

*Felix Academicus:  
Tales of a Happy Academic*

Also by Skip Eisiminger

Poetry

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Essays

*The Consequences of Error and Other Language Essays* (Peter Lang, 1991)

Word Games

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# Felix Academicus: Tales of a Happy Academic

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Skip Eisiminger



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# Contents

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*Preface vi*

*Foreword vii*

*Acknowledgments viii*

Epiphanies of Purpose	1
Creation Myth	5
The Presumption of Optimism	6
The Helplessness of Fathers	11
The Vice and Versa of Pain	12
Scales, Feathers, and Skin	17
An Embarrassment of Suffering	18
Smokin' and Drinkin' and Such	23
Coast Cure	29
Word Wise	30
Accepting Responsibility	35
A Continual Allegory: Some Thoughts on Literal-mindedness	36
The Long and Short of Brevity: Fact and Speculation	41
Twelve Toes and Counting	45
When the Teacher's Wrong	50
Scarlet Women and Blue-Eyed Boys	55
Honk If You Love Voltaire: A Religious Life	61
A Sexual Life	68
A Grammarian Considers the Deity	75
A Feel for the Ball	76
The Older the Vintage the Better the Buzz	84
On Play and Competition	85
A Love Poem	89
A Racial Autobiography	90
Thy Will Be Done	97
The Language of Race	98
An Apology for Expediency	103
Doing the Best He Can	111
The Commonwealth of Bells	118
Hello and Goodbye: Threshold Rituals and Their Importance	124
Like Nail Clippings in the Fire	129
Singing from the Same Hymnal: Searching for a Common Bond	130
Father-Son Talk	135
The End is Nearish	136
A Bouquet of Reincarnations	142

*Index 148*

*A Note on the Author inside back cover*

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## Preface

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**L**ou Holtz, the former football coach at USC, observed that happiness is a poor memory. My recall is not particularly good: I swear I know many of the answers on *Jeopardy*; I just can't remember them. No, my academic contentment has little to do with having a bad memory; I recall the bad times all too well, and the good times I make an effort to take note of in my journal and card file. I've taken to heart the advice of Kurt Vonnegut's Uncle Alex: "Please notice when you are happy." But Alex and I both know that diamonds burn, and gold cannot stay.

My old American literature professor at Auburn, Dr. Robert Pierle, was closer to the mark than Coach Holtz when Pierle observed that he had the best job in the world: he was being "paid to read books and talk about them." When I heard him say that, I knew I was in the right major because I loved to read and write, and I could not think of another job in which I'd be paid to do those things that I would have done regardless of the profession I chose. As an academic, however, I could read those things I chose to read (for the most part), say the things I wanted to say (for the most part), write the things I wanted to write (for the most part), and be paid for doing them. Grading a stack of papers and attending a committee meeting every so often seemed well worth what I was getting in return: a tenured job (eventually), a private office, the respect of society, a secretary, the summer off if I chose to take it, free access to a copier, a computer, a telephone, a fax machine, a good library and ILL service, smart caring colleagues, a handful of good students (God bless them!), access to a fitness center and cafeterias, a concert series, a free lecture series, a four-day-a-week schedule with classes starting at 11 AM, paid travel, a year off every six years, and (finally) a decent salary. Indeed, if my calculations are correct, I should receive about as much when I retire as I am currently making teaching over two hundred students a year. The South Carolina TERI program, of course, had a lot to do with my financial security, and whoever dreamed up the academic handout has my eternal gratitude because it ranks right up there with Medicare, the G.I. Bill, and Social Security.

One of John Updike's characters says that "America is one vast conspiracy to make you happy," and, in my case, it seems to be working. All I ever expected was the opportunity to pursue Dame Felicia, and now it appears I have caught her.

The essays which follow, the product of what V. S. Pritchett called a "congenial monotony," are the evidence of my felicity; I trust they will give my readers as much pleasure as they gave the *felix academicus* who wrote them. Enjoy!

Skip Eisiminger

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## Foreword

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The writer of personal essays, like the creator of the form, Montaigne, seeks to engage readers by sharing experiences, opinions, discoveries, observations, responses to books, speeches, works of art, and a myriad of facts and ideas gleaned from a lifetime of desultory reading. Perhaps better than in any other form of writing, including what hopes to pass as straightforward, truthful autobiography, personal essays enable authors to unveil themselves, even if, as in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne in a personal essay introducing his *Mosses from an Old Manse*, they proclaim themselves not to be “one of those supremely hospitable people, who serve up their hearts delicately fried, with brain-sauce, as a tidbit for their beloved public.”

The personal essay, by its very nature, is self-revelatory even in the act of concealing. It allows us to see what makes the author tick. Word by well-chosen word, sentence by well-wrought sentence, paragraph by richly informed or impressively opinionated paragraph, the author comes into being before our very eyes and grasps our minds, challenges our ideas and codes of behavior, tickles us, infuriates us, leads us, and touches our hearts. It does not overwhelm us with its length nor underwhelm us with its lack of solid content. It raises a point, makes it, and clears out, leaving us room to reflect before our brains turn to jelly or cement. As we reflect, we have the sense that we have shared companionable moments, as though we had sat at a table breaking bread with someone possessing a richly stored mind, someone who had lived fully, thoughtfully, conscientiously, someone whose experiences ranged from the humorous to the tragic.

In defining and describing the personal essay, I find I have given an overview of the artistry of the personal essays you now hold in your hand. Indeed, my friend and former colleague, Sterling (Skip) Eisiminger has mastered the art of the personal essay. Taking a cue from the aforementioned Hawthorne, I invite you to join me in Skip’s study to observe him at work, to read over his shoulder, to ask him to keep preparing delicious and hearty dishes of “brain sauce.” Come prepared to be well-fed, engaged, and even envious, for few people today write as well as does this prose-poet.

John Lane Idol, Jr.

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## *Acknowledgments*

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Six of the essays in this volume were previously published. “Word Wise,” “When the Teacher’s Wrong,” and “The Long and Short of Brevity” originally appeared on-line in *The Vocabula Review*. “A Continual Allegory,” “The Language of Race,” and “An Apology for Expediency” were first published in the *South Carolina Review*. The author wishes to thank the editors of both journals for their permission to reprint.



## *Dedication*

*Felix Academicus* is dedicated to all the happy academics (though some are admittedly happier than others), especially, but in no particular order:

Harold, Ray, Hallman, Fred, Dick, Mark, Bill, Roger, Claire, Albert, Malcolm, Tharon, Sylvia, Meredith, Dixie, Charlie, Ron, Roger, Lucy, Michael, Elizabeth, Teddi, Michelle, Wayne, Keith, John, Jack, Joan, Ed, Richard, Summer, Chip, Morris, Deuel, Louis, Corinne, Ben, David, Carol, Ned, Marion, Donna, Jill, Allen, Ryan, Victor, Jennie, Jason, Sean, Ardyce, Susanna, Kara, Clint, Laurie, Lynn, Jennifer, Neil, Ashley, Frank, Jonathon, Laura, Terry, Mary, Amy, Cynthia, Barbara, Susan, Jan, Justin, Martin, Allison, Stephen, Mason, Xioll, Amanda, Stephen, Kimberly, Robert, Patrick, Kira, Bart, Catherine, Philip, Donna, Art, Angie, Mark, Joseph, Elisa, Skye, Lenny, Rob Roy, Bruce, Jim, Jerry, Bob, Joel, Hal, Cecil, Debbie, Joe, Cecelia, and Dan.