

## It's a Writers' World

BY LOUISE UFFELMAN

**"Writing is easy," said Mark Twain. "All you have to do is cross out the wrong words." If only it were that easy. As these three law alumni authors know, it takes patience, perseverance and a passion for the written word.**



**Steve Johnson '81L: Semi-autobiographical**

Former venture capitalist, Steve Johnson and his wife, Neal, left Seattle a couple of years ago for a completely different lifestyle in bucolic Walla Walla, Wash. She was interested in establishing a farm, and he was interested in writing a book.

Fast forward to the present, and Johnson has just published his second book, *Bottled Walla*, the sequel to *Welcome to Walla Walla*. "I'd always wanted to write a book, ever since I was a child," he says. His wife nudged him along by suggesting it would make a perfect present for their 30th wedding anniversary. "So I tried it and found out how much I enjoyed it." He uses the pen name of Sam McLeod.

Johnson wrote for the college paper while an undergraduate student at the University of

Virginia. He learned to write succinctly at the Darden School of Business, where he learned that “no one wants to read more than one page.” And he learned to write logically and persuasively in law school at W&L. As a practicing lawyer, he honed his ability to edit his thoughts before setting them down on paper. Eventually, he skipped the keyboard altogether. “It’s much faster to dictate than type,” he comments.

But more importantly, he’s a born storyteller who just never found the time to write down all the interesting scenarios going on around him—until now. “I’m a people watcher,” he declares. “I’ve always enjoyed imagining what people might be thinking based on their facial expressions.”

Now he wakes up every day with a story in his head. “My brain wants to dictate a story. Sometimes it’s well organized, and, as a two-fingered typist, I can’t get the words down fast enough. Sometimes that’s not the case, and I have to figure out what the story is before the words come.”

In both his books, Johnson has adopted the classic letters-from-home approach. His works are semi-autobiographical in nature; he allows himself artistic license. He charts his adventures in building a farmhouse, barn and guest cottage, meeting new people, exploring the area, as well as converting 160 acres of pastureland into a refuge for wildlife.

While he enjoys the writing, he does not enjoy the logistics involved in self-publishing. “It’s a big chore,” he admits of Detour Farm Publishing L.L.C. “All that paperwork and details to keep track of.”

Feedback on his book has been overwhelmingly positive, and he’s discovered that he has a substantial female following. “Women like the letter format. They say, ‘Steve, we really like eavesdropping in on someone else’s life.’ And they say they like to read the stories before going to sleep or out loud while they are in the car.”

Johnson has one more Walla Walla book in him, to complete the trilogy, before he moves onto other writing projects. He’s interested in trying fiction, travel writing and perhaps completing an autobiography.

As he says at the end of *Bottled Walla*, “I’ve learned that writing is addictive. I hate to stop.... I feel content. I feel alive.”

## Terry Brooks '69L: Fantasy

**T**erry Brooks published his first book, the popular *The Sword of Shannara*, in 1977. It made history as the first book in the science fiction/fantasy genre to appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list and to stay there for five months. Critics hailed it as the heir to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the very book that set Brooks on the path of fantasy writing in the first place. Heady praise indeed, yet it almost didn’t happen.

Brooks began writing in high school, mostly science fiction, westerns and non-fiction. He majored in English at Hamilton College and attended law school because he didn’t think he could support himself as a writer. Legal studies, however, proved uninteresting, and he began his first book to entertain himself. “Law school is extremely boring,” he told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1992. “Like writing your name a thousand times, that kind of boring.” Nonetheless, he completed his degree and practiced law in Illinois—and continued to write.

He sent *The Sword of Shannara* to Del Rey, a newly formed publishing house. As an unsolicited manuscript, it joined hundreds of others on the slush pile. But

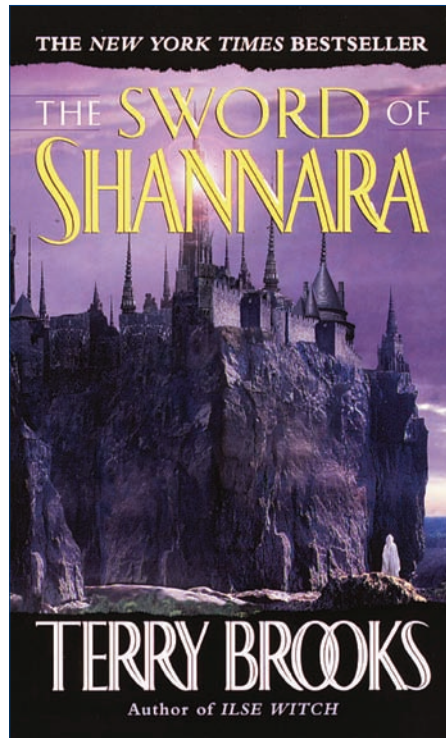
his work caught the eye of a savvy editor, and his career went on to fulfill any fantasy he might have entertained.

He has since written 25 books, including the successful book companion to George Lucas’ *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* and a semi-autobiographical book, *Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life*.

Brooks seems to write nonstop. As soon as a book is published, he has a draft of the next one ready for production. *Born of Wild Magic* is due out in August 2006.

He also has an official Web site, [www.terrybrooks.net](http://www.terrybrooks.net), where he keeps fans up to date on various projects and responds to e-mailed questions. There he told one

reader, “I like my stuff right where I can find it, which is right where I left it, which better not get moved. I tend to line up pencils and notes and such before writing. My kids think I am nuts. They’re probably right.”



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Breathe deeply of it.”

—TERRY BROOKS '69L

He's always maintained the importance of daydreaming, and the worlds he has created demonstrate how well he practices what he preaches. In *Sometimes the Magic Works*, he observes, "If you don't think there is magic in writing, you probably won't write anything magical.... Writing is life. Breathe deeply of it."

30 years, he has been a solo practitioner, focusing mainly on health, administrative and constitutional and civil trials. Yet even there he finds links to history. "Most of the legal issues in my cases involve constitutional law. I'm practicing history. It inevitably creeps into everything I do."

When he isn't working on a case, he's writing. "I write at night. I write on the weekends. I write during lulls in the day. It's all about applying the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair," he laughs.

In *Retreat from Gettysburg*, Brown tapped into hospital and quartermaster records to examine Lee's situation from a different angle. "The state of your supply line is critical," he says. "You need to have shoes and socks for your soldiers, you need to feed your horses and mules. I think what Lee accomplished, moving thousands of troops and all of his supplies 45 miles across the Potomac, was not a defeat but a victory."

Brown is working on three books in various stages of completion. The book closest to publication is *One of Morgan's Men: The Memoirs of Lieutenant John Porter of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry*. His second, *The Lincolns in Kentucky*, involves a different look at Abraham Lincoln. "Some years ago I was retained by the National Park Service

to perform the title examination on the Lincoln boyhood home," said Brown. "It is the story of Abraham Lincoln's father, Thomas Lincoln, and his trials and tribulations over land claims. All the lands he claimed in Kentucky were lost over title disputes. Such is why the Lincolns left Kentucky and moved to Indiana where the territorial government had surveyed the land in order to guarantee good title. The book discusses the court system in Kentucky and the judicial process followed by those courts in resolving disputes over title to lands."

His largest project is a history of the Army of Tennessee, which patrolled between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. He says, "This is the army that defended Kentucky and then faced one disaster after another from Shiloh to the invasion of Kentucky, to Murfreesboro, to Chickamauga and Chattanooga, to Atlanta and Franklin and Nashville. The book will cover the supply and communication systems of that army and the immense difficulty it faced in providing subsistence and forage for its men and animals."

And finally, he has steadily been collecting material to some day write the history of Washington College during the war. "I love writing," he states. "There's nothing else I would rather be doing." †



### Kent Masterson Brown '74L: History

There are more than 7,500 books already published on the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg. So why did Kent Masterson Brown '74L decide to write another one?

"This book covers an aspect of Gettysburg that had never been written about," he explains. "We've accepted what the critics have said for years about General Lee's retreat from Gettysburg. All these clichés. There were aspects that didn't add up for me."

His re-examination led to the award-winning *Retreat From Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics and the Pennsylvania Campaign*, Brown's third book. He also is the author of *Cushing of Gettysburg: The Story of a Union Artillery Commander* and editor of *The Civil War in Kentucky*. He's written countless articles on the Civil War and lectured extensively around the country.

Born and raised in Kentucky, Brown often visited Civil War battlefields with his family. "I was spellbound by the sights," he remembers. "I fell in love with the atmosphere. I'd come back from these trips all fired up about what I had seen. My father, who was a tank battalion commander in World War II, and I would spend hours talking about military strategies—both World War II and the Civil War. It was a serious passion with me. I thought I was going to be a career soldier."

Instead, he majored in history at Centre College and continued his education at W&L's Law School. For the past