

**You're a
what?**

Greeting

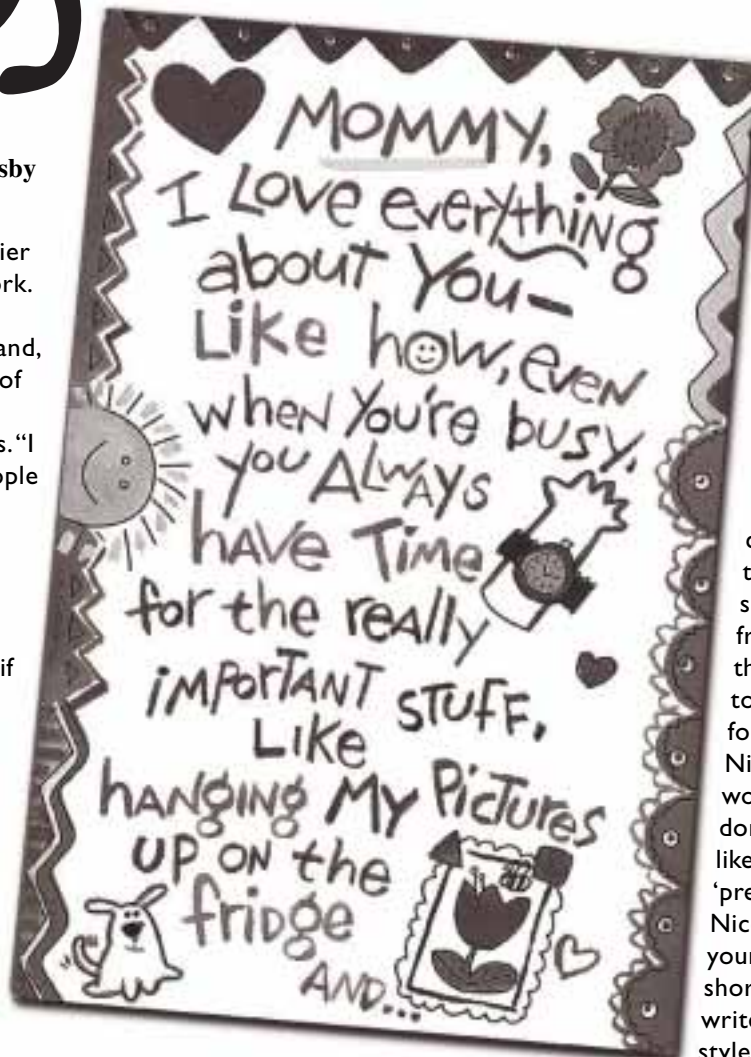
by Olivia Crosby

Trips to the mailbox are happier because of Nicole Fraser's work. As a greeting card writer at American Greetings in Cleveland, Ohio, Nicole has been a part of millions of birthdays, special occasions, and everyday hellos. "I use my creativity to bring people closer together," she says. "That's a great feeling."

Greeting card writers help people express thoughts and sentiments. "Greeting cards have to feel very personal, as if the words apply to you specifically," says Nicole. "But they also have to feel very personal to thousands of other card shoppers." To accomplish this feat, writers look for emotions many people share, such as the feeling of freedom after graduating from school.

Card writers like Nicole usually write to fill a specific request. Their editors tell them the types of cards the company needs, such as cards for a birthday or a Mother's Day line. Editors give writers information about the card's sender and receiver, including details about their ages, genders, and relationship to each other.

To find common themes to write about, Nicole follows the latest cultural trends. She reads modern poetry, looks through magazines and



comic strips, and skims popular novels, including Oprah's Book Club selections—all of which are in her company's library. Other card writers in her office read sociology and psychology books and watch television shows. "We have to know the language people are using today," she says.

Nicole often writes short, pithy phrases or other pieces of prose, but her favorite style is greeting card poetry. "I love writing long verse," she says. "I like the challenge of finding just the right word to match the rhyme

and meter. It's like a puzzle." What makes the challenge even greater is that the poetry has to sound conversational and modern. "We don't want anything stilted or sing-songy," says Nicole.

Greeting card writers choose their prose to fit the sender, whose style of speech is often different from their own. "One of the hardest things for me to learn was how to write for male card senders," Nicole says. "There are some words that men typically don't use in conversation, like 'treasure,' 'joy,' or 'precious.'" For teenagers, Nicole might use slang; for younger people, she uses short, simple words. All writers learn the speaking styles of different types of people in different situations.

As she writes, Nicole identifies the feelings the sender will want to express. "You have to understand and care about people and make sure that comes through in your writing," she says.

Nicole usually spends between a day and a week working on each card, but she develops some card concepts over months. And in a pinch, she can finish a card in an hour.

Even after working to find the perfect words, however, card writers might never see their original text in

Olivia Crosby is a contributing editor to the *OOQ*, (202) 691-5716.

card writer

Greeting card images courtesy of Nicole Fraser and American Greetings

print. They submit their work to editors who make or recommend changes. Being open to these changes is part of the job. "This isn't a career for writers who are too protective of their writing," says Nicole. "Lots of people will make suggestions and change your work."

Sometimes, suggestions from others make finishing a card easier and more fun. In Nicole's company, as in most large card companies, writers brainstorm for inspiration. Humor card writers spend much of their time building on each other's ideas and jokes. To make collaboration easier, writers work in cubicles arranged in a bullpen configuration or migrate to common sitting areas. But writers can also retreat to quieter areas while composing.

When they're not working on a particular card, writers are experimenting with new styles or different types of card senders. They work with marketers, editors, and graphic artists to create additional card lines.

Some innovations require an entirely different kind of writing. Computerized cards, for example, are meant to be adjusted and personalized by the sender. Writers give senders options by composing flexible verses.

Other writers create electronic cards, which are short and often are paired with animation, for sending over the Internet.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, at least 210 salaried employees wrote and designed for greeting card companies in 1999; they earned an average of \$36,620. Many more greeting card writers worked as freelancers, self-employed workers who sold their work to greeting card

publishers for a fee. The Bureau does not have data on these writers. But according to industry sources, most work part time and earn an average of about \$60 a card. Larger companies pay between \$100 and \$150 a card.

Many card writers begin as freelancers. Nicole is one example. After studying English in college, she worked in another field and wrote cards in her spare time. Freelancers call greeting card publishers to find out what types of cards they need and then send appropriate drafts. Nicole got her current job by sending American Greetings a writing portfolio that included copies of her freelance work. Other greeting card writers begin their careers as proofreaders or interns at card companies.

People who want to become greeting card writers can have any college major, according to Nicole. Her fellow writers have degrees in subjects ranging from advertising to theater. But, she says, every aspiring writer should attend creative-writing seminars and classes and watch for modern trends. "Don't copy what's already been done," she says. "Think about what you and your friends want to say to each other right now. Your ideas are the future of the industry." 