

**Adventures In the Written Word, July 2025**

**Danny Willims**

**★★ featuring Meredith Sue Willis ★★**

**Remember the 2012 movie *Battleship*?** Probably not. It's that kind of movie. What obviously happened is, the producers made the movie, watched it, and realized it was lame. Then one of them said, "Let's pay a big-time actor to put in a couple hours of work, add a few minutes with them in it, and market it with their name." Maybe they didn't offer enough money. Tom Cruise apparently turned them down. Sandra Bullock, Leonardo DiCaprio, Kristen Stewart, Johnny Depp, Charlize Theron . . . When they got down to Liam Neeson, he agreed. They added a few minutes at the beginning with Neeson as a US Navy admiral, telling his sailors to go out and kill the space invaders and save the world. The sailors do that. Then at the end, Admiral Neeson presides over a victory ceremony, and presents the Navy heroes with Navy Hero Medals and vouchers for a two-night stay at any Wyndham hotel.

That's what I've done this month with this column. After a year and a half or two doing it, there's no evidence anyone has ever read one, so **Meredith Sue Willis**, an actual writer, has agreed to let me put a little of her in here, and her name at the top. Just like Liam Neeson in *Battleship*. Except I'm not paying her, and there are no braid-fringed epaulets.

**In an article not long ago**, a bunch of authors and other amazing people said a little about some of the books they return to because it makes them feel good. The writer of the article didn't ask me, but if they had:

*The Shipping News*, E. Annie Proulx. Quoting The Byrds: "Everything is so wrong, I know it's going to work out right." To begin with, Homer Quoyale just doesn't fit in anywhere, and he's dismally aware of it. Then his malicious wife dies in a car accident, and he's left with two daughters to care for. About a fifth of the way through this satisfyingly hefty book, there's no direction but up for the Quoyales. An aging but lively aunt persuades them to migrate with her to Newfoundland, and get her vacant childhood home ready to live in again. Newfoundland turns out to be Quoyale's kind of place, a land of seal blubber sandwiches, where nobody knows or cares what it would take to fit in anywhere else in the world. It's obvious by this point that Quoyale, his daughters, and their aunt are going to find their heart's home on this island, so it's time to just enjoy the happy journey.

*Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf. It feels kind of weird saying this book makes me happy, like it makes me happy to be shaken by my heels, rolled down a hill, and stranded in an infinite house of mirrors. The title character lives through about four centuries, and seemingly four hundred quite odd occurrences. The closest thing to unity or a focus I can see is Orlando coming to know many of the leading British literary figures, encounters which may or may not say something about the writers' works. These episodes are scattered amid an assault of experimental language and social criticism, held in a framework of Orlando as page boy to Elizabeth I, Ambassador to Constantinople, award-winning poet, pastoral British nobleman (first as Lord Orlando, then as Lady Orlando) and so much more. The book makes me happy by reminding me that language is infinitely flexible and fun.

*Poems*, Gaius Publius Catullus. There's something here for any mood, as Rome's great lyrical poet addresses matters as eternal as love, and as current as his mortgage and his boat. Reading Catullus aloud back in grad school, I could sway to his rhythms even before my Latin was mature enough to catch his sly references. The love poems, addressed to an idealized woman called Lesbia, have especially endured. For a look at what these lines have inspired, search "Lesbia painting." "Da mi basia mille," he writes, "Give me a thousand kisses." In the TV show *Outlander*, the lady's wedding ring is thus inscribed. A song in the musical *Rent* echoes the "thousand kisses" wish. Another piece which endures is the "Ave atque Vale." Catullus's brother died far from home, and Catullus journeyed to the site to place tributes, and to say "Hail and farewell." Much of the extant writing from the time of Julius Caesar is grim or violent. It makes me happy to be reminded that these people also had joy, and that I can share in it. (And yes, #16 is often cited as the most obscene thing ever written.)

My little high school on the West Virginia-Kentucky border offered one English class per grade and zero electives. but my dear Miss Irene Perry stayed after school one day a week, 1969-1970, to teach World Literature to me and one other student. The works were drawn from a list she shared, two legal-size Ditto pages. Not mimeograph, but Ditto, the pale purple print that smelled weird. Today these pages rank in my mind as one of the precious thing I've lost. I hope Judy still has hers, wherever she is, but it's been 55 years. These final two are from that list. (The list also introduced me to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, another book I've read many times, but that one does not belong in this story.)

*The Little World of Don Camillo*, Giovannino Guareschi, 1950. (Several more English volumes followed, either translations or extensions of three books published in Italian, 1948-1963. There are also some movies, at least one in English.) The "simple, endearing neighborhood or small-town priest" trope is ancient, but always ripe for another revival. Don Camillo is the parish priest of a small Italian town in the Po Valley, and best frenemy Peppone heads the town Communist party, which has won a majority of seats on the town council. The "action" consists of friendly moral and philosophical (and sometimes pugilistic) arguments between the two, the quotidian problems of Don Camillo's rustic flock, baffling encounters with the larger world, and such. It's a comic-book story, creating a charming place akin to our fantasies of the "good old days" that never were.

*The Sound of Waves*, Yukio Mishima, 1964. Bildungsroman. There, I used a big word I learned somewhere, German for "education novel." "Coming-of-age" in English. Shinji's father died in World War II, so the presumably teenage boy and his mother work to support themselves and a younger brother on their very small, isolated island. Shinji is learning the fishing trade, and he's about as fine a young man as can be. Walking home from work he always visits an elderly couple, pays humble respects, and gives them a choice fish. Of course the village rich man has a beautiful daughter, and of course she and Shinji are attracted to one another. A rival suitor appears, a false rumor dims Shinji's prospects, and to sort things out, the rich father secretly arranges a test of courage and integrity between the two suitors. I won't spoil the ending and tell you who wins.

### **Meredith Sue Willis shares this:**

I read George Eliot's *Middlemarch* about every 5 years. It's my ideal of a novel that has lots of good story lines and complex people, but manages to hold them—characters, story lines—in a sort of multi-dimensional force field, each acting on each in a way that both keeps them separate and binds them together. All of which is just to say it is the story of people in relation to each other and to society. And far more than the sum of its wonderful parts.

Another one I go back to repeatedly is Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which is one of the best examples I know of how speculation and imagination work through powerful sense impressions. With no scientific or magical explanation, Butler's protagonist, a young black woman writer, is whipped back from the late twentieth century to slave times. The draw is a red-headed white boy ancestor of hers who she repeatedly has to save from danger. She survives by learning a lot fast, and pulls no punches about how slavery and, by extension, other profoundly immoral institutions, damage everyone involved.

### **Next?**

Don't try to deny it: You have a book or books of your own which makes you happy whenever you read it again. It would be groovy if you share. You could see your name or *nom de courriel* trumpeted on this site, bringing glory to yourself, your family, and your home town. Also, it would confirm the star power of Meredith Sue Willis.

But Wait! There's More! Share your postal address, and I'll mail you a curated set of two or three books from my attic. I'd like to send 80, but that's too much of a wallet hit.

### **Watch Your Language**

A Space-X spokesperson said the rocket "experienced a major anomaly."

*That sound so much gentler than "spectacularly exploded."*

Morgantown man accused of assaulting woman pregnant with twins.

*Local news headline, possibly about a major medical anomaly.*

Maybe news reporters and headline writers are doing this more, or maybe I'm getting more crotchety (or all of the above): using "after" instead of "when." "As in: Nine people killed after plane crashes in Alaska. (What rotten luck; first their plane crashes, then somehow they get killed.) A ballplayer bruised his wrist after being hit by the ball. Houses were destroyed after a storm hit the area.

27+ Hottest Cool Gadgets to Save Time, Get More Done, and Enjoy Life - Ideally As Gifts (an ad)

*An inflection point in the tide of human affairs. For quite some time, I've amused myself by scrolling down all these lists—53 Insane Inventions You Won't Believe Exist. Top 33 Tech Gadget This Christmas. 29 Must-Have Items to Make Your Life Better.—only until I get to the*

*Peeps. No matter what the putative subject of the list, this space-age marvel would be on there somewhere. Until now. (With the recent defunding of NASA, it may be quite a while before civilization experiences another forward leap like this.)*

El Salvadoran national enters guilty pleas in . . .

Man arrested in connection with . . .

(Two recent WBOY-TV headlines on the same day.

*What's the difference between a "man" and an "El Salvadorean national?" One of them we are supposed to presume innocent. I've seen "Muslim man" in a news story about some despicable act, but never "Presbyterian man."*

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### **THAT'S What I call writing!**

Last month I shared a delicious paragraph from Evelyn Waugh, a writer widely considered a master of just-right English. I intend to make this practice permanent, at least temporarily, and present it under this heading, unless I forget. Here's a piece of Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," as perfect a short story as has been written. The narrator, an attorney, is introducing us to his copy-clerks. The one he nicknames Turkey performs adequately in the mornings, but is approximately useless after apparently indulging in spiritous liquors during his lunch hour. Now the narrator turns his attention to his other scribe, whom he calls Nippers.

Though concerning the self-indulgent habits of Turkey I had my own private surmises, yet touching Nippers I was well persuaded that whatever might be his faults in other respects, he was, at least, a temperate young man. But indeed, nature herself seemed to have been his vintner, and at his birth charged him so thoroughly with an irritable, brandy-like disposition, that all subsequent potations were needless. When I consider how, amid the stillness of my chambers, Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him; I plainly perceive that for Nippers, brandy and water were altogether superfluous.

### **Special Bulletin**

I write this thing, and some other things, because it's fun. When I realize I'm writing stuff instead of doing something "productive," like baking a pie or clipping my toenails, I tell myself it's because I'm an editor, and getting my name and a few words out there might lead to some work. It's a lame lie, but fortunately, I'm gullible. If you're writing something, or thinking about it, email me. The last book I edited was a huge, complete non-fiction manuscript by the time I

got it. The one before that was a modest-sized novel from an author who was open to a little nudging. Several times (I've been at this a while) I had a back-and-forth about something an author intended to write.

E-mail me and let me know what's going on with your baby, and I'll think about it or read what you share, and have maybe a little free advice and certainly a lot of encouragement. If you ask, I'll send you whatever I'm writing that day.

**Danny Williams, [editorwv@hotmail.com](mailto:editorwv@hotmail.com)**

me: this book brutally ripped out my heart  
and tore it to shreds then stomped it into  
the ground as i drowned in a sea of my tears  
and basked in eternal sorrow

me: here read it