

An aspiring writer's failed attempt at fooling an English teacher

The words that have flowed from my brain to the fingertips bouncing on a computer keyboard can be traced to the influences of a high school English classroom more than 20 years ago, where I once tried best to impress a teacher not with my reading knowledge but with my typing skills.

My quest failed miserably.

Here's why . . .

Nancy Zimmerman was my English teacher during my freshman and junior years of high school, where she exposed myself and dozens of



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my then-teenage peers to the world of literature. Among the great pieces of literature that were taught by Zimmerman (or "Miss Z" as she was called) were Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird" and Edgar Allan Poe's numerous scary tales, including "The Cask of Amantillado" and "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Zimmerman was always a person who pushed students to further expand their reading comprehension and to improve their writing — even if it meant taking their writing to a different level. A stickler for accuracy (she constantly referred to a massive copy of Webster's Dictionary that was the size of the New York City phone book) and detail, Miss Z detested book reports on spiral notebook paper, written in pencil. She preferred book reports that were typed (as in a typewriter) . . . never on onion skin paper . . . and always with the student's name in the top right corner.

A well thought-out book report is always more appreciated when a per-

son takes the time to put their words through a typewriter keyboard, not on a Big Chief tablet, she once said.

That's why she once proposed an incentive whereby a student who typed their book reports (don't forget: these were the days before computers) would be given an A for their effort.

I took that incentive to heart . . . and even took it a step further.

My reaction to the incentive (don't forget: I was a dumb freshman): if Miss Z guaranteed an A on any typewritten book report, why would any student even read a book? Couldn't the student just make up the book report, type it all nice and neat, and turn it in for an A grade?

That's exactly what I pursued when I went to the school library early in my freshman year, grabbed a book off the shelf, sat down at the typewriter and started pounding a two-page report. I didn't have to even read the novel. I just scanned the dust jacket, picked up a few tidbits from the book's foreword, made up the rest with a great deal of artistic license, pulled the sheet from the typewriter platen, and placed the book report atop Miss Z's desk, where many of my classmates had turned in their book reports on the dreaded spiral notebook paper. I thought of myself as a young Steinbeck, thanks to my trusty family typewriter and what I thought was a clever mind.

Just put the A atop the book report, Miss Z, so I can get on to the next class and dazzle the teachers with my brilliance.

Little did I know that the book I chose for the report — "The Great Gatsby" — was among the most-read and most-studied novels of modern American literature.

I didn't know that at the time.

I just thought it was one of several

thousand books that Miss Z did not have time to read from the school library (don't forget: I was a dumb freshman).

When the day came to have that book report returned to me, I was astounded

to read the following inscription atop the book report. In bold red ink, the note read, "Andrew . . . You will not receive an A for a well-typed report, or even a C for your lackluster imagination but an F for trying to fool an old English teacher. Please read the book and try again. — Miss Z."

Throughout the remainder of my high school years and even into college days, Miss Z and I would often kid each other about my failed impression as a big-headed frosh. Even when she and I

would exchange Christmas cards in recent years, she would sign the card by saying, "Merry Christmas to you and your family. — Miss Z. P.S. Have you read The Great Gatsby yet?"

I thought about those moments when I learned that Nancy Zimmerman died last week at the age of 61. She left the world much too early but gave more than 40 years of life to education, where she expanded young minds with words of the world's greatest writers. And, amid those lectures on Shakespeare, Poe and Twain, Miss Z instilled into me a deep appreciation for reading and an even greater desire for stronger writing.

How I write . . . and how I read . . . can be directly attributed to my years under the tutelage of Nancy Zimmerman.

And, should any of you try your hand at fooling an old newspaper man with made-up facts and a penchant for fibs, just give your fingertips a rest. I can instantly detect a person who is trying to pull the wool over the editor's eyes.

After all, Miss Z taught me well.



Nancy
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