

Red Books, Raw Gems

The College's class reports • by Deborah Smullyan



The faces behind the books (from left): Deborah Smullyan, Jason Hale, Dawn Carelli, Christine Frost, and Diane MacDonald

tinuously published for at least 150 years. They started out as compendia of memorial tributes to fallen members of the classes, written by the class secretaries, but gradually the emphasis shifted from the dead to the living.

Harvard's books are also unique in their genre. No other school has a formal publishing program of this kind. Yale's "class-books" are published at the discretion of each individual class, under the editorship of a volunteer from the ranks; Princeton alumni likewise publish

their own reunion "yearbooks" with no staffing or funding from the university. At Stanford, the alumni association does pay to have submitted entries scanned as PDFs and photocopied, but there is no editing and little consistency of format in the resulting books, with many entries reproduced in the grads' own chicken scratch.

The class reports were all-Harvard until 1973, when Radcliffe women debuted in the pages of the decennial report of the class of '63. Radcliffe's pre-1963 classes publish reports, too, at their own discretion and editorship, containing entries scanned and photocopied in the manner of Stanford's books. (The first Harvard fiftieth report to embrace Cliffies, however, was that of the class of 1956; see "A Fiftieth First," July-August 2006.)

Please tell your classmates, in a paragraph or two, what you would like them to know about your activities, interests, family life, career, etc., concentrating on the past five years. No résumés, please, and first-person narratives only.

IF YOU ATTENDED Harvard College—even if only for one day—you have been asked to submit to the above exercise every five years since, for publication in a typically red-covered book in advance of each reunion. Perhaps you can't be bothered; perhaps you are loath to broadcast details of a personal nature; but if you are like many others, you revel in this regular opportunity to share your evolution and reflections with others in your class.

Just what is this bond with classmates? For those who feel it, it is surprisingly

strong—born in the soul of an 18-year-old, out on his or her own in the world, far from home and parents, possibly for the first time, learning to rely on a network of peers who start out as complete strangers and end up becoming a second family.

If you have ever stood and watched the alumni procession at a Harvard Commencement, you have felt a stirring sense of the cavalcade of life in its different stages; these books do the same thing in print.

My life peaked in 1981, when I won the Ms. PacMan championship in the basement of the Union—and used my prize, a gift certificate to the Spinnaker at the Hyatt, to take my mom to brunch because I couldn't get a date. It's been all downhill since then, but I'm sure it'll pick up one of these days.

—Alan J. Kuperman '85

Harvard's class reports have been con-



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The Class Report Office (CRO) consists of five full-time, professional editors. Director Diane MacDonald worked in the office in the late 1990s, left to develop on-line materials for textbook publisher Addison-Wesley, and then returned in 2004 to take the helm. Assistant director Christine Frost stays up half the night writing historical novels (one about Dracula's wife is now shopping for an agent). Dawn Carelli is a self-described “recovering French horn player” with a love of foreign languages, art, and flower gardens; Jason Hale moonlights as the force behind FatCity.com, a rock music Webzine; and the author of this article has written and edited obituaries in this magazine since 1993.

Remember the Depression? It and I went steady in the Hollywood of the late 1930s. During those uncomfortable times I was variously a motion picture set designer, short subjects dialogue director, freelance cartoonist and writer. All this was pretty hungry going, and so go I did—back home to Denver in 1941. There I wound up with the Remington Arms Company as (of all things) a quality control engineer writing shop manuals on the subject of “How to Make Ammunition for War and Profit.” In 1944, eager to see our product in practical, everyday use, I joined the Infantry (103d Cactus Division) as a combat artist-correspondent in the ETO. Far as I know, I never managed to shoot anybody, but they made me a staff sergeant and gave me the Combat Infantry Badge, two battle stars, the Bronze Star and Good Conduct Medal. The last of these, in all candor, was undeserved.

~ William J. Barker '37

Many alumni are surprised to learn that their submissions are edited at all. “It is a lot of work,” says MacDonald. “We turn around a high volume of content over the three-month period after each deadline, and we send the text through four cycles of editing, fact-checking, and proofreading before a book goes to press.” The truth is, a class report that made its way into print without that exhaustive process would be a woeful object: it is amazing how many people unwittingly omit the name of one of their children, or give dates implying that they married a current spouse before divorcing their former one, or misspell “Machu Picchu.”



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In its labors, the CRO staff receives the advice and consent of class report chairs from each class—volunteers who serve as liaison. The report chair, who is often the class secretary, helps draft the communications to the class to exhort their participation in the book and assembles the front matter, which always includes a foreword from his or her own pen. Occasionally a narrative passage needs to be vetted with the University counsel's office, on grounds of being libelous or an invasion of a third party's privacy. This could be an outing of the sexual preference of a senior tutor back in the day, or a diatribe against an ex, or a lament over a son's drug problem. If counsel so advises, out it goes. For the most part, however, it is CRO policy to let people have their say. And it gets interesting.

*God damn your putrid madness, you dead man!
God send down my mad vomit straight to Hell!
May devil Satan make a feast upon it,
and sicken from our bloody, rotten gore,
and die in holy hell
forevermore!*

~William Van Brunt Lewis '65

The class reports are fascinating as personal and historical documents. Because the responses are actively solicited, all sorts of people, from the stellar to the struggling, write all sorts of things: from boasts to confessions, from curmudgeonly grunts to prolix discourse, and from bulleted lists to metered verse. The twenty-fifth report also offers the priceless feature of juxtaposed then-and-now photographs—the youthful yearbook image beside a current one supplied by the alum. (The fiftieth uses only current photos, but permits casual snapshots of the subject with family or friends, or mid-sail on his sloop on Penobscot Bay.)

As the surviving one of the two black men in the Class of 1946, I find it interesting to note that as far as my life since leaving Harvard is concerned, I must put being black first and all else second. I suppose if I were a member of the Class of 1971, my attitude might be the same, but my orientation to the world and my preparation for it probably different and better.

~Edwin B. Randall Jr. '46

As primary historical sources, the books are remarkable, bringing past epochs vividly to life. Leaf through the

twenty-fifth report of the class of 1942 and you will see what it means to have a military draft during a war: page after page of young Harvard men who died violent deaths in places with foreign names. Read the tenth report of the class of 1992 and you will see the dot-com boom and bust writ large. The early books of the 1970s classes are full of the pride and exhaustion of women blazing professional trails; 30 years later, these same women offer sober—but still proud—post-mortems on the gains and tradeoffs of their liberation. As editor Dawn Carelli says, "Reading the reports is kind of like reading a collective diary. Plus, you never know what you'll run across—or whom."

If there was ever a defining moment in my life, it occurred on June 22, 1993, when I was the unwelcome recipient of a bomb from Ted Kaczynski [62], the Unabomber.

~Charles J. Epstein '55

But it is as personal documents that the class reports fulfill their real potential. There is a thrilling counterpoint between the universality of the shared life

cycle among the members of a given class and the individuality of their voices and stories.

Some perorate at considerable length; narratives of three pages are not uncommon. For others, a one-liner says it all:

Happily married. Three great kids. Sole practitioner. Life is good.

Lost a leg to gangrene.

These books are full of the stuff of *tele-novelas*. There's a great deal about love and marriage:

In typically maudlin, Irish-Catholic fashion, I was on the verge of acquiring a large number of cats, decorating with doilies and bowls of slightly dusty hard candy, and otherwise throwing myself full-tilt into spinsterhood, when he came along. We were married at Memorial Church in July 2002.

~Mary-Jane Buckley Ruggels '85
...about loss:

In our house, the banks of light switches are all up or all down, and on our boats, the winch handles point into the cockpit, a symmetry that our orderly son Philip mandated long ago. We light our gas burners

Some Technical Considerations

THE PROCESS of publishing the class reports has undergone a predictable technological revolution in recent years. The move to desktop publishing began during the reign of Anita Pariseau, director of the CRO from 1997 to 2004, and has reached full flower under MacDonald's leadership. Many people still send their information on paper, but, increasingly, alumni submit entries on line via a secure website unique to each class. For its fiftieth-anniversary report in 2002, just 15 percent of the class of 1952 used the on-line method; in this year's fiftieth-reunion class, 1957, about half did.

Many alumni want to know whether or when the books will be available on line. Right now, the answer is "No and never." The plethora of personal information contained in these books would be a bonanza for hackers, and no security measures would provide adequate protection. As they are, restricted to print, the books are available only to members of the classes and to others in a limited number of repositories: the Harvard University Archives, Boston Public Library, New York Public Library, New England Genealogical Society, and the Library of Congress. (Though, of course, the odd volume also manages to find its way onto eBay.) Putting the class reports on the Web would make alumni vulnerable to predation of various kinds, which would doubtless result in their becoming more guarded in their revelations. The very nature of the books would change, and not for the better.

The cost of publishing the books ranges from about \$15,000 for the slimmer directories (for the fifty-fifth, sixtieth, and sixty-fifth reunion years), to \$27,000 for the softcover reports (for minor reunions) to \$100,000 for hardcover books (for major reunions). Each class pays the costs out of its own coffers, although the three major reports reap a partial subsidy from the Harvard Alumni Association. Class members are asked to contribute monetarily to the project, but all receive a copy of the book regardless.

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with matches because years ago Philip turned off the pilot light, both to save gas and save the world. We have no pets, because Philip was allergic to fur and feathers. Recently a friend told me that since Philip died, I have become nicer. Perhaps she's right. Perhaps I am. But it is too high a price to pay.

~Paula Budlong Cronin '56
...even about madness and murder:

On Saturday night, September 20, 1975, I had been off the bottle for about ten days when I suffered from a hallucination involving my long dead father, ___ '27. I picked up a hunting knife and stabbed my mother, ___, Smith '27, in the heart, killing her with a single stab wound. In a daze for about half an hour, psychotic, I called for help from the Chicago Fire Department and then was descended upon by more Chicago policemen than I had ever seen outside a district station. I was arrested that night and charged with murder (subsequently indicted). I had been living with my mother for seven months, and never saw the inside of that apartment again.

~Oliver D. Ferguson Jr. '52
People talk about their work:

I've reached the magical stage of retirement—the sabbatical that never ends—after a third of a century teaching anthropology to undergraduates at St. Lawrence University. I knew the time was approaching when students began telling me their parents had taken my course, and my original class notes began resembling the Dead Sea Scrolls. I look forward to working on my fifth book at a leisurely pace as I wait for football season to get under way.

~Richard J. Perry '64
...and, in the most heartfelt terms, about their hobbies:

For the past couple years, I have also been spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about Godzilla, a childhood obsession I have been able to revive in the carefree wake of tenure. My book *Godzilla on My Mind* was released in October 2004, just in time for the King of the Monsters' fiftieth birthday, and has gone through three printings in less than two months.

~William M. Tsutsui '85
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Mita

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tic government consumes itself in hubris and jingoism, as we hurtle backward into myth and religion, as we squander our earned goodwill and refuse to "see ourselves as others see us," the American Century sputters out.... Was it inevitable? Or could we, educated men and women, have done more to preserve the beacon that once gave hope to the world? I know that I did not do enough. In any case, it is too late. No one listens to irrelevant relics.

~Rafael M. Steinberg '41

Though self-congratulation abounds, it rubs shoulders with wry epiphany.

As I enter the twilight of a mediocre career, there is still much to do.

~James M. Cronin '65

Most of the time, my life is ideal; when it's not, I act as if it is anyway.

~James H. Ellis '85

"What I love about my job," says editor Christine Frost, "is reading the thousands of little autobiographies. They are entertaining, and sometimes poignant, but they also offer some perspective as I follow my own existential path. I went to a large public university as an undergrad, and I appreciate the close-knit culture Harvard College has. The class reports preserve that closeness in a unique way."

No doubt a few end up in people's recycling bins, but most class reports find a permanent home on a special shelf in the study. One nice thing about them is that they outlive us: a few weeks ago, a widow called the office to see if we would be interested in the full set of class reports her husband had left behind. I consult my own growing collection quite often. When the thirty-fifth report arrives in my mailbox, any day now, my College roommate, Vickie Charlton, and I will meet over coffee somewhere and don our reading glasses for our customary pre-reunion *analyse de texte*. (The glasses became a necessity starting with the thirtieth report.) We share the sentiment of the member of the class of '57, a retired international management consultant, who prefaced his entry in this year's fiftieth, "I hope that most of you classmates have sat down and done your reports. You can be sure that I will read every single one." ▢

Deborah Smullyan is a member of the class of 1972.

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