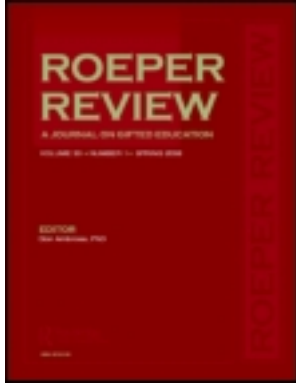


This article was downloaded by: [University of Calgary]

On: 09 January 2012, At: 15:39

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Roeper Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uror20>

A journey through creativity as a writer and researcher: An interview with Jane Piirto

Suzanna E. Henson^a

^a Teaches at Florida Gulf Coast University, E-mail: sxhens@wm.edu

Available online: 20 Jan 2010

To cite this article: Suzanna E. Henson (2006): A journey through creativity as a writer and researcher: An interview with Jane Piirto, *Roeper Review*, 29:1, 5-9

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783190609554377>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

A Journey Through Creativity as a Writer and Researcher: An Interview with Jane Piirto

Suzanna E. Henshon Piirto:

Dr. Suzanna E. Henshon graduated from the College of William & Mary in 2005, and now teaches at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her first novel for gifted readers, *Mildew on the Wall*, was published by Royal Fireworks Publishing in 2004. E-mail: sxhens@wm.edu



Jane Piirto is a Trustees' Professor at Ashland University in Ohio, Director of Talent Development Education, teaching in the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and in Educational Leadership. Her scholarly books are *Talented Children and Adults* (3 editions, latest 2007 from Prufrock Press); *Understanding Those Who Create* (2 editions); *Understanding Creativity*; *Luovuus*; and *My*

Teeming Brain: Understanding Creative Writers. Her literary books are *The Three-Week Trance Diet* (novel); *A Location in the Upper Peninsula* (collected poems, stories, essays); several poetry chapbooks and a new poetry collection forthcoming from Mayapple Press. She has published many scholarly articles in journals and anthologies, and is an award-winning scholar, poet, and novelist. She has an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from Northern Michigan University.

Henshon: *What led you to the field of gifted education?*

Piirto: I was doing my dissertation at Bowling Green State University in 1977 and the Placement Office called me and said there was a part-time job as a coordinator in gifted education and would I be interested in interviewing? I said, "Yes, set up the interview." I went to the college library and looked up gifted education. I faked my way through the interview, got the job, and started February 1977 as a coordinator.

Henshon: *What led you to creativity?*

Piirto: That weekend, while studying for the interview, I saw the Marland Report's six categories of giftedness. Immediately I noticed creative thinking was a category of giftedness and I was surprised. Aren't visual and performing artists creative? Aren't athletes creative? I thought about the Marland Report. I was also a creative writer and was interested in the psychology of creativity. I had taken a seminar in educational psychology and had chosen creativity as my research topic. And as an artist I was really kind of surprised at the psychological approach to creativity. It seemed so dry and so overly cognitive.

Henshon: *As a poet, novelist, and researcher, does your work merge? Do you see connections between the creative process and the research?*

I took workshops and creative problem solving training. I took training in divergent thinking, and was one of the first advanced trainers for the SOI institute. I trained hundreds of people with the Mary Meeker SOI model, based on Guilford's model. There was a disconnect because when I was looking at divergent production, I really only knew one person who had ever used the creative problem solving process. I certainly didn't when I was writing and doing my creative work, so I started to look at what had been written about the creative process. I admired most the 1962 anthology called *The Creative Process* edited by Brewster Ghiselin, who was a poet in Utah. He worked with Calvin Taylor, one of the researchers on creativity in the 1950s and 1960s. Ghiselin's introduction influenced me greatly. When I looked at the accounts by adult creative producers of their own creative processes, I saw that the field of gifted education was not at all acknowledging these. Gifted education creativity theory was in the modernist mode: the Germanic positivist mode. That disconnect was palpable to me and I couldn't find writing in the field of gifted education about how eminent creative producers experienced their own creativity and how they used it.

I was also a Poet in the Schools for the National Endowment for the Arts in Ohio doing workshops in poetry and residencies in the schools and I would get these kids to write by doing things that were meditative. One of the best techniques I used when walking into a class with hostile kids was asking them to close their eyes. So I wrote an article on that, *Incubation in the Creative Process*, and submitted it to GCQ. They published it. So my work in an alternative way in the process began with formal publishing in 1979. I also sent a survey to my fellow poets in the NEA program, and presented my first research study on the creative process in creative writers at a Houston conference in 1979.

However, I continued living separate lives: my creative life and my professional life. I began to merge them in the eighties when I was the principal of the Hunter College Elementary School in New York City. I asked the teachers for the best writers in their classes and formed a little poets group of writers who I came to call writing prodigies. We would have poets' lunches in my office. "Quiet, poets at work," one of the kids wrote on a sign she posted on my door and I would accept no phone calls, no messages; my secretary was asked not to interrupt us. We would take little field trips with a pencil and notebook and walk to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We would go in and sit quietly, meditatively

before our favorite works of art. After the enjoyable time walking, giggling, and laughing, we would write poems. I instinctively had the students use the creative process I used and not the ones in the positivist gifted education lexicon.

Then I was called by NOVA, who wanted to interview our chess prodigies at the school. They were doing a show called Child's Play, based on David Feldman's book, *Nature's Gambit*, and I said to the producers, "Well, Feldman is wrong because he says there are not writing prodigies." So, I took my children's poetry that we had written over those months and years and wrote a paper on the writing prodigies and gave it to the producers. They asked us to be in the film. They rented a room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and filmed us there. We thought we were going to be TV stars, but we were left on the cutting-room floor except for two of my student prodigy poets who read their work before the cameras.

I always viewed my work as a poet separate from my work as a school administrator. I thought my big research interest was gender. My dissertation was on female teachers in Ohio in the 19th century. I had taught in a women's studies department at Bowling Green State University. I had published articles in *Roeper Review* and the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* on gifted and talented women and really didn't bring the creativity interest to the fore except with my work on young writers. I wasn't getting it in my own research life.

So then I took the job at Ashland University in 1988 and I was back in Ohio where I had been a coordinator when I first began in the field in the late seventies. I became active again in the Ohio Association for Gifted Children and Marlene Bireley asked me to write a chapter on creative adolescents in her edited book on gifted and talented adolescents. Then, at one of the state meetings in Toledo I happened to be behind James Webb in line at Tony Packo's Ribs Restaurant and said to him, "You need a good book on creativity." He looked at me and said, "Hmm. Want to write it?" I needed tenure and I said okay. I wrote a prospectus and outline. I wanted to emphasize creativity in domains again; this was instinctual, intuitive. I didn't do the CPS process or SCAMPER as I planned and wrote the book.

I also was working on the textbook then, *Talented Children and Adults*, and developing thoughts about the Piirto Pyramid of Talent Development, which was one of the models to diminish the importance of IQ, and to emphasize the importance of personality attributes, talent in domains, and the very great importance of environmental influences, which I called environmental suns. IQ is important. All my review of studies for the latest edition of *Talented Children and Adults* has yielded a confirmation that g is the main influence for high scores, even in tests that purport to be alternative. It's nice to have a high IQ, but it isn't necessary for most talent domains. Renzulli was right. Above-average does just fine, and even average for some domains.

The creativity book was called *Understanding Those Who Create* and it came out in 1992. The first edition of *Talented Children and Adults* came out in 1994. In 1992, John Feldhusen, editor of GCQ at the time, produced an editor's essay claiming that we should be looking at talents in domains, and *National Excellence* came out in 1993 advocating that we stop using the term gifted and start focusing on the term outstanding talents. When I heard this I did a search and replace for the book manuscript, replacing all the uses of the word gifted with the word talent. I then had to define the type of talent. It was very good to do this, as it helped me clarify what type of talent I was talking about: academically talented, science talent, writing talent, and so forth. I also changed the name of the manuscript from *Gifted Children and Adults* to *Talented Children and Adults*. It turned out I was right in the mainstream of the new thought in the field of the education of the gifted and talented, where I had arrived through wide-literature review. I am a reader and always have lots of references in my work. I like to read outside the field and to relate that thought to thought in gifted education. I remember my moment of insight while driving through Pennsylvania, on I-80, the I of incubation, that personality attributes are foundational to the flowering of gifts and talents, and not IQ.

Henshon: What were the most important lessons that you learned from a mentor?

Piirto: I wasn't in a graduate program in talent development education, as I already had my PhD when I started in the field, and I never took a course in the education of the gifted and talented, so I did not have the usual road to being mentored. The mentor that I speak of most is Mary Meeker. When I started in the field in 1977, I went to Columbus, Ohio for a two-day workshop for the Structure of Intellect Learning Abilities Test. She had a new book, *The Structure of Intellect*, recently published by Merrill, and she had been a school psychologist who was a student of J. P. Guilford. I always liked math and assessment beginning with my second master's degree in guidance and counseling in the early 1970s. I remember leaving that workshop and telling my husband, "Now I know what we should be doing in schools. Diagnosis and prescription based on strengths." The focus on strengths was crucial for my thought.

I started testing kids in my neighborhood. When I had questions I would write to Mary Meeker and she would answer me kindly. I went to California and took her workshops in the summer. In 1978, she made me one of her advanced trainers. Her kindness and goodness, and her perceiving my creative curiosity was just very, very wonderful. I was very sad when she died about a year ago. We had kept in contact over the years. She had become quite a skilled watercolor painter, and she would send me a small watercolor every Christmas. She was on the Board of Directors of NAGC for many years. At the conferences (I have attended every conference except one since 1979), she would

invite me to her room and we would talk about spiritual and creative things. We had a real, true friendship, and she was always the mentor. I always looked up to her and admired her greatly.

Henshon: If you had to name individuals both in the field and maybe even outside the field who have had the greatest effect on your thinking, who would they be?

Piirto: Number one, Mary Meeker. Second, Dean Keith Simonton. I remember when I was writing the creativity book and came across his work on scientists, I thought, "Why should I write this book? It has already been written." I met him at one of the first Wallace Symposia, where he was a keynote speaker, and said to him "You can't be Dean Keith Simonton. You are too young." His brilliance and influence has been profound. I continue to admire his work. Every so often I e-mail him when I read something else groundbreaking by him: "You're still the man, Dean." I would like to see a debate between him and Richard Tarnas, the Harvard historiographer/social psychologist and the Harvard philosopher/depth psychologist.

Another influential person is Michael Piechowski. I had three Dabrowski conferences in 1989, 1990, and 1991 at our university, and I remember him teaching about the importance of qualitative responses, reading his Ashley data to us as we sat quietly moved by the narrative. He is a true Renaissance man. We mostly talk about books, arts, and culture. Another person is Rena Subotnik and her longitudinal work. She has been my friend since the 1980s, when we were together at Hunter. I saw how you can carve out research work in the busy academic life. She had 7th grade students pulling names for her longitudinal study of elementary-school graduates in my office when I came to work in the morning, and she modeled for me the dedication it takes to do research. Her evolution in thought over the years has mirrored mine.

Continuing to stand on the shoulders of giants, I really admire Joyce VanTassel-Baska, who was in the same shared doctoral program as me, she at Toledo and I at Bowling Green, for creating a center out of nothing and for going for what she thought was a good curriculum based on academic rationalist principles, and for making an impact on gifted and regular education in the curriculum field. I have my students in the curriculum class buy one of the units of the William and Mary curriculum and prepare to teach it.

When I began teaching teachers of the gifted and talented, I came to admire the textbook influence of James Borland, Abe Tannenbaum, and Edwina Pendarvis, Craig Howley, and Aimee Howley. David Feldman, John Feldhusen for his editorial in 1992, my longtime colleagues in the Conceptual Foundations Division, including Michael Pyryt, Nora Cohen, and Don Ambrose. Others include Diane Montgomery, my sister in emphasis on the arts and in knowing how to do research, and my depth psychology book friend, F. Christopher Reynolds. The list is not exhausted, but I will stop here.

Henshon: What other areas have held your interest over the years and how have they evolved?

Piirto: I have a dual career. I am within the creative writing world where I send out my manuscripts and they are accepted or rejected. My novel, *The Three-Week Trance Diet*, won a first novel award. Publication of the novel was the prize, and I am proud of that. I have won \$12,000 in fiction and poetry awards from the Ohio Arts Council. I continue to study and do creative writing. It is my way of creative expression. Last year I took a workshop from poet David Baker that reset my chronological formal poetry clock. The arts are always extremely important. I cannot visit a city without going to its art museum, and I've come to admire regional art as found in small museums. I like to go alone because it is much more intense.

Other interests abound. I also like to travel the world, and I drove alone on the left-hand side of the road across Australia in 2003 and New Zealand in 2004. I am involved with my friend and collaborator F. Christopher Reynolds in his movement of unreality, where we exchange art for art. I've won a few photography contests lately, and that has become a passion. I love to sing in harmony. I am actively involved with my family. Being a mother transformed my life, but being a grandmother really transformed my life. I am blessed with good and long-time friends who nourish me.

Another writing and research interest of mine comes from my hometown, Ishpeming, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I published collected works about the mining location I grew up in, *A Location in the Upper Peninsula*, and now I want to write the Great Upper Peninsula Novel, a sort of tale of two cities, about the iron moguls of Ohio and the paternalistic mining company of my hometown. When I have time, I go to the historical societies of Cleveland and Marquette, Michigan, and read. I've written one creative nonfiction chapbook as a beginning, *Young Mother in Ishpeming*.

I also am active in research and writing about my ethnic group, Finnish Americans in the United States, and often present my literary work at their gatherings and conferences. I'm published in various anthologies of the work of Finnish-Americans. On the scholarly end, I have written about Finnish-American women writers such as Jean Auel.

In my own professional life, I began to be interested in the curriculum reconceptualist movement, and have attended the curriculum theorist conferences. These people who are curriculum theorists are some of the most brilliant people in education. I have an invited chapter in an alternative educational psychology handbook where they had me talk about the creative process in creators and not insist upon the divergent production model that continues to dominate gifted education 60 years after it was invented by Guilford. I have another invited chapter in an edited book on education and Eastern thought, based on a piece on Krishnamurti that I published after a research trip to India where I looked at

indigenous schools for the gifted and talented, in the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. Krishnamurti had a lot to say about educating students for authenticity. This article probably wouldn't have been accepted in a gifted education journal, as it's a narrative and uses the technique of textual analysis. Meeting these curriculum theorists and arts-based researchers has profoundly influenced me.

The other thing that has influenced me is my reading of depth psychology. I've even offered a few seminars on depth psychology and education, and have an interest in bringing depth psychology to gifted education. I feel we are so measurement oriented that we fail to celebrate the mystery of giftedness and talent.

I have worked with the Arts-Based Educational Research SIG of AERA in trying to have the arts be a legitimate way of expression in social science and I have a couple of articles in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* on using poetry and fiction techniques in social science research. I remember, when I entered the field in the 1970s, naively proposing poetry readings and arts-sharing seminars for the conferences. I am eternally grateful to Joyce VanTassel-Baska for inviting me to read poetry both at the National Curriculum Conference at William and Mary, and even at NAGC in Salt Lake, when she was program chair. I'd like to see more of the artists in the field being invited to participate as artists, and not as social science researchers. I was glad to see the state director of Iowa play Chopin at the last Wallace Symposium, in the memorial for Julian Stanley. We need to have a place for people who have majored in the arts and who enter social science where they can retain their essential selves, not having to be schizophrenic, as I probably had to be when I entered social sciences after having been in humanities (I have a master's in English literature and taught in a university English department for years). So when I have my students do high-stakes projects, I let anyone who had an undergraduate major in music, literature, visual art, theater, or dance do an alternative project based on that art.

Henshon: Could you talk about your own creative process?

Piirto: I am very fortunate because at this stage of my life I can write in the mornings, and I live alone with my black cat. Contrary to stereotype, I am not a witch. I don't go to the office until the afternoon, and never write in the office. I write alone in my quiet house and my creative process is informed by walking, by reading, and by thinking. Like Mark Rothko, I find a lot of my processing is done lying on the couch thinking. Like Kary Mullins, driving long distances on superhighways also is fertile for the process. Throughout, maybe a thought will arise relating to something. My dreams are also extremely important to me and I keep a dream journal by which I extract images both in the scholarly writing and the literary writing. The original form of my Pyramid of Talent Development came from a dream.

Henshon: What is the most interesting thing you have learned about creativity?

Piirto: I am most interested in the creative transformation in my students, who are mostly women, elementary teachers who come into my class, many of them busy mothers, and who say "I am not creative." I take great pleasure as they go through the class and the creative process I have developed based on my research into the creative process of creators in domains, of the four core attitudes, the Seven I's, and other activities we do, of showing them, "You are creative." I am also struck with the attachment that people have in our society to the idea that creativity is only about artists and not for all. All people are creative and it has been ridiculed out of many of them until they think they are not creative. Once they start looking at their lives, they realize they are. Many are profoundly changed by this class.

Henshon: What is some of the research that you're working on currently?

Piirto: I have carved myself a mental research line. That is to write a book about every single domain from the middle part of my creativity book, *Understanding Creativity* (formerly *Understanding Those Who Create*). I have already written one of them, a book called *My Teeming Brain*, on creative writers, and now I am considering writing a book on visual artists. These books use my Piirto Pyramid as the theoretical frame. I have piles of biographies of visual artists all over the house and I am working my way through them. I have a research line probably for the rest of my life. I still have to get in that book on the Upper Peninsula. I have literary manuscripts, a collection of creative nonfiction, several collections of poetry, a collection of short fiction, a couple of unpublished novels that I circulate at various times for various calls for manuscripts and literary contests.

Another research line has to do with talented adolescents. For 17 years, I have received a grant for a summer honors institute, and I began to assess the students on personality attributes to confirm the bottom of the Pyramid. I have used a lot of the instruments that The Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) used, for example the MBTI; and newer ones, for example, the OEQ and the OEQ II, and I have lots of data with decent numbers. Diane Montgomery is going to help me analyze all these data. I say I'm researching the normal, average gifted and talented student, while the Talent Search people have researched the top 1 percent. I compare their results to mine, and so far have found few differences.

Henshon: How many books have you published?

Piirto: I have 16 books, if you count the 5 self-published chapbooks from my small press, Sisu Press.

Henshon: If you had to give someone advice on the things not to do in their research, what might some of that advice be?

Piirto: I give advice all the time because I am the qualitative methodologist, quote expert unquote, in our

doctoral educational leadership program. I ask my students doing high stakes projects (dissertations and master's theses) to reflect on their passions: their "thorn" on the Pyramid. Using the Eisner notion of critic and connoisseur, I urge them to go with a passion, something that you are interested in and that can sustain your imagination for a lifetime. That is what my interest in women and creativity has done for me, and I'm still passionate about both.

What not to do? No more divergent production studies, with an experimental group and a control group, where the experimental group improves in brainstorming, and the control group doesn't, please! No more surveys of eighth graders in technology classes asking them if they like computers.

Henshon: What do you see as the most important questions that studies should address?

Piirto: I'd like to see a little more bravery in the researchers and in the gatekeepers for the journals. For example, arts-based studies can address different ways of knowing, that are just as legitimate as those that are traditional in the social science lexicon. Qualitative research in alternative forms, portraits, auto-ethnographies, and the like can inform us. Our journals' editorial boards are afraid to approve alternative research. Reynolds' and my article summarizing depth psychology, which has a long-time presence in the domain of psychology, took years to be finally accepted and published. That we are the field of gifted education and that we ignore and marginalize the artists among us is something I want us to stop.

Henshon: What are some areas within the field that you think may have been misinterpreted as far as the research goes?

Piirto: I love all good research. I have to read a lot of research because I have been asked to do multiple editions of my books, and I'm on a few editorial boards. I love to see the evolution of individual researchers as they go through their lives. I love empirical research like Camilla Benbow's, David Lubinski's, and David Lohman's. Lohman is my new rock star, with his new work on regression to the mean, which I think every district coordinator should read and apply. I love to read research. I feel that each good research study, is, as Robert Bly, the poet, once said, is "An island upon which I can stand, and say, "This is true. This is true." He was talking about poetry, and in many ways, good research is poetry, because the interpretation and application is dubious and the form, especially with the exotic statistical techniques people are using now, is the point. I have asked researchers what does this technique mean? What do these results imply? And sometimes they are very vague. The discussion sections of research articles are notably lacking in implications and applications, as the authors just say: Here it is. This is what I found. This is it. Look what I've used. Aren't I clever? I'm not answering your question, am I?

Misinterpretation? I think the grouping research from the gifted side should be more prominent than it is. The same goes for the research on acceleration. I think that general education has misinterpreted us as a field. We have bad press.

One of the things that gets me in gifted education is that many of us who are professionals come from the working class. Many of our parents did not go to college, yet we remain in this field that has elitist accusations. If we had not had the sun of school in our personal Pyramids of Talent Development, the influence of educators and teachers, to get into this field, we wouldn't be where we are in our professional lives. We are among the most anti-elitist as professionals. So many of us in gifted education come from the working class so the idea of classism bugs me. My father worked for a mining company and was a union member, and my mother was a typist at the Navy Yards in World War II, and then she stayed at home. My background is not unusual among my colleagues in gifted education. It was teachers who saw my talents and potential and I want to pay them back. My work in the postmodern and my compulsive, wide reading, have informed these realizations, and I'm glad for the curriculum reconceptualists who helped me take the blinders off in this arena. Now I wish some of them would really look at all children as including our children.

Henshon: What's happened in gifted education research that you think should receive more attention than it has?

*Piirto: Of course I would like to see more attention to the creative processes as they are practiced by creators. I would like to see more writing and research along the lines of James Borland's anthology, *Rethinking Gifted Education*. One of my lines of research is postmodernism and one piece I am proud of is my 12-issues article that was excerpted and modified for a special issue of JEG. I think sometimes we are stuck in the positivist paradigm and that we are afraid to think in terms that are old hat in the humanities. We in gifted education often slink down the halls of our colleges of education and our schools, perceived by our colleagues as being stuck in the assessment mode of testing and selection. That's one reason why I have spent these years trying to develop a model where you look at giftedness and creativity in domains and that IQ threshold is not so important except in a few domains. I think we need to acknowledge that there are different ways of knowing, and that the critics of our field have a lot to say. Talent development is different in different domains. I am very glad to see the work of James Kaufman and John Baer on creativity in domains in the recent edited book from Lawrence Erlbaum. John Feldhusen said to me in an e-mail a few years ago, "I didn't know it would take this long." We wouldn't have any equity problems if we look at talents in domains.*