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**LAJM INTERVIEW:
JIM FITZGERALD ON WRITING**

Editor's Note:

*For the past dozen years Jim Fitzgerald's columns for the **Detroit Free Press**, often whimsical and lighthearted, sometimes satiric and barbed, occasionally impassioned or moving, have been regular reading at breakfast tables throughout Michigan. Often they have been distributed in classrooms as studies in irony, humor, voice, and argument. Certainly he is the practicing essayist most read and recognized by Michigan students and teachers alike.*

*Fitzgerald began writing essays in St. Stephen's Catholic High School in Port Huron, then attended Port Huron Junior College and majored in journalism at Michigan State University, graduating in 1951. He was hired by the **Lapeer County Press** to sell advertising and write a weekly column, "Along the Main Stem," which would help sell the advertising. "I was supposed to write nice things about the advertisers," he says. "I usually wrote bad things, and that sort of started my style." Eventually he became editor of the **County Press** and continued writing a weekly column, syndicating it around the state. In 1976 Kurt Luedtke, then an editor at the **Detroit Free Press**, hired Fitzgerald as a full-time columnist. He writes four columns a week, forty-eight weeks a year and is syndicated in over fifty other papers.*

Elmore Leonard says, in the introduction to Fitzgerald's collection of favorite columns, *If It Fitz*: "The thing that amazes me about Jim Fitzgerald's columns is they can veer off in unexpected directions, appear to be topic-hopping, observe llamas and Lee Iacocca in the same piece, but always manage to get back in time to arrive at a perfectly logical conclusion. Within this sometimes astonishing structure is an essay composed of clear, expository sentences."

Fitzgerald lives with his wife in an apartment whose expansive windows overlook downtown Detroit and the Detroit River. In its spacious and comfortable living room, he gathers the material for his column and then walks to the offices of the **Free Press** each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday morning to write one column each day (for Wednesday, Friday, Sunday, and Monday editions of the paper, respectively). In the excerpts which follow, from an interview conducted in his home on June 6, 1986, Fitzgerald discusses some specific columns and his general composing process.

Writing a Typical Column

I make notes, sitting over there with a pad, all the time, and I clip newspapers, and live my life the way I want to live it. Those are my three sources—how I live, what I read, and what I see on television or hear on the radio. Notes and clippings all go into this folder and after about two months it gets so fat I throw it out and start a new one. I suppose 99% of what goes into this folder never goes into a column. They're just things that I think might make a column so I write about them.

For example, here's a note: "What's all the fuss about not being able to buy a car on Saturdays in the Detroit area? Just do what Ann Landers did." This clipping was from an excerpt from Ralph Nader's book where Ann Landers described how she bought a limousine by picking up the phone and calling Roger Smith, the president of General Motors, and he delivered it to her door next day. I said, "What the hell, Roger's not an elitist. He'd probably do the same thing for me if I wanted." I thought there'd be a column in that so I made the note and kept the clipping. I made another note here, which occurred to me one day as I was sitting there. "Why don't the states do what the baseball teams did to the Free Agents?" My thought was that in baseball the owners all sign free agents—Kirk Gibson couldn't get a better deal. Obviously they met somewhere on a dark night and said, "Let's do this," but you're not supposed to know that. Why don't the cities and states do that and quit giving tax breaks to GM and the rest of these guys looking for the cheapest place to build a factory?

There are three ideas there. So I ended up writing a column and while I was writing on the keyboard I got another idea: "Why do they pick on the auto dealers' hours when I think the bankers' hours are more outrageous than that?" I usually make about three or four notes while I'm writing the column on the keyboard and then throw them away.

I ended up with Monday's column, which starts: "A lot of people, not to mention the Federal Government, are apparently unhappy because practically all car dealerships in the Detroit area are closed Saturdays. They should write to Ann Landers." It all grew into that and a little bit later in there I got to say something about the bank hours. There're two things I

want to say so I build a column to give me a chance to say them. In the last paragraph—I never even did use the baseball agent thing, but the thought was there about the collusion on dark nights—I said, "While I've got Roger Smith on the line, I'll ask him what he would do if all cities and states got together one dark night and conspired to help ordinary tax payers by no longer giving tax breaks and free lollipops to auto manufacturers looking for the cheapest place to build a factory. If that happened, would Roger Smith write to Ann Landers?" That's how those disparate thoughts got woven together. That's how I work.

Selecting Topics and Generating Ideas

When this pile of notes and clippings gets so big maybe halfway through a two-month period, then I'll get my pad out and go through and write down on here the most promising stuff in there. Every once in a while I'll think I've got one there and I've got one down there and I can tie those together, because that's what I do, tie things together. So I draw one arrow going to another. I made a note there because my wife gets so mad at me for bringing fudge home from work (she can't eat it and I can), and I wrote down here: "She was criticizing me about losing my temper watching a Tiger game and they lost." I got down here and I thought, "Those two might make a column together" and they did. They did, believe it or not.

But it's usually a matter of the day that I make the note or make the clipping; it won't immediately come into a column. Maybe a week later something else along the same subject will occur to me and I'll tie them together. It gives you one thing to play off the other. I've been doing it so

long I do it unconsciously and I never thought about it until you called. That's the way it happens.

I'm always looking for ironies. But I am conscious when I get to the end that I've got to button it up with the top so it's logical, so people can see why these disparate subjects all got in the same column. It's a technique that comes naturally to me after all these years.

The start and the end are always the toughest part of the column. The first couple paragraphs I try to get going. As a much better writer, Sydney Harris, put it in one of his columns once, "One paragraph gives birth to the next paragraph." It does to me very well.

I often won't know where I'm going to go; often one paragraph gives me the idea for the next paragraph and so on. That's why these notes are written. One paragraph will give me an idea for a paragraph six paragraphs later and I don't want to forget it, so I reach over and make a note on a pad. I'll start columns and I'll end up going where I had no idea I was going to go.

I don't have writer's block. If some people can't get their whole, original idea of what they're going to write or outline it in their mind or on a pad, they don't even start. I never do that. I say, "Well, I don't have much of an idea here, so let's write this first paragraph, maybe that'll give me an idea for the second."

The big decision made every day—and it probably determines if it's worth a column—is what to write about. No matter how many things you have in a folder you're more likely to write about what's on the top of your mind. Something's happened, something's in the daily paper, the Challenger has blown up, you want to comment. Most days I think about it while I'm walking to work and generally I'll have a pretty good idea of what I want to write about. Lots of times I'll have that one topic.

What was that stupid column about the Puffalumps? That thing, a release about a promotional contest nominating local celebrities to be Puffalump dolls, arrived on my desk a few days ago, and I thought it was stupid. I had no intention of writing about it. What was on top of my mind that day coming to work was what I thought was a dumb move by Richard Chrysler. The point was he was against tax amnesty but he'll take advantage of it because it's legal. And he spent a lot more money than that on advertising. What a stupid thing. I'm sitting there and there's this Puffalump doll on my desk and I said, "Well, I was nominated to be a Puffalump and this clown wasn't. That's probably why." A crazy idea but that's my style and if I don't do it a little different, if I write a straight column, it would be an editorial saying, "Chrysler's a jerk because he did this." So I tie in there with the Puffalumps, get a few laughs, at the same time make a point.

How I knotted that together was, "I'm against the Puffalump contest but if I win it I'll take whatever comes with it in the spirit of Richard Chrysler who did the same thing." That's reaching pretty far, but that's what I do.

I do get material from readers through the mail or on the phone; quite often they'll give me good ideas or they'll have an experience that'll make a column. Generally it just comes out of this folder.

I read the papers real closely, and I don't think I'd read them that closely if I wasn't writing. Very often the nugget that will strike me will be the bottom of the story. Sometimes reporters don't realize that they've got something there. For somebody, it's a throwaway line in an interview, but that strikes me. It's usually ironical, like that Ann Landers thing, something that will be grist for my mill, to use a cliché. I just lead the life I like to lead. Unconsciously I'm picking up on all these things.

Generally the columns about my granddaughter, Emily, would come from when she's around and I don't see her that often but when she comes she stays a few days and there might be material there for three or four columns. But I only write the one and leave in the file the notes on another and it might get in a month later or might not. If I wrote about a particular subject yesterday, any subject, I'm not going to write about it today. I mix 'em up, I always have.

I don't know what I'm going to do on Monday. I almost consciously don't even think about it. I'm just relaxing and I know it might be something I'll read in the paper on Sunday or Monday morning.

Paragraphs Spawning Paragraphs: An Example

I listen to WJR, it wakes me up in the morning, and the news program played a tape of Mayor Young complaining about the crime coverage and in

a very quick phrase he said something about "writing only sensational stories' to quote from a *Detroit News* memo." Well, he was referring back ten years. The *Free Press* didn't pick up on it at all. The *News* ran a transcript. Nobody caught what he was talking about with that reference to a memo, but it struck me right away. I said, "Hell, that's that same memo that I had all the trouble with and they wouldn't run the column ten years ago and I still have it in my file." I knew right then I had a column.

I just went to work and wrote it. The minute I heard that I knew I had it. It gave me a chance to take a crack at Kurt Luedtke who's leading the fight against the Joint Operating Agreement between the *Free Press* and the *News*—it gave me a chance to have a little fun with him and how I ruined his career because he cancelled the column. He's a good friend and he'll get a kick out of all that. You get that idea and you've got to fill it out so you get a chance to take a little jab at him, take a little jab at JOA, take a jab at the editor who killed the last column. He's still there and he probably read that; I don't know how funny he thought it was.

This is what I mean about paragraphs spawning paragraphs—The minute I'm into him I'm into the fact that currently he's fighting the JOA and I know I can make a little crack about that so I did this obvious piece of satire—what the hell was it? Oh yeah— "I understand Luedtke's writing an expose-type screenplay about two boys, born in different hospitals, who grow up to be Siamese twins and endanger the free enterprise system by jointly agreeing to operate the same waterfront joint (WJJOA)." It's quick satire and I know he'll get a kick out of that and it gives me a chance to make *that* point. And by then the column is about written and I've made all

these points and hopefully twitted your curiosity and then I've got to explain why Luedtke pulled the column—and he had a good point—and then once I've got that explained, I got to say what's in the memo and that Mayor Young is saying the very same things he said ten years ago and my response, which I took almost word for word from the ten year old column that never got printed, so I finally got some use out of that—I don't feel so bad about wasting the time. By then the column's over and I get to the end and what I did up here I knew was going to happen, if I said there were two killed and I'm only going to talk about one, somebody's going to wonder what that second one was, so I use that to close the column.

It was another example of one paragraph spawning another. Going in, all I knew was I was going to write about that ten year old memo. Then that brought up Luedtke and then it occurred to me what he was doing about the JOA. I didn't know all these things when I started. It just came to me. The minute I'm going to say, "Well, I've only had one killed in two thousand," that's not right, I've had two killed—the other was just a couple months ago—so I mention having two killed and the moment I mention that, later on, I know I've got to say something about that second column.

My motto as an editor and later as a columnist—and I have a son who writes and he gets tired of me telling him this—"Never raise any questions that you don't answer." If you haven't got the answer, don't raise the question. If I wasn't going to say something about that second column that was killed, I never would have mentioned it. I could have lied and said they only killed one. Nobody would have known the difference.

Revision and Style

I don't think I've ever reread one, maybe after a month's time or upward of two years, where I haven't seen where I could have made it better— maybe just one paragraph, one word— "God, why didn't I say that?" I don't disagree that I should have written it—I just didn't do as well as I could have. Maybe I should have worked a little harder on it because I spend a lot of time going for the right word or the right sentence. So I could read over these right here and think of a better way to do them. You always thing, "I could've done better, I could've done better."

Running your own paper, as I did at the *County Press*—of course you're the editor too—you put in what you want to. Coming to the big time, in the *Free Press* and syndicated in a few other papers, if you read other columnists and they're in the big time, you think, "Hell, I can do better than that." It's the same line of thought as, "This is good enough to go in because there's things in the papers around here that aren't as good as this." It's still not very good, but it's good enough. You can't hit a home run every time you're up to bat. When I get done with one I think is really good, I'm conscious of it.

I like to think they're professional—that's a good word—and I strive for consistency—I'm prouder of that than anything else. I like to keep the level consistently high and I think I do for the type of thing I do. I go for laughs more than anything else. When they get to the end of the year and it comes time for the contest, I have a hell of a time picking out ten first-rate ones, whatever percentage that is. You always start out to say something, no matter what your approach is—if it's silly you write on silly stuff— there's

always a point, you want to say something. Maybe the next day I read it and say, "Did I say what I wanted to say?" And then "How well did I say it?" And then every once in a while, like the thing I wrote on Ann Landers for Monday, I think I said what I wanted to say.

It's generally paring down. When you start out you might think, "Boy, can I say enough about this subject and get my fourteen inches?" but generally they're too long. You have to go back and take something out probably nine times out of ten. I was an editor for so many years and with the new technology you edit as you go along. It is conscious. When I'm writing, up early in the column, and getting a little too silly or a little too smart in the back of my mind I usually say to myself, "Well, I'll probably take this out later," and I usually do. Because if it gets too long, you leave the best stuff in and take out the crap.

I prefer a short column. I never have padded. It's always trimming down. Sometimes you trim as you do it. I'll say, "I could put this in" but it would make it too long so I wouldn't put it in. Or I'll put it in knowing I'll probably take it out. That's the beautiful part of writing on the word processor—it's so easy to edit and take it out. Back when I was doing it on a typewriter it got so hen-scratched you had to start all over again to get a clean copy. I probably threw away six or seven or eight false starts. That's why I love this machine. It probably takes an hour off the working time on the column.

The start is usually the big struggle, to get that lead and then the next couple of paragraphs. I think I had some false starts in the Ann Landers

piece. Some things I put in there just for effect, like the thing about the dealers getting together one dark night. That wasn't in there at first. I put that in later.

I avoid cliches like death and when I do use them, I make fun of myself for using them. I just try to say it differently. I want to sound a little different so I will sit there for a while thinking, "What's the way to say this?" I think when I said something about Roger Smith delivering a car to my front door I could have left it at that but added, "along with a payment book." I think that's a little funnier and more honest, too. Makes more of a difference between me and Ann Landers.

It's all technique, I guess. You do it automatically after you've been doing it so many years. It just happens. It's hard for me to talk about it or explain it because it just happens.

Intentions in Writing

I try and pride myself on being understood. I want to be clear. On the average I've always come up with short paragraphs and short sentences. I'll throw in an occasional long sentence, maybe real long, just for the effect. It doesn't matter how long the sentence is, just as long as it progresses logically and doesn't have dependent clauses that you don't understand. I want to be clear and to be understood.

I'm trying to be interesting. I'm trying to catch 'em with the first paragraph and keep 'em to the end, if I can. It's a technique. Today's column is a good example. In the top paragraph I said the *Free Press*

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refused to run a column I wrote. Supposedly that's going to interest somebody; they're going to want to keep reading to find out why they rejected it. I want it to be interesting and I'd like to touch them, either make them laugh or make them cry. The best column you can write is where you can make them both laugh and cry at the same column.