

2-12-2024

## You Can Write!

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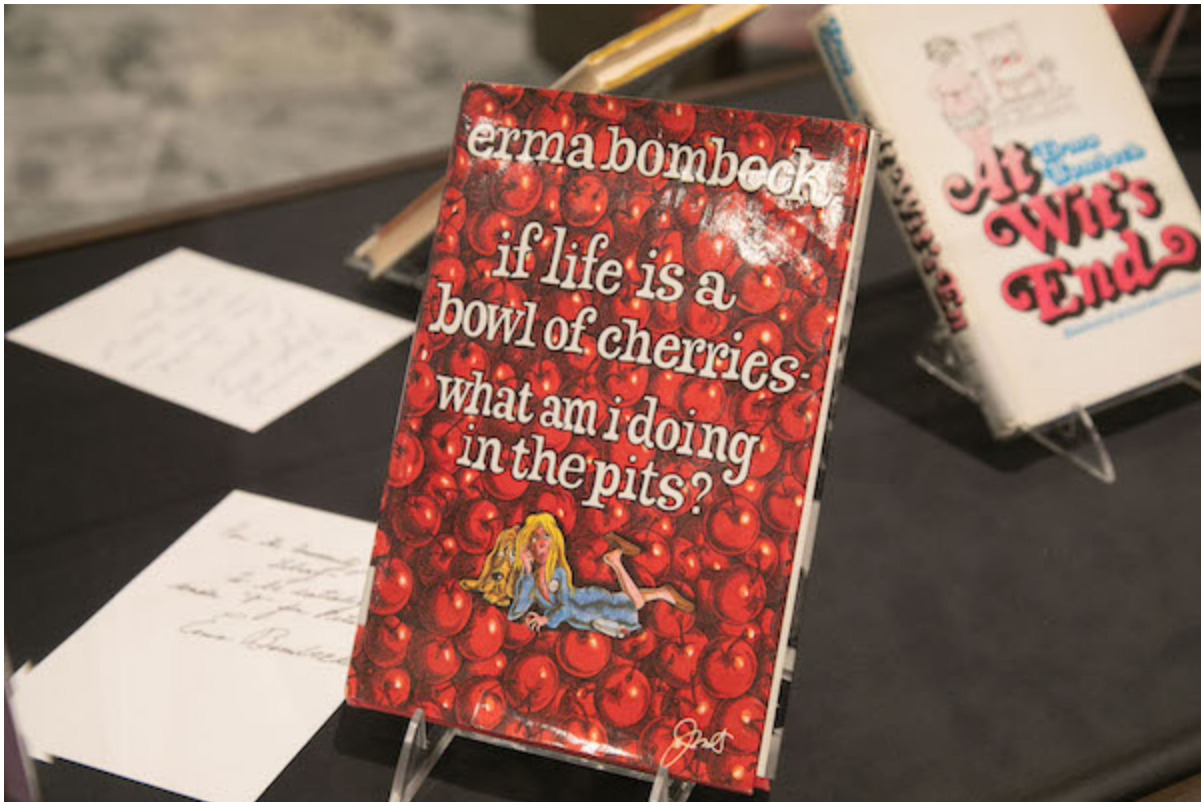
Spina, Eric F., "You Can Write!" (2024). *President's Blog: From the Heart*. 379.  
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# You Can Write! : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Monday February 12, 2024

## You Can Write!

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By Eric F. Spina

It's fitting that Erma Bombeck's papers be housed at the University of Dayton, I told the audience celebrating the Feb. 8 grand opening of the "[Beyond the Byline: Erma Bombeck's Story](#)" exhibit.

"It's here where she heard three magical words from her English professor, Brother Tom Price, S.M., that changed her life," I said, and then paused...

"You can write!" the audience shouted in unison, on cue.

That moment said everything I needed to know about Erma Bombeck's enduring appeal on our campus, in her hometown, and across the nation where hundreds of writers and fans have watched [the opening event](#) for a [thoughtfully curated exhibit](#) in the Stuart and Mimi Rose Gallery in Roesch Library that runs through June 15.

Like Dayton Flyer fans, Erma aficionados are passionate. And rightly so. The 1949 University of Dayton graduate made a name for herself as one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who penned the truth about motherhood and family life with all its foibles, frustrations — and joys. Since 2000, we have held a popular biennial writers' workshop in her name that draws hundreds of enthusiastic writers as well as a contingent of UD students, faculty, and staff.

“Everyone here knows Erma Bombeck was a national treasure,” said Archivist Kristina Schulz, who worked with now-retired Dean of Libraries Kathy Webb and Erma’s children to bring the nationally syndicated humor columnist’s original manuscripts, columns, handwritten notes, speeches, articles, and memorabilia to her alma mater.

“As we’ve introduced our beloved humorist to Gen Z, they’re surprised at the level of her fame and influence. To put it in a modern context, Erma Bombeck is like ‘the OG of viral content.’ She was the first humorist to be ‘liked and shared’ on social media, which at that time was the U.S. Postal Service and the refrigerator door,” Schulz said. “Unlike us, her humor never gets old.”

Matt Bombeck, Erma’s son and a screenwriter in Los Angeles, and his wife, Jackie, spent seemingly endless hours packing the collection into boxes, tracking down additional material, and digitizing hundreds of photos. The couple and Erma’s daughter, Betsy, flew in to celebrate the exhibit’s opening.

“How you’ve managed to distill 90 boxes into a journey and into a story is really remarkable,” Matt said. “Her life and work are now home. We hope the reading of her writing is not just nostalgia, but it’s meaningful and continues to make people laugh.”

In a keynote talk laced with equal doses of humor and scholarly reflection, Gina Barreca called Erma “a comic genius” who never backed away from the blank page.

“Her humor gathered people together, rather than polarized them,” said Barreca, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of English Literature at the University of Connecticut and a humorist. “When you’re laughing together, you’re standing on the same turf. That’s what humor does.”

The late columnist Art Buchwald once asked Erma what she wanted to be remembered for after she died. “Why can’t my work,” she asked, “stand by itself?”

Indeed, it is.

*(For information about the exhibit, which is free and open to the public, visit [Beyond the Byline](#). [Watch the recording of the opening event here](#). Photo credit: Jayonna Johnson.)*