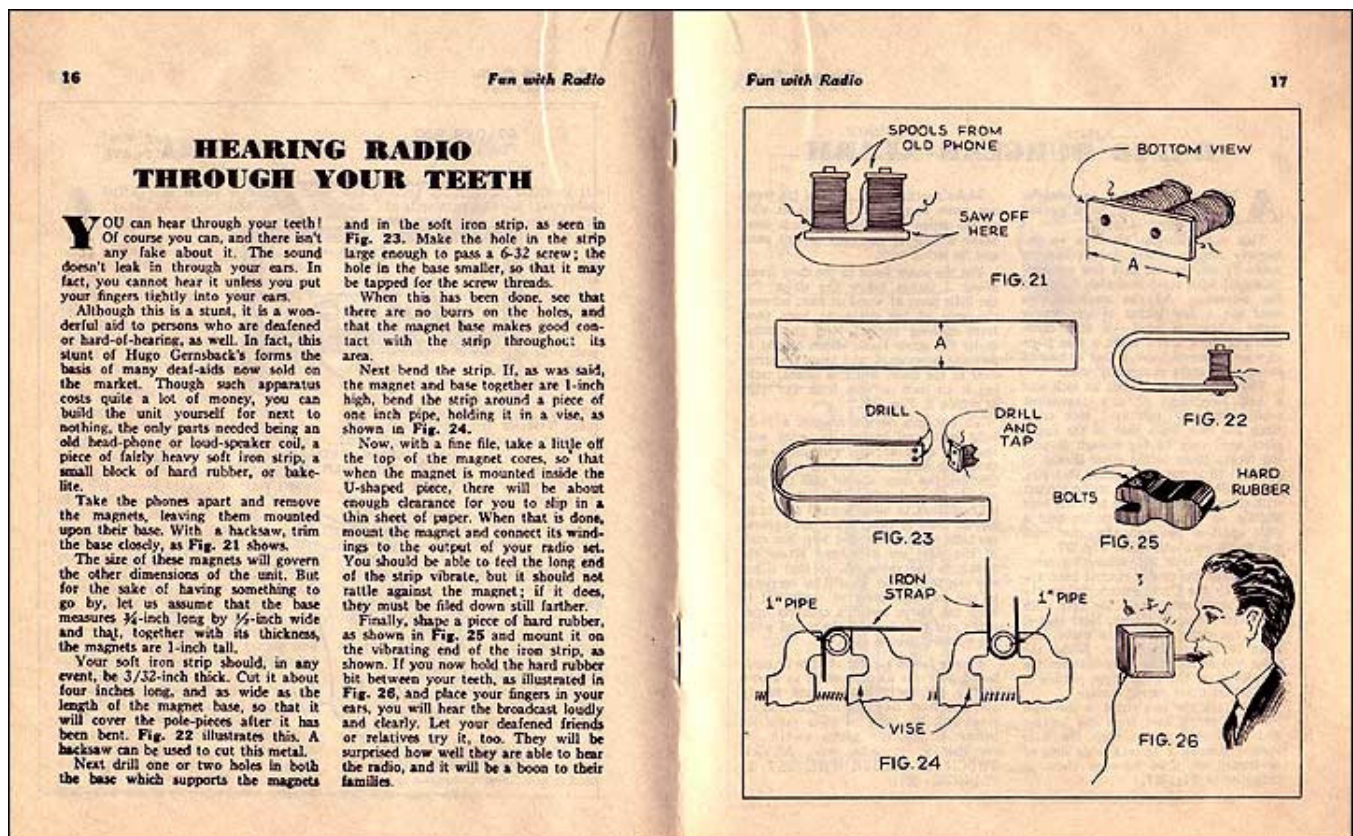
And without going into any inappropriate detail, I bring it up for one simple reason. When our briefest of romances ended, I thought that I could never ever do another funny piece ever again. Ever. I mean, he had essentially thought up the idea, picked the cuts and written the script.

"That's ridiculous!!!!" My friend and boss Mary Beth said. "You were funny before you met him and you're still funny! Snap out of it!" It was one of many, many key times in my life that the voice of Mary Beth altered my future.



If you are lucky in this business and in any business, while you are still learning the ropes you get to work with some great talent. I was extremely lucky. I worked with Ira, Sean Collins, Taki Telonidis, Sandy Tolan and Brooke Gladstone among many, many others. But there comes a point when you have to separate yourself from all the people who have helped you, influenced you, nurtured you, taught you, and been good to you, and you have to go and find your own way. For some of us it happens by force, others by choice, but either way it can be an ugly day when you are forced to work alone and see what becomes of you without all that great support around you. It is lonely, depressing, demeaning, intimidating, horrifying, terrifying and exhilarating. At least until it is terrifying again.

And now, fourteen years later, Ira has a gargantuanly successful radio show that has single handedly changed the landscape of personal narrative and I have a failed TV sitcom and stretch marks. I think we both did pretty well, don't you?



## LESSON # 4:

### ***If You Have Any Say In The Matter, Never Let A New Editor Edit Your Beautiful, Flawless Piece Of Creative Writing, & If You Don't Have Any Say About It, KILL YOURSELF***

After the Oscar episode, I started pitching and filing off beat reporter pieces at ATC. Then one day I had an idea for an essay. I wrote it up and read it to an editor with two little music cues written in. He said hey, if we're gonna do it, let's really camp it up! And a new form was born: the highly produced personal essay. I started pitching and producing those.

But unfortunately, my friend and great editor who had basically come up with the genre moved on, and one day I had to do an edit with someone else. Not that this person was moody or anything, but I did know of at least one staff person who set his lunar watch to coincide with her menstrual cycle so that he would know when to avoid her completely. I was really looking forward to this edit.

Let me just interrupt myself here to say that reading the copy for an essay in an editor's office, with no tape, no sound effects and no one else there to laugh is one of the most excruciatingly painful experiences a writer can have. (One of the seasoned writers on my TV show --a long time veteran of the Simpson's has said that he can't even be in the room when his script is read for the first time by the actors because it is just so humiliating and unbearable). Really, it's awful. Even remembering it makes me weak.

So anyway, this editor and I went into her office and I read through the essay. She did not smile, she did not laugh. Not a grin, not a smirk, not a chortle. Oh, the shvitzing. When I finished, she just looked at me.

"I don't think it's funny," she said. "I don't get it."

Okay?

"What don't you get?"

The essay was about being single and not liking it. There was a line that read "You make more frequent hair appointments... just to be touched by the shampooer."

She said, "Like this line about the shampooer? Why don't you just make it, 'you make more frequent hair appointments?'"

Oh God. Smite me please. Then, I was saved by the bell. Her phone rang. It was a lengthy call. I chewed over strategies in my mind. Grovel? Insist? Explain? Suicide? When she was done, she turned to me.

"It's fine."

"What?"

"It's fine. It's funny. Just produce it as is."

"Okay?"

"I'm going through a divorce and I'm just not in a great place."

Of course I was filled with empathy and feelings of support and felt badly for her. But come on, my piece!!!

Then there was the time I was chastised for using the word nipple in a piece ("your ovaries start shriveling up like raisins and your nipples start facing south.") and it became a building-wide debate over whether it was a sexual reference or not. I lost.



And I won't go into the very painful events surrounding the airing (or lack thereof) of a piece I did on snoring except to say that I had a huge fight with an executive producer over it and a few days later a woman in the apartment next to mine asked if everything was alright because she'd heard so much yelling and crying.

Nevertheless, I continued to do work for NPR. I also got married, moved to Minneapolis, did a few pieces from there and had a baby which leads me to...

## **LESSON # 5:**

### ***NPR May Not Pay For Shit, But You Can't Beat The Exposure***

**-OR-**

### ***Thank God Jim Brooks Listens To "Morning Edition." Otherwise My Children Wouldn't Go To College***

The day after my first child was born, I had a piece that aired on Morning Edition. Fortunately for me, James L. Brooks was in his car on his way to work and heard it. Jim Brooks, for those of you who don't know, produced "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "The Simpsons," "Taxi," "Room 222." He wrote "Broadcast News," "Terms of Endearment," and produced "Big," Jerry Maguire, "As Good As It Gets," etc. His agent called and laid it on thick. She spoke extremely quickly.

"Isn't it fantastic! Jim wants to option your work for a possible sitcom! It'll be a modern day "That Girl!" Like a "Seinfeld," only about something! It'll be all about you! With a big star, like a Meg Ryan, only for television! He loves working with Joan Cusack, this could be a vehicle for her!"

"I went to high school with Joan Cusack. She did my make-up for 'Fiddler on the Roof' in nineteen seventy-eight."

"Oh my GOD! You're from Chicago????? Jim is going to LOVE that!!!!!"

And on it went. Meanwhile, I was literally sitting there in red long johns, with two feet of snow on the ground, engorged breasts, sore nipples, no sleep. If anything seemed like a dream, this was it. She called me to essentially tell me that I needed a lawyer to oversee the "option deal." Which leads me to...

## **LESSON # 6:**

### ***Never Trust An LA Entertainment Lawyer***

Enough said.

After hiring a lawyer who of course later screwed me, I flew out to LA to meet Jim Brooks. My feelings going into this vaguely resembled those of the cowardly lion on his way to see Oz. Brooks' office was formerly that of Samuel Goldwyn. Or Meyer. One of the two. Suffice it to say it was big. Lots of Emmys, a few Oscars.

What the fuck was I doing there?

Much of what was said went right past me. I remember how nice he seemed. I remember the size of the sofa and the floor to ceiling windows. There were two other people in the room who smiled a lot. We kibbitzed. I think. These are the two things he said that I remember most clearly.

The first: "So, what do you want to do with your life?"

Do with my life? I don't know what the fuck I want to do with my life. I've never known what I wanted to do with my life. Things just kind of worked out the way they did and here I am. I have never once thought about a five-year plan or even what my next job will be. Is this my life anyway? I thought it was a dress rehearsal. I have no idea what I want to do with my life.

"I've always wanted to write for television."

The second: "Great. Would you like to write a pilot?"

A pilot? Are you fucking kidding me? I don't even know what a page is supposed to look like. Last time I saw a script it was for "Fiddler On The Roof" and that was in 1978. What is a pilot anyway? How long are they? What are they supposed to be about? Does that mean I'd have to show you my writing because I'd rather gauge my eyes out with a rusty penknife. Are my breasts leaking? Fuck no I don't want to write a pilot.

"Absolutely!"

And then, nothing happened.

But I worried a lot that it might.

Three years (and one lawyer) went by.

Which leads me to what happened while I was worrying or...

## **LESSON # 7:**

### ***NPR May Not Pay For Shit, But You Can't Beat The Exposure***

It was seven o'clock in the morning and a piece of mine had just ended on Morning Edition. The phone rang. It was a literary agent telling me he loved the piece and had I ever thought about writing a book? All I could think was, who the hell is calling me at home at seven in the morning? But while relating this story to Mary Beth, the oracle of wisdom and keen instinct, she said, "Mr. X? I know him. He's a good guy." With her stamp of approval, I called him back. Long story short, I wrote a proposal for a book and my wonderful, fantastic, shrewd and amazing agent sold it to HarperCollins and suddenly I had a book contract. The proposal was basically the transcripts of almost all my radio

essays, touched up for print. It added up to eighteen pages. My life's work. The book contract was for 256.

I wanted to gouge my own eyes out with a rusty penknife.

## **LESSON # 8:**

### ***(Perhaps The Most Painful Of All)***

### ***The Only Way To Write (I Hate To Say It), Is To SIT DOWN And WRITE***

I once heard an interview on Fresh Air and I think it was with John McPhee (if not Mr. McPhee, I apologize for misquoting you, please, don't sue) and when Terry asked, "How do you write? What is your method?" He said, "I get up in the morning and then I take the tie to my bathrobe and literally tie myself to my chair. Otherwise, I can't write."

The man has to be tied down. And what I discovered was, we all do.

I had to write 256 pages. I had nine months (I found out I was pregnant with baby #2 the day I got the book contract). Not that I'm compulsive, but I divided the number of pages I had to write by the number of days I had to write them and came up with five pages a day. I went to my office at nine-ish and picked up my daughter at two-thirty-ish. In between, I didn't get out of my chair until I had written five pages. It didn't have to be a good five pages or a polished five pages, just five pages. And here's what I discovered: Once you impose discipline on yourself, you'll be astonished to see what bubbles up. I even ended up throwing out some fifty pages.

Sitting down to write every day requires a relationship to develop between you and your method of choice (computer, typewriter, legal pad) and for me, writing became a conversation I was having with my dear friend, the computer. We had our daily clandestine little tête-à-tête and the misery of writing became a little less miserable. I got into the groove. I grew fat as a bus. I finished the manuscript. Twenty percent had been on the radio and was rewritten for print. Eighty percent was new material ("Lipshtick" HarperCollins, 2000. Run don't walk and get yourself a copy immediately). My agent wondered who I might be able to get blurbs from, which leads me to...

## **LESSON # 9:**

### ***Lying Well Isn't Only Appreciated In Hollywood, It's Expected***

I called Jim Brooks and told him I was going to "be in LA." Could I stop by and say hi? Sure, he said. I bought my ticket. I called Mary Beth who was then living in LA and told her I was going out there to see Jim.

"What are you going to do when you see him?"

"I don't know, shmooze."

Then Mary Beth gave me, yet again, a talk that would alter my future.

"You can't just go out there and shmooze with these guys! You have to tell them that you want to write this show. You have to tell them all your ideas for it."

" But I don't have any ideas. I just wrote a book. I don't have an idea left in my head. I'm a desert. I have two small children. I haven't slept in four years. I'm leaving in a week."

"Books come and books go. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I've seen you turn things around faster than that.. Get a hotel for three days and pound out some ideas."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I don't want you to come to me in ten years and say, 'Why didn't you push me to do the TV show when I had a chance?'"

As though that would ever even occur to me. After she got through with the semi-lashing, I was furious. Who the hell was she? She should try having two kids in three years and writing a book. Then, a few days later, I realized goddamn her, she was right.

I went out to LA, talked to Jim, got the blurb and mentioned more than once, "You know, if you ever want to revive the project, I'd love to try writing it," which was of course a huge lie since I lived in mortal fear of having to write it. They said, "Okay, we'll call you."

And a week later the phone rang.

Jim's partner and I started working on ideas and rough drafts. When it seemed like it was in some kind of shape, we sent it to Jim. He would give me notes and I would overhaul the script. Then we would send it to him, he would give me notes and I would overhaul the script. Then he would give me notes and I would overhaul the script. Etc.

Much of this entailed sitting silently in the office of James L. Brooks and waiting until he had a brilliant idea that I would scribble down on a piece of paper and record on a micro cassette, then go home and write into the script and send to him. We worked on four scripts this way. Then Joan Cusack became available. We sent her the scripts. She signed on. I had another baby. So did she. The train left the station and "What About Joan," the only sitcom to be shot in Chicago, was launched, leading me to...



Joan Cusack & Gwen Macsai

## LESSON # 10:

### ***Ignorance Isn't Always Bliss. Sometimes It Is Just Plain Humiliating***

A story: While we were in pre-production, there was some talk about a theme song for the show. I happened to have a good friend who is a singer/songwriter with four cds out and a wonderful voice that I thought would go perfectly with the show. At lunch one day I threw up a soft lob and pitched the idea that we use her. Jim's partner just looked at me.

"Name four of your favorite musicians."

Was this a test? I didn't know what to say.

"Stevie Wonder? James Taylor? Aretha? (A child of the seventies) Yo Yo Ma?"

He looked at me again.

"We could get any one of them to do a theme song for us."

Okaaaaaay.

What I didn't know when I started:  
Everything.



How to write a script.  
Who did what.  
How the schedule worked.  
What the routine was.  
What I would be responsible for.  
How a TV show works?  
And on and on and on.

Things I learned:

## **LESSON # 11:**

### ***It's a Young, Single Person's Game***

- Lots of writers won't tell you their age.
- Among the writers, I was the only mother. Among the entire cast and crew, I was one of only a few mothers among lots of fathers.
- The hours would kill anyone over twenty-two anyway.
- There is a misbegotten notion, like on Capitol Hill, that youth is a great indicator of talent - and that once you are over a certain age, you must no longer be talented. We had some exceptions to this rule, but generally this is true. Also, it is very much a man's world. This is not a big secret.

Most of the head writers are men and most of the shows are staffed with mostly male writers. Again, there are some exceptions and we had more than your average number of women writers but this was unusual.

**LESSON # 12:**  
***Most Shows Fail***



Your chances are better of being 5'6 and getting an NBA contract.

**LESSON # 13:**  
***Television Writing is Really-Really Hard***

**LESSON # 14:**  
***I'm Not Very Good At It***

Why television writing is so hard:

1. The Setup

The shows are written by a group of writers. Maybe eight, maybe twelve. After a writer comes up with an idea and the other eleven or so writers help flesh it out, the writer goes away and writes a first draft. S/he shows it to the head writer and gets notes and writes a second draft. After that, the script gets "tabled," or, thrown to the writer's table to be rewritten. The writer's table is a long conference table in "the writer's room." It is filled with candy wrappers, coffee cups, pens, pads, newspapers and things that are unmentionable in polite company.

A large number of writers sit around the table, scripts in front of them, looking at a TV/computer monitor mounted above their heads. On it is the script and the writers go through it page-by-page, line-by-line while a writer's assistant changes the lines. This is mostly accomplished by people shouting out ideas and seeing if anyone laughs. Then the head writer has the final say as to what goes in and what doesn't.

A script is about forty pages long. In forty pages, you have to fit in an A story and a B story. Each actor needs to have something to do and say. Every three lines or so, there needs to be a hilarious joke. No one can speak for longer than two or three sentences unless you have just celebrated your 100th show. Oh yeah, and the premise has to be original and brilliant, and every single person working on the show from writers to carpenters have to be at the top of their game for your show to even have a prayer.

## 2. The Schedule

On Monday morning, the cast and writers and head crewmembers gather for the table read (where the actors sit around the table and read the script out loud). Then we break and the head writer gets notes from the studio, the network, the director, and the other executive producers. After lunch the writers start writing and often times completely overhaul the script. What was funny on the page may not be so funny when read aloud. They work late into the night. When they break at 2 or 3 am, the assistants to the writers' assistants Xerox the scripts and deliver them to the actors' doorsteps so they have them available with their morning coffee.

On Tuesday they rehearse the new script and run through it for the writers. Then, since what seemed funny during the table read doesn't always work when it's on its feet, it gets rewritten again, late into Tuesday night.

Wednesday, same thing.

Thursday is reserved for camera blocking and some rewriting.

On Friday the show is shot, but often not before some last minute rewriting. On Friday night, it is shot in front of a live audience and when a joke falls flat, the writers scramble to rewrite on the spot and feed the actors a new line. After the audience leaves, there is often more rewriting and re-shooting. Or at least there was on our show. Of course all this time you have to be readying scripts for the following weeks so that you can start the whole thing all over again on Monday morning.

## 3. A Quote From the *NY Times* About The Simpsons:

"The rewriting process, guided by notes from the Executive Producers and from Matt Groening and James Brooks, is rigorous. 'A good Simpson's script is when you change 75

percent and everyone goes, 'good script, ' says Matt Selman, who joined the staff at the age of 25 in 1997. 'A bad script is when you change 85 percent and everyone goes, 'bad script.'"

I rest my case.

### **LESSON # 15:**

***There Is Much More To Say About Television and My Experience Therein. However, This Is a Website About Radio and Frankly, I Really Don't Want To Be Sued...***



(Last But Not Least)

### **LESSON # 16:**

***There Is A Lot To Be Said For Obscurity***

Radio is a medium of respect. Most of the people I know in radio stumbled into it because they had something to say and then learned the form. Anyone can learn it. It isn't that expensive. You don't have to have a degree in it. I like to think you can still walk into a public radio station and get a job, an internship or at least won't get thrown out if you want to hang out and volunteer. Radio is powerful and has the ability to really move people. If I had to make a choice between a picture and an audiotape of a loved one, I would take the tape.

Humor is rare on public radio. A lot rarer than it should be, but don't get me started. Humor gets no respect. But it gets remembered. Humor done badly is really bad, like the proverbial violin. But done well, ooh, I get goose bumps. TV has a lot to offer. Radio has more. Except as far as pay is concerned. It was fun to walk in that world for a while even though I think I humiliated myself on numerous occasions. I would do it again. But radio is my first love and like a first love, no matter how far you stray and no matter how badly it ended, your heart still skips a beat when it walks through the door.

## A Conversation w/ Gwen Macsai



### Love's Cautious Climate

Thomas Marzahl - December 10, 2002 - #18

I'd like to start off the discussion by asking Gwen why she wants to come back to (public) radio - if it's more that it's because it's her first love - or whether it has something to do with a general lack of humor on the public radio airwaves. And do you hope to do a bit to change that, if editors will let you, and despite the cautious climate in the general public radio world today?

## **On The Way**

**bw** - *December 11, 2002 - #19*

It seems though that you are almost settling for radio - like it's your second choice!!  
Actually - radio does have this sort of 'on the way' somewhere else (book deal a tv show or a movie option)' quality to it - is this just because of the money??

I would love to hear more about the ideas you raise in lesson #15 - lets talk about radio now and radio future... what would we hear if you had your own show???

## **Would That Be Chin Hair?**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 13, 2002 - #25*

The program directors tearing their hair out. I would love to do my own show, have always wanted to do it. But, given the circumstances of my present life, it would be pretty hard to pull off. What would it be? I don't really know except that I guess I would just want it to be as fun and irreverent as possible. Unfortunately, I know how much work goes into a really well done one-hour weekly show... Part talk show kinda thing, part produced goofy stuff, I don't know. I'm just thinking out loud.

As for radio now and radio future, where do we start? I still think that NPR needs to take the Ira Glass approach...and seek out new talent. Hand-pick new voices and do what you have to do to train them for radio. Then, NPR should devote a small staff of non-territorial, non-competitive, un-cruel, non-news people to support, nurture and shuttle these people through the machine of the network. A "creative desk" if you will. I don't ever see that actually happening, however, it would be a small investment with huge dividends for NPR. Why does a piece about chin hair get more listener mail than news of Bosnia. Like it or not, this is the culture we live in. Things that make people laugh, just like things that make them cry ("my so called lungs," for instance), are what move people and make them not only remember the piece but love NPR for having that type of work on the air. god knows, car talk and this american life have shown us that even throwing a bone to this kind of work, let alone doing it well can even translate into DOLLARS, a language management seems to understand a little better than the point of doing a piece on the cockroaches in congress (the bugs, not the representatives, though really, what's the difference?).

Anyway, when they hire me on as a consultant for lots of moolah, I'll have my restructuring plan ready. In closing however I will say one other thing. A little patting on the back and appreciation goes a long way with creative people. Something NPR has a hard time remembering. Most companies do. This is the single biggest error in my opinion because a happy workforce is a loyal one. Of course, I haven't been in the building in like, seven years so what do I know.

## **Our Serious Friend**

**Andy Sewell** - *December 11, 2002 - #20*

Radio, for those who have 'discovered' its soft cozy edges and specific idiosyncrasies, is a great friend. And maybe because of that one-on-one nature of Public Radio (one voice telling me things without Neon and info graphics distracting me) it leans to serious...

In any event, the humor is there, and it doesn't come from the hilarious hijinks that unfold when Phoebe forgets her own birthday. It is simply a different way to tell a story. Public Radio need not compete with television ...it simply needs to keep doing what it is doing - making us smile, laugh, cry, fume, yell, cheer, and any other human reaction it elicits.

## **What About Gwen?**

**Andy Knight** - *December 12, 2002 - #22*

What About Joan was witty, smart, and endearing. Perhaps those strengths were its biggest drawbacks. ABC certainly didn't know how to market it. It was too smart for ABC, the All 'Bout Cancellations network.

Gwen, what are you doing now?

## **On The Megilah**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 13, 2002 - #23*

That's what my accountant wants to know. Actually, in the interest of full disclosure, I have to say that one thing bringing me back is a CPB grant I got in '96 and never was able to initiate, due to babies, book, etc. I am now trying to re-ignite the grant. If that flies, I will be back shortly. As far as no humor on the radio, there is precious little except...on the weekends in "humor" shows. As NPR gets more and more news heavy, it seems to be harder and harder to work it in. It just isn't a priority when all hell is breaking loose around the world. And, while everyone gives it a lot of lip service, the truth is that the system is not built to give editors the time nor independents the true independence it requires to do it and do it well (nothing kills a vision like too many editors or levels of approval). Having said that, I will say that I miss it. I miss the people, the buzz, the neurosis (did I just say that?) and the whole megilah. Someone once asked me to write an essay about patriotism and though it never aired, the opening line read "I think about patriotism the way I do about marriage: sometimes you say to yourself, 'this is exactly where I want to be' and other times it is all you can do not to pack your bags, walk out the door and never come back.' I think that the same can be said of working for public radio. There's nothing like it, and there's nothing like it.

## **The Royal Screw**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 13, 2002 - #24*

As far as I'm concerned ABC screwed us and screwed us pretty royal. I might mention here that the guys in charge of tv sitcoms for ABC were fired after our year but hey, I'm not worried about their pension fund. Long story short, I know that the show had its problems but ABC was never really behind us as I see it. They dropped all promotions after the first two or three weeks and did nothing to help us out after that. Anyway, as to what I am doing now, I guess the best answer would be, recuperating.

## **On Process and Pants**

**chelsea merz** - *December 17, 2002 - #26*

When you make pieces, such as trying to buy an Oscar, I imagine that most of the surprise and creativity happens in the editing process. Conversely, when you write essays for the radio I imagine that the surprising moments happen while writing. What are the advantages/disadvantages to these methods?

Also, how did you adapt your radio essays for print? What liberties are there in writing for radio vs. writing for print?

And, any comments on NPR's radio drama "I'd rather eat Pants?"

## **On Pants, Actualities, Arteries, And Expansion**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 18, 2002 - #27*

To answer your last question first, I haven't heard "I'd rather eat pants." I have heard promos for it and maybe a few seconds so, while I often comment on things I know nothing about, I feel that to do so in a public forum would be unseemly.

As to the differences between doing pieces versus essays and where the surprises lie, to me, they both have their goods and evils. Doing a piece is in some ways easier in that you don't have to start with nothing but thin air. You are doing a piece about SOMETHING and interviewing SOMEONE. And usually it is around these people or ideas that the piece is constructed. How you construct it of course is where the creative process comes in. I always thought it would be a great assignment, if I ever teach again, to give everyone in the class the exact same tape and have them make a piece out of it, just to see how differently they would come out. Even give them the same actualities, especially in non-hard news pieces.

In making a piece, I would say that the surprises happen (for me at any rate) in the interview itself and in the logging and cutting...when I log tape, I listen to everything, keeping an ear for what I could possibly want to use, then dub those, listen again to cut it



down, then listen while writing. And in all that listening, sometimes the tape makes you think of something you wouldn't otherwise think of, almost as though the tape is actually suggesting something to you. You hear someone say something and it reminds you of a piece of music, or a joke, or a piece of tape you heard on the news, or your uncle. Any of this might be fun to bring into the piece and if you don't listen back to your tape a lot, this doesn't happen as much.

And then of course, many surprises always happen while you are writing (piece or essay) which is why on any given day you could sit down to write the same piece and it would come out completely differently. The disadvantage of doing a piece is that you are relying on someone else for the base of the piece and if they suck, you have to find someone else, or write rings around the tape or abandon it. Also, pieces are nice in that they get you out of your room/apt/office and out in the world as opposed to sitting in front of a computer while your arteries harden.

The best thing about an essay is that it is wide open, which is also paralyzing. The surprises are mostly in the writing however, for me, with all the campy sounds and music. Oftentimes it has happened that we don't find the exact right music until the last second and sometimes a sound FX or piece of music will suggest something be changed and it is always better to be open to all that stuff all the way through. Once the writing part is done, it is really fun to just sit there and pick music, SFX and coach people who do the voices. I'm never more relaxed than when the writing is finished.

Adapting radio for print... you get to expand a lot and include all the things you had to cut, on the other hand, you'll never be pithier than when you have to fit it all into seven minutes. In the adaptation for print, you get to go down side roads and fill out things with examples and repeat yourself endlessly. In fact I think those would be my instructions for a how-to manual.

### **Dignifying Humor**

**Daniel Costello** - *December 19, 2002 - #28*

I think Gwen's work is funny to many people because it is relevant to their experiences. With regards to the Eat Pants marathon, how many of us are displaced Jewish fruit-store owners from New York? Some of that thing is funny, but as a whole it is torture. Five parts? And why do we care if NPR is opening a L.A. bureau? How about some real news instead of the Collectors Edition Forced Humor Grand Opening? What are they trying to tell us with the Seinfeldesque theme music?

How about working humor into regular news analysis on occasion? Aaron Freeman and John Dempsey used to have a great local show on WBEZ called Metropolis on Saturday afternoons. One of their features was called Who Dat? They played quotes from newsmakers and callers tried to identify them. Some were serious and some were funny.

Each week there was one called the Daley Double, where the objective was to take a Daleyism and decipher what Hizzoner MEANT, not what he said. Very funny, and it fit smoothly with the serious bits.

Is there an institutional bias against humor because of the historical and frequently current connection to education? Do the editors or whoever think that humor is not dignified enough for public radio?

### **Oscarfying Humor**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 20, 2002 - #30*

If you ask me, there is an institutional bias against humor almost everywhere. Do you ever see funny movies winning Oscars? Or funny books winning Pulitzers? There is a general assumption out there that if it is funny, it is not serious (no pun intended) in that it is without meaning or depth or focus or truth. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Would you rather walk out of a movie and say, "I cried my eyes out," or "I laughed, I cried, it was the whole megillah." Give me the latter any day.

Most people respond well to humor. Or at least good humor. And when they respond, you already have an open line of communication you can use to tell them something more "serious." It's the same in writing a novel or disciplining children. Try yelling your head off, then try making them laugh and see what gets their attention.

### **Drek**

**Julia Barton** - *December 20, 2002 - #29*

I really liked your description of TV writing, Gwen. Just curious: do you think radio would benefit from that kind of group effort? Many editors in pub radio are very good at what they do, but when it's all dependent on one person who may not have had lunch or is grumpy about some inter-office politics...the next thing you know, the life is sucked out of your writing, and you don't even know why. Or your writing lacked life in the first place, and it's still lying there after the edit. At least in TV, the thing gets thrown around a bit. And also tried out on a fake public first. Then again, most of the writing I hear on TV is drek.

### **Poor Bastard Child**

**Gwen Macsai** - *December 20, 2002 - #31*

I wouldn't force my worst enemies, not even my worst editors, into writing en masse. Because it may be an exercise in writing together but ultimately there is one person who decides what goes in and what stays in (until they get notes from the next level of executives) and that person is likely to have a very different sensibility than the original author. While there will always be editors who don't get things, and there will always be editors who's personality is a bad match to yours (I use such restraint here), I do think that

there are, in general, some things that can be done to ensure a happy healthy creative arena.

The best editors understand that 'creative' people need a comfy place to do their work (symbolically) and set about to do what they can to make sure that happens. Whether that means assigning them to the kinds of stories they like and are good at, or giving them a drawer to put their things in, or letting them work 20 hours one day and three the next, whatever. People like this are very rare. And when you find one, you will go to the ends of the earth to work with them because it is so safe and wonderful. NPR needs to find people like that to edit the creative people. Or, as I mentioned before, set up some kind of creative unit or desk so that this kind of work isn't always the poor bastard child of a slow news day that sits on the shelf until a slot opens up. But that's just me. If Mr. CEO wants my opinion, I'd be happy to provide.

### **Busy Rattling**

**Jackson** - *January 4, 2003 - #35*

I think we're all agreed that there is not enough humor on PR (or in public broadcasting generally) and the reason, as far as I can see, is that we spend roughly a quarter of our working lives rattling tin cups.

A couple of things occur to me as I read over all this: there are people who are just funny when they open their mouths. And then there are people like W.H. Gilbert in Topsy Turvy.

### **Just Plain Funny**

**Gwen Macsai** - *January 5, 2003 - #37*

I actually think that if Public radio hired people who were really funny to do funny pledging, the drives would be over in two days. In Chicago, Ira started doing funny pledges and I guarantee you he's one of the most popular pledgers. I definitely agree that some people are just plain funny by nature and others will never be no matter how hard they try (and by the way, degrees in funniness are in no way related to mental adjustment, in fact, just the inverse, I should know). But the problem is not that there aren't funny people, it's that no one is really there to support and nurture their talent vis a vis public radio.

### **Devolving Elves**

**Andy Knight** - *January 7, 2003 - #41*

This conversation on the place of humor on public radio is even more interesting when compared to the devolving state of affairs over on the TAL boards regarding Sedaris's Christmas stories. It seems that nothing alienates listeners quite as quickly as comedy.

## **Censoring Happiness**

**Jay Allison** - *January 7, 2003* - #42

Yes, in our neighborly TAL Boards, satire is defending itself in the age-old battle against charges of racism, tastelessness, and anti-baby behavior on Christmas.

Gwen, do you have any thoughts about the relationship between humor and offensiveness? Do you rein yourself in sometimes? Have you been censored?

In your experience, was this issue of offensiveness dealt with differently in public radio and commercial TV? Would public radio be happiest if it never offended anyone, ever?

## **Boobs, Boogers, And A Nice-A Piece A Pie**

**Gwen Macsai** - *January 12, 2003* - #56

I had to take the word breasts out of a piece, I had to take the words "pick your nose" out of a fading voice in reverb (ME is a family show!) When I was working, I had bouts of fighting with editors all the time and of course, I always lost.

There is definitely a connection between some humor and offensiveness. I never could listen to Andrew Dice Clay, for example, but someone out there paid his plumbers bill. There seems like there is a general line of acceptability for humor, and then people push the envelope to broaden the line of acceptability. Some of the time, it moves things forward and sometimes it's just still offensive. But the whole thing is so subjective.

As for TV, you cannot possibly get more rank than the writers in the writer's room, depending on who the head writer is... And sometimes it seeped into the script because basically there is a mindset among some writers that that's what's funny...

If public radio never offended anyone ever, it may be happier but I think its listeners would be less happy. I don't want to offend people so I feel like I stop short (so very like women) but I am so happy to hear people who do. In my own work I have stopped short of writing about something or someone if I think that it will hurt specific people if they heard it.

And remember, there are some people who would be offended by apple pie. And they have the time to write a lot of letters.

## **Pissing Off**

**Thomas Marzahl** - *January 8, 2003* - #48

I'm curious... what kinds of experiences have you had when suggesting humor to a given editor, be it in form of a piece, or just as a line within a piece?

Does public radio, because it takes itself so damn seriously now, not have room to push the envelope anymore? Witness some of the changes that happened post-September 11, when several stations yanked Harry Shearer's *Le Show*, a program that while interesting and sometimes even quite funny and off the wall, isn't exactly cutting edge.

One of the reasons that I continue to listen to Marketplace, for instance, is because that is a show that does *\*not\** take itself (or the markets, or the corporate big- and littlewigs) too seriously. And the hosts reflect that, too.

By the way, Jay, an old news director colleague of mine once said, "if we're not pissing someone off, we're not doing our job." So, please, more risk taking, at the risk of offending, not less. There's always the off button.

### **Yes, To Spam!**

**Gwen Macsai** - *January 12, 2003 - #55*

Talking to editors about humor is sort of like hitting your proverbial head against the proverbial wall. I have had all kinds of responses while pitching ideas and pieces. The best luck I had was when I was working for a long time with Taki Telonidis who had a rare kind of autonomy on ME. I pitched to him, he mentioned it to the exec, and we produced the entire thing and then played it for them. He was my editor and producer. Can you believe that? I feel like I'm telling my grandchildren about the great victrola, for god's sake, it's that antiquated to think that you don't have to go through a long line of hard news people.

I also had an editor who told me that if it was an old subject, like aging (the sample she used), she didn't want to hear the piece, no matter how funny it was. We then had a lengthy conversation in which I stated that who cares what a piece is about if it is written about in a new and interesting and funny way. I got nowhere. She said, "It's like when people first get to NPR and they all want to do stories on spam and Peruvian throat singing. No more spam and Peruvian throat singing!" It was a conversation I will never forget, though I would like to.

Then there was the famous ode to marriage story although I feel unable to go into the details on that one. The reason that story had a problem getting on the air on Valentine's Day, the day it was supposed to, was because (they said though I always felt it was an excuse) I'd had a piece on ME that same day that the exec didn't know about. That was good reason to bump that piece and let it sit on the shelf for over two weeks after that. At the last minute they put Dave Barry on the air on Valentine's. But of course, I have no harsh feelings whatsoever.

## **The Comedy Quotient**

**Rebecca Flowers** - *January 11, 2003 - #50*

...it really depends on the editor, but overall I think there is an unwillingness to do certain kinds of humor. Isn't that one of the reasons TAL has done so well? Now there's a TAL voice, of course, just like there's an ATC voice -- I think the "humor voice" on ME is a bit more jumbled up, for better or for worse, but they do seem willing to do a wider range of bits. I almost said "riskier" but I don't mean that. Risky in terms of the comedy quotient, maybe. But not politically risky, for sure. Also I noticed you can't make fun of public radio on public radio -- there goes a huge chunk of material for us all!

## **In Love With Laughter**

**Gwen Macsai** - *January 12, 2003 - #51*

I'll fall in love with anyone who makes me laugh, whether they do it naturally because they just ARE funny or whether they are trying really hard and happen to be successful. Laughing to me is like the greatest aphrodisiac. At least for that moment. Romantically, I have to say, it has lead me down quite a few rocky roads but we all have our weaknesses. I reiterate here that humor and emotional balance usually have an inverse proportion to one another. I should know.

## About Transom

### What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.



Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere - by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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## ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

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