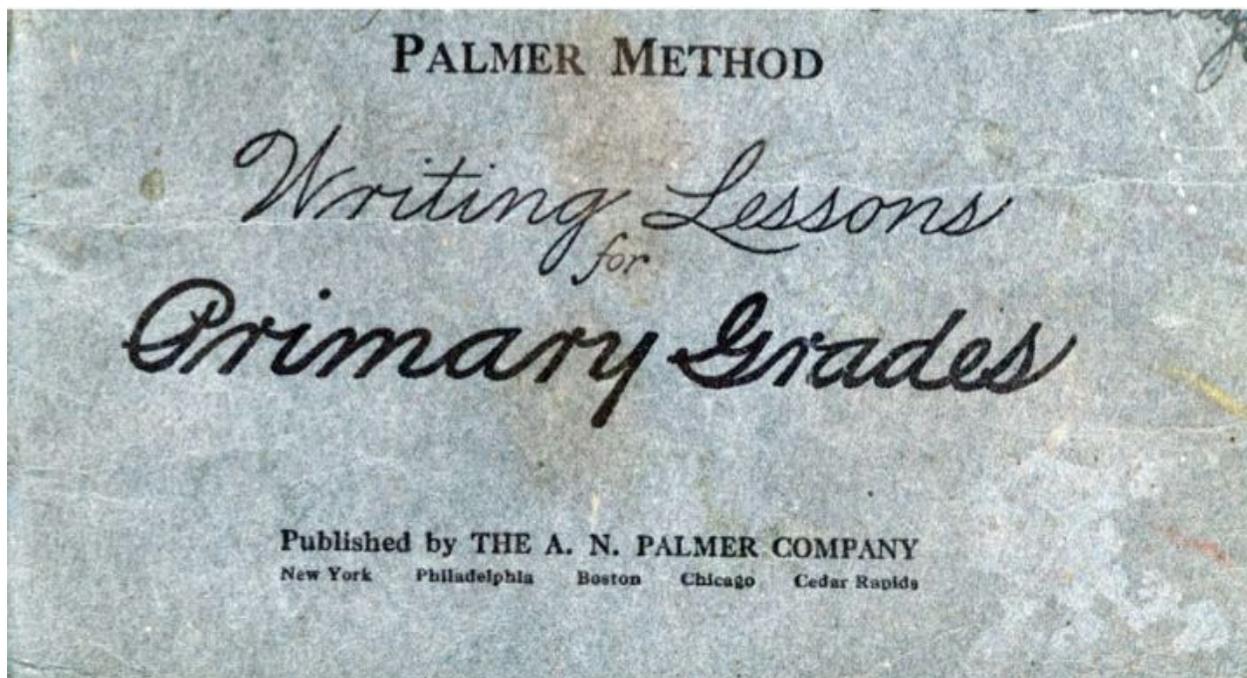


Kristen Gallagher TASK 03: Penmanship

I don't write by hand much anymore. When this task first came out, it called to mind one special feature of Catholic Grade School—penmanship class. Penmanship was typically given one hour per week, and I seem to remember it happening on Fridays. Now that I think about it, things like art and music were also once per week Fridays. What does that mean to a kid? I heard a teacher once (Mr. McCabe, my middle school teacher) say we did those things on Friday because the kids were all spun out and behaving badly by Friday anyway, so might as well just embrace it.

In retrospect Mr. McCabe was probably engaging in some inappropriate behavior with the boys. He hung out with them on weekends, especially two boys, Jimmy and Eric. He drove them everywhere. Even after middle school, all through high school, he would show up with the two of them at the mini-golf or drive them to and from a dance. There was something deeply weird and wrong-feeling about it to me and every other person I knew from middle school. The kind of weird that these days would get you on the sex offenders list.



Penmanship, from the beginning, was framed as something the boys would be bad at. I can just picture the nuns saying something sternly like, "BOYS! Believe you me I will be on the LOOKOUT for YOU! One false move, one slip out of these lines and I'll SMACK you within an inch of your LIVES!!!" They were allowed to talk to us like that. They were also allowed to follow through by beating us within an inch of our lives. Boys had bad penmanship, that was the pre-condition. Therefore, the conclusion was all boys would be beaten within an inch of their lives every Friday. I swear you could hear the lust for beating boys in the old nuns voices when

they cracked their hands together and said “Penmanship!” And like a crack of lightning they’d get a simultaneous response. Imagine 30 second graders moving in fearful unison, trepidatiously putting away everything else and taking from their under-chair storage space only the thin blue penmanship booklet, laying it on the desktop, placing the pen at the top where the little ditch for pencils is, and waiting to find out, how much will it be today.

In addition to being a scheduled class, Penmanship was also something our teachers could just whip out whenever they felt like it. They did that with religion too. I remember once our Literature class was spontaneously cancelled—we didn’t get to finish discussing *The Merchant of Venice*—because Sister Michel Marie needed to have a tirade at us about the evils of tight designer jeans such as Sassoon and Gloria Vanderbilt. She took the full hour of class time to berate us with this. That was how it always was, they could just whip out whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted. And Penmanship was a favorite when they were feeling angry. I was good at it, so it didn’t exactly bother me, but I came to feel more and more anxiety for the boys. Every time there was Penmanship, they were all about to get walloped, some of them damn hard, and they knew it. I remember one day a boy named John Lyons, who had horrible handwriting, started crying and holding his stomach when a penmanship announcement was made.

While whoever had bad penmanship got beaten, whoever had good penmanship had to walk up and down the rows of children, book open, slowly rotating side to side so each student could observe closely, so everyone could study and admire her perfection. The best girl at penmanship in my class was always Crystal Johnson, who was also the only black student in my whole school during grades 1-8. Crystal had excellent penmanship. She executed Palmer Method Handwriting that looked like it had been generated by the same machine that printed the book. You had to look closely at the quality of the ink to tell the difference between the example at the top of each page and Crystal’s copies.

When we were really in trouble, we were made to do penmanship all day, and only because it hurt. You may know, the longer you write by hand the more your hand cramps? That pinching pain in the palm pad under the thumb, the blisters and chafing along the inside of the top knuckle on the resting finger. That was our punishment—one of them, anyway—to write until all of our little hands hurt. I remember once having to write, “We are little Devils in this classroom” for an entire today because some of us had behaved badly in morning mass. Many of us couldn’t make it through the day. I think even the nun realized she may have gone too far about an hour before the school day ended and she let us all stop writing and put our heads down on our desks.

Jesus loves me.