

**164th Anniversary Dinner Presidential Address
October 28, 2013
John J. McDonough, M.D.**

What Do They Expect

When I delivered my first paper to the Literary Club on November 23, 1998, titled **Appointment with Murder**¹, I took the liberty of making an opening statement. At the time, I was seriously worried that I was violating some ancient tradition and I would be summarily dragged from the podium and cast into 4th Street. Now, taking my chances again, I would like to reread that opening statement.

Remember, that was 15 years ago:

“Since this is my first paper before the Literary Club, I would like to take the liberty of making an opening statement. Twenty-two years ago, I walked down the forward brow of the USS Constellation, an aircraft carrier, leaving a group of men I admired for their intelligence, dedication, and patriotism. I never thought that I would have the opportunity of being associated with another group of men who shared a similar set of values: education, literature, and good fellowship. I would like to thank you, the members of the Literary Club, for that opportunity.”

That statement is as true today as it was 15 years ago. I would also like to thank Joe Stern, my Sponsor, who is no doubt attending the Celestial Branch meeting tonight. The title of my address is **What Do They Expect**. I am paraphrasing the title of William G. Werner’s Presidential Address at the 116th Anniversary Meeting on October 25, 1965, in this room, 48 years ago, about tips on writing for new members. His title was **What’ll They Expect**², and six of our current Club members probably heard that paper in 1965. Mr. Werner joined the Club in 1943 and remained an active member until his death in 1974, and he presented 25 papers.

Tuck Asbury (member since 1961 – 52 years) remembers Mr. Werner as a stalwart of the Club and a great friend of his father Eslie Asbury, President in 1957. He seems to have performed the same role as Bob Hilton, Jr. who joined in 1966 and was still mentoring young members when I joined in 1996. I recall Bob, the Mr. Literarian of that era, seated in one of the red wing backed chairs near the stairs, stopping me following my first paper, and saying “I enjoyed your paper, **but** you really haven’t written a literary paper until you have written fiction”. That was a challenge that I took to heart, but it took awhile. It was my third paper in 2004 **With Apologies to Somerset Maugham and John O’Hara**. He was right. It was very tough, but afterwards I felt exhilaration and that maybe I had made the team.

So tonight, I would like to talk about members, specifically new members and what the club means to them and what we can do to help them find the full flower of their expectations and encourage other like minded young men to join the camaraderie of this band of brothers (Shakespeare’s Henry V, 1598). The August 2013 issue of Vanity Fair magazine had an article titled **The Lions in Summer**³ about E.L. Doctorow, Robert Caro, Jason Epstein, Truman Capote, James Jones, George Plimpton, Kurt Vonnegut, Bobby Van, James Salter, and Peter Matthiessen. All of these great writers had summer homes in Sagaponack in the Hamptons, within a short distance of each other. In the ‘60’s and ‘70’s they gathered on weekends to converse, debate, try an idea or a chapter, and drink and drink some more. I think you can imagine a smoke filled room with the scotch or wine flowing and with these guys laughing, arguing, and sometimes making passes at the host’s wife. Here’s where we come in:

“All these men have socialized together for decades. Salter and Matthiessen, though, have a special bond. Close but competitive, wishing each other the best, but maybe not quite the best, they share all the complexities of the camaraderie that draws writers together in the first place: **the literary friendship.**”

I think that’s what has sustained this Club for 164 years. The complex camaraderie of men who want to write, to learn, to improve, to try something new, accept the challenge, and to a greater or lesser extent we are all competitive. It is part of the genetic and hormonal madness of being male. We want to do our best, but we recognize when another of us does that best and we congratulate him honestly and sincerely.

After, as thorough a search as I could do, I came up with only seven literary clubs in the United States that do what we do, present essay or short story papers to a group on a regular schedule. Cincinnati’s Literary Club was the first such group founded in 1849, operating for 164 years except for seventeen months during the Civil War. A legal agreement, by the Club’s Officers, on October 8, 1862, appointed an executor to resurrect the Club⁴. The executor, Rueben H. Stevenson (a founding member) resumed Club activities on February 19, 1864⁵. All of this is perfectly understandable for that time. In early September 1862, Confederate General Kirby Smith was approaching Cincinnati with 12,000 battle-hardened veterans. General Lew Wallace (later the author of Ben-Hur) declared martial Law closing all business activities and activated a defense of the city^{6,7}. Three weeks later the Literary Club shut down for 17 months for safety and due to the loss of members to the Union army. On July 14, 1863, General John Hunt Morgan and 1800 of his Confederate Raiders rode through the northern suburbs of the city – Glendale, Springdale, and

Sharonville^{8,9}. The monetary damage was minimal by Civil War standards; but, as a Psychological Warfare exercise, the effort was priceless. On February 19, 1864, the executor felt safe enough to resume the Club's activities.

Two Clubs were formed in 1874, the Chicago Literary Club and the San Francisco Chit-Chat Club. The Chicago Literary Club has a website that is definitely worth a visit, where you will learn that Dr. William F. Poole joined at the first official meeting on March 31, 1874. Dr. Poole had been a member of Cincinnati's Club from 1871 until his move to Chicago in 1874. He is described as the "wet nurse" of the Chicago Club by bringing the copy of our Constitution & Bylaws and customs, which they largely copied¹⁰. Thus avoiding a year and a half struggle of a Constitutional Committee. The others are the Indianapolis Literary Club 1877, The Literary Club of Denver 1970, The Cedar Rapids Literary Club 1974, and the Chit Chat Club of Columbia, MO 1998. The Indianapolis Club is unusual in that it advertises that it serves coffee, tea, and water before and after the presentations, but Indiana was a hot bed of prohibition.

Cincinnati has 100 regular members, 12 honorary, and 24 associate – all men. Chicago 170, mixed men and women. San Francisco 25, men only. Indianapolis 150, men only. Denver 12, men only. Cedar Rapids 55, men and women, and Columbia, Missouri 20, men only. So 5 Clubs men only and 2 mixed gender.

Recently, I queried members with 5 or less years with us and a few, long of tooth, members and asked two questions: **What did you expect as a new member** and **What hasn't happened?** The responses were candid and sincere, and often the composition and the length of the email indicated that significant effort and thought

was put into the response. Some of the responses were off topic of new membership and expectations, but gave valuable insights into other aspects of the club that need to be addressed. Let me begin with what was an almost universal answer to **what did you expect**. I will quote several of the answers, but will not identify the author:

“that I would hear excellent papers each week. This has largely happened: the paper quality has been quite high. While some subjects may interest me personally more than others, the vast majority has been very engaging to hear even on those subjects that aren’t of top-of-the-mind interest to me.”

“I expected literate, well researched, clever, and slightly intimidating papers. I didn’t always get them.”

“I expected to hear many good papers on a diverse range of topics, full well realizing that not all of them would be of the same quality. I also expected good companionship and informal discussions with intelligent people. I would say that all those expectations have been met.”

“I expected many more papers in which the deliverer researched a topic of interest to him and held forth on it. I did not expect the many, many quasi autobiographical pieces that we hear.”

That is why the Board of Management instituted a writing sample from all candidates. I realize that some of you are not happy about it, one member saying that he would never have gotten in with that standard. For him that would not be true since he has delivered a number of stellar papers, but I can assure you that so far that policy has been effective, at least after reviewing the samples we have gotten. We cannot stop there. We need to continue to challenge ourselves. We know we can’t hit it out of the park every time, but why not try. If you have time and think you need it, why not a creative writing course just for the fun of it. Remember, if you are going to write about that trip to Granma’s, it better be pretty damn funny or heart rending!

A significant point was raised on acclimation to the Club; I learned that there is a “Rock Star” among our membership --- John Diehl! Several mentioned John’s kindness in talking to new members about the Club, its history, and its Traditions. He even gave them papers to see examples of what we do and advice in research. This was followed by several suggestions for orienting new members. I realize that several attempts have been made in the past, but have fallen by the wayside. I believe a concerted effort at an orientation program and mentorship would go a long way in getting new members up to speed. One respondent suggested that the primary sponsor take a lead role in this process during the first year of membership and another suggested a 50 minute tutorial for new members given by a Board of Management designee to go over the year in review – highlighting special events like this dinner, the holiday celebration, and summer picnic. Navigating the website, financial issues, constitution & bylaws, expectations and thoughts about papers – the do’s and don’ts, and of course information about the somewhat mysterious BOM – who they are, elections, and our various committees. We have taken this to heart and Paul Franz and I have discussed a New Member packet that will contain a lot of this material. Those of you in the business world know this as “OnBoarding.”¹¹ Others by coaching or mentorship. This is **organizational socialization**: The mechanism by which new members acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to become effective club members and insiders. Tactics such as orientation meetings, printed materials, or computer-based orientations introduce the new members to the Club. Research has shown that these socialization techniques lead to positive outcomes for new members such as greater satisfaction,

performance, Club commitment, and less intent to quit. Our Club candidates are already a personality subset of the population, which responds well to “OnBoarding”, with proactive personalities, and they are generally open, conscientious, agreeable, and curious. **They want to learn and improve.** Why not encourage that. I will ask the Board and the membership for their help and support in developing a viable long-term Onboarding/Mentoring program for recruitment and development over the next 6 months; and, speaking of the mysterious BOM, I would suggest to the Board that at any Board meeting, not in **Executive Session**, that we allow two younger members or even more mature members as well, to attend in non-voting roles. We are limited by space so the number cannot be large. That would hopefully remove the smoke and mirrors contention and demonstrate what it takes to run the Club - a learning experience. For some of you this is heresy, for others possible improvement. I feel it is simply a rededication to the principles this Club was founded upon in 1849 when a group of young men, average age 26, got together for intellectual improvement and camaraderie.

Another theme, which was reflected in the responses, was an interest in having a discussion of the papers or questions & answers posed to the author, following the paper. Several suggested that if the presenter were willing to host a table, that one be designated to accommodate the discussion group. At a future meeting, I will ask for a quick show of hands to determine interest, and speakers would be asked for their desire to host. Needless to say drinks are on the house for those who choose to participate.

Despite the almost universal satisfaction with their entry into the Club and its welcoming, a significant number of the respondents expressed concern over their assimilation:

“I spent the first couple of years trying to engage as many members as I could, particularly over our light dinners after papers. It was not easy breaking into what seemed like cliques. Few Members returned any effort to engage me. I’ve finally settled into a routine of engaging mostly with those people I knew before I joined and with those who joined at about the same time I did. There’s an easy going and natural relationship with them. I realize now that many of the members are simply off-limits, which is still something of a disappointment.”

“I was quite surprised at the paradox of the great cordiality of the group and the difficulty of meeting and getting to know individuals. On many occasions when I have inquired of other members of the identity of a person whom I didn’t know, the response was ‘I’ve been a member for X years and I still don’t know.’”

Several others expressed gratitude when members went out of the way to get to know them, referring specifically to informal lunches or dinners. Candidate members really enjoyed joining the members group that meets at the University Club at 6 PM for dinner on Monday night. Meeting and talking with established members on their first or second visit to the Club seems to have made a lasting impression. Bill Sena routinely orchestrates a lunch on most Friday afternoons that leads to some very lively discussion. One final quote:

“But there is one aspect of the LC that has only happened once, thanks to the generous invitation of Howard Tomb, and that is to meet and talk outside the Club’s door. During that lunch, as I did expect, and thankfully as it did result, the conversation was deeper, more direct, and made me feel more rooted. Of course that sort of discussion is almost impossible when we’re standing for the 20 minutes prior to a paper and the conversation comes truncated by hello’s and good-to-see-you’s. All in good time, I am sure.”

In conclusion, when I said that I would quote some responses but not identify the author, I lied. With permission, I am attaching Richard Hunt's response to me. It is too long to quote here but it is a very literary, but humorous and poignant statement on what it is to be a new member. I urge you to read it and I would be happy to email it to you if you would like.

Well gentlemen, we're good, but there is plenty of room for improvement in the papers, in our dealings with new members, and in our recruitment efforts. These are hurdles that we can surmount and I urge you to be talent spotters, seize the initiative, and, to paraphrase an old Navy announcement I heard many times at sea, turn us into the wind and start launching aircraft.

Gentlemen, Good Night and Happy Anniversary.

John J. McDonough, M.D
President
Literary Club
2013-2014

Richard Hunt's e-mail Response to the Questions

- 1. What did you expect as a new member?**
- 2. What hasn't happened?**

From: Richard Hunt (address deleted)
Sent: Tuesday, October 22, 2013, 11:02 AM
To: McDonough, John
Subject: Re: LC Questions

Jack,

You pose two interesting questions. Time has taught me that the simplest of questions have the most complex answers (very Zen of you).

As I mentioned, during the four-hour drive from Cleveland on Sunday, this was a great couple of queries to mull over. I suspect the following response is 4x longer than what you wanted (and yes, the intro paragraphs are almost always written after the body is drafted so it's not as if there's any paranormal premonition here). You can blame either the tendency of my word spigot to stick open or Mark Twain's famous line about "I would have written a shorter letter but I didn't have the time." So in the interest of making sure I get this back to you promptly, here goes.

1. What did you expect as a new member? Even after the half dozen visits prior to the membership application, I wasn't precisely sure what to expect once inducted. A crowd of congenial faces, sure. An enclave of support while stepping into the welcoming foyer and generous rooms – that too. But there was no heavenly chorus nor brass trumpets which swelled after walking in the front door. Then again, there weren't any "pay no attention to the man behind the screen" disappointments a la Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz nor pick-up basketball games. Thank goodness that none of the above ever came to pass; one shudders to imagine. Instead, the meetings, more so, the readings, continued on just as they had when I visited as a guest...and that, as I've come to learn, is the cord that ties us all together. Due to the unique nature of the LC, the almost anachronistic premium which is placed on courtesy, kindness, reverence for strong writing, and an almost insurmountable collective good cheer, well, all that combined with traditions that stretch back a century and a half renders an experience which is completely unique in this day and age.

Was it always this way? That's hard to imagine as well. Then again, for even the oldest current members...what do we truly know of the tactile fabric of life in the mid-1800's? We only know what we read in, and revel in, as part of the Club's history. But can we truly visualize and actualize what it was like to create the by-laws for this group at a time when horses conveyed people and goods (50+ years before cars); fireplaces still provided toasty warmth but endless work (although central heating was soon to come); music and theater only came live; and clothes were scratchy, stiff, scarce and usually stinky. How different it would have been to be a member then...but how amazing it is that the precepts they set forth still apply and bind us kindly together as rules of order.

But here's the part that I did expect, and I suspect has remained true from the first meeting; by virtue of the way the words are strung together, the viewpoint of the author is shared to those in attendance. The same then as now, likewise not wildly different from what books by their nature do – convey the glimmers of an individual mind to a wider audience of readers. So it's almost obvious that new members should expect that LC members have always prized the sage selection of "le mot juste" and enjoyed the company of smart peers across

professions and generations of other club members. Did I know to expect this? Maybe, but not in all the richness that is offered every Monday evening.

So the question that has the most resonance for me is a slight twist: what have I come to expect as a member? An open door, open minds, and the unquestionable (although that is not to suggest unquestioning) support from the other 99. And as they say, that's something that money can't buy.

As a publisher, especially in these days of digital gee-gaws and falling reading comprehension scores from schools, I will pretty much pledge my service in any literary oriented endeavor. Call me dedicated, call me desperate...all I know is that I'm not going to walk away from this fight unbloodied. And as I've learned to appreciate from the volume of collected histories from John Diehl, seemingly no one ever took a genteel pass from the LC. Be it the Civil War or uncivil liberties, the one thing asked of us all is the spunk to put our thoughts down on paper, hopefully revise them once or twice beforehand, and then deliver them with vigor. That opportunity is one to be treasured and I have indeed come to anticipate with great longing those papers that stir our minds and souls deeply.

2. What hasn't happened? Haven't won the lottery...then again I never buy a ticket. Haven't grown six inches, haven't sailed to Morocco, haven't flown in a private jet to Hollywood for a screen test even though I sat next to Nick Clooney at last year's Anniversary Dinner. So just like the bit about the heavenly chorus at the start, what hasn't happened is similarly good and fair and right. This isn't a blood networking event where we troll for business; we're here to celebrate the academic exercise of writing and elocution.

But there is one aspect of the LC that has only happened once, thanks to the generous invitation of Howard Tomb, and that is to meet and talk outside the Club's door. During that lunch, as I did expect, and thankfully as it did result, the conversation was deeper, more direct, and made me feel more rooted. Of course that sort of discussion is almost impossible when we're standing for 20 minutes prior to the paper and the conversation comes truncated by hello's and good-to-see-you's. All in good time, I'm sure.

Oh, the hazing hasn't happened yet either. Or perhaps I missed it. C'est la literary guerre. Over and out. Or to paraphrase Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh - "Thanks for asking my opinion." And now I will retreat back to my corner and go quietly about my business.

Richard

References

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3. Michael Shnayerson. **The Lions in Summer**. Vanity Fair Magazine August 2013, p. 126.
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