



# CLOSE-UP: WRITING PROGRAMS, CONFERENCES, GROUPS

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Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

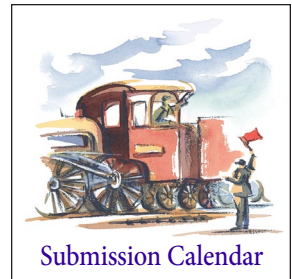
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**NAM LE**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*How did the Iowa Workshop alter your focus?*

I wouldn't have written stories, I think, if I hadn't gone to an MFA program in America—mainly because the fiction that I was reading was novel length, and so when I moved to writing fiction, my ambition was to write novels, to write what I had been reading. Going to a place like Iowa, you get exposed to so much short fiction, especially contemporary short fiction, which is exciting and formally ambitious and aesthetically challenging. I loved it. That, in conjunction with short stories being more conducive to the workshop format, was why I moved into writing short fiction. At the same time, the greatest attraction of the short stories I was writing was that they weren't the novel I'd been writing! I felt so straitjacketed by that novel that just to be able to move to different points of view, different voices, different subject matters, different protagonists, was liberating.

*The seven stories in The Boat range drastically in setting and style and subject matter. How important was it for you to demonstrate this sweep in your first collection?*



At no point did I truly believe that this would be a book. Publishers aren't that interested in short fiction, and when they are, it seems they're only publishing linked collections or novels-in-stories. A lot of people at Iowa were writing those types of collections, but that just didn't interest me at the time. Part of it was because I'd just had my eyes opened to this new world of short fiction, and I was being blown away by so many different types of short stories, so many different voices and ways of approaching the form. Seeing as I was coming to the form for the first time, why would I want to circumscribe my own formal exploration? Part of me wanted to test out for myself how it was that I'd been so affected by these other stories. ■

**FREDERICK REIKEN**, *interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

*Right now there are more graduate programs than ever for aspiring writers to choose from. You direct Emerson College's. A very talented MFA student of my own recently told me that she has come to despise the workshop environment because the very nature of it implies that one is supposed to find something wrong. It was difficult for me to respond to this. What would you say?*

I would say that ninety percent of the time there *is* something wrong. I would also say that workshops are good only insofar as they help cultivate your own critical instinct, so that you can learn to recognize—either on your own or with a minimum of feedback—where your story or novel isn't working. As I am always saying, it's important for students in a workshop environment to be able to assimilate the criticism that's useful, and it's also important that they be smart enough to ignore a lot of it. **Readers will often make very basic, unusable suggestions about things that are in fact legitimate problems with the work, so what you're mostly getting is feedback that can identify where the problem is. Then it's up to the writer to find a solution or decide to move on to something else.**

In my opinion, the best approach to a workshop is a proactive one, in which, even if you can't speak, you feel like you are an agent in the process. A workshop will never give you the exact answer, and students who come in thinking that way get frustrated, especially when half of the people in the class say one thing and the other half say another. I would also suggest that after a while, you need to move beyond the workshop environment entirely. Four or five semesters of workshop are, in my mind, about as much as is useful for a lifetime. Still, it's important to remember that you will probably never have twelve people paying as much attention to

the nuances of a story as you will get from a workshop, so it is a relatively unique and potentially very useful experience. But in the long run, it's more of a practicum that prepares you for many years, if you stick with it, of learning how to do it on your own.

*A friend of mine who graduated from a graduate writing program told me that his degree got him nothing. Of course he was speaking about industry success, which has eluded him. Do MFA programs need to adjust to the reality of student expectations and offer professional guidance?*

Absolutely not. Creative writing itself is not an industry, even if MFA programs seem to have become one, and even if a writer's ultimate goal is the industry success of being published. MFA programs can still only make one promise, which is that they will help writers to cultivate their art and craft. Sometimes when I encounter a talented student, I find that I am able to offer advice or help regarding the publishing world as well, but that will only come after a student has embraced the process of becoming an artist, and has found that he or she is capable of producing a book or story that could in fact be publishable. In that sense, an MFA program can be a stepping stone, but it's important not to put the cart before the horse. **There is no amount of success that can come from advice or guidance unless a writer is talented, motivated, and deeply committed to the discovery process that will enable him or her to produce a work of high-quality fiction.** In my own experience, getting to where I could produce a publishable novel took eight years of total immersion. I can't remember doing much during my twenties other than writing or thinking about writing, and I am amazed when students think it can be any other way. Once in a blue moon a wunderkind comes along, but it's uncommon, and those writers are most likely going to succeed anyway, with or without an MFA. ■

**DEBRA SPARK**, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

*What's most difficult about teaching writing to undergraduate and graduate students? And what's the difference? At the very least, it seems your craft talks at Warren Wilson led directly to your book of essays, *Curious Attractions: Essays on Fiction Writing*. That program keeps you on your toes, doesn't it?*

Teaching writing to undergraduate and graduate students is so different as almost to not be the same activities. What is difficult about teaching undergraduates is writing comments on the work. That sounds terrible, but it's true. It would be a lot more fun if you never read the students' work, and

that isn't even about the quality of the work, just the sheer effort of giving detailed feedback. With graduate students, teaching writing is much more of a discussion with peers. I learn a lot from my graduate students—from their perceptions about literature and their thoughts about their own work. As for the specific program I teach in, Warren Wilson's MFA Program for Writers, I can't say enough about it. I greatly admire the way it is run, as well as the other writers who teach there. And the students are amazing. I've learned a lot by attending classes and by having to formulate my own thoughts for lectures. ■

**DAVID LEAVITT**, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

*You moved back to America in 2000 to teach creative writing at the University of Florida. In Martin Bauman; or, A Sure Thing, a teacher of creative writing named Stanley Flint asks his students to read the first sentence of their stories. If he likes what he hears, he allows them to continue. Are your methods as severe as Flint's? What happens in your workshops?*



Photo: Tanya Trifilie

I am a kinder teacher than Flint. That is to say, I try to inspire the students to impose rigor on themselves. I also try to teach them disobedience: that is to say, the importance of ignoring advice in which they don't believe, even when it comes from authority figures.

*What do you teach? What writers do you find instructive for your students?*

I teach fiction writing workshops on both the undergraduate and graduate level. In both, I assign a lot of reading. In my undergraduate courses, I assign the work of the great American short-story writers: Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, Grace Paley, Denis Johnson, Amy Hempel, Mary Robison, Raymond Carver. In my graduate workshops, I assign short novels, most but not all of them British. Novels I teach regularly include Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk*, Muriel Spark's *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Beginning of Spring*. Next year I'm going to add Banville's *The Newton Letter*. ■

**SHAWN WONG**, interviewed by Anne de Marcken:

*In the introduction to The Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology, you and co-editors Gundars Strads and Kathryn Trueblood write, "Any young*

*writer who feels trapped, deterred, isolated, weary, or just plain disillusioned should take heart in knowing that the lives behind the poems and stories in these volumes were as rich with struggle as his or her own.” Why is it important for a young writer to be able to personally identify with other writers?*

I think many writers, young and old, sometimes feel that the troubles or issues they have with their own writing are all of their own making, and that no other writer has had those same professional, personal, or artistic problems.

When I was working on *American Knees*, I was fortunate to have a residency for one month at the Rockefeller Foundation center in Bellagio, Italy. One day I was having a terrible time writing, and thought that I was the worst writer in the world. I went for a walk down into the village, and ran into Susan Sontag, who was also a resident at the center. She bought me a *caffè latte*, and we started talking. She asked me how my writing was going, and I said that I felt like I was the worst writer in the world. She told me a story about writing her novel *The Volcano Lover*, and how **she wrote a draft of a chapter and realized that she had used the word “really” twenty-four times in the draft. She asked me, “Have you ever written that badly?” I laughed and said, “No.” She asked, “Feel better now?” I did feel better, and it was very generous of her to tell me that.**

Later, Susan, along with Builders Association theater director Marianne Weems, and I would take the Foundation’s rowboat out on Lake Como and talk about writing, play six-degrees-of-separation games, and talk about Susan’s work on her novel at the time (which became *In America*). I had never had a residency before, and that contact with the scholars, artists, and writers at Bellagio helped me immensely. Marianne made me read the entire first draft of *American Knees* to her out loud, and while I was reading, I’d make notes in the margins with my pencil. If I could pick two people to be the audience for the first draft of *American Knees*, I guess having a theater director and Sontag wasn’t a bad choice. ■

## MICHAEL SCHIAVONE:

When I was twenty-five, I took a fiction writing workshop in Boston. The thirty-something instructor’s debut story had just been published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, back when they printed fiction on a regular basis. This was not the type of man who held hands and wiped noses when it came time for critiques. While today I call him an honest and insightful mentor,

eight years ago I wanted to kick his ass all over the Boston Common.

The evening my story was up for evaluation, I sat quietly and listened to my peers voice strong words of encouragement and sensitive suggestions for improvement. As the half-circle was workshopping my piece, the instructor—we'll call him Tom—was driving his red pen deep into my manuscript, X-ing out paragraphs, entire pages no less, as the woman next to me praised my use of detail and knack for dialogue. When it came time for Tom to make his closing comments, he looked exhausted, glaring at me like I'd offended him personally, speaking with scorn as he read aloud—I hate when they do that—my myriad mistakes: the unjustified ending, scene avoidance, amateur grandiosity, lacking movement, etc. The way he attacked my stupid little story, you'd think I'd made a pass at his wife and succeeded.

I darted out of there, stomping back to my apartment in Beacon Hill like a wronged child. For days I stewed, cursing him as I jogged along the Charles River, rehearsing conversations where I told him off, put him in his place. **What did he know, Mr. Atlantic Monthly, Mr. Stegner Fellowship? Didn't he realize I got A's in college creative-writing classes, that I drank and smoked like a real writer? This self-centered rage lasted for weeks until it found a nice home inside my overpopulated Resentment Chamber, just next to the Envy Compartment.** Then I threw that short story away, because “revision” wasn't yet in my lexicon. Revision was for suckers, for those who couldn't get it right the first time. So I swore off fiction for good, fully embracing my fate in the financial services industry.

Less than a year later, I'm back again, signed on for another workshop with the same organization, different teacher. Having spent a week in Florida the month prior, I'd come away with a strange story that really excited me, a piece with a life of its own, characters who didn't want my heavy-handed input every step of the way. So the evening I'm due for a critique on this submission, I learn Tom will be filling in for our regular instructor, who was tending to a family emergency. The blood was rushing, my fists clenched. In class, many asked, “What's at stake?” while others wondered if an elderly woman would really wear high heels with jeans. And while Tom still slashed red Xs though my prose as the group offered their opinion, he didn't display the same contempt-filled grimace in the face of my manuscript. After student evaluations were complete, he held up my story and announced it was flawed, that there were some serious sequence issues, that the ending was all wrong, etc. Recording his comments, I was ready



yet again to throw in the towel. “But,” he continued, his tone softening, “I think you’ve got something here, Mike.” I could have cried in his arms.

In 2000 that story was featured in *New Letters*. It was my debut publication. I was paid \$45.00; a Xerox copy of that check is still filed amongst the hundreds of rejection letters I’ve amassed over the years. So what was different this time? My attitude, for one, the courage to face this story the morning after a critique—the very key to any success I’ve enjoyed. I scrutinized that story silly, obsessed over it, lived in it. I’d become willing, albeit reluctantly, to revise, to do the work required. Tom’s methods had infuriated me, but that was my problem. Now I consider myself very lucky, even blessed, to have had an instructor of his caliber. As corny as it sounds, he shaped me. In spirit, Tom taught me when to kill my darlings, how to see through my self-serving narratives, where to find the truth in fiction. **By the sheer conviction of his comments, I learned the vital necessity of keeping my ego at bay, to allow my characters—not me—to determine the story. After all, it belongs to them; it’s theirs. Only when I achieve that sense of separation do my stories take flight, do I make it into print.** And while I no longer smoke cigarettes in dark bars, I have emerged as a relentless practitioner of revision, and this has enabled me to become that real writer, passing on that giant red X to others. ■

**LYNNE TILLMAN**, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

In college I took all my electives in studio art. At the time it was important to me, not in terms of the direction of my writing, but because, psychologically, making art was very different from being in the English department. I was interested in thinking about approaching a canvas and seeing what I could do to it as opposed to approaching a page. I felt much freer about art, because I had license to do whatever I wanted; I wasn’t an art major, and I didn’t know anything about what I was doing. There was some measure of freedom in that way.

In the English department, there were some very nasty professors. The way literature was taught made me feel excluded from the possibility of ever writing anything. It wasn’t that I compared myself with the great writers, although I did have a horrible teacher, a Joyce scholar, and in one class he said, “By the time Joyce was your age, he had already written *Dubliners*.” And we were just in college. That infuriated me. ■

**SANDRA CISNEROS**, interviewed by  
Robert Birnbaum:

*Is it through the various writers' conferences and seminars that you have contact with other writers?*

I don't have very much contact with other writers. I don't get invited to these things, or I don't go to them. I hate panels. I speak to librarians and to conferences of English teachers. That's what I do: teachers and librarians. And high school kids. I go out and meet the kids. I don't hang out with writers. It's very rare. Even when I do these book fairs, as I'm going to do next month, I come in and I go out. I can't hang around with lots of people these days because I am hypersensitive. So when I am around a lot of people or a big roomful of people, I get almost autistic. I get overwhelmed and really tired. So I don't like being around large groups.

*I didn't write a novel and I feel the same way.*

That happens to you, too, huh? You know why? I think because the kind of work you do is so intensive with people that perhaps, whether you realize it or not, you are just absorbing everybody's buzz. **I feel like I am in a box of bees when I am in a room with lots of people and I'm just looking for the door.** I find myself getting more and more agoraphobic as time goes on. Part of it is because people's perception of me has changed. I haven't changed. The MacArthur suddenly made people look at me and "ching ching"—How can she help me? So I feel like a lot of people are the *chupacabras* [a blood-sucking mythical monster, supposedly part goat]; they all come, trying to suck your blood, trying to find how you can help them. Or they look at you as somehow you have the secret to the light, and you are going to be able to pass it on just by waving your hands over them. In the past I was very open and generous, and I found that it just exploded in my face. A lot of people weren't there for me when I needed them. So I have become a little shell shocked. Subsequently, I'm almost paranoid and frightened of people now. Maybe I'm losing out on meeting some marvelous people, but I am doing the only thing I can to save my spirit. I really felt—especially when I was finishing this book [*Caramelo*—so open and overwhelmed by people. I am still trying to recover from that. ■



Photo: Ray Sanisteban



**BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON**, *interviewed by Margo Williams:*

**I think it's vital to give aspiring writers a community wherein they feel invited to take risks with their work.** Whether the risk is writing creatively for the first time or finally pushing into deeper, more complex subjects, we must establish and nurture an environment where the writer feels empowered to take a leap of faith on the page. This is both a macro and micro concern, within the discipline as a whole and in individual workshops. Without a safe community of like-minded individuals, individuals taking part in the shared enterprise of witness and empathy—that is, the shared enterprise of making art—the rest will fall away.

The community that a good workshop or creative-writing program fosters should cultivate a writer's confidence and give her the wherewithal to put pen to paper, fingers to keys. So one piece of advice would be to seek out and immerse yourself in a community of people who care about language the way you do. ■

**CHRISTOPHER COAKE**, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

In my first year at Ohio State University, I got to take part in a weeklong workshop run by Nick Hornby. I was thrilled—we were lucky to get him to visit us—but I didn't expect much, personally, just because I couldn't imagine a writer more different from me in terms of approach and theme. But then Nick showed up, and he was terrific to all of us: generous, wise, personable. He read a story of mine I'd just finished, "Cross Country," and told me he liked it a lot. On the way out of the country, he dropped my name with his publisher, Riverhead, and they contacted me, which sent me into a complete tizzy. I was a first-year MFA student who'd just begun to mine the good stuff, and I didn't know what to do. I sent them—unwisely—every story I had, maybe five of them, though now I see that only two were worth showing off. Riverhead eventually said thanks but no thanks, but in the time it took them to get back to me, I'd managed to put together most of the rest of the stories in my first collection. I then submitted the collection to an agent, Marian Young, and she said yes, and then a few weeks later Harcourt said yes. This all happened by the end of my second year in the program. My head was spinning, and still is, in a lot of ways. Even in my wildest pre-MFA fantasies, it never played out like that.

**I didn't go to OSU with a book particularly in mind. I was just trying to get into a situation where I could write, period, and be surrounded**

**by people who were as in love with writing as I was.** Even though I had a strong group of friends and family around me, helping me through Joellen's death, I felt adrift from the writing life and a writing community. So I went in search of one. And that's exactly what I got; I met people at OSU I loved completely, and will always love. I know this sounds disingenuous, but it's true: the book still feels incidental to me. Without that time and that community, I'm not sure I would ever have started *any* book, let alone finished this particular one. ■

**MICHAEL PARKER**, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

I would like to do for my students what my teachers did for me, which is to encourage the effort, point out without sugarcoating or evasiveness where I went wrong, and inspire respect for the act of writing itself. ■

**RICK MOODY**, *interviewed by Tim Hohmann:*

*When you were writing all that “unruly” stuff as an undergraduate, did you envision a future as a novelist? Did Angela Carter and John Hawkes encourage you to pursue writing as a career? Did you think at this time you would ever be able to sustain yourself as a writer?*

No, no, and no. Hawkes and Carter were never careerists, and didn't encourage people to have careers. In neither case was it their style. And I **never imagined that I would be as lucky as I have been. Never. It's been a mystery to me. If I got hit by a bus tomorrow, I would die a very fortunate young man.**

*So Carter and Hawkes were both at Brown?*

Yes. I had Angela for all of sophomore year (when she filled in for Hawkes on sabbatical), and then Hawkes for second half of junior year and all of senior year. Did my MFA at Columbia, from 1984 to 1986.

*What is your honest opinion of MFA programs?*

I think that many American graduate writing programs are warehouses, really. They don't teach much because the workshop is a faulty form, and they don't prepare the degree candidates for the life afterward. I didn't get that much out of graduate school myself—young people might as well go work for a few years—and my perceptions seem often confirmed in the experiences of others. You might as well join the Peace Corps. It might

even be more profitable, in fact, than graduate school.

*Why do you think the workshop is a faulty form?*

The workshop is oriented toward consensus as a model. Which presumes that the majority opinion about a work of art is the most valid assessment of that work. I disagree with this idea right at the outset. A lot of really interesting work is so challenging to the majority opinion that repression has been the first reaction to this work, *Ulysses* and *Naked Lunch* being two examples. I remember being in a class at Columbia where we discussed *Naked Lunch*. I'd say that three-quarters of the class really despised the book and couldn't make heads or tails out of it. I was one of the lone voices in support of Burroughs's novel, if that's what it is, which seems incredible to me now. Had Burroughs been a student that day, had it been a workshop, instead of literature class, my colleagues would have given him a very hard time. "Where's the narrative here? There's no continuity!" So I think that the unaided workshop is not strong enough to "teach" fiction writing. Both really challenging work and really horrible work are shortchanged in this model of instruction. What is rewarded by consensus—which by virtue of its statistical clumping in the middle of the taste range would seem to be another name for mediocrity—is work that is easy to talk about.

*Do you think then, that the net effect of graduate writing workshops/graduate writing programs is the homogenization of the form?*

Yes. I think we have seen the fruits of this tendency toward homogeny in the published American fiction of the last twenty years. A lot of American fiction looks exactly the same. There's a workshop style. I will say that the so-called low-residency MFA programs—I'm teaching in one this year, as I am also teaching in a conventional workshop program—interrupt the tendencies of the workshop to some degree, since they depend largely on one-on-one correspondence between instructor and student for their pedagogy. It remains to be seen what the effect of these courses of study will be, but I think they represent, theoretically, an interesting departure from business as usual. I think my low-residency students get a lot more attention from me than I ever got from my workshop instructors when I was in graduate school. ■

**ASKOLD MELNYCZUK**, interviewed by William Pierce:

*As a Bennington professor you seem to use different teaching methods with different students, while maintaining in your letters a sense of mystery and poetry. In one approach, you advise choosing the most vital element of a draft and expanding the work from that point, discarding the rest.*



I think you hit on what's clearly evidence of one's limitations as a teacher: your methods grow out of your own practice. On the other hand, that's the idea behind the whole show.

I try to enlarge my own narrow repertoire by describing the approaches that other writers have taken. And I do try to teach everybody differently. For instance, there are people who are so determined to write out of first-person experience that you want to say no, nothing that has happened to you can enter into your fiction. There are people who you feel have not experimented with any other approaches than a conventional realist one—people who write pretty standard chronicles of a day in the life, in the belief that anything looked at closely enough becomes interesting—was it Flaubert who said that?—without recognizing how closely you've got to look these days. I try to figure out as quickly as I can, and often by instinct, what students know of the choices available to them, and try to be sure they have a larger sense of their own possibilities and repertoire. It would be a disaster to try to use the same approach with everyone.

What you describe as a poetic, allusive response, I suppose might also be experienced by some people as elusive and dodgy, a refusal to offer the direct suggestion. The decision behind that is deliberate and longstanding. You're better off teasing somebody into thought, because laying out very clearly what should be done in one example doesn't give writers anything they can take home and work with the next time around.

**The most important moment in a writer's life is when they discover their material, because then they'll give it the kind of devotion that it requires.** Until then it will feel like finger exercises. It can be very high-level finger exercises, and you learn a lot from them and stay limber and absorb skills that you make use of when you finally hit the thing that's yours, but that's the thing you want to keep moving toward, while mak-

ing sure you always understand how broad the range of possibilities for any subject is. Then I guess you feel your way by “guess and God and hope and hopelessness” toward the one that’s going to break something open for you. ■

### CARY GRONER:

I’m always a little surprised to discover that there’s actually a debate about whether writing can be taught. To me it’s like wondering whether neurosurgery can be taught. Of course, there have been geniuses with extraordinary intuitive and analytical capabilities who learned to write excellent fiction just by living life and reading the work of others. For the rest of us, I think it’s helpful to find a teacher or a school and prepare for a strenuous apprenticeship.

**I’d been working for twenty-plus years as a journalist, and writing a novel for ten of those years, when I finally had to admit that I had no idea what I was doing when it came to fiction.** I didn’t understand the tools well enough to answer even the basic questions. Is anybody going to care about these characters? Should this piece be in first person or third? If third person, how close should the POV be? Should a given section be in scene or in summary? Within a scene, what should be direct dialogue, what should be indirect, what should be summarized?

I had no clue, so I became one of those middle-aged grad students euphemistically referred to as “returning” in the education biz. I was offered a scholarship to the University of Arizona, where I found a wonderful and supportive community of faculty and other students. I learned tons, very quickly, thanks entirely to the kindness and generosity of my teachers and my colleagues, and it was much, much more efficient than trying to figure it all out on my own. ■

### VALERIE LAKEN, *interviewed by Peggy Adler:*

After college and a couple of years in Eastern Europe, I came back and entered a PhD program in Slavic Literature at the University of Michigan in 1995. By that point I was *trying* to write fiction on the side, but I had no idea what I was doing. One day I came across a little sign in a coffee shop advertising a writing workshop with Josh Henkin, a novelist I really admire, who had gotten his MFA at Michigan a few years before. The class was hard for me at first, but I ended up taking it several more times. He

had a discount for repeat offenders, and after a while there was a whole group of us repeating—Nick Arvin, Don Lystra, Mary Jean Babic, Ami Walsh. Writers I really admire. I discovered how helpful it is to have that kind of community. Writing's too hard to keep the faith all alone.

Then I took a writing workshop at Michigan with Nick Delbanco, and he sort of pulled me aside one day and said, "If someone could grant you a wish: either a PhD in Slavic Literature, or a published book of fiction, which would you choose?" I immediately said, "A book of fiction." But I answered the way you would say, "A winning lottery ticket," because that's how obvious but out of reach the goal felt to me. And then he said, "So what are you doing in that PhD program?"

That was it: I applied to the UM MFA program. I tried to finish my dissertation at the same time, but my heart wasn't in it, and Slavic Studies is too challenging a field for anyone—let alone me—to succeed at halfheartedly.

*Did you ever question your decision to leave the PhD behind?*

Never. I actually think it's a lot harder to get a PhD and a tenure-track job in Slavic literature than it is to publish a book of fiction. It's an incredibly demanding field, filled with geniuses, and I just wasn't made of that stuff. I was starting to get the sense, anyway, that writing was my calling, and that whether or not I could succeed at it, it was the thing I wanted to devote my life to. Not just the writing itself, but the workshop environment as well. I like the communal aspect of it, especially the way that a good workshop engages students as complete humans, not just receivers of information. **Best of all, we get to analyze literature not as an already accomplished text but as a live experiment in progress, with any number of possible outcomes and strategies for achieving those outcomes. That feels both practical and thrilling to me. ■**

**MICHAEL PARKER**, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

*In addition to teaching in an MFA program, you've also taught at several writing conferences. How do students benefit from these conferences? And from the teaching writer's perspective, what do you get out of them?*

Well, let me take the last part first: I get to get out of town. I get to hang out with other writers, and though this isn't something I often do, it can turn out to be a fun time. And I get to meet a lot of people I wouldn't otherwise meet, as the makeup of a summer conference is very different from



an MFA program. There are a lot of older students, some of whom have just started writing, others who've been at it for years. **There are people who have no real interest in getting published and others who want to publish so badly they'd damn near kill for it. It makes for an interesting mix. As for what students get out of it, I think the intensity is a good thing, for these conferences tend to cram into a week what might take months to accomplish.** And the ones I've done, there's lots of exposure to the writers, especially at night after the lights go down, and I suppose this is a good thing, depending on the writer, and the fullness of the moon. ■

**MARY GAITSKILL**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Did you go to a writing program?*

No. When I was in school, there were very few writing programs. I remember hearing about Iowa, but I had no interest in it. Now it's become something that people feel they have to do, which I think is very unfortunate. I taught myself to write by reading and writing a lot and by not showing it to people constantly. That's the thing about the writing program that bothers me, this idea that you need to show it immediately to a group of twelve people. They're not going to have a deep understanding of your work even if they spend the entire two years with you. It's difficult to have a deep understanding of another person's work. It's a very intimate thing, how a story is working on the inside. It's very difficult to comment on that. All you can comment on is the outside.

I've worked very alone and very privately. In the past I occasionally showed things to people and they almost never liked them. When I was younger I was aware of writing groups, but I never wanted to do that, and I think it was good that I didn't. You really are alone when you write, and these groups give you the illusion that you're doing it with other people, and you really can't be.

*Do you think the group detracts from finding your own way?*

Not for everybody. Some people feed off the energy of a group—these people are typically the people who dominate the group. Ultimately, I think even they need to get out of the group at some point, but for a time it can be inspiring for that type of personality. ■



**ANN PATCHETT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*In his quest to express his love to Roxane [in Bel Canto], Fyodorov declares, “Some people are born to make great art and others are born to appreciate it. Don’t you think? It is a kind of talent in itself, to be an audience, whether you are the spectator in the gallery or you are listening to the voice of the world’s greatest soprano. Not everyone can be the artist. There have to be those who witness the art, who love and appreciate what they have been privileged to see.” How do you think this idea relates to the world of literature and writing?*

I think it comes out of literature and writing. I think about it in terms of MFA programs specifically. There’s no way that everyone who comes out of an MFA program is going to make it as a writer, not by a long shot. So the question is, do you use that time to become a great reader and a great appreciator of art, or do you just feel a constant disappointment in yourself and in your life if you go through one of those programs, but never go on to be somebody who creates great art. It seems that MFA programs are kind of tragic if they’re just creating a whole lot of people for very few spots on the job. But if it can be that people have a chance to express their own creativity, and to genuinely appreciate more fully the creativity of others, then it doesn’t seem like a waste of time. It does seem very sad to me that MFA programs leave so many people feeling that they’ve failed. ■

**MARK WINEGARDNER**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

People in creative-writing programs are doing the work that editors used to do. Editors used to edit. They are mostly just acquirers now. That front-line editing mostly gets done by people’s mentors.

*Or peer groups.*

Right. I’m doing a lot of the work for my students that editors used to do. I really preach this to my students: “Okay, now you are to a certain point in your writing. You have a bedrock layer of fundamentals. Guess what? That’s nothing! As hopelessly difficult as that has been to achieve—a foundation is a good way to put it. If the foundation is solid then the building will not fall down, but if all you have is a foundation, you can’t live inside that.

For most writers the kind of growth they do after they get out of a creative writing program is everything. For the lazier, less committed, more timid, they don’t necessarily get any better and they get to a certain point and stagnate artistically. And that is nothing and editors are right to bitch about that.

But they don't always see the whole picture. I recognize how frustrating it must be to get stories that aren't exactly inept but aren't good enough to make you want to publish them. Well, okay. Great. There's not any real shortage of good stories. Any magazine that is perceived as a really important magazine, whether they pay a lot of money or, like *Ploughshares*, don't pay much but are seen as an important magazine. They are not having any trouble. They may be sifting through massive piles to come up with what they have, but they are filling their pages with great work. ■

## MYLA GOLDBERG,

*interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Do you have people you show your work to?*

I've got a cast of about five readers I rely on. Having readers who you trust, who are smart, and who love you enough to be able to tell you what isn't working is absolutely essential. ■

## ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK:

I think it would be instructive for young American writers to keep in mind that the American system of bringing up writers (through creative-writing workshops, publication in obscure literary reviews, repetitive submissions to—and rejections by—a monolithic profit-driven publishing industry) is a nearly unique experience and produces a very different kind of writing and a specific process with its own advantages and risks.

Comparing the work of the young Slovenian writers, which I often translate, with the work of young Americans I have encountered in workshops and read in literary reviews, I would say that American writers tend to have a much better sense of craft and, by and large, produce more polished writing. They know the tricks of the trade—the principle of *in medias res*, the rules of POV and dialogue. This is all well and good, but has a few dangerous side effects. It carries the risk of creating a formulaic outcome—the hook followed by the back story, the obligatory but often meaningless physical descriptions, all the showing but no telling. There is a safeness in this sort of writing—a fear of exposition, of putting forth bold intellectual



Photo credit: Cyril Tramont

ideas, of breaking the very rules of structure that have been so painstakingly learned, an intellectual act in itself. And also a reluctance to shock—a by-product of the nice, all-accepting, almost therapeutic atmosphere of many workshops.

As far as Slovenian work is concerned, it is true that I am more likely to encounter appallingly poor craft and intellectual pretentiousness, but I am also more likely to be jolted upright by a bold opening, a bold idea, a structure completely out of left field, which makes me shake my head and say, How did they come up with that? So, as is often the case when comparing cultures, the ideal lies somewhere in between the two. It would be ideal if American writers could somehow manage to hold on to the craft they learned in the workshop, tuck it away somewhere inside, and then vehemently, violently shake off the shackles of formula, the imaginary objections of all those literary magazine and workshop readers, and write stories that *need* to be written, that, more than merely entertain, add something new to the ongoing dialogue among and between writers and readers. ■

#### WILLIAM LUYVAAS:

Jerry Bumpus, my professor as an MFA student at San Diego State and a fine story writer, encouraged me to develop the more-outré, less-realistic elements of my stories. This was good advice. Positive feedback can mean more to us as developing writers than negative feedback. Yes, writing instructors must point out weaknesses in student work, but they should also emphasize potential strengths. Jerry taught me this. ■

**ALICE MATTISON**, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

*You have said you taught yourself to write fiction. What did you do?*

I never went to school for it. It happened slowly. I just kept writing things and sending them out, and they would come back, and I would write again, and write more and more and more, and I gradually did get better. **I learned a lot about writing fiction from writing poetry—about language, about clarity—but I think because I had nobody formally teaching me, it did take a bit longer. But I always had help from friends. I am a writer who believes in having writing friends.** ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*When you were in school, you had the opportunity to study with John Barth and Donald Barthelme, but you decided not to.*

That was lunacy on my part. I'd heard that Don Barthelme sometimes said, while holding up a story in class, "This is amateur night." If he'd said that about my work, I would have been crushed, utterly defeated. I had great ambitions and a fragile ego. I wanted desperately to be a writer. I didn't have the nerve to enroll in a class with either Barth or Barthelme, so I made all these bonehead mistakes as a young writer that I think they would have cured me of in two weeks. **But who knows? You only know where the trolley you got on took you.**

*What are some exercises you suggest to beginning writers?*

It depends on what the writer needs. I've asked students to write scenes in which the subjective experience of time for the characters is different from clock time; dialogue in which no one is listening to anybody and dialogue in which characters are picking up cues from one another; scenes in which something is obvious to the reader but not to the character; scenes in which the writer tries the reader's patience a little. You need to be a fairly practiced hand at this to make these exercises work. In lower-level classes, I give exercises like "Ten things I know about her," and one of them has to be a secret. At the more advanced level, we deal with questions of communication, of time sense and maybe subtext: put a character on the page who constantly says one thing but means something else; congest the subtext. It depends on what a particular writer needs. If I gave everybody the same exercises, I would be like a doctor who gives the same prescription to all of his patients. ■

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Was the MFA program an important experience for you?*

It was wonderful for me. It offered me a great opportunity to spend time with other writers. At first when I started the program, I told my parents I was going to be a teacher to appease their worries. From this place where you're sneaking to do this thing that you love, suddenly I was in this community of writers, and I had the constant fellowship of writers and people who take writing seriously. That was extremely important to me. Other people were around me writing, and I had a much-needed sense of cama-

raderie. If you're not the kind of person who needs to be alone, and you need encouragement sometimes, that sense of community can be very helpful.

*You can start to feel crazy if you're alone too long with the work.*

Even if you've published before, when you're starting over writing can feel like the most useless and self-indulgent thing in the world. When you're already published, the readers, editors, agent become your community, but in the beginning, if you don't have any kind of support it can feel really futile.

*What are some of the problems you see in the work of new writers?*

Most of my students have good verbal skills, but it's difficult for them to create a story, especially a large one. This is the difficult part. Most workshops tend to produce short-story writers, because those are easy to be workshoped. As a fiction writer, one should be able to write longer pieces as well, which are harder to teach in the workshop setting. ■

**RICHARD RUSSO,**  
*interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

*Do you still go to Warren Wilson?*

I haven't done it in a few years but I'm going to go back.

*A low-residency program?*

Yes, it's the grandfather of them, actually. It's the best of them, I think.

*Andrea Barrett goes there.*

Charlie Baxter goes there. It's been a while since he's been there. Robert Boswell. We've all taught there from time to time. Our most consistent and reliable way of seeing each other is to show up at Warren Wilson.

*Why does Iowa get all the attention?*

Warren Wilson has produced—I've lost track of how many novels and short-story collections, not to mention individual stories published in good places—yes, they have a wonderful track record.

*So why does Iowa get all the attention?*



Photo credit: Elena Seibert



Iowa was the first, and they've always had wonderful people teaching there and always had the cream of the crop, it seems, of students go there. And Warren Wilson is a very different kind of program in that you go there for ten days and then you go away—everybody goes away—and then convene again a half a year later. The students tend to be much older and they tend to be in other professions. Whereas students in Iowa and other conventional writing programs, they're there. They live there, they are studying and teaching. One of the things that's wonderful for the writers at Warren Wilson is that when the students leave, so do we. We don't have to go to department meetings. [Laughs.] The only colleagues we have are other writers. The medievalist is not somebody we have to deal with on a daily basis, much less the sociologist or whoever. It's a marvelous sense of camaraderie and a sense of shared purpose. And it's very intense and it's wonderful and in ten days it's over. [Laughs.] You go home. ■

**PATRICIA HENLEY**, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

*You've taught fiction writing at Purdue for a long time. How has teaching affected your writing?*

Teaching at the university level, especially the first five years or so, forced me to think through my own process and to study what others had written about process. You often hear the axiom, You don't really learn something until you have to teach it to others. I think that was true and it was good for me.

*What's most difficult about teaching undergraduate and graduate students?*

Well, let me say what's good about teaching undergraduates. They're malleable, curious, they make big leaps, when they make them. I could teach undergrads for the rest of my writing career and be happy with that. What's hard is that so many of them have been imprinted with junk stories, just like eating too much junk food. It's given them a skewed sense of what's important about stories and telling stories, which, after all, is one of the most meaningful human activities.

Graduate students are more difficult to teach. They often have been big fish in little ponds, over-praised, before they come into an MFA program. They come to an MFA program not to work hard, but for more of that praise. They can be set in their ways. Even after teaching in an MFA program for fifteen years, I'm still not convinced that the MFA program is the best way to become a writer. ■

**ERNEST J. GAINES**, interviewed by  
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*What kind of impact have your many years of teaching had on your writing?*

My students keep me aware of things around me, but I don't know that my "style," and I hate using words like that, has changed in any way, or if my views on life have changed. Most of my students are middle-class, white females. I learn about their ways of thinking and describing things, their backgrounds and social lives. So when I come to write something of my own, I can use this if necessary. For example, when I was writing *A Gathering of Old Men*, I had someone in mind just like Candy. In fact, she's still on that plantation, and she knows I was writing about her in some ways. I've learned a lot about writing about white females by being aware of my students. I am always picking up things, and sometimes I don't know I am doing it. I am always getting information from the things and people around me, the sounds, the sights, the weather. ■



**SIGRID NUNEZ**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*Do you teach regularly?*

I teach fairly often. I don't have a position. I do adjunct teaching—quite a bit. I taught at Columbia, undergraduate and the MFA program, Amherst, Smith, and the New School, Hofstra, and I've been a visiting writer at Washington University, Sarah Lawrence, and then I've done some of these conferences. And at the poetry center at the 92nd Street Y. Those are all different kinds of students. Different ages. ■

**STEVE ALMOND**, interviewed by Aaron Gilbreath:

*What did working at the Greensboro Review as fiction editor teach you about the world of publishing?*

That was the boot camp for me as a story writer. When you read twelve hundred stories in the space of a year, you see all the bad moves, all the evasions, all the extra words, all the bogus, you know, "Let's give this character a dead mother or a crippled sister, or make them sexually abused when they were a kid"—all the ways inexperienced writers try to lend their

characters weight, meaning, as defined by tragedy. The editorial experience was just incredible. I learned more doing that than I did in any other aspect of my MFA program. The classes, the workshops, those were all helpful, but there was nothing like seeing the same mistakes over and over and over again. Writers who don't give the reader enough basic facts to figure out what's happening, because they think that's making the story "mysterious," and it's gonna make people read on, when it's really just confusing the fuck out of them. I mean, all those common mistakes, all the totally obvious similes and metaphors that get in the way of actually being in the world of the characters—I was just pounded by them day after day, and I think it made my prose, through that sheer process, at least less stupid, if not suddenly elegant and poetic. ■

**CHANG-RAE LEE**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*What made you decide to go to a writing program?*

After my mother died, I came to realize that the novel wasn't going anywhere, and a friend of mine suggested that I get out of New York City, to get out of a rut and away from all that had gone on. She had attended the University of Oregon as an undergraduate, and said it might be a good place to get some work done, and on that basis alone I started looking into programs on the West Coast. It was sort of crazy. The University of Oregon MFA program gave me a fellowship based on that first attempt at a novel. The director of the program, Garrett Hongo, the poet, happened to be in New York before I decided to attend, and we had a drink. I felt an immediate connection with him. We didn't work together in terms of the writing, but he was someone I could relate to, and it tilted my decision to go to that program. I wasn't interested in school so much as I was interested in having a couple of years supported. I had the ideas for *Native Speaker*, and I wanted to get to work.

*So what did you get out of the program?*

I got a lot out of it. I had a weekly forum for the chapters of my novel. I quickly learned that you have to leave a lot of the suggestions on the table, but it was great to hear the range of responses to the work. It was a wonderful time for me to have a respite from everything. Being away from New York helped me write about New York in a way that I wouldn't have written had I been in the midst of it. It gave me a perspective that was more imagined than real, which is of course the approach one needs for fiction writing. It's not about the real. ■

**AMY BLOOM**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*What are some of the common problems you see in the work of new writers who you are teaching?*

As I said to my students at Yale the other day, there were four major problems with the stories they just turned in. One was the “I’m smart, you’re dumb.” The other was “I’m smart, my characters are dumb.” Another one was “I have a secret,” in which the author tries very hard not to tell the reader what’s actually going on. The final one was that complex emotions can only be expressed through complex and convoluted sentences. ■

**CAROL ROH-SPAULDING**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*What do you learn from your students?*

We have these little writing groups in my advanced fiction class. I split it up into groups and we meet at coffeehouses in town and talk intensely about manuscripts. I learn from them all the time. I’m always hearing about what they read, about new authors. Not all of them read. The best students are reading and writing, and those are the ones who will go the farthest. The other thing is knowing that they are facing the blank page, and I’m facing the blank page, and that doesn’t ever change. You go at it again and again and again, all your life. Some days it feels given, but most days it doesn’t.

*Are there writing exercises you find especially useful?*

I tend to use that book, *What If* [a collection of writing exercises by Anne Bernays], a lot. I use them, and some of them I adapt, and half are my own. I’m always creating new exercises. One they seem to enjoy is going to a public place with lots of people roaming around and just watching, being actively nosy. I tell them not to take a notebook, but just to fill up. When one person strikes their interest, I suggest they follow that person around, and at the end of an hour to have made up a past, a full life story for that person. There is a book of photographs by Imogen Cunningham, called *After Ninety*. I ask them to look at photographs of these old people and very quickly answer thirty-five questions, on impulse, about each of these photos, so they can get a sense of the sort of stories they have inside them. They’re not making it up, they’re consulting this deeper self to find what they think might be this person’s favorite food, their sexual history, etc. By the time they’re done, they feel pretty great about their imaginations. ■

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK, *interviewed by William Pierce:*

*What writers do you count as your mentors?*

It was Derek [Walcott], who, after reading some of my poems, said I should finally face the tale of the tribe from which I'd been trying to escape. This was in the early eighties, when I was already in my late twenties. I can't begin to explain how oddly hostile the atmosphere was at the time to people from Eastern Europe—it had a lot to do with the hangover of the sixties, anxieties about the fifties, the Holocaust. Not only was nobody interested in Ukraine, most people I spoke to kept trying to tell me I was confusing it with Russia, that I didn't know my history. Derek knew better. He's a genuinely bold thinker and a very generous man, and saw what story I needed to tell in order to begin to feel like a free human being in the world. I owe him a lot.

I took a couple of very helpful classes with Rosellen Brown when I was a student in the master's program at BU, and she was a brilliant reader and teacher. I'd gone to BU to study with the poet George Starbuck, whom most people know as part of the group of young poets hanging around Robert Lowell in Boston in the late fifties. The others included Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—the three of them, George and Plath and Sexton, would go off to the Ritz for drinks after Lowell's class, and Sexton would regularly park in the loading zone, because, after all, she was going to get loaded. **George was a meticulous, inventive craftsman whose stress on the discoveries possible through revision left a lasting mark on me.**

Helen Vendler was also at BU then, and was a galvanizing presence—her readings of poems seemed so definitive and well supported that if you happened to differ with her you might find yourself arguing with her in your head for years, trying to persuade her to hear as you did. She had such ebullience and passion, she showed you there was nothing dry or bookish about this life, that the study of literature was as rollicking, urgent, and necessary as medicine or business—maybe more so.

*Did you know that your poem "The Enamel Box," a photocopy of the typescript, is in Box 8 of the John Gardner papers at the University of Rochester? Was Gardner a teacher of yours?*

He was the first writer to show enthusiasm for *What Is Told*. I'd submitted an early chapter, written in a couple of days way back in the early eighties, and sent it to Gardner at his important mag *MSS*. He wrote back a very enthusiastic rejection, which I have framed in my office at U. Mass. Alas,

the rest of the book took rather longer to finish after the initial burst of inspiration. I later submitted some poems that he and Liz Rosenberg did publish. ■

**TIM GAUTREAU**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*In 1977, you took a writing seminar under Walker Percy at Loyola University New Orleans. Did Percy play a role in opening the field of fiction to you?*

When you work under the aura of a great writer, it is always influential. You actually see somebody who is productive and successful and is doing something good as a writer.

Just being around him was helpful. Percy would focus on basic things about novel structure: you've got to get the thing off the ground; you can't go on tangents when you write. When you teach creative writing, you say basically the same things over and over. The things that I say to my beginners who have never written a word of fiction are the same things I would say to God if He asked me how to write a short story. It's all pretty basic. And that's what Percy said. ■

**FREDERICK REIKEN**,  
*interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

*You teach at Emerson College now. Have writing programs become institutionalized, the antithesis of art?*

**I think a common mistake that young would-be writers make is the belief that an MFA program is going to be like law school, that you can go through your two or three years and come out a “writer.”** Many find out the hard way that this isn't true, that unlike law school, there is no cause-effect relationship between going to an MFA program and getting a book contract, though it certainly can help. I also think that because of this misperception, writing programs now have a certain marketability, and so naturally they'll play into this idea—that by getting an MFA you'll legitimize yourself as a writer. That's the biggest problem, that the perception exists and is reinforced by the institutions, and that many students are surprised or alarmed to find that one's evolution as a writer to



Photo: Barbara Brady Conn



the point where you're creating truly artistic fiction that is also publishable generally takes a lot longer than two or three years. Some writers do land book contracts after three years of an MFA program, but they're usually the ones who had been at it for years already when they began the program.

Still, I would say that writing programs are not the antithesis of art. In any group of fifty people who call themselves writers, there might be two you can consider genuine artists. Those writers are probably not going to be adversely affected by spending three years in a stimulating academic environment, getting feedback from established authors as well as peers, and being part of that particular school's writing milieu. In fact, they're probably going to gain a lot from it.

*A lot of instructors at such programs refrain from brutal criticism. Students aren't always told what they need to hear, even when it's the painful truth. Do you feel that writing programs should weed people out, as is done at medical programs, put commitment to the test?*

My sense is that writers need to hear straight and honest criticism, in a respectful, nurturing atmosphere. I personally see no reason for a teacher to look a student in the eye and tell them their story is a piece of shit, even if it is. **Most writers who I've seen go on to succeed have done so because they are intelligent enough to learn from the feedback they receive, smart enough not to listen to most of it, and determined enough to keep writing.**

In fact, most successful writers are successful because—through some mix of talent, perseverance, self-reflectiveness, and egomania—they are capable of continuing even though many people have suggested they do otherwise. My first fiction workshop was with Paul Auster during the fall of my senior year at Princeton. He was a very hands-off teacher, who gave us an assignment each week, and then would offer five or ten minutes or so of feedback to each student. It was exactly what I needed, and in that semester I went from writing work that was basic undergraduate drivel to work that was promising undergraduate drivel. At the end of the year, when I was trying to decide whether to go to med school or apply to MFA programs, I dropped by Paul's office and asked him what he thought. He said, "You know I admire your writing, but you should probably go to med school. You'll have a much nicer life."

I reminded him of this when I ran into him at the Miami Book Fair last year, and he noted that although in my case it may have been the wrong

advice, it was good advice—and I agree. Anyone who would respond to that advice by going to med school probably should go to med school. But I'll point out that what Paul gave me was not brutal advice. Brutal advice would be more along the lines of “Your writing stinks. Don't waste your time.” **The fact was, my writing was quite unformed at the time, and the odds of my succeeding as a writer would have seemed slim to anyone. But thankfully no one gave me any brutal advice. It probably wouldn't have deterred me in the long run, but in the short run I would have felt that much more embarrassment and shame.**

*You've mentioned that you see only twenty percent of MFA students continue to write after earning a degree, and that eighty percent who enter a program romantically committed will not be by the end. Publications such as McSweeney's have an open disdain for writing programs. What is the argument in favor of sustaining them?*

It's hard to be a writer. Unless you happen to have a trust fund, you have to wait tables or work some tedious day job in order to make your rent, and finding quality time to write is very difficult. The best contribution of writing programs to any writer or would-be writer is that they provide a focused time in which you've put aside everything for two years because you've made the decision to write. It also gives you a community of support, which is again why I'm not a fan of the brutal-criticism school. In a predatory environment, it's hard to feel supported.

In my case, an MFA program gave me a sort of jump-start, since I'd been so focused on the sciences. UC Irvine provided me with structure and taught me what I'd eventually need to do on my own—i.e., when I no longer had the luxury of workshops and fellow writers all around me. And frankly, I had no need for workshops after two years. I'd pretty much internalized all the workshop ideas and was ready to move on.

It's true that only twenty percent or less will continue writing once the program ends, but for that eighty percent who quit, at least they gave it the old college try and hopefully had a decent social life while doing so. *McSweeney's* hates writing programs because most writing programs are traditional and *McSweeney's* stated objective is, more or less, to undermine anything traditional. I think it's great that *McSweeney's* has created another niche—a sort of hip anti-niche, aspects of which are quite brilliant—but it's just a different position and perception.

So I think the whole thing should be taken with a grain of salt. Writing

programs won't make you into a writer, but they're useful as a stepping stone for people who have, in one way or another, been writers and/or potential writers their whole lives, and who feel like such an environment would be productive. But there are also people for whom writing programs will be a waste of time. Unfortunately, some of those people come to writing programs anyway, and perhaps that's one bad aspect of the establishment part of MFA programs—that people think they can't become a legitimate writer without having an MFA.

I'd also say for anyone who attends a writing program, it's important not to hang around in that MFA environment for too long. Once you're done, get out and figure out who you are. In the end, writing is a self-starting, solitary endeavor, and to continue as a writer you need to find a way to build this into your real life. MFA programs provide structure and can be helpful, but they are not real life. In terms of real-life credentials, the only thing an MFA degree will do is help you get a teaching job, assuming you've already published a book or two. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*I think it must be difficult as a teacher to put aside your own ideas. When you read something, you automatically have your own thoughts about it, and to keep yourself constantly in check like that and tune into what a student wants to do must be a challenge.*

It is difficult. Sometimes, in my arrogance, I think I know what a student should do, but if I keep listening I can hear the way that student is trying to tell a story, and I try to help them toward that goal. I throw out possibilities and questions and challenges, but the student must do the work. Sometimes a student will come back to me and say: Do you remember when you said such and such, but I won't remember because I was throwing out everything I could, and they took what was important to them. They catch what they need. If a student stays in one place and does not want to move, I challenge harder. I become fierce, I'm afraid.

I try to speak to the fear, or try to expose it. Sometimes I wonder if I should do this—a psychologist would probably say no. But because so much energy goes into keeping the fear hidden, when it's released a lot of energy is freed, and the student feels very alive. I must say that if the fear seems to be keeping something in place, I don't touch it. **But if the student can realize that everyone feels this way, everyone is afraid of this, then they can**

give it to their character. Then they're working with human fear rather than letting it work them. ■

**VIKRAM CHANDRA**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*Now that you are a professor of creative writing, how has your writing been affected?*

It is a great privilege to make a living by talking about the kind of work I'm interested in, to be paid for engaging in a conversation about writing. Some of the students are good writers and serious about writing, and they teach me things all the time. And they also keep me on my toes, keep me from becoming complacent about my judgments, my tastes, and my politics. Being in a classroom has been very good for my work.

*What do you believe is your role as a teacher?*

I want to create a space in which a serious, close reading of each student's work can happen. Often, the best reader in class for a given student's work is not the teacher, but another student. So my job is to provide a certain amount of direction, to encourage them to work hard on each manuscript that comes into class, to help them listen to reactions to their work with detachment, humor, and openness. **The danger in workshops is that the young writer starts writing for the committee, to please the crowd, to gain the teacher's admiration.** This is generally a danger for young artists; even if you've never stepped into a workshop, you can be frightened by the establishment, seduced by its rewards. So you must learn to protect your voice, to defend what is essential to you. My job as a teacher is to be honest, to help each student find his or her voice, as best I can. ■

**JAMAICA KINCAID**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*You teach sometimes.*

Yes, I teach at Harvard University in the fall.

*When students sign up for your classes, what do they think they're signing up for, what do you suppose they've heard about your classes?*



Photo: Melanie Abrains

Oh, I don't know. They never reveal. You know they're used to very accomplished people, once they get to Harvard. I'm probably the least accomplished person they meet. They know quite well who everybody is...

I'm not a college graduate. I wish I had the discipline for it, but I'm terribly undisciplined in certain regards. I think I could now do it better. I go to lectures, and when I'm at Harvard I see the most amazing people come through, and they're saying some incredible things. I'm in awe. I think now I could, but before, when I was young, I just didn't have the discipline for it.

But you know, where did the Brontes go to college? Where did George Eliot go to college? Where did Thomas Paine or Thomas Jefferson or George Washington go? Did George Washington go to college? This idea which we now have that people ought to have these credentials is really ridiculous. Where did Homer go to college? ■

**KATHLEEN TYAU**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*You've been in a number of writing groups. What qualities make a group a particularly good one for you?*

I find that it helps to write together every time we meet, even if only for a few minutes. There's something soothing about the writing process that helps me deal with the criticism. I also think this bonds the group. We discover that even stuff we've written quickly can be pretty good. And we start to honor our beginnings. Before we critique a story, we describe what's going on rather than simply prescribing ways to make it better. I'm not sure why this technique has such a positive effect. Maybe it's because you can see that you've communicated. We also commit to writing. Each one of us. Every time. The energy and commitment you get from this you can't get any other way. ■

**NOMI EVE**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

After I finished [my MFA at] Brown, I went to live with my cousins... I was writing and I didn't know who to read my work to. Suddenly I didn't have other writers around, and my cousin Joanie said, Well, read to me. She's a jeweler and an avid reader. So I started to read to Joanie and her daughter, Abby, who now is sixteen, and I realized that they were as good if not better readers than the writers in my graduate program, because they're just readers. They don't have their own voices in their heads, and from that

moment on, and it's been five or six years now, I read to anybody I can get a hold of.

*Sometimes people think of literary fiction as having appeal really only for certain groups—well-trained intellectual ears.*

And I want none of that. The people who aren't writers who read my work, I think, are responding to the same things that people who can talk about writing are responding to, but they're just readers. That was a big learning for me. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Stewart David Ikeda:

*Let's talk about your place as a writer when you're not writing, and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award you won last year, which entails community service. What has your experience been with the project, and how did it affect your work?*

I'm trying to encourage people in small towns to do some writing and to form groups—not necessarily workshops—to show one another their work. It's the equivalent of trying to convince people that baseball is just as much fun, or more fun, when you play it out in a vacant lot and you're not much good at it, as when you go to watch the American League at Tiger Stadium. It's wrong to believe that only professional writers can write things of value. So, I'm trying to convince these groups that all the intentions they've had for writing are worthy; and I am there to give them permission to write—as if they needed it, though often they do—and to convince them that writing leaves a trace, and there wouldn't be a trace of what they thought or felt or knew about their families, or what they believe about God, about the kinds of stories they want to tell—there will be no trace of that unless they write it. The response has been enthusiastic, but it takes time; it takes a lot of nerve for people who have not been rewarded in any palpable way for their writing. I have a lot of people who want to write family histories that would otherwise be lost. Last month there was a man whose wife died in middle age, and he's trying to organize a writing group with others who have lost their spouses.

Most people I meet want to write stories, novels, or poems, but they've just lost the nerve or they don't know how to proceed. I wanted to foster some alternative to the workshop; it seems to me that in small towns, there's usually a library where there's an opportunity for people to talk about their work. ■



**CAROLYN CHUTE**, interviewed by Barbara Stevens:

*How did you recognize what was unique in your own work, and once you recognized it, how did you develop it?*

The first Stone Coast Conference was ten years ago and I went to that—not as a student, but as a hang-around person. There was a guy there who was doing a reading, a novelist. I don't remember who he was, but I remember he was good. He looked like a novelist. He had the tweed jacket and everything—gray hair, a beard. Anyway, he read, and I thought, My gosh, I could never write like that. I will never be a writer. I was so depressed. Because the way he wrote was, well, he made references to things I didn't know about, like Homer and things like that. He was a very academic kind of person. I thought, No one's going to want to read my stuff.

*You were writing at that time?*

Yeah. And later, during that same conference, I had a reading where I got a lot of good feedback from some people.

*Do you remember what you read?*

A piece of junk. It was terrible. Terrible. But I thought it was great after people said that nice stuff, so it encouraged me.

So I began to think, maybe it's like apples and oranges. I mean, that man had the tweed jacket and the greyish hair, he was taller than I was, his hair was shorter. He had a different face; he had a different thumbprint. He was a different person. His story is valid, but that doesn't mean that mine's not. I really, really, around that time, came to terms with that—that you don't have to copy other people or even ever try. You just bring yourself to your fullest, whatever that is. ■

**LYNN FREED**,  
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*I know that you spend a lot of time at writers' retreats, such as Yaddo. How do these residencies help you?*

There is the blessing of peace in a retreat that happens to suit my fraught nature. I arrive in a heaven like Yaddo, and I sink immediately in a sort of peace from life that I seem to be able to find nowhere else. It has something to do with the



Photo: Nancy Crampton

way the spirit settles there, away from the noise of my life. But there is also the fact that one is both left alone and taken care of. There are the days in silence, to work, and then the evenings in the company of others who have been working. It is magic. I often write more there in a month than I do otherwise in six months, or more. ■

**NOMI EVE**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Something I really do not believe in is undergraduate writing majors. I think they should be abolished. I think they're hurtful. I think anybody who wants to be a writer should be a reader for a significant period of time, should be trained in reading, should be a good reader. When you're eighteen, you need to read. If you're gonna write you're gonna do it anyway, but you don't need to be in those writing workshops yet. If you want to do it, do it as an elective. I was a pretty hard-core English major with Shakespeare and all the things that we should read. I really believe that we need to read. And then when you're twenty-two, twenty-three—we're not talking about millions of years later—then do your writing school if you want to, if you need to, but I really don't think it's a positive thing for undergraduates. I believe that vehemently...it's not so much avoiding the writing classes as it is gaining the literature classes, having that.

One of the things that I thought was missing in my own education as a master's student, was that nobody spoke to me about my writing in relation to my life, in relation to me, at all. It was your work and that's that. Let's talk about the work. There was no conversation about your relationship to your work in a real organic way. I have such a deep relationship to every word I write and to where this book fits into my life, that I think there should have been conversations about that. Writing is such a strange process. We never spoke about that. We never spoke about the process of a writer's life.

*What do you mean by that?*

Well, I was trying to write a certain chapter, a crucial chapter in my book, and I would spend the day writing and I'd think that I had done well and then I would throw up. Alistair would come home and he'd say, *How was your day, Honey?* and I'd say, *I threw up again. I wrote a lot and I think it's good.* And he'd say, *It doesn't sound good. It doesn't sound like it should be this way.* It had happened for a week. At the end of the week I started to read him what I had written and it was awful. It was the wrong stuff. It wasn't right. It was covering up the truth. And my body was physically

reacting to that. It was amazing. It was incredible. But that's what happened. I stopped writing that and I started writing the right stuff and I stopped throwing up, just like that. And nobody in writing school tells you anything about that and I'm sure it happens to other writers. It has to. Nobody says anything about that. About the different weird ways it fits into your life and your body. There are lots of things like that that I could have benefited from, I think, in a community of writers, having that sort of conversation. Besides studying books, wonderful books, and having people write, and getting critiqued, which I think is a wonderful situation to be in. I just think there's not enough talk, at least there wasn't in the program I was in, about writing and life, about how strange it is and how magical it is. Every single piece of my book has demanded something different of me, of my lifestyle, of my time commitment, every single piece.

Most of my writing teachers never spoke to me about why they're doing what they're doing, their relationship to their work, their passion for it. Everything was much more focused on the individual work, on the piece, but it's about more than that...Conversations about the soul of a book, our own soul's relationship with a book. And that's where the magic lies. I think we're not yet ready, certainly not in academia, to have soul conversations. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*Every Thursday night since the fall of 1987, a writers' workshop has met at your house. How did this come about?*

In the fall of '87, a woman from south of Boston called. She said she had eight writers who wanted to pay a couple hundred dollars each for four nights of a workshop. And then ten writers gave a benefit for me that winter. I thought, Well, all those writers gave me that, so I'm not going to charge writers until I have to. I said, "Come up and I'll see what you are doing." So they came over, and I talked to each one, and I said, "It looks like we need a workshop." So that's how it began. There's been a major rotation over ten years. We have a twenty-seven-year-old who hasn't been here much because she's in Harvard at the business school. One woman has published a novel; another is publishing stories in quarterlies. There's another woman in her seventies who is publishing. They're pretty much in their thirties and forties, most of them, with jobs and families. ■

**THOMAS E. KENNEDY**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*What perspectives have you gotten from people in your workshops?*

There's no doubt that teaching is the best way to learn, because it forces you to test your assumptions and see if they're really true. That actually is what I've learned from teaching workshops, that I have to constantly put my own statements to the test. When I critique a story in a workshop, I write down my thoughts about it. I'll read it first and copy edit, and then I'll write out my thoughts. Sometimes I'll write many pages; sometimes just a couple, until I'm sure that my assumptions about that story are valid. Sometimes, halfway through writing out comments, I'll think, Oh, wait a minute. I missed something here. I'm complaining about something which is actually a strength in the manuscript. Then I have to go back and revise my thoughts about it. That's one of the great benefits to the teacher of a workshop. It's good exercise. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

What I noticed at the University of Michigan was that there seemed to be a new breed of students whom I was seeing during the last five years or so who were bookish and who were using their bookishness as a new form of rebellion. Or revolt against official culture. Using their bookishness as a way of saying, "Don't bother me with your damn video games. No, I'm not going to watch that TV show. I'm reading." If book culture and reading gets any more marginalized, sooner or later a marginalized population of young people will discover it all over again. I thought I was seeing some of that. I know there's an argument that something has happened to all of our attention spans—that long books are difficult for people to read. I don't think that's true at all. Neal Stephenson and his immense books...

*And William Vollmann's three-thousand-page book. And there's a new [904-page] translation of Don Quixote that's been published.*

It just seems to me that there is less interest in the immense novels of manners in the old style. It does seem as if the long texts that young people are willing to read have to do with societal, cultural forms that are in a state of fever or crisis. ■

**SIRI HUSTVEDT**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*You mentioned your husband, Paul Auster. It is unusual that two writers in a relationship are as successful as the two of you have been. There are some similar themes in your work. How has it worked out with both of you having the same profession?*

When we met seventeen years ago, Paul was not a very famous writer. He had published poems with small presses, had translated a lot of poetry and prose from the French, and had written a number of essays, some of which were printed in the *New York Review of Books*. At the time I met him, he had finished the first part of *The Invention of Solitude*, and was working on the second part, “The Book of Memory.” He was a poor, struggling writer, and so was I—even though he had a lot more to show for himself. Books were certainly part of our attraction to each other. I remember an ecstatic moment early in our love affair. Paul had his arms around me. He looked at me and said suddenly, “Whom do you prefer, Burroughs or Beckett?” I said, “Beckett,” and he said, “So do I.” That sealed it.

Many people assume that writers who live together must be locked in a competitive battle. But, honestly, if you love someone well and are loved in return, that nonsense doesn’t come up. I lived through Paul’s struggles and disappointments. *City of Glass* was rejected by seventeen New York publishers, but their stupidity did not slow him down. Now that novel is translated into twenty-seven languages, and people read it all over the world. It keeps selling and selling. I loved his work right from the start. When I read *The Invention of Solitude* before it was published, I thought the man was a genius. The fact that he has become an internationally celebrated writer has always seemed to me a confirmation of my good literary opinion.

*Do you work together?*

He reads his work to me more frequently than I read to him. I’ve been working on a novel for two and a half years now, and Paul hasn’t seen it yet. But he will see it, and what he says will be important. Paul’s sentences are finished much earlier than mine are. He constructs a book paragraph by paragraph. I write and rewrite whole books over and over. We are both very honest with each other and brutal if need be. When you know the person is on your side, criticism is only good. Usually when Paul tells me something isn’t working, he confirms a doubt I’ve already had. ■

**ALICE MATTISON,**  
*interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

*You have said you taught yourself to write fiction. What did you do?*

I never went to school for it. It happened slowly. I just kept writing things and sending them out, and they would come back, and I would write again, and write more and more and more, and I gradually did get better. I learned a lot about writing fiction from writing poetry—about language, about clarity—but I think because I had nobody formally teaching me, it did take a bit longer. But I always had help from friends. I am a writer who believes in having writing friends. I believe we are all one large team of people working together and we have to push each other along. I had begun exchanging manuscripts of poetry with Lloyd Schwartz when we met at Queens College at the age of nineteen, and then along the way I picked up other writing friends and people who weren't writers but who read my work and responded to it. ■

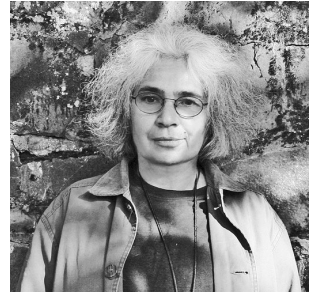


Photo: Paul Beckman

**ROY PARVIN,** *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Academic writing is a different kettle of fish than creative writing. Swarthmore College is a fine college, but at that time they treated creative writing like the bastard son, just as novellas are the bastard sons of the publishing world. They only had one creative-writing class in the whole English department. It was a much more classical education, in terms of reading poets who had been dead for two hundred years. At the time, I probably wasn't particularly good at that. I had to learn how to be a reader. History informs my writing so much because I wound up being a history major, and I think that was perfect, because all history is finding the many, many triggers for why one event occurs. And that's basically what a story is. I mean, a story might have more than one event, certainly, but it is an investigation of why something occurs. That's one reason why my stories have more details—because I was a history major. ■

**ASKOLD MELNYCZUK,** *interviewed by William Pierce:*

*As a Bennington professor you seem to use different teaching methods with different students, while maintaining in your letters a sense of mystery and*



*poetry. In one approach, you advise choosing the most vital element of a draft and expanding the work from that point, discarding the rest.*

I think you hit on what's clearly evidence of one's limitations as a teacher: your methods grow out of your own practice. On the other hand, that's the idea behind the whole show.

I try to enlarge my own narrow repertoire by describing the approaches that other writers have taken. And I do try to teach everybody differently. For instance, there are people who are so determined to write out of first-person experience that you want to say no, nothing that has happened to you can enter into your fiction. There are people who you feel have not experimented with any other approaches than a conventional realist one—people who write pretty standard chronicles of a day in the life, in the belief that anything looked at closely enough becomes interesting—was it Flaubert who said that?—without recognizing how closely you've got to look these days. I try to figure out as quickly as I can, and often by instinct, what students know of the choices available to them, and try to be sure they have a larger sense of their own possibilities and repertoire. It would be a disaster to try to use the same approach with everyone.

What you describe as a poetic, allusive response, I suppose might also be experienced by some people as elusive and dodgy, a refusal to offer the direct suggestion. The decision behind that is deliberate and longstanding. You're better off teasing somebody into thought, because laying out very clearly what should be done in one example doesn't give writers anything they can take home and work with the next time around.

The most important moment in a writer's life is when they discover their material, because then they'll give it the kind of devotion that it requires. Until then it will feel like finger exercises—and it can be very high-level finger exercises, and you learn a lot from it and stay limber and absorb skills that you make use of when you finally hit the thing that's yours, but that's the thing you want to keep moving toward—while making sure you always understand how broad the range of possibilities for any subject is. Then I guess you feel your way by “guess and God and hope and hopelessness” toward the one that's going to break something open for you. ■

**PAM DURBAN**, *interviewed by Cheryl Reid:*

*You've said that you taught yourself how to write.*

It was part of the advantage I had in going back to graduate school late, not right out of college. I was tougher minded. I knew I wanted to write and I used those workshops to clarify my own sense of how I wanted to write. What I believed and what I didn't. But everybody teaches themselves how to write. Nobody can teach you. And teaching yourself how to write involves re-writing the same sentence and paragraph fifty times until it's right. You must learn to take care with your own work—that's what learning to write is.

*It's a discipline. No matter how many people read it and tell you what's wrong with it, it won't be right until you take the time with it.*

That's right. You have to teach yourself what good writing is and then learn to do it yourself. I think some people are put off by the way I teach. I have spent so much time trying to be objective and even ruthless with myself that it is almost second nature, and so I assume they are ready for what I have to say. I try to be objective and unsentimental when I am looking at my own work. ■

## MELANIE BISHOP:

*Can creative writing be taught?*

This is a question that the academic community has been battling around for a while. I think good writing is a combination of talent, excellent observation skills, mastery of craft, and a dogged persistence. You can't teach talent and you can't teach persistence. But you can train people to be better, more careful observers and you can definitely clue them in to aspects of craft. Some of the most talented students I've ever encountered—I mean raw talent, students who couldn't write a bad sentence if they tried—were also the least motivated. Drove me nuts because I would think, *You are so good, if only you'd decide to be serious about this*, but you can't teach someone to want that. Other students have had to work much harder, but through their persistence, have obviously come much farther than the student who never went past the first class. When I've seen this question debated, I always go back to two things: 1) how much I learned in my graduate program. Teachers and peers taught me how to be a better writer. I made progress there that I couldn't have made on my own, in a vacuum. And 2) how much my own students grow and progress



through the classes they take. Many of them started out writing mediocre stories; many have gone on to be published. So my personal answer is it *can* be taught and it's a valuable thing to teach and to learn. ■

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Was the MFA program an important experience for you?*

It was wonderful for me. It offered me a great opportunity to spend time with other writers. At first when I started the program, I told my parents I was going to be a teacher to appease their worries. From this place where you're sneaking to do this thing that you love, suddenly I was in this community of writers, and I had the constant fellowship of writers and people who take writing seriously. That was extremely important to me. Other people were around me writing, and I had a much-needed sense of camaraderie. If you're not the kind of person who needs to be alone, and you need encouragement sometimes, that sense of community can be very helpful.

*You can start to feel crazy if you're alone too long with the work.*

Even if you've published before, when you're starting over writing can feel like the most useless and self-indulgent thing in the world. When you're already published, the readers, editors, agent become your community, but in the beginning, if you don't have any kind of support it can feel really futile. ■

**GARY D. WILSON:**

*I have just finished my first fiction-writing workshop at a local university and am wondering whether I should attend another workshop, apply for a degree program, join a writing group, what?*

You have answered part of your own question in that you list several options open to you at this time. But before you decide on anything, you need to take a moment to ask yourself what your goals are. Are you willing to give up your day job in pursuit of your art, or are you more inclined to fit it in around the edges of your current lifestyle? How supportive are those closest to you of your desire to write? These, of course, are only some of the questions you need to consider as you decide what to do next. If you feel that you have the talent and desire to pursue writing on a full- or

nearly full-time basis, then you should be looking at more workshops, in either non-degree or degree programs. The more exposure you get to the writing of your peers and to solid criticism of your own work from instructors and other workshop participants, the better. The more you write, the better you become. The more you read, the more you know what is being and has been written. The more you read and write and talk about writing, the better you develop your own aesthetic.

Those, in a nutshell, are the reasons to stay involved in workshops. But good ones, with serious fellow writers and instructors. Whether you get involved in a non-degree or a degree program again depends upon your goals. If you want to teach somewhere down the line, a graduate degree in writing will certainly be helpful, especially coupled with a solid publication record. On the other hand, if teaching is not in your future, why bother? There are lots of good workshops available in non-degree settings without the hassle and pressure of a graduate program.

Now for a word of caution: no matter where you seek new workshops, be mindful that you can reach a saturation point with them. It's easy to become workshop dependent, and that's bad. In the end, you must become your own best critic regarding your work. Besides workshops, there are local writers' groups and organizations that you might want to join. Again, be careful. Be sure they're filled with people who are serious about writing and reading. Many groups are primarily social in nature and would probably not be satisfactory for someone who is looking for an in-depth critique of his or her story. Attend a meeting or two to sample what goes on before you commit yourself. At bottom, writing is a solitary pursuit; and although most of us want some kind of contact with others who are caught up in the same craziness, we must move inexorably away from connection with others and toward isolation with our imaginations. That should be the ultimate goal of any writer. ■

**ROY PARVIN**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*What did students take from your classes, do you think?*

I've kept in touch with some and I think a lot of it is about revision. I'm a monster for revision. I believe in revising. I believe in throwing parts of the story away that don't work. I mean, starting over from scratch. And I think it's a very humanizing thing for a student to hear, "I have as much trouble as you do at this." I might be more stubborn than you, I might have

a greater vision of how the story could occur at this point than you do, but I flounder as much as you do. We're all involved in the same endeavor. The page is, of course, blank for everybody.

There were more process issues that were involved, trying to make things actually happen, having the courage to act. I'm sure you get a lot of stories that are on the edge of something happening, but the writer doesn't want to commit themselves, and so what they do is just write very nicely. And you as a reader are saying, "Come on, come on, jump! You can make the jump." You know you're not going to fall into the abyss. And I think it was pushing them towards getting away from just nice prose, which you'll find in a lot of writing programs. You'll find some wonderful prose technicians. But is there a heart there? Is there something beating in the story? Is there a sense of desperation or passion?

*Takes a terrible lot of courage for anyone to do that.*

I liken it to getting up in front of a bunch of people and singing a song. You're thinking, This is great, I'm hitting all the notes, but there's the fear that a lot of it's coming out flat. I think that playing it safe keeps you from that fear, but it also keeps you from getting published. I took the emphasis completely off publishing and more just thinking about writing one good story. Which was my original assignment that set me off in writing—just writing one good story. ■

**DANIEL WALLACE**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

I really do believe that you can learn how to write, if you're interested in learning how to write. Just over time I've learned how to hear the rhythm of a story and the rhythm of a sentence. That's why it's important to write, to not worry about publication. Not worry about anything, especially when you're starting out. Just spend all your time reading and writing constantly. As much as you can, as much as you can stand. I would write new stuff in the morning and then take a break and then rewrite that in the afternoon. Then take a break, and then write something completely different at night. It would just be continuous, every day.

It's really hard to write. I think that people don't take it as seriously because everybody can write. I play basketball with a lot of doctors, or a lot of people who are becoming doctors. It takes them like ten years before they are really and truly doctors, but if you told somebody, Well, in ten years or so you'll

publish a story, I don't think many people would want to do it. People don't think of it in terms of there being a process, a learning process, a learning curve, the same way that people become doctors and lawyers and other things. Obviously you've got your MFA things, but those really aren't that arduous, I don't think. And they don't take that long, really, to get. I'm not sure that that's enough. I think it's a good way to spend time writing, though.

*Right. As a structure within which you will write.*

Yeah. That's your job. And that's why I did take a few creative-writing classes in college. Maybe one or two a year, because I couldn't make time for it otherwise. I could justify it because it was homework. ■

**CAROL ROH-SPAULDING**, interviewed by  
*Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

*When you're reading and responding to students' work, what are your goals, your processes?*

Well, that changes as I grow as a teacher and a person. I've been reconsidering my approach because I can be very hard on myself and on those close to me, so I'm sure sometimes I'm too hard on students. My default mode, which I'm not proud of, would be to say, Okay, there's this, this, this, and this wrong; go fix it—like perhaps an editor would. But that's not being a teacher. Even in a writing group with peers, that isn't necessarily the best approach. What if you simply avoided a lot of the criticism that an editor would give? What if you were primarily encouraging? Over time, the author might stop to think, You know, nobody's commenting on this part I thought was so great; that must mean something. Anyway, I think there are other ways of communicating with students. My main mode has been this [*snap, snap, snap of fingers*], because I'm so good at that. **That's my PhD training, too—to be an intellectual is to be adversarial about others' ideas. It's useful for people that can handle it, but why not be more encouraging? So I've been trying that idea out.**



When I'm at my best with students, I'm trying to figure out what they're trying to do and help them do it. They are where they're at, and this is what they want to do with the story, and I'll try to help them get there through the step they need to get to on the way to the next step. So mostly I'm asking about their goals for a scene or for the story as a whole. They often can't articulate them well, and having to articulate them better helps them get somewhere. ■



**STUART DYBEK**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

The way I teach writing has evolved over the years. I've taught now for quite a long time, and I've taught at every level. Something that's obvious, I suppose, but that took years for me to see, is how little schooling in craft most beginning writers have had. There's enormous emphasis on reading, and I applaud it. Writers certainly need to be avid readers. One of many reasons writers read is to instruct themselves in the craft. But most classes that young would-be writers have taken are literature-interpretation classes. Very seldom, if ever, is craft mentioned in literature-interpretation and survey courses. I think most literature teachers take craft for granted, if they consider it at all, and they're far more comfortable discussing philosophical ideas, analyzing psychology, or detailing various political agendas than they are in talking about how a particular piece of writing was fashioned.

Take dialogue, for example. Most undergraduate writing students know how to punctuate dialogue; few have ever been asked to practice it or consider its myriad uses, yet it's as important a tool as any a writer has.

Take point of view. Students can identify point of view in a story, but again, very few have really considered the various ways point of view can be manipulated. They've come from classes in which they've read and debated gender wars and multicultural issues—all enormously important—but no one has ever asked them to notice how a writer uses transition, even though it might be argued that the art of writing the short story is the art of making transitions.

So I emphasize craft not, I hope, in some workmanlike way, because I don't believe that about craft. **I believe craft is the way the writer makes magic, the gifts through which the writer transcends his or her limitations and participates in a power borrowed or stolen from the gods.** Craft, like ancient gifts the gods gave mortals, gives you a power over language that isn't wholly your own.

I think craft can be taught as a series of “movements,” the way dance or the martial arts are taught. One learns, for instance, the certain feel and sound of opening a story, how to locate and explore a resonant image, how to sense out a title, the change of gears that often signals closure, and hundreds of other like moves, and, as in dance or karate, these moves become instinctive, available for lightning-quick reactions and recombinations.

Models are, of course, important, and obviously are found through reading—reading carnivorously, as writers do, to use Michael Ryan’s phrase—but the practice of these techniques and the discussion of their uses is what the art of writing is about. I’d like to think that’s my emphasis when I teach. ■

**MARY YUKARI WATERS**, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

*Did anyone read your early work and give you feedback?*

Yes, I was in a workshop for many years with a teacher named Tom Filer. He held it in his home, with the same group of students every year, and that was where I did most of my early writing. It was a real sanctuary. He’d read us letters from Chekhov, or Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech. We never discussed publishing, or any of the business aspects of writing; it was always about the art. And after the workshop session, we’d snack on wine and appetizers. Tom opened up a whole new world for me. I consider myself very lucky that I stumbled across him. ■





# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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