



A WRITING LIFE

One woman's story from features to funny animals

By Lisa Alcock

NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Just over two years ago, Sara Hoagland Hunter moved her creative life – writing for video, radio, and print – to a small South Natick office with a view onto the Charles River. Since 1996, the Charles has lent her peaceful inspiration for the flow of all kinds of writing: Looney tune lyrics, children's picture books, and assorted video documentary and promotional productions.

Hunter, 44, has been writing since her undergraduate years at Dartmouth,

where she incorporated her creativity energy with the pen into developing skills in video production, including producing a video tribute to Captain Kangaroo. After graduating from college in 1976, she began her working life as a feature writer at the Christian Science

Monitor in Boston. Since that time, for just over two decades, Hunter has evolved a writing career – in print, radio, elementary education, and video production – that has stretched her creative spirit from writing zany parodies of nursery rhymes

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

HUNTER, PAGE 11C

HUNTER, FROM 9C

to a documentary video on Korean adoption.

"I still choke on the phrase: I am a writer. I love the concept, but I feel I am a lot of things," Hunter explained at a recent interview in her home. Today she juggles writing and producing videos, and writing lyrics for children's CDs and the text for children's books, while managing a schedule of going into local schools as a visiting writer.

"My three basic areas have been teaching, writing and producing. To me they all boil down to the same word: expression," Hunter said. "It's expression of an idea. It's an expression of caring about your idea, but also caring about sharing it with people. For me, the hard part about writing is that you are so alone, that you don't see your audience. The good part about teaching is that you are on stage and getting immediate audience feedback."

Hunter's eclectic writing schedule may seem odd to some people, but she sees the production of video and written media as creations of similar energy and effort.

"It's strange how many people have said, 'How can you do video production and write?' I really think it's the same process. The first part is having the idea. The second part is that you gather all your raw data, either with a camera, tape recorder or your pencil. And then you have to condense, and purify, and edit until you have a beautiful final product.

"That's the same, whether you are producing a video or writing a kid's book," she said.

And in developing her writing for several media, Hunter has dabbled in many varying areas of creative work. During late the '70s at the Monitor, she participated as a writer/producer in the early years of the organization's radio program Boston. That radio work helped her develop new writing skills.

"After tape recording an interview, you transcribe it just as if you were writing a feature, the difference is you don't write it up, you edit it and then you write your in-between, your script," she explained. "Once again, you are presenting a person or idea in the most cogent way you can. In a lot of ways I like radio and television because you're less the middle man, and are presenting the subject or person as they are."

During her early years of working she married Andy Hunter, a man she met on blind date. In 1981, her husband's career decision to join the family business took them to Williamstown, Mass. Sara had to find a new place to pour out her creative spirit. She had always wanted to write for children, so she went to the editor of the Williamstown Advocate and offered to write a column just for kids called "Children's Choice." It included kid topics and interviews, and there were prizes from local business for kids who played games incorporated in the column.

She began writing manuscripts for kids, but replies at that time were only rejections. Still not busy enough, she attended North Adams State to earn a teacher's certificate and began student teaching in 7th and 8th grades. Then in 1983, the Hunters moved to Boston and Sara began teaching English at Dover-Sherborn High School. In 1986, she completed a master's at Harvard in reading and reading disabilities.

That next fall, the Hunters adopted their first child, John, from Korea, and a second child, daughter Abby, the next year. Hunter stayed at home, tutoring and teaching for various public speaking and drama programs over the next few years. Then when her daughter entered public school in the fall of 1992, Hunter went to work for a video production company. A year later, she went into business for herself.

Old connections put Hunter in touch with an editor who finally ended up at Jim Henson Production and Hunter began writing children's picture books featuring Miss Piggy, Kermit and other familiar characters. That writing led to similar work for Warner Bros., and she began writing picture books, workbooks, and coloring books tied to television characters particularly Looney Tunes.

Hunter jumped to lyric writing because she had been regularly writing verse for Looney Toons picture books. So when Rhino records formed a partnership with Warner Bros. to produce records, Warner Bros. recommended her.

"Verse just has always come very easily to me," she explained. "In high school I had a great correspondence with Dr. Seuss, who was my hero. I sent him some of my verse that had been published in the high school magazine and he wrote back with encouragement and critiques. One of the reasons I went to Dartmouth was because he had gone to

Dartmouth."

With some of her earlier pic-

ture-book writing, parody was the goal in this newest venture in lyric writing. So Hunter went to work writing totally silly parodies of Nursery Rhymes, belted out by Baby Looney Tune characters. Some of the rhymes featured in the latest version, "Born to Sing Too," include "My Bunny Lies Over the Ocean" (set to "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean"), "Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Baby Martian Gone" and "Baby Elmer Had a Friend" (set to "Old MacDonald Had a Farm").

Today, Hunter incorporates her varied writing and teaching experiences in everything she does. With her varied writing background, is able to match her vision to what she considers the best venue for expressing a given idea or subject.

"I think the topic can dictate the medium. When I decided I was going to cover a story of Navajo code talkers, I thought about it as a video documentary. I thought about it as a kid's book. But, in a way, the topic dictated it. I thought: Do you really want to invasively go to the Navajo Reservation with bright lights and big cameras? No, because they aren't going to open up and I

wouldn't do that to those people. You think about the audience, and it was kids who I wanted to know the story."

Collaborating with an artist for illustrations, Hunter ultimately wrote, "The Unbreakable Code," a children's picture book about a little boy, John, who learns from his grandfather about how Navajo Indians saved the lives of thousands of Americans in the Pacific during World War II, using the Navajo language for an unbreakable code system.

"And yet when I chose to do a story portraying foreign adoption, to me there could be no powerful way to show that - if the adoption agencies in Korea would let me in - than showing a baby being put in the arms of his parents with music going behind it. A really good writer could probably present that in writing better than I could in video, but I couldn't," she explained.

That documentary also became a personal journey for Hunter, who had adopted her son from Korea. Much to her surprise, the agency chose Hunter to be the baby's escort for the 14-hour plane trip home to Boston, and thus the video producer

became part of the story.

At the beginning of that film, Hunter quotes from an essay by English writer, Lawrence Durrell: "Journeys like artists are born not made. A thousand differing circumstances contribute to them, few of them willed or determined by the will - whatever we may think." Durrell's observation surely speaks to Hunter's own writing life. She sees her journey as one that has not only built her writing skills, but also helped her bring vital life experience to her work.

"If you look at writing as the cogent sharing of ideas, then the more experiences and the more ideas you have, the more you are going to be able to share," she reflected. "Which is why I think I am a better writer in my 40s than I was in my 20s. I have more perspective, but also the motivation for me is different. When I first started writing I was very ambitious and very much in it for myself. Somehow, thank heavens, over time, I am still driven, but there is a broader mission involved, which is less selfish.

"It always amazes me the infinite number of stories to write about, to film or sing about," she concluded, "And I can't wait to do more."