

NOT JUST FOR THE BIRDS

Katherine Plumer

Writer's comment: Who'd have thought I could make it through English 101 (Advanced Composition) by writing all my essays about chickens? I made it my goal at the beginning of the quarter, although I wasn't really sure I could pull it off in such a "serious" class. But Jayne Walker encouraged me to write in my own voice - what a revelation! Her teaching revived a writing style I had long since lost to English classes that tried so hard to make students sound like textbooks.

— *Katherine Plumer*

Instructor's comment: I'm delighted when students come into my English 101: Advanced Composition classes with a passionate interest they want to pursue, in various modes of writing, throughout the quarter. Katherine's wonderfully vivid, often funny, first-person report brings readers into a little-known world of poultry exhibitors. Who could have imagined what it's like to bathe fifteen chickens and groom them for judging? From this report and the two excellent essays that followed, I learned a great deal about chickens, and Katherine's talents as a writer made the experience thoroughly engrossing.

— *Jayne Walker, English Department*

Most people seem to think it's pretty weird that I show chickens. They're right, I suppose. It's an odd hobby. I started showing when I was eight years old, and thirteen years later I'm still at it. I went to a county fair way back then, and decided that one day I would own some of those cute little bantam chickens. On July 29, 1987, that dream came true, and from then on I've been a dedicated member of the poultry show world. Why do I show chickens? Well, you could say I'm just weird. But I love everything about it: my birds, my poultry friends, the competition, and the camaraderie.

The number of chickens that I have varies from season to season. The breeding season usually starts out with about seventy-five birds, and I hatch anywhere from 200 to 400 chicks between March and July. Throughout the summer and fall, I gradually sell almost all of those chicks until I am down to just the cream of the crop again. I raise Rosecomb Bantams, one of many breeds of miniature chickens. The adults are only a little over twenty ounces. I work with color genetics to develop new and improved color patterns on these birds (that's what happens when you're an art major who raises chickens), and to bring back old colors that have long since disappeared in the Rosecomb breed. I used to name every one of my chickens, back in the old days when I only had a few. But as the population grew, I started running out of names, and out of time to spoil each chicken enough so that it was worthy of a name. Now I only name my favorites - those that win a show or those that simply win my heart.

Poultry shows are a huge part of my life. My show season runs from September through February. I go to about six shows a year, and show about fifteen birds each time. California shows usually have 1,000 to 2,500 birds. The largest show ever in the western hemisphere (in Ohio in 1998) had a mind-boggling 13,000 birds. If I had the time, I would start preparing for a show months in advance by training each bird. People who are not in school full time can do this. They train their birds to pose when someone walks past a cage, not to fear someone picking them up, and absolutely not to peck the judge. And then there's conditioning. Proper nutrition is a must, to put a good sheen on the feathers. Everyone seems to have something that they swear by to put a bird in condition, from cooked rice to milk to ground beef to fish oil. It takes more than just throwing the birds a handful of corn every day. I tend to start preparing for a show about a week beforehand, since that's all the time I have.

Before the show, every bird gets a bath, and each bird handles this in a different way. Ducks of course are easy. Just put them in a bathtub with some soapy water for ten minutes or so, then rinse. They do all the work. Chickens are a different story. Chickens are not waterfowl, though I've had some that seemed to think otherwise. The unsuspecting bird is first placed in a basin of warm soapy water. Some accept their fate and stand calmly, allowing themselves to be scrubbed and soaked. Others have an amazing ability to avoid contacting the water for any more than maybe two seconds at a time. As soon as they touch the water they shoot right back out, squawking madly. It may take a few tries to keep a bird submerged, and I may get just as wet as the bird. After washing and rinsing, I wrap the bird in a towel and let it dry for several minutes. Then, if I'm lucky, my mom will dry it so I can start washing the next one. Most people dry birds with a hair dryer, preferably one that's good enough not to give out when half way through a soggy chicken. Chickens tend to react to the dryer the same way they reacted to the water. Some just put up with it and stand calmly. Some are so surprised they just sit there, feet balled up beneath them. Others will embark upon an amazing flight - though wet chickens really don't fly very well - off the kitchen table and all the way into the living room, with an angry human close behind them. It takes me roughly forty-five minutes to wash and dry one bird. This means I sometimes spend almost twelve hours out of my weekends washing chickens.

Once sufficiently dry, they stay in cages in the barn for a week until the show. I have this crazy idea that they will somehow stay clean this way. This has yet to happen, but letting them get a little dirty in the

dry barn is better than putting them back in their outdoor houses, which turn to “chicken soup” when it rains. They always need a little rewashing before I pack them in their boxes and head off to wherever that weekend’s show may be. Poultry shows are always on weekends. Exhibitors can coop-in any time between Friday afternoon and Saturday morning. This makes for crazy Fridays. Some shows are less than an hour away, and others are several hours away. Sometimes I can’t make it to the shows on Fridays, so I end up having to leave in the wee hours of a Saturday morning to drive several hours before the sun finally yawns its way over the horizon and all the roosters in the car greet me with their morning chorus.

An essential part of showing chickens are the carrying boxes. A box has to be big enough that the bird can turn without damaging its tail feathers, but not so huge that it takes up the whole car. Some people prefer plain old cardboard boxes, and others like plastic or wooden kennels. I use wooden boxes. I have four of them, and each box holds six birds. Whenever I look at a car, I think in terms of how many boxes it could carry. My car holds four. It’s a strange way to look at things. When I arrive at the show, I carry all the boxes of birds into the show building and put each bird in the appropriate cage. Each cage has a small card that lists the exhibitor and bird number, and it’s all carefully arranged so that the birds of the same breed are caged in the same area to make it easy for the judge. If any of the birds have gotten dirty or ruffled their feathers in the boxes on the drive there, Friday nights are the time to remedy this. I give my birds food and water, and when all that’s taken care of it’s time to coop myself in - at a hotel of course - and try to get enough sleep so I’ll make it through the next day.

We all have to get up earlier than one would hope to get up on a Saturday. Judging starts by nine o’clock and it takes me nearly two hours to get the birds ready, so I have to be ready to go by seven. People are very serious on Saturday morning, because that’s the time to get all the birds ready for judging. Everyone has their secrets. Everyone has their little boxes of show stuff: rags, silk cloths, toothbrushes, Q-Tips, paper towels, oils, lotions, conditioning sprays, and mysterious little unmarked bottles. There is rarely any attempt at deception, but that’s not to say it’s not done at all. If any flaw on a bird is deliberately covered up, by cutting a feather, painting an off-colored spot, or anything like that, the show committee can choose to disqualify not only that one bird but also the exhibitor. Instead of covering faults, as exhibitors of other animals sometimes do, most poultry exhibitors do their best to simply breed away from the problem. It’s interesting to see the different ways that people groom their birds. Like me, some just quickly tidy each bird, knowing that the way it looks is the way it will look and at this point there’s really not much to do about that. I put a little clear eucalyptus oil on their faces to give them a “brighter” (I don’t mean that in terms of intelligence) look, and wipe the feathers with a silk rag to give them a nice sheen. I try to have this done well before judging starts. Others continue to fuss and fiddle with each bird until the judge is right there-rearranging feathers, wiping off dust, and even “brushing” the fluffier breeds.

I have shown other types of animals, and the poultry show attitude is far removed from the uptight competition that surrounds so many other shows. As much as we are there to show our birds and maybe win, we show to see each other. We categorize each other not by job title or income, but by what breed we show. Old men seem to dominate the poultry show world. There are a fair number of women, though, an increasing number of little kids, and a definite gap from the age of about eighteen to thirty-five. When kids leave the youth programs like 4-H and FFA, they tend to stop showing, but years later they often regret this and get back into it. Some of us manage to keep it up even when we are in college. There are few “chicken guys” remotely in my age range, at least in this state. Young men often stop showing birds some time in high school, because compared to steers or swine, chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys are just not cool enough. Judges are usually (you guessed it) older men who wear long white or black coats with their name and state embroidered on the back. They’re certified by either the American Poultry Association or the American Bantam Association, and they have to know a whole lot about poultry. The birds get judged on their shape, color, size, weight, and condition. For every color of every breed there is an “ideal,” and they

win awards based on how closely they approach that ideal. It's no easy job.

Judging takes place in a very systematic way. Usually the judge will first just glance at every bird in the class to get a feel for what's there. Then he or she will take out each bird to examine its good and bad points. Different judges have different systems, but most will put a check mark on the coop card if the bird is good. Then it's back and forth to compare all the good ones until at last the judge settles on the best. This of course was just one small section. First each variety (color) gets judged. Then all the "Best of Varieties" within a breed (based on general body type) compete for "Best of Breed." Then all those birds compete for "Best of Class," which are groups based on geographic origin. Then within each species all the Best in Class birds are judged against each other. For chickens, the judges select a "Best Large Fowl" and "Best Bantam." They also choose "Best Large Duck," "Best Bantam Duck," "Best Goose," and "Best Turkey." So then all *those* birds get put on Champion Row—a row of cages in the center of the show room—where they will vie for Best in Show the next morning.

Sunday, too, comes early. If by some miracle one of my birds has won a class championship the day before, I will get to the show at eight o'clock to get the bird spruced up again for judging. I usually get there around that time anyway, to feed my birds and take care of any sales. Champions are judged in the morning. Winning will not bring fame or fortune, just a trophy, a little more status in the poultry fancy, and the knowledge that you must have done something right. When the time comes to pick the champion, the judges gather around Champion Row, and again look closely at every bird there and debate about which one deserves the prize. The owners of the birds stand restlessly and wait, fidgeting but trying to look calm as the judges inspect their birds. The rest of us just stand around and watch, happy for the winners but wishing we had something to be so nervous about.

The judges confer one last time, and the show superintendent places a sign that says "Best in Show" on one of the cages. Someone smiles, and people shake hands with the winner, congratulating him or her wholeheartedly on the well-earned win. The photographer takes pictures to publish in the Poultry Press, and people start to pack up. Once again I gather my birds into their wooden carriers, collect my ribbons, say good-bye to my friends, and go back home to face my other world again and wait for the next show to come along.