

An excerpt from Wade Rouse's
Keynote Address

at the 2024 Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop in Dayton, Ohio

One of the most seminal memories of my childhood was watching my grandmother and mother read Erma's column, *At Wit's End*, in our local, rural newspaper. My grandmother would save the paper until my mom could join her, and the two would pull up chairs at my grandma's pink Formica dining room table, pour two cups of coffee and read the column together.

I can see their faces as clearly as if they were in front of me right now: After a long day or week of work, they would sit beside each other, exhausted, faces drawn, and slowly, their cheeks would lift, their brows would soften, their lips would curl; they would smile and then, often, double over in laughter. For one moment in this tough world, my mom, a nurse, and my grandma, a seamstress, would forget about their troubles, aches, pains and losses and laugh together. And then, my grandma would retrieve a pair of scissors from a kitchen drawer, cut out Erma's column and put it on her refrigerator under a magnet of a spotted bovine that read, "Holy Cow, I Can't Believe I Ate the Whole Thing."

I remember thinking, if I could do that — if I could make those I love and those I didn't even know — smile or laugh or just escape for one moment and forget their troubles, boy, it would be the greatest job in the world.

When my grandma would cut out Erma's latest column and place it on the fridge, I would take the old one and put it in a scrapbook. I collected them out of love for her at first, thinking my mom or grandma might want them again someday, but the older I got, I began to read them myself, study them, laugh — and that's when I first dreamed of being a writer.

I started like Erma did: I locked myself away in my bedroom and wrote stories in longhand about my family. How crazy they were.

All the women in my life — mom, grandmas, great aunts, cousins — were incredible oral storytellers. They could tell tall tales that kept you riveted until the punchline.

My mother, in fact, never met a period or comma in her life. She could tell stories — often the same ones, over and over again — that lasted for days. My father, a chemical engineer, would get so annoyed that he would storm out of the room and yell from another, “LAND THE PLANE, GERALDINE!”

My family was funny and cantankerous and odd and crazy ... and I loved them very, very much.

One Christmas I opened a huge present and found that my grandma and grandpa had gotten me an aquamarine Selectric typewriter — you remember typewriters, right? My grandma told me it would help make my dreams come true.

One of the first things I ever wrote on that typewriter was a letter to Erma Bombeck: My grandma found an address, and I penned a letter telling Erma how much my mom and grandma loved her writing and how I dreamed of being just like her. My family gently warned me I might not hear back from her, but I knew better ... I felt just like Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*. My dream was going to come true. I waited and waited, and then, one day, my dad brought home a big padded envelope addressed to me.

Inside was an autographed picture of Erma Bombeck as well as a handwritten note on a card that read: “Keep writing, laughing and believing, Wade!”

That would turn out to not only be fortuitous advice, but also perhaps the best advice I would ever receive.

In middle school, I made the horrific mistake of singing “Delta Dawn” for our talent contest — while holding a faded rose, no less — in front of a crowd that made the fellas from *Deliverance* look like the Jonas Brothers. I was heckled off stage. I ran off that rickety runway directly to my mom and grandma and yelled at them, “How could you let me humiliate myself like that?” My grandma said to me, very calmly, “No one should ever stand in the way of you being you.” As if they knew I was going to bomb, they had

gifts waiting to ease my pain: A little leather writing journal and a copy of *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. Inside, my grandma had inscribed, “Keep writing, laughing and believing, Wade!”

Side note: When I teach writing workshops, I still teach from that copy of *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*, and I always mention Erma when asked which writers inspired me. I go to a number of fancy literary panels where authors are always asked which authors inspire them, and so many will say — in a very serious voice — someone like, “Dostoevsky.” And I will think — and sometimes say out loud — “You are so full of crap. Just name someone you really, really love. It’s OK.” Today, When I say Erma Bombeck, I often get crickets from high school and college students, and then I read them this line from *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*: “I didn’t know why my husband gasped every time Lassie cleared the fence until I was twenty-six.” The college kids will laugh. Every time. “Great humor — and writing — is timeless,” I tell them. “Read some Erma!”

Fast-forward a few years after that middle school debacle. I lost my brother, Todd, when he was 17 in a tragic accident. Todd was everything I wasn’t: Tough, country boy who, I knew, would give my family everything I never could and that I thought they wanted: grandchildren, normalcy. As you can imagine, this sent me and my family into a tailspin. My father refused to discuss it. My mother refused to get out of bed. I thought God had made a mistake. It was my grandmother who willed us back to life, who said by ignoring Todd’s memory, we were ignoring his existence, the gifts he gave us, the life he had. “To bury his memory along with him is a disgrace,” she said. She told me to write about him, and I believe that saved my life.

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