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**P** from print edition

**W** web exclusive

**Chillin' with Calvin Trillin**  
 in conversation with Pamela Ryckman  
*June 2005*

Calvin Trillin is not a physically imposing man. He is short, maybe 5'6" or 5'7", with a slight build. But when he begins to speak, Trillin's low monotone voice is transfixing. He rambles and reminisces and digresses freely, his speech broken by the words "uh" and "sort of." An experienced journalist, he has interviewed and been interviewed so many times that stock answers are hard to avoid. He anticipates questions before they're asked and steers toward comfortable ground, using nearly the same verbiage to describe an event from one interview to another. Many of his spoken anecdotes are already featured in his memoirs and first-person essays. Despite being a humble, welcoming, self-deprecating Midwestern man, Trillin dominates.



Illustrations by [www.marlenekryza.com](http://www.marlenekryza.com)

Born in Kansas City, Mo. in 1935, Trillin received his B.A. in 1957 from Yale College, where he was "chairman" of the *Yale Daily News*. He served in the Army and worked for the Atlanta bureau of *Time* magazine before joining the staff of *The New Yorker* in 1963. From 1967 to 1982, he wrote a series for *The New Yorker* called "U.S. Journal," a 3,000 word essay written from somewhere in the United States every three weeks. Trillin was a columnist for *The Nation* from 1978 to 1985, for King Features Syndicate from 1986 to 1995, and for *Time* magazine from 1996 to 2001. Since 1990, Trillin has contributed weekly comic verse to *The Nation*. In 1994, he published "Deadline Poet," an account of being a rhyming news commentator, and this year, he compiled his recent poems into a *New York Times* best-seller, "Obliviously On He Sails: The Bush Administration In Rhyme."

Trillin lives in a red brick townhouse on Grove Street between Hudson and Bedford Streets in Manhattan's West Village that he and his wife Alice, who died in 2001, purchased in the late 1960s. He personally greets this interviewer at a front door a few steps below street-level. He leads the way, up a staircase to a comfortable family room and open kitchen. Light streams in from windows to the north and west. Almost everything in the room is painted white, offset only by tables of natural wood. Bookshelves line one wall, while the other

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The Rail invites you to a reading with Jason Flores-Williams and Brian Carreira, along with musical guest Steve Strunsky of the Lonesome Prairie Dogs.

Thurs., Sept. 22, 8:30 p.m.  
 Vox Pop--Flatbush, Brooklyn  
[www.voxpop.net](http://www.voxpop.net)

**OFF THE RAIL FALL 2005** at the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library - Grand Army Plaza (718) 230-2100 in the 2nd Floor Auditorium

Tuesday, Sept. 13 from 7 till 9  
 John Ashbery  
 Leslie Scalapino

Tuesday, Oct. 18 from 7 till 9  
 Kenneth Bernard  
 Lynda Schor

Tuesday, Nov. 15 from 7 till 9  
 Diane Williams  
 Christine Schutt

Curated and hosted by the Rail's Fiction Editor Donald

is decorated with tribal masks. An old typewriter is the centerpiece of the family room table; it invokes Trillin's passion and his art, though he would likely call it his "trade." Trillin says first that it has no significance, but then that it was in a store window on Hudson Street and his wife bought it for his birthday one year. "It has this beautiful case made out of the same type of wood, so it was pretty."

Trillin settles into an overstuffed white American chair and invites this reporter to sit in chair next to him, adjacent to the white cushions that line window seats overlooking Grove Courtyard, a cozy private garden behind Trillin's home. Visible from the window is the tree featured in one of O. Henry's stories, though Trillin can't remember which one.

**Pamela Ryckman (Rail):** Do people always interview you in your home?

**Calvin Trillin:** Yeah, I don't have an office at *The New Yorker* anymore. The one in the last building turned out to be sort of a storeroom because I never went up there, so this is about the only choice unless I want to go to a bar.

**Rail:** Do you write here? Have you always worked at home?

**Trillin:** Yeah. I have an office upstairs, so I write here or in the summer I live in Nova Scotia, so I write there. I think I started writing more at home here when my daughters were young. My older daughter was born in '68 and in '67 I started this series going around the country every three weeks—*U.S.*

*Journal*—so I was gone one week out of three. So I wanted to be home. And it wasn't really a problem. I didn't grow up writing in the woods or anything, so if someone came in and said, "Tie my dolly's apron," I tied her dolly's apron.

**Rail:** How did you know that you wanted to write, to be a journalist? Was it because, as you say in *Messages From My Father*, that your father mentioned being a "newspaperman" when you were three years old?

**Trillin:** I don't know that I ever decided what I wanted to be. I think that I eliminated other things. It wasn't very systematic and I think it was a less organized time than it is now. When I got out of college, except for the draft, which I had to face, everything was sort of open. I mean, in those days, out of 500 people in a class at Harvard Law School, there were probably six women, so there was sort of an embarrassment of riches. So whatever people wanted to do, there was probably some sort of opening. I don't think I ever decided. I just wasn't one of those people. I think there were very few at my age who decided early on that they wanted to be reporters. It had sort of a déclassé image—like the guy with the bottle in the bottom drawer. The word "journalist," we didn't use it. It was kind of a candy-ass word. And the pay was terrible.

At any rate, I think that most people my age wandered into it. I wrote that when I did a profile of Johnny Apple a year or two ago in

*Breckenridge*

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**The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:**

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice--Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).  
Come to the Brooklyn Waterfront Festival.



Illustrations by [www.marlenekryza.com](http://www.marlenekryza.com)

*The New Yorker*. One of the things that was unusual about Apple was that he always knew he wanted to work for *The New York Times*. Most of the rest of us, either we decided that we really couldn't face law school or the novel didn't work out or something. You have to remember this was before Watergate and before heroic journalism. If we were taking a poll of people in their sixties asking how they got into their field, you'd find that there would be a hodge-podge of events.

**Rail:** How is journalism different today, and what do you think is the future of the profession?

**Trillin:** It's become more like what people would like to think of as a profession. I mean, it's not exactly a profession in that you don't need credentials to do it. I don't know what the real definition of profession is, as opposed to a trade. But it's more organized and structured and professionalized, to a certain extent. I think a good example is the trouble some of the local columnists have gotten into in the last ten years, over-embellishing stories. It used to be assumed that's what local columnists did, or street columnists. If the quote wasn't good enough, they made it up. That's the way it was.

Also, there was some quote, it was something like, "The *Times* is only interested in women and *The Herald Tribune* in booze" or vice versa. I can't imagine something like that being said now. But there really was a lot of drinking. And now it's more like other businesses. There are some good things about that and some bad things about that. You've got Apple, who's sort of the last colorful figure, in a way.

It was funny, reporting. I always wanted to go home at night. A lot of people loved being there late. They didn't want to go home, where their wives would tell them about the basement, or whatever. They liked walking around in their socks and would go out for these long dinners and then come back to work. I made the mistake of saying, "You know, if we just sort of worked through dinner, we could actually go home." But they had no intention of going home.

It was more interesting there because there was all this sexual tension. When I first got to *Time*, all writers and editors were male and all researchers were female. It was policy. There was one researcher who was such a wonderful writer and would write, but they listed her as a researcher. So they liked all this sort of tension in the air.

**Rail:** What's the mark of a good story? What type of stories attracted you or what kind of drama do you look for? I'm curious, especially because some of your most heralded books—like *Denny* or your writing about your family—are some of the most undramatic?

**Trillin:** I wasn't looking so much for a dramatic story so much as a good narrative line, a story with a beginning and a middle and an end. It doesn't have to be a "shoot-em-up" or anything. Although I never even thought about starting where *Denny* was born; that was just not a way to do that. And also the book on my father, which doesn't seem to be chronological—it does have a narrative. It wasn't the only kind of story I liked, but compared to a story about an argument about development somewhere where one party is rubbing up against another party, "on-one-hand versus on-the-other-hand," it just seemed to be cleaner. It didn't have to be a murder.

I think the hard part of writing is the structure. You can write each sentence as well as you can write it. You may not be able to write it as well as John Updike, but you can write it as well as you can write it by simply writing it a lot of times. That's not true of the structure, necessarily. You might never get that. I always thought that the hard part of the story was where to start and where to finish.

And these stories don't necessarily have to start at the beginning, chronologically. I remember thinking that sometimes

stories, as you write them, are about making paths in the woods. Sometimes it just opens up and it's just obvious. You can see where to go next. It's so obvious that you don't even need to think about it. But usually, you have to reach back to the previous paragraph and do an awful lot of transition. Because it's hard—the structure is really difficult. To me, a story that has—even if it's well-buried—some sort of narrative line to it already, like a murder, makes it easier.

But the thing on Denny—I'm not sure I ever intended to write it. I just started writing. I also felt so sad because I couldn't believe anyone would ever do that (commit suicide). The book on my father just grew out of the book on Denny. I actually put that aside to work on my father's book for a while.

**Rail:** There have been so many writers from George Orwell to Margaret Fuller to Hemingway who have written instructional pieces on writing. Hemingway even said that an unhappy childhood was a key ingredient. What advice do you have for a young writer?

**Trillin:** I think the advice I would give a writer is don't pay any attention to any of this stuff. I think writing is totally individual. However you get the thing done, the process—I think that it has a lot to do with your background, with how you started. For instance, I learned to type when I was in eighth grade, not voluntarily, but because the Kansas City schools ran out of money and my father was appalled by us being out in the street, so he sent my sister and I to the Sarachon-Hooley Secretarial School and then my sister was freed, which was another reason I think he had some ideas for me because he did the opposite of what was expected. It was the girl who was supposed to be able to type in those days. But I was made to type for 45 minutes a day.

My mind is sort of hooked up to the keyboard. So that has a lot to do with the way I write and it even has a lot to do with the style. Maybe not a lot, but something with the sort of way I put sentences together. I tend not to write a rough draft and then go over it with a lot of pencil. I just put it through the typewriter again. I kept putting it through the typewriter and it kept bouncing off the keys. So it changes the way you approach things.

I used to type in the back of the car. So I don't need to go into a cabin in the woods. Some people didn't do that. So what I'm saying is that it's totally individual, how your mind works and what your experiences are.

**Rail:** How would you describe your writing process?

**Trillin:** The story I always tell about the writing process when people ask me this at speeches is that another writer, I won't mention his name other than to say he's John McPhee, came to into my office at *The New Yorker* once. John and I used to work at *Time* together, so we'd known each other a while. And he was telling me about his day, how he writes, for about 20 minutes. It was very complicated and he's a very methodical guy, and I've always told him it was totally unfair that because most writers like to think that sloppiness of mind is part of the whole thing. At any rate, he went through this whole 20 minute thing that ended with him getting the day's production of however many pages xeroxed at the same copy shop and leaving one copy in his office—this was in the days before computers—and going back with the other copy and putting it in a little box which he then put in this crawl space above the kitchen, which he had figured out would be the last place to go if some horrible fire or some other awful conflagration destroyed his house and him and his family. And he got through and he said, "Do you think that's neurotic?" and then I said, "No. It sounds okay to me. If you're able to start again the next day, then that must be the way you have to do it."

Because God obviously didn't intend people to make a living by writing. It's just silly, if you think about it. So whichever sort of

artificial structure you have to set up to make yourself do it, then that works. When I first got to The New Yorker, there was a writer who wrote in finished paragraphs. He got a paragraph to the point where he would hand it in before he went on to the next one. Well, if I wrote in finished paragraphs, I would still be working on my first paragraph. I just wouldn't be able to do it.

My first rough draft was called around the house my "vomit out." I just had to get it out and get through it. I don't even know why I did that, except that it was a way of taking an inventory of things I needed to get in. It wasn't even in English. I always tore it into pieces afterward.

I think the whole idea of the writing process just is a natural thing and you can't tell someone how to do it. It's sort of like telling people how to rear children. You spend so much time with the kids that you can't actually continue to do something that's not in your nature because they'll know you're a fraud. Like I've written, either your children are the center of your life or they're not and the rest is commentary. It doesn't make any difference.

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