

VOICES

ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level.

And that's why the East Oregonian will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Pendleton or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

**Tom Hallman Jr., tbhbook@aol.com**

*Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Oregonian newspaper. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Umatilla County.*

# A conversation with a Hollywood bad boy

By **SUZANNE GLORIA**  
*Special to the East Oregonian*

I'd left school that afternoon having no idea that my life was about to change because of a spur-of-the-moment decision I made at the stop sign. I teach students who sometimes have a hard time following my rules, and they had successfully employed every tactic possible to get under my skin.

As I approached the intersection, I heard an announcement on the car radio from a company looking for men and women to come to a hotel that afternoon to be extras in a movie to be filmed in Portland. I was intrigued, but immediately thought of all the reasons it seemed all too ridiculous: too old, not pretty enough, my fellow teachers would think I was silly. At the stop sign I paused. Turn left and I go home. Turn right and I head to the hotel.

I turned right. The line leading to the hotel ballroom, where auditions were being held, was full of hopefuls, all of them younger and quite stylish, so far from what I knew I looked like in sensible teaching clothes.

"Next."

My turn.

I took a deep breath and headed into the ballroom. A photographer had me pose for a head and full-body shot and then I was told if they wanted me, they'd send me an email. They did so.

I was given a document that told me to report early in the morning, and also reminded me of on-set protocol: Be on time and follow directions. Most importantly, never speak to the cast or risk being replaced immediately.

Once at the site, I checked in and was sent to the wardrobe coordinator, a woman who selected a Jackie O-inspired green sheath dress for me to wear to the party. It seemed too short and too tight. She thought not and solved the problem by handing me a new pair of control-top panty hose. She added strappy high-heeled sandals, a thick gold choker and large hoop earrings. Outfit complete, although still too tight, I proceeded to hair and makeup.

Perched on a high director's chair, my eyes were covered in goop, my face smeared with foundation and brushed with powder. To finish the look, my lips were stained red and dabbed with gloss. Next the stylist teased my hair at least two inches, sprayed it, smoothed it and sprayed it again. I was ready for the party.

I made my way to the shuttle area where extras gathered. Standing alone, I had an uneasy feeling of being watched. Discreetly, I lifted my eyes and scanned in all directions. A man was standing about 6 feet to my left looking at me. He was wearing a leather jacket, blue jeans and cowboy boots. His hair reached his shoulders, his eyes small and brown.

It was him.

Sean Penn, a two-time

Academy Award winner, a Hollywood bad boy and outspoken political powder keg. We stared at each other for about five seconds, until I remembered the "no eye contact" rule and turned away. Luckily, a white stretch limo arrived, and the driver motioned me to get in. Sitting alone in the back, I wondered if the driver had made a mistake and thought I was a "real" cast member.

Winding slowly through familiar streets, I saw three of my friends on their morning walk. They were gawking at the limo trying to catch a glimpse of a celeb. The blackened windows obscured their view. Laughing, I imagined their surprise or disappointment if they knew I was the occupant. Eventually, I was dropped off at a "Brady Bunch" look-alike house, my home for the day.

When we arrived at the set, the production assistants began to stage the scene, a backyard party for Walt McCandless, played by William Hurt. His wife, Billie McCandless, played by Marcia Gay Harden, had planned this event. The stars sat on a table located on the upper tier of a deck, the extras on the lower tier. I was positioned by the steps and handed a helium balloon and told that during a speech the "wife" would look at me, roll her eyes and shrug her shoulders. I was to follow her lead and do the same.

Over and over, we practice the scene, the romance of being in a movie slowly dissipating.

Sean Penn, who was directing the movie, continually used the steps to walk up and talk with the stars. I tried to make room for him, but we kept side-stepping each other, right-left, left-right. After doing this a number of times, while standing face to face, I impulsively broke the "no talk" rule.

I looked him straight in his eyes and whispered, "Do you want to dance?" The expression on his face was worth suffering the consequence of "you will be replaced." He looked at me with the same surprised look I had given him earlier, and quickly went to his director spot.

There were numerous takes until "That's a wrap!" was heard two hours later. Back at the staging area, the extras were treated to a scrumptious buffet. Under a perfect blue sky, I savored the feast and the memory of the day.

Returning my outfit to wardrobe, I stepped back into my life as a teacher, my movie career over.

But it wasn't just yet. I passed a table where the cinematographer, the producer and the director were in deep discussion.

Sean Penn looked up and smiled.

"Hey, thanks for being here," he said.

I returned his smile.

"Sure," I replied.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, Hollywood's bad boy chuckled, waved and turned away from me to continue his conversation.



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