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*"Give me a place to stand and I will take you somewhere else."*

## **Erma Bombeck – Overnight Success?**

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In the mid-20th century Americans developed an insatiable interest in the instantaneous. Not that purveyors of the quick-cure-in-a-bottle hadn't existed earlier in our history, but from the 1950s onward the options for immediate gratification multiplied. We ate fast Mac-food; stocked our cupboards and freezers with pre-cooked, ready-mixed, heat-and-serve meals; lost five pounds in five days (or at least tried to); took Excedrin® for immediate relief from headaches; bought Publishers Clearing House® subscriptions in hopes of instant wealth; quickly calculated what we would do with the cash with our hand-held Texas Instruments® and Hewlett Packard® calculators; and smeared potions on our skin to wipe away acne and wrinkles. These habits have morphed but not diminished in the ensuing decades.

Our love affair with the expeditious extends to celebrity. We applaud the "overnight success." So, perhaps it is not surprising that one of the most oft-quoted factoids about Erma Bombeck is her "instant" rise to fame and fortune. Less than a month after her column *At Wit's End* first appeared in the *Dayton Journal Herald* in 1965, it was syndicated by *Newsday*. The column was carried by 38 papers by the end of the year and 500 papers by the end of the decade. This narrative gives the impression that one day Erma – fed up with ironing sheets, removing yellow wax buildup from her kitchen floor, and packing fluffernutter sandwiches in her kids' school lunches – sat down at a typewriter; discovered her sense of humor; gave a cry of, "Eureka!"; and overnight, became a columnist as widely read as Mark Twain. Bingo!

The proverbial 25-year overnight success is closer to the truth. A young Erma Fiste cut her teeth writing snide humor articles for her school paper *The Owl* a quarter-century before *At Wit's End* saw the light of day. That was in 1940, at age 13. She wangled a half-time job at the *Dayton Journal Herald* as a copy girl at age 15, just so she could learn all the ins and outs of the newspaper business. She continued in that position through high school. She contributed funny articles to the University of Dayton's *The Exponent* while in college; helped her fellow employees at Rike's Department Store laugh via their company newsletter; tried her hand at serious topics by writing newspaper obituaries and editing flight manuals at (what later became) Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. As a young wife and mother, her occasional comic *Operation Dustrag* followed shortly by a weekly column *Zone 59* (named for her suburban postal zone) helped her hone her craft at tickling our funny bone while still working in relative obscurity.

If *At Wit's End* was an overnight success, that night was longer than Rip Van Winkle's 20-year snooze, and included over two decades of burning the creative "midnight oil." Nevertheless, it surely is a fun fantasy to think such a successful career could start with a little packet whose instructions claim, "Just add water, and stir."