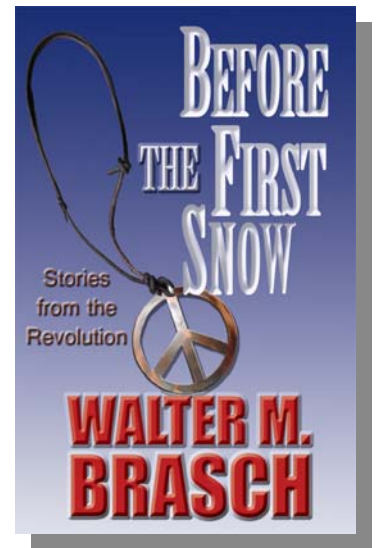


SUGGESTED QUESTIONS
BEFORE THE FIRST SNOW
By Walter M. Brasch



INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

You've received very strong reviews for *Before the First Snow*. Michael Blake, the writer who won an Oscar for *Dances With Wolves*, calls you "an exceptional writer." Dan Rather says the book is "First-rate fiction that explores and contemplates modern American history, culture, politics and journalism. A rare combination of excellent fiction-writing and deep thought." And, Heidi Prescott, who's senior vice-president for the Humane Society of the United States, says *Before the First Snow* is "A beautifully-written and powerful look at humanity and the reverence of life as seen through the lives of a social activist who never lost hope, and the reporter who covered her story." Most of your books have had strong critical acclaim, haven't they?

Tell us a bit about your background—how you came to be a writer.

You're a columnist and you've written other books, right?

About this book, *BEFORE THE FIRST SNOW*. It's your first work of fiction, but you combine journalism and literary fiction. What's the story *behind* the story.

OK, so now, what's the story of BEFORE THE FIRST SNOW?

BOOK STRUCTURE

You present a very unusual framework for *Before the First Snow*. The odd numbered chapters cover an eight month period leading up to the Gulf War in January 1991. But, the even-numbered chapters seem to be a chronology between the mid-'60s and the Gulf War. Can you please explain this interesting method a bit more?

David, the reporter, is writing the book in first person in the odd numbered chapters. But, in the even numbered chapters, David is writing in the third person, and the time frame is 1964 to 1990.

When we first meet David, we see him on a tour to promote a book about revolutionary journalists. That seems to set the stage for the story development.

Your main character, Apryl, is in almost every scene in the odd-numbered chapters, which cover only a seven month time leading up to the first Gulf War in 1991. But, she seems to be a minor character, and almost doesn't appear at all, in most of the even-numbered chapters. Why is that?

There are a lot of layers in your book, and it seems like readers should read it at least twice to understand how everything integrates with each other.

There's a lot of humor in your book. With such a serious theme, how did you integrate the humor into it.

You integrate facts easily within your story. They're there, but don't interfere. For example, you casually mentioned the Newspaper Guild's minimum wages in 1967. Tell us a bit more about the "facts" part of the book.

One of the more descriptive chapters was about Haight-Asbury section of San Francisco, especially during the Summer of Love, which was 1967. The facts are very exact, including the kinds of clothes, the costs, the music, and the rubber-neckers who came on Gray Line tours just to see the culture. You make the reader a part of the scene, to feel what they felt during that year. How close is that chapter to your own life?

I assume the facts also extend to the information and location of the historical figures within the book?

Just as you mix real historic names with fictional names, you mix real place names with fictional place names. Why is that?

BOOK PLOT AND CHARACTERIZATION:

Your three main characters are Apryl, Sam and David. In various parts of the book, you give the readers ideas about what Apryl and Sam look like and how they dress. But, you say nothing about David. Is this deliberate?

In *Before the First Snow* is an interesting dichotomy between Apryl and David, and the nature of society. Apryl is a do-er, a person involved in the fight for social justice. But, she says that David, the editor of a magazine, even though he's a liberal editor, is an observer. Never a part of the story.
[See p. 29]

You have your editor, David, growing up in California and then moving East. Apryl, the activist, grew up in the East, moved to California, and then back to the East. Was this geographical shift deliberate?

Why did you call the magazine that David works for *Century*? Is that of any historical importance?

In one chapter, you have David doing a story about a drug-induced hippie girl who wanders into a cafe. [See pp. 103-109] In a later chapter, you have Apryl mentioning that she gets high on life, not drugs. [See p. 224] Yet, it seems that the girl-hippie he writes about in 1967 is the same one he writes about in 1990. Is she?

In chapter 28 [see pp. 283-285], you talk about a woman who wanted to cut down an azalea bush, and of a neighbor who begged her to keep it. At first reading, it doesn't seem to fit within the book. Can you discuss this chapter a bit.

I assume this is somewhat like the passages where Apryl talks to David about noticing things—or, rather, not noticing them. [See p. 292-293]

THEMES AND ISSUES—GENERAL

Before the First Snow integrates history, the counter-culture, and contemporary social issues. For example, you write about America being oil-dependent and searching for energy alternatives in 1990 before the first Gulf War 20 years ago. You could just change a date, and it'd be the same problem today.

You seem to take on the establishment. For instance, your characters have numerous issues with government and Big Business.

A lot of *Before the First Snow* looks at the problems of oil-dependency vs. what proponents call “clean” nuclear energy. With the meltdown and problems at the Japanese nuclear reactors, as well as the undeclared wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, *Before the First Snow* seems to be even more relevant today.

It's obvious that your characters aren't thrilled about nuclear energy, and how the big energy companies have aggressively tried to control government and people's lives. But you seem to be fair in how you handle the conflicts.

Before the First Snow has a heavy pro-labor focus. Apryl is a photographer for labor unions. And, you have a whole chapter devoted just to the grape strike

in California during the mid-1960s. Aren't you afraid that the book will have a limited appeal if it focuses just on labor?

The concept of fear seems to be a part of *Before the First Snow*. Can you elaborate a bit? **[See pp. 62-65 for the base]**

I also noted that you enjoy poking fun at the educational establishment. In fact, one of your funniest chapters is Apryl's confrontation with the administration of a college. **[See pp. 221-223]**

Chapter 4 **[See pp. 49-53]** discusses a racist college professor who refuses to rent an apartment to Apryl. The story takes place not in the South but in the North. Is this a true story?

A lot of *Before the First Snow* looks at the environment. Sometimes it's just an unobtrusive line here or there; other times, it is an extended look, as in your discussions of an azalea bush **[See pp. 283-285]** and of an entire housing development. **[See pp. 265-266]** Yet, you don't hammer that theme into the readers.

One of your most interesting chapters is a dichotomy between Woodstock in 1969 and Kent State in 1970. **[See pp. 139-150]** You use the voices of the people who were at each one. You start by showing differences, yet you seem to merge those differences. You seem to be telling us that the hippies of Woodstock and the young soldiers at Kent State all seemed to live the same lives, and have the same problems and ambitions.

One of your most powerful scenes is of a drunken Vietnam veteran who David and Apryl meet at a bus stop late at night. The veteran is drunk and may have post-traumatic stress syndrome. Tell us a bit more about this, and why it's in the book. **[see pp. 151-152 and 162-165]** Is that person someone you know?

One of the themes in *Before the First Snow* is a person's right to privacy versus a public's . . . or, more really, a journalist's right to know. Yet, you subtly position this within the book without yelling and screaming. The scene about the fisherman, and Apryl's reactions, are just one example. **[See p. 204]** What are your beliefs about this important issue?

In your chapter about welfare and food stamps, you seem to be sympathetic to those who truly need help, and how uncaring, unfeeling, the government is. **[See pp. 86-87]** But, you also have very sharp words about people abusing the system.

The Humane Society of the United States has praised your book. You thread a number of issues about animals into *Before the First Snow*. [See, e.g., pp. 117-120, 225-226]

You were active in anti-war movements, yet you present rather sympathetic pictures of veterans. Could you please discuss this issue a bit more fully? [See pp. 217-218, pp. 139-150, pp. 151-152 and 162-165]

THEMES AND ISSUES—MEDIA

You talk a lot about the media, and it seems like you have a lot of fun with this area. [See pp. 98, et al.]

The media, especially the establishment media, come in for a lot of abuse. Yet, David is an editor for an establishment magazine. Is this another way for you to show the problems and the conflicts not only within the media and society, but individuals as well?

You make some very interesting observations that the American revolution was led by journalists, but that the changes of two hundred years later, in the 1960s, were led by the counter-culture and the alternative journalists.

One of the major themes in your book is that reporters just observe and don't participate. Isn't observing what reporters are supposed to do?

You also give a very unique look at reporting when you have Apryl, the activist, telling the reporter, David, that he sees trees as a blur [See pp. 206, 209] and that he writes but has no remembrances for the people and their lives [See pp. 292-293]. Could you please expand upon that?

You slip in several references to the problems of literature being published. On p. 172, you note that "a book about a woman her place in a social movement would always be trumped by ghosted celebrity tell-alls and books of lurid and fast-paced plots written by hacks." Were you slyly referring to BEFORE THE FIRST SNOW and the publishing industry?

You seem to have fun with TV news [See p. 255, et al.], and even have a rather funny commentary about a TV news reporter who spends more time patting down her hair and checking her lipstick than in getting the news. You also mention that in a couple of years she might become a local news anchor and even be allowed to be in the same county as Walter Cronkite. What do you REALLY think about TV news?

You also have fun with PR people and with book critics. Some of the funniest lines have to do with you—or, rather your characters, making fun of them. For an author who needs both PR and good reviews, isn't this a bit risky?

One of the themes of your book is about the First Amendment rights. You even discuss how your liberal characters defied a liberal organization's attempt to ban publications they thought were degrading to women. **[See pp. 56-57]**

The public thinks authors make a lot from their writing. The Stephen Kings. The John Grishams and Tom Clancys. The Danielle Steels.

The *smallest* part?

So why *don't* make a lot of money?

So, why do you write?

There's an interesting section in your book about writers. Let me read a part of it. **[See pp. 72-73, about Henry Luce]**

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY:

You are a liberal, active in social justice issues, a member of several unions, and proudly say you were a child of the '60s. This seems to be very similar to your main character, Apryl. Just how close are you to your characters? Did you live the life you described in *Before the First Snow*?

Somerset Maugham said of his book, *Of Human Bondage*, that "It is not an autobiography, but an autobiographical novel; fact and fiction are inextricably mingled." Many authors have written autobiographical novels. We had Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* . . . Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* . . . and Ernest Hemmingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Just how close is *Before the First Snow* to your own life?

You wrote for the alternative press in this 1960s, didn't you?

Just how much of David is really you?

Is Apryl a part of you, also?

And, please tell us again where our listeners can buy a copy of *Before the First Snow*

