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Code in the Cursive

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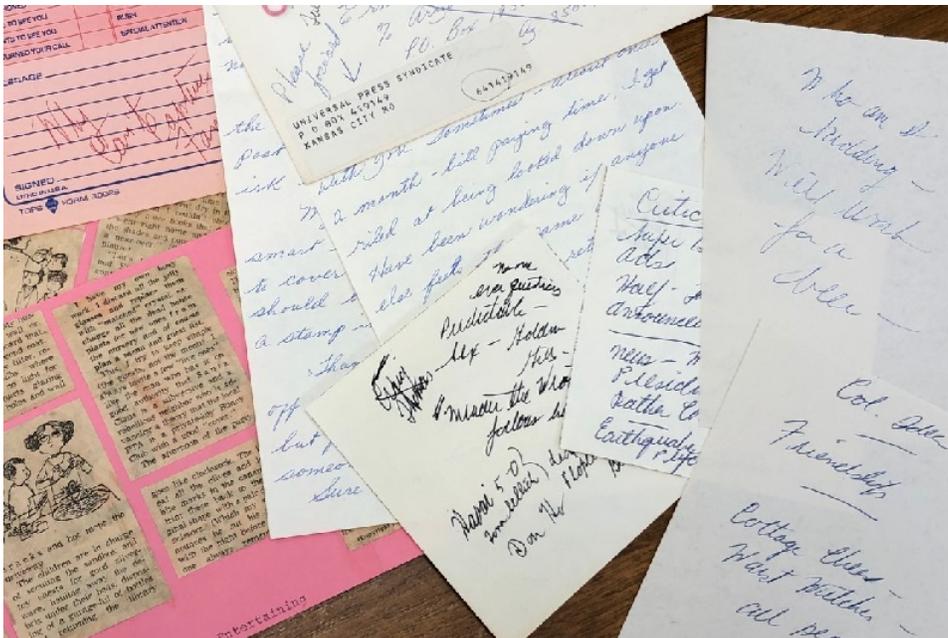
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THURSDAY MARCH 31, 2022

Code in the Cursive

By Katie Jarrell

While digging through the Erma Bombeck collection recently, I came across a handwriting analysis that a woman named Pat Blanco from Arizona sent to Bombeck in 1984. Bombeck had sent Blanco a handwriting sample that read:

- This is not the first time I have had my handwriting analyzed. A total of 137 “handwriting persons” said I was quite disturbed and humorless. I believe in 138 opinions — just to make sure. Erma Bombeck

I was excited to find this because I’d had a few thoughts on Bombeck’s handwriting myself. When I first saw it on the little scraps of paper that fluttered out of folders, I was surprised to see how loose and discontinuous her script was. In fact, I incorrectly had assumed Bombeck’s secretary Norma’s handwriting was hers, as Norma’s tight, curling cursive matched the way I imagined the handwriting of a world-famous writer. However, I soon determined that Bombeck’s handwriting actually represents her perfectly.

Though I had my doubts about the merits of handwriting analysis, I read the full report, and it appears that Pat Blanco knew her stuff. For instance, she focuses on Bombeck’s signature and says, “You are still a modest lady, but are rather proud of what ‘Erma’ has accomplished. Your signature suggests that you want your own identity, apart from the family. You are no longer content to be Mrs. Harris’ daughter, Mr. Bombeck’s wife, or the Bombeck kids’ mother.”

Exactly. If Bombeck had been defined only by her relationships to other people, then in 1964, she would not have marched into the office of Ron Ginger, editor of the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*, and announced, “I’d like to do a column for you.”

That is not to say that her family wasn’t of primary importance to her. In fact, they drove a lot of her

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ambition. In an interview about being grand marshal of the 1986 Rose Parade in Pasadena, California, she said, “I looked at my mom and dad, my three kids and my husband and thought, ‘There are few parts of my career that are worth sharing. Most of it is discipline, anxiety attacks and hard work, but this is one thing I can have them share with me that they will remember for the rest of their lives. This is something we have done together.’” While her professional and private life were divided in some ways, they were also closely intertwined.

Blanco goes on to describe Bombeck as “the ultra tactful lady.” Numerous letters in the collection provide evidence of this contention. For example, in 1981, journalist Sydney J. Harris wrote in his *Chicago Sun-Times* column that Bombeck, “a sweet, shy lady,” had once come to him for career advice and had “left bucked up” after he told her he was “sure she would break through.” He went on to say that he never saw her again because she was “much too busy counting her royalty checks.”

Filed with this column is a letter from a longtime reader of *At Wit's End* who took a dim view of Bombeck after reading Harris' story. “Your last name should be BOMBAST, rather than BOMBECK,” the reader wrote, adding, “You might begin a column some day [sic] soon, within the very very near future, how much you are indebted to Sydney Harris for your success.”

In response, Bombeck simply writes, “An explanation for something that is untrue is not needed — especially since I don't know why. We write for the same syndicate and I met Mr. Harris once — after I had been syndicated six years in 200 papers. The man who is responsible for my career is Glenn Thompson, retired executive editor of the *Dayton Journal Herald*.”

In the end, the handwriting expert tells Bombeck she has a “speck of self-conscious or shy about something in [her] personal makeup” but has “a wholesome self-confidence and a very good adjustment to life.”

Isn't it refreshing to know that Bombeck — the famous columnist, bestselling author, TV personality, producer and parade marshal — still held onto that speck of self-consciousness? Society wants us to believe that success depends on self-assurance, but a bit of awkward self-consciousness makes us human — and made Bombeck feel like a friend to all.

— *Katie Jarrell is a project archivist in the University Archives and Special Collections.*

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Erma Bombeck

This is not the first time I have had my handwriting analyzed. A total of 137 "handwriting persons" said I was quite dented and humdrum. I believe in 138 opinions — just to make sure.

Erma Bombeck

ERMA BOMBECK: Author, Newspaper Columnist, and Television Personality. Erma's writings deal with people and situations on a realistic level, stressing the humorous side of most everything. Her writings are seasoned with warmth, understanding and wit. Her handwriting shows a very positive, complete individual. Quick comprehension, generosity, warm emotional response, imagination, perception, and a bit of sarcasm add up to a witty type of humor. Her curious mind explores anything of interest. Keenly observant, Erma absorbs the color of situations, and her creative imagination takes it from there. She's efficient, loyal, sympathetic, and maintains a strict moral code softened by a cheerful, optimistic attitude. She's modest, but loves attention and the drama of an audience. She leads an active life, full of controlled activity. She listens more than she talks. She is fluent at speaking and writing, but more at ease when writing. She avoids controversial issues and is careful never to offend. She thrives on variety and enjoys colorful surroundings, as long as everything is in good taste.

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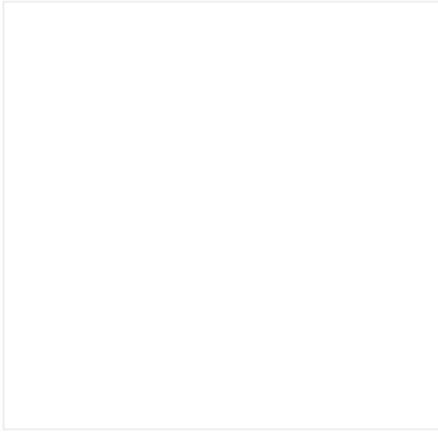
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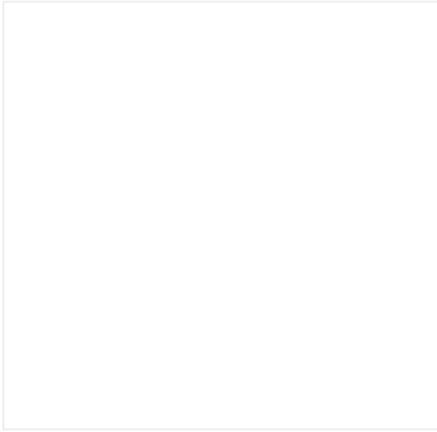
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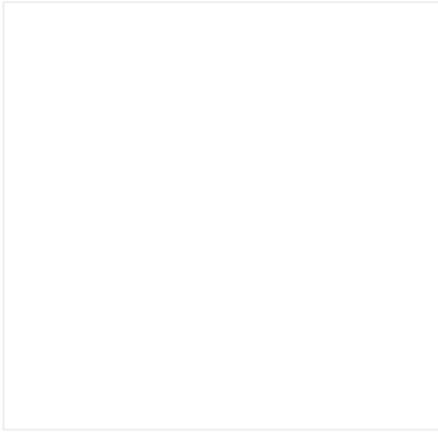
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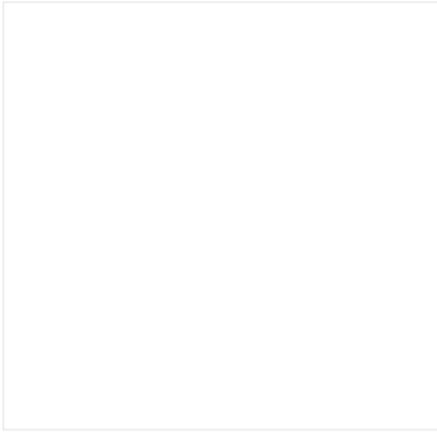
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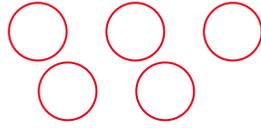
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