

Richie Swanson of Winona works at his computer on his boathouse Monday afternoon. Swanson was awarded the annual PeaceWriting Award for his unpublished novel, "The Trouble With Becoming an Aunt." The award honors writing that promotes peace.

Kevin E. Schmidt
of the Winona Daily News

Local writer wins peace award

By Kari Knutson
Winona Daily News

A self-described "incorrigible hermit" has stepped off of his Mississippi River boathouse and into the spotlight, winning a national writing award.

"The reason I have time to write is because I live a simple life with very few possessions," Richie Swanson said Monday. "I'm the kind of person who struggles with chit chat."

Swanson, who says he writes about four to five hours a day at his Winona home, last month won the PeaceWriting Award for his novel, "The Trouble With Becoming an Aunt." The \$500 award was given by PeaceHope, an organization led by James R. Bennett, professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas. It is given to the writer of an unpublished novel that promotes peace.

Swanson's novel tells the story of a mathematician's daughter who has

"This is a unique contribution to our understanding of the consequences of our war machine."

— James R. Bennett, on Winona writer Richie Swanson's award-winning novel

helped design nuclear missiles and whose brother is working on an X-ray laser-defense system.

"The subject chose me. I didn't choose the subject," Swanson said. "I think everybody grows up with family conflict and when you add the equation of nuclear weapons, you have rich subject for a story."

Bennett established the award to encourage more writers to take on the

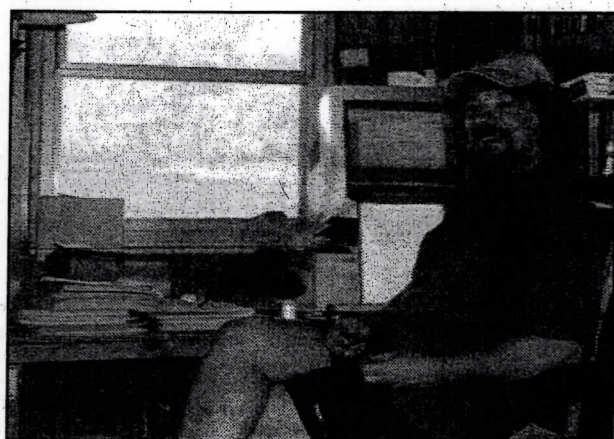
subject of peace in society.

"This is a unique contribution to our understanding of the consequences of our war machine," he said of Swanson's novel. "This was, I hope, a real stimulus for him to work on his novel and send it out to publishers. I hope the novel will be published."

Swanson has studied journalism at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, bicycled across the United States and worked in an Alaskan fish cannery. He is doing a few touchups on his novel, which he plans to have done by Christmas. A few agents are interested, and having this award will help, he said.

He feels very strongly about the message of his book.

"The message is the development of high technology weapons needs to take place in a democratic process. Not in the Pentagon and corporate offices," he said. "I'm flattered to have my work associated with peace."



Greg Sellnow/Post-Bulletin

A computer, on which he does his writing, is one of the few luxuries Richie Swanson has afforded himself. He lives in a small boathouse on the Mississippi River and gets by on an annual income of less than \$10,000.

Boathouse life just right for Richie

Spartan lifestyle allows Swanson to work on his writing

WINONA

Writer and naturalist Richie Swanson leads the kind of life that makes many of us feel guilty about our consumer-driven existences. Or, at least, it maybe *should* make us feel guilty.

He lives in an aging boathouse tied up along the Mississippi River that is no bigger than your average dining room and lives on annual income of about \$9,000. This is how he does it: He eats a lot of vegetables and uses meat only as a condiment. He heats and cooks with wood and does not have indoor plumbing. He wears cheap clothes. He does not have a television set. His primary mode of transportation is bicycle. His electric bill averages \$15 a month.

"I like good food," Richie says. "But if there's a choice between going to a restaurant and reading Albert Camus or Dorothy Allison, I'll take the novel. I live on good books, good birds, cabbage and rice."



Greg Sellnow

To get to Richie's boathouse you take an unnamed gravel road down an embankment to the river, which is mostly blocked from view by thick trees and foliage. His boathouse is one of several dozen floating, semi-permanent homes that make up what has become known in Winona as the Boathouse Community. Members of the community, which was incorporated several years ago as part of a plan to keep the state Department of Natural Resources from having the houses removed, together pay fees for trash removal, inspections and maintenance of a portable toilet.

Richie is one of about 25 boat house dwellers who live along the river year around. His neatly kept domicile consists of a tiny kitchen area, a small loft where he sleeps, a stove, a few old chairs, an overflowing bookshelf that takes up an entire wall, and a desk on which a computer and printer sit.

Next to the desk is a five-drawer filing cabinet marked with these headings: "Trouble," "Song," "Story," "Myth," and "Cycle & Dust." Richie is not the kind of guy who can be easily categorized. (He bristles when folks refer to call him as a '70s-style hippie.) But, in a way, those file-cabinet headings are the focal points around which Richie's life revolves.

"Trouble" is short for "The Trouble with Being an Aunt," the completed novel he's been trying to get published for the last couple of years.

The novel, whose protagonist is an anti-war activist, won the 2000 Peace Writing Award presented annually by the PeaceHope organization based at the University of Arkansas.

The novel has seen the inside of at least three major publishing houses, but so far there have been no takers.

"I've come to realize that this is not the kind of novel that belongs with a big publisher," Richie says. "So I'm changing directions. Right now I'm looking for a new agent."

In the meantime, he's started work on a new novel, a love story that revolves around bicycling. That brings us to the "Cycle & Dust" heading of his life.

Richie grew up in Norwalk, Conn., and graduated from high school in 1972. He attended Bowling Green University in Ohio, but left school in 1977 to explore the country on a bicycle — something he did for the next three years, before settling in Winona in 1980.

"I became a full-time beach bum, and I've been trying to make a living out of it ever since," Richie says with a laugh. "I'm not that much different from someone who sells driftwood in his front lawn."

But instead of selling driftwood, Richie sells stories. The "Myth" and "Story" drawers in his cabinet contain dozens of essays and fiction writings, many of them based on creation myths. And the "Song" drawer is full of articles he's written about song birds. His modest income comes primarily from the sale of these articles to a variety of magazines and on-line journals.

I asked Richie if maintaining such a spare lifestyle is his way of making a statement about the excesses of our society. He said he doesn't see it that way.

"It's a lifestyle that speaks for itself," he says. "It allows me to work on my art. When I stand in front of the post office with a group protesting our government's foreign policy, that's making a statement."

Greg Sellnow's columns appear Tuesdays and Saturdays. He can be reached at 285-7703 or by e-mail at sellnow@postbulletin.com.

Author doesn't live in Oregon, but he writes about it

Name: Richie Swanson

He wrote: "The Trouble With Becoming an Aunt"

It's about? "It won the 2000 Peace-Writing Award for an unpublished novel contributing to peace, granted by PeaceHope, director James Bennett, professor emeritus, University of Arkansas. It describes a woman who, since birth, confronts the accelerating capabilities of nuclear destruction."

"Her father designs guidance systems for Atlas and MX missiles, and when her brother signs up to study the X-ray laser for Star Wars, she decides it's time for serious action. The Oregon Coast connection is that she relives her family struggle while meditating on the resilient sea palm, walking the beaches."

Are you from Oregon? "I was never officially an Oregon resident. But if you count the nights I have slept on beaches, in hiker-biker camps, in campgrounds on the coast, in roadside parks and forest service camps throughout the state, you will end up with about 1,000 days of very good fun, almost three years, but no mort-



Richie Swanson

gage payments. "And I know this does not work for people who do not inhabit fictional universes, but if you count the days I have spent writing about the Oregon Coast, you get at least seven more years. And if you count the days reading and imagining about it, you go back to the time when volcanic rock was boiling its way down the Columbia River Valley, and even back as far as when the first person emerged out of the ocean fog and left a footprint on the sand, which ever happened first; I was there."

What do you do for work?

"Currently I just write. I don't believe much in the consumer culture. I don't take part in it much. I cook soup on my wood stove. I eat a lot of cabbage and rice. I've seen the earth ripped up in many ways as I've bicycled all around the U.S. and Canada,

scenes. I chisel language. My nonfiction bird-writing process is different. I experience the ecosystem and species. I talk to every ornithologist possible. I try to prevent complicated science from becoming inaccurate soundbites."

What's next? "I am writing a novel about love, premonition and bicycling the Oregon Coast."

He's reading: "I just finished 'Celilo Tales,' edited by Donald Hines, myths from the Columbia River before EuroAmerican conquest."

"I read all the native myth I can get my hands on, because so much of it details rich connections to the ancient natural history of the continent that is mostly gone, and to the present nature that remains."

"I love the meaning of stories that go beyond the anthropocentric."

Oregon authors appears regularly on the Books page. Direct comments or suggestions to Assistant Features Editor Paul Denison, who can be reached by phone at 338-2323, or by e-mail at pdenison@guardnet.com.

and I don't like to deny the connection that what humans use, wildlife loses. I live on several thousand dollars per year."

Background: "I live a simple life in a boathouse on the Upper Mississippi River in Winona, Minn., hauling water in six-gallon jugs, heating with wood. I was born in Norwalk, Conn. I was pretty much a full-time bicycle bum 1977-1987. I've lived in the boathouse since 1987."

"My partner Barbi used to live next door in another boathouse, and I helped raise her son here on the river."

How did you become a writer?

"Turning Point No. 1: I left college to explore North America by bicycle, and I kept journals of people and critters I encountered."

"Turning Point No. 2: I met Robert Olen Butler at the Port Townsend's Writers Conference in 1991, and at that time he had the time to tutor me and generously share his knowledge of technique, and to help me form a workable aesthetic."

What is your writing process? "I free-associate. I dream voices and