

FROM THE BOSTON *GLOBE*

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Keep those cards, letters coming

By Alex Beam, *Globe* Columnist November 20, 2006

There is a character in Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" named Hugh Whitbread . Mrs. D detests Whitbread, the "perfect specimen of the public [meaning private in England] school type." He is a snob, a prig, "a first-rate valet"; but he possesses a gift that his acquaintances admire: "the art of writing letters to the Times."

I prize the subculture of newspaper letter-writers, the men and women who beg to differ, or to amplify, often in prose superior to the work they are criticizing. And publishing readers' letters, as we do every day, is vital to the life of a newspaper. It reinforces the useful fiction that someone is reading the paper and actually paying attention.

There happens to be a real-life Hugh Whitbread alive and well in the United Kingdom, a lawyer and author named Francis Bennion . On his website, francisbennion.com, you can read dozens of letters addressed to the London Times ("Is Pornography Therapeutic?"), the Daily Telegraph ("Should Bestiality Be a Crime?"), the Guardian ("The Nonsense of Child-Centred Education") and other papers. Bennion told me that he has never written to an American publication, although he was published in the Toronto Globe and Mail, in 1975, bemoaning a teachers' strike.

Bennion has been placing letters for more than 50 years, and he offers much wise counsel for the would-be newspaper scribe:

- "1 Avoid propounding an utterly outrageous view.
2. Condense like a milk factory. . . . [I condensed point three -- AB. Speaking of condensation, New York Times letters editor Tom Feyer once suggested that letters run about 150 words, invoking the admirable brevity of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The inevitable response from a reader: "Why does Lincoln get 250 and the rest of us a measly 150?"]
4. Write better than the hacks (though this will not win you an invitation to join the staff).
5. Subtly suggest you know what you are talking about, and are probably, if the truth were known, the leading expert on the topic.
6. Don't however try to puff your own book: this ploy will be seen through and censored."

Bennion speaks from experience. In one letter, he tried, and failed, to hype his "book of secular sexual morality entitled 'The Sex Code.'" He publishes the unedited version of the letters on his website.

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