

Introduction to Focus: Why Teach Creative Writing?

The question should be, “Why not teach creative writing?”

We don’t need to doubt, question, or defend ourselves.

Tom Grimes’s trenchant observation above was the first, almost immediate, response to the call for papers that went out on the subject “Why Teach Creative Writing?” Grimes, the director of the creative writing program at Texas State University, apologized for his prickliness but stood by his statement, as would any professor who senses someone, in asking why one teaches a given subject, might be dubious, to say the least, about said subject.

But if we offended anyone in posing that question and establishing this Focus for *American Book Review*, we’re sorry. Because the impetus behind the question was *ABR*’s recent attendance at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) annual conference, held this year in Chicago, during a not-too-chilly but flu-ridden long weekend in February. They were heady days, it should be said, as we here at *ABR* got to mingle with our peers from Fiction Collective Two, NewPages.com, Starcherone Books, and the many creative writing programs in the US, Canada, and UK. Surrounded by likeminded

folk, no one ever wonders why creative writing is taught. The answer seems obvious when one steps into the book fair: Everywhere one looks, there are independent presses; journals small and large; writers’ colonies; and reading series and readers, readers, readers galore.

Yet if an AWP member stepped out of the book fair—a rather insular space—she or he might be asked by a security guard or other hotel guest, “What’s this convention about?” As soon as one mentions writers, the layperson expects to hear Stephen King or J. K. Rowling would be delivering the keynote address instead of Charles Baxter or Marilynne Robinson. Of course, anyone with a degree in creative writing, or anyone who ever completed a creative writing course, has put up with this kind of inquiry for some time now. Always it seems there are two worlds of writing: the popular and the literary, and everyone knows that Anne River Siddons and E. Lynn Harris or Elmer Kelton and Anne Rice didn’t have to go to school at Iowa or Hopkins or Houston to learn how to write a good book. And if James Alan McPherson or Ann Beattie are so good, why are her or his books out of print? In other words, why learn how to write when all it might get you is the approbation of the five thousand souls pressed together in the Hilton

Hotel on Michigan Avenue?

Well, that’s what we wanted to talk about after AWP ended. The same kind of things that Richard Hugo dealt with in *The Triggering Town* (1979)—a much cited source in the forthcoming essays. About why creative writing teachers do what they do, knowing that many insist still that creativity of any kind cannot be taught. About what they do when clods like us ask such boneheaded questions. About what methods seem to work. About what joys result. Or what agonies. Whether what might be good for students might not be as good for instructors. And so we sent out the call for papers to a select number of creative writing teachers and program directors. And what we gathered is this rather remarkable number of short essays, far more than expected, from a range of people that demonstrates just how varied the world of creative writing in the university is. Poets and short story writers. Experimental wordsmiths and traditional evokers of scene. From snowy Utah to balmy Mississippi and many points in between. Furthermore, we like to think that this is only the beginning. We hope that those of you who visit *ABR* online will take this opportunity to add your voice—in assent or dissent—toward those arranged here. So let’s get the conversation started.

Responses

Delightful Jibber-Jabber Lee K. Abbott

I am tempted, given the givens that are my character, to provide the flippant answer: Why not? More seriously, however, I’d like to quote the late John Updike, in particular from his introduction years ago to the summer fiction issue of *Esquire*: fiction (and by extension all creative writing) is the best instrument we have to show how it is “to live in the here and now” (which sentiment I’ve modified to note “no matter the where and no matter the when” in order to include, say, historical fiction as well as speculative and science fiction). At worst, I see little wrong in trying to understand the world by throwing some English at it (or Urdu or Tagalog, or whatever is your tongue of choice). At the very least, we make our students, the talented and not-so, better readers. We improve their ability to assess the work a sentence (or a line) does; we make them sensitive to the choices a writer makes with the “willed word”; and, yes, along the way, we reacquaint them with their own humanity, however indifferent over time they’ve become to it. For more able students, we provide them the skills to make their own magic, and we give them opportunity after opportunity, courtesy of the demands of the page, to make real those “things about to disappear.” The very best of our students, happily, contribute to the delightful jibber-jabber that is literature, whenever and wherever it is written.

Lee K. Abbott is the author of seven collections of short stories, most recently All Things, All at Once: New & Selected Stories (Norton). His fiction has appeared in nearly one hundred periodicals, including Harper’s, The Atlantic, the Georgia Review, Epoch, the Southern Review, and Boulevard. His work has been reprinted in The Best American Short Stories, The O. Henry Awards: The Prize Stories, and the Pushcart Prize series. Twice a winner of fellowships

from the National Endowment for the Arts, he has published essays and reviews in The New York Times Book Review, The Miami Herald, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times Book Review. He is Arts & Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at The Ohio State University, where he teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing.

Benevolent Workshop Power Angela Ball

Workshop on a good day is power become benevolent, become playful. The teacher’s and readers’ roles as judges are transformed to those of co-conspirators in a detective mystery. Where is the poem’s best self? How can it be ferreted out, down what passageway or out what window or across what dizzying rope bridge?

My favorite thing about Workshop is the communal brain that can develop. A brain entirely devoted to the work at hand, and possessed of adaptive urgency. The poem appears in front of us. Something is wrong—something to do with word choice, angle of approach, structure, music. Suggestions arise. Some immediately fall away, like bowling balls trying to decorate a hat. Only a beat is lost—or not even that, because the not-useful detritus paves the way to ideas—just as when a single writer works alone. Thoughts proceed out of each other till some suggestion is immediately recognized as right. Everyone shares in the idea, augmenting, and editing. Understanding, spontaneous and universal, radiates from the project at hand. The poem begins to assume an undeniable presence, an identity. And just when it seems that all is decided, a devil’s advocate appears with a cogent objection that leads to another strengthening change.

Workshop brings everyone’s best brain—the generous, flexible, problem-solving, playful brain—

out of hiding. There’s a “let’s put on a show” brand of joyful resourcefulness, a happy discovery of the magic that can be made from the simple materials at hand.

The writer participates, too—sometimes directly, sometimes just by silently steering the group, through her reactions, towards or away from ideas. The teacher is a similar figure—a rudder of sorts on the ship of exploration.

My favorite time in Workshop is when I sit back and listen to my students being helpful, saying useful things, collaborating—having forgotten their egos and the petty prejudices that come with living, using their best and purest skills in service of poetry.

Lindsay Walker has been part of our graduate program for five years, both as an MA and PhD candidate, so I enlisted her help in describing what happens in class. Here is what she has to say:

The size of our workshops (usually between eight and twelve) is ideal, I find. We have the opportunity to introduce and receive feedback on our work almost every week. There’s a wide diversity of background, style, and taste, and I really enjoy the various perspectives through which I get to see my poems.

There’s something very diplomatic about the way our workshops are run here at Southern Miss. The work is the focus, not the personality of the author or the respondents, and it seems that by taking egos and competitiveness out of the equation, there’s a real generosity of spirit that surfaces in the class. The overall quality of the poems is taken into account, but the focus is always on how to improve regardless of what stage a particular poem is at.

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Authority, talent, privilege—any of those things one either brings or doesn't bring to class—take a back seat to the poem on the table. Unlike other workshops I've participated in, there's no drama or emotional fireworks. We let our guards down; we move forward.

After four years of poetry workshops at USM, one thing I've noticed is that those students who do the work, who show up every week and find something to contribute, who keep an open mind and listen to the rest of the class, improve without exception. In my own experience, workshop has given me both the guidance and freedom to develop my own taste and modes of expression. My instructors and peers have offered invaluable advice over the years, but they've also given me the space to do my own thing. The result is I have a much better sense of what I like and why in my own poetry and when reading others.

The point here is not to present our program as a paragon (though we're mightily proud of our students and what they continue to accomplish) but to present some of the strengths of the workshop method, which has had its share of detractors but which continues to help writers hone both their editing skills and their capacity for generosity.

Angela Ball's latest book of poems is *Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds* (2007), which received the Donald Hall Prize from the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. She lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she teaches in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi and is an associate editor of *Mississippi Review*.

Steal This Book Leslee Becker

Maybe we teach creative writing for the bread. "We all hunger for the love of our fellow creatures, and when one is hungry, even a half-baked loaf tastes sweet" (Anton Chekhov). Raymond Carver would add gravy. He ran a workshop once for us Iowa inmates. I liked his modesty and uncertainty. He mostly apologized, insisting he didn't know beans about teaching. "Don't get me wrong now. Maybe it's just me and my taste, but I wonder what might happen in this story if the writer made the main character a bartender, not a lawyer. Why not give it a try?" He called us students writers. I confess that I long to be a student always, learning from my own work and the work of master writers, but also knowing that the

process moves along more expediently in writing programs, when we get the attention we crave.

I went to Hollins, Iowa, and Stanford, teaching at the latter two places, and stealing from Richard Dillard, John L'Heureux, Nancy Packer, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Hilma Wolitzer. Now, as the Director of Colorado State University's Creative Writing Program, I'm being asked to discuss pedagogy, and expecting to be hauled off to the Home for the Easily Bewildered, or to the penitentiary for committing fraud and theft.

My colleagues and I are unashamedly various in our approaches, probably satisfying current students, and frustrating prospective ones, who beg for statements of our teaching philosophy. We're the products of writing programs, and we likely try to emulate our best mentors. I steal flagrantly, even that old canard about how creative writing can't be taught, but it can be learned. At CSU, the learning is done intimately and extensively, the students' three-year stretch culminating in a thesis and portfolio of their writing, self-assessments about courses, workshops, internships, and a hefty list of annotated works, all the requirements showing that we honor studio work and close reading.

I never asked my teachers for their philosophy; I saw it in action, when Richard Dillard remarked that it's exciting and titillating to watch a field of grass being mowed down, but isn't there something eminently satisfying by waiting to watch it grow?

When I started writing and considering where I'd serve time, I read Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*, seeing him tackle the question—can creative writing be taught?—in 1979. "Yes it can and no it can't, but a good teacher can save a good writer a lot of time."

Next question: "What about the student who is not good? Is it possible for a good teacher to get from that student one poem or one story that far exceeds whatever hopes the student had? It may be of no importance to the world of high culture, but it may be very important to the student. It is a small thing, but it is also small and wrong to forget or ignore lives that can use a single microscopic moment of small triumph."

Answer: "A creative-writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters."

Call me an incorrigible thief. Call me a lifer.

Leslee Becker is the Director of the Creative Writing Program at Colorado State University. Her story collection, *The Sincere*, won the 1996 Mid-List Press Fiction Award. Her stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, *Epoch*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of *The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society Award*, the *James Michener/Copernicus Society Award*, and a *Wallace Stegner Writing Fellowship at Stanford*.

Writing Wrecks Kelly Cherry

To have permission to write—it was a liberation, and it was life-saving. For me, that is no exaggeration. I lived for every word that dropped from each teacher's lips. I attended a program that had zero interest in celebrity or sales: what teachers and students alike strove for was to add to the literature we held in highest esteem and embraced with whole-hearted passion. It was a long time ago; the publishing world, the literary world, and the world of creative writing programs have changed hugely, and perhaps neither teachers nor students are as innocent as they were, but novice writers still seek a writing program as a kind of salvation, a place where guid-

ance, encouragement, companionship, and serious criticism support a creative life that can be lived to the full.

I'm less convinced that writing programs are good for the teacher. Teaching writing wrecks one's spelling, even one's grammar, and saps one's energy. To teach and also write for years on end requires a lot of stamina. I've learned that a writing teacher can recover energy, find new energy, by teaching literature classes. More universities should allow their writing teachers to do this, especially as in many English departments literature professors are teaching literary theory rather than literature. Of course, writing teachers do have the gratification of seeing their students succeed as writers, and that is no small matter.

Speaking of which, I have heard some writing teachers say they choose to teach graduate students rather than undergraduates because graduate students are more likely eventually to write about them. This strikes me as bizarrely Machiavellian.

Kelly Cherry is the author of nineteen books (including *Girl in a Library: On Women Writers and the Writing Life* and *The Retreats of Thought: Poems, both forthcoming in the fall*), eight chapbooks, and two translations of classical drama. She is Eudora Welty Professor Emerita of English and Evjue-Bascom Professor Emerita in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in retirement has held a number of named chairs and distinguished writer positions.

The Crab Grass Question Bret Anthony Johnston

The question, which comes up every so often like indigestion or crab grass, always offends, frustrates, and confuses me. Its implicit attack/insult—that creative writing isn't worth teaching—seems not unrelated to the logic of those folks who, upon meeting a writer, say they plan to write a novel but just haven't yet found the time. And there's related charge in the question, the cryptic assertion that creative writing lacks value, which value can only be construed as commercial or fiscal, so "why" muck up students' brains and semesters with fluffy, time-wasting classes? Their time, the question suggests, would be better spent elsewhere, in, say, a business or hotel management course. And commercially speaking, such classes are surer bets, but when did education get reduced to a pesky hoop through which students must jump just to land in a job? The notion—again, not too far removed from the crab grass question—that learning how to craft a narrative or write an elegant line of poetry is a liability rather than an asset seems like a very slippery slope toward an insular, egocentric life. The kind of life, in fact, to which I've always assumed education was the antidote.

In my workshops, I ask the students not to write "about" characters but to write "as" the characters, to fully inhabit someone else's senses and skin; that is, I ask them to empathize with characters, to render them without judgment in language that is clear, artful, and rewarding. I ask them to think of the reader first, to view the act of writing as one of humility and compassion, to take part in the profound act of witness. To write fiction or poetry in a meaningful and moving way, writers must forget themselves. They're learning to think and learning how not to think, discovering how the structures of form (whether narrative or poetic) liberate rather than limit the imagination, and they're participating in a tradition of honoring and shaping the human

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experience with language. The workshop—all workshops—awakens their curiosities as much as it awakens their talent; it teaches them to be more sophisticated and engaged and enthusiastic readers, and it requires them to sacrifice—their time, ego, ulterior motives, and agendas—for a power higher than themselves: the process of getting a soul on the page. The whole shebang is an act of faith, an act of courage, a protest against the fragility and limits of the body. Students leave creative writing classes more aware, more engaged, more sensitive to the nuances and textures and beautifully strange frequencies of life. The question isn't why teach creative writing, the question is why the courses aren't required.

Bret Anthony Johnston is the author of Corpus Christi: Stories and the editor of Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer. He directs the creative program at Harvard University and can be reached on the Web at <http://www.bretanthonyjohnston.com>.

Melding Form and Content Anna Leahy

I'd like to think that *American Book Review's* feature signals that we are finally beyond the question, "Can creative writing be taught?" The question is an accusation in disguise. A growing body of literature answers that charge by documenting how we really do teach this subject. So, let's agree to put that old question out of its misery. But *ABR* forefronts a different, much better question: "Why teach creative writing?"

Purpose—*why*—is vital to creativity. Neurologist Alice W. Flaherty, in *The Midnight Disease* (2004), notes that researchers have difficulty establishing a relationship between, for instance, intelligence and creativity. Drive, however, increases the likelihood of learning to do something well. Flaherty suggests that internal motivations like curiosity and fascination encourage creativity and also keep a writer focused on the work, engaged with the language, and less susceptible to distraction. *Why* matters a lot, both in terms of how I myself write and publish poems and how I teach.

Like many writers, I came to creative writing

without a conscious career decision. I hoarded paper by the time I was five. While my attorney mother sat at her desk at home, I sat on the floor next to her and scrawled nonsense cursive on yellow legal pads; we wrote the Illinois Constitution together. My fourth-grade haiku won a local radio contest; I enjoyed counting syllables while writing about a hamburger. In high school, I was reprimanded for penning a poem for the school newspaper that might hurt the feelings of the nun who ran the cafeteria and was lauded for a feature comparing the nun who made girls cry in math class to J. R. Ewing from *Dallas*. My first year at Knox College, I took a fiction writing workshop with few guidelines; my stories paled in comparison with those of upper-class majors who filled the course, but that challenged, rather than fazed, me. Looking back through my rosy-rationalization glasses, I see that writing mattered to me all along, and that's why someone published my poetry collection. I was driven to and by the process of writing by forces beyond my control, or so it seemed. My drive to teach, however, did not come naturally. It was my sister, not I, who gave her dolls and stuffed animals after-school lessons in the basement playroom, teaching them math or spelling, while I read *Nancy Drew* or the *World Book Encyclopedia* or watched *Charlie's Angels*. As an undergraduate, I did not speak in class for two years. When I started a graduate program, I taught composition because a teaching assistantship was the means by which I could afford focused, mentored writing time. Though I was diligent in those early courses, my curiosity fueled my writing, not my teaching.

Only after I had mastered the mechanics—planning a syllabus, grading fairly without being trapped by criteria, being comfortable in front of an audience—could I understand teaching as a creative act and to see the workshop in particular as exciting. Somehow, while living up to external expectations for teaching, I had mistakenly separated form from content, despite my poet's knowledge to the contrary. Once I thought about form (teaching) and content (creative writing) together, I had internal motivation to teach.

Those of us who employ the workshop probably teach, in part, because, at the end of each semester, students submit work that surprises themselves and that they are proud to have written. Poetry is a new option in the MFA at Chapman University, so I was concerned, at first, that my courses were filled with fiction writers. Their sense of discovery and hunger for close attention to language, however, increased my insight about teaching (and drew several of them seriously to poetry). A workshop is about far more than genre. Almost without exception, my undergraduate and graduate students move beyond what they can easily do. Everything I orchestrate leads to that moment in which students are awed by what they've made because they were curious enough—or nudged—to try something.

But there exists another aspect of *why*: why teach creative writing in colleges, universities, and other educational settings? In *Patronizing the Arts* (2008), Marjorie Garber states, "That makers of art should be housed in universities, at the undergraduate, graduate, research, and teaching levels, is as reasonable, natural, and logical as that the university should contain and nurture other makers: engineers or chemists, or applied mathematicians." Creative writing is an active, participatory discipline. Students learn this subject by doing, and re-doing. Making things—and the practical skills that go along with such making—is essential to us as human beings. Universities are cultural centers, Garber reminds, where experts gather with the resources and freedom necessary to nurture makers.

We need to nurture not only those makers, but also the appreciators of what's made. Last fall,

students in my introductory course at Chapman University were talking before class. One student said that, because she now understood how hard it was to write a really good paragraph, she was in awe of published authors. Another indicated that she read for more than content now; she found herself noticing and judging style, regardless of topic. Yet another student remarked that she now spoke up in other classes because she knew how to talk about readings; she understood assigned texts more thoroughly. Our courses give rise to the pleasures of reading and to connection with each other.

Creative writing, as an academic discipline, asks students to study the process of creating literature, and that study engages students deeply in language and texts, as well as with other writers. So, when it comes right down to it, we teach creative writing, in part, because we've read the National Endowment for the Arts reports about the decline of reading. Whether or not our students ever publish, we want appreciative readers. That's reason enough, because we're only human. And we are most human in our art.

Anna Leahy's collection Constituents of Matter won the Wick Poetry Prize and was published by Kent State University Press. She also has two chapbooks, Turns about a Point (Finishing Line Press) and Hagioscope (Sow's Ear Press). Her poetry appears in journals such as the Connecticut Review, Crab Orchard Review, Image, The Journal, and Air & Space Magazine online. She edited the pedagogy collection Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom (Multilingual Matters) and has published several essays on teaching creative writing. She is an assistant professor at Chapman University.

Re-learning Writing Lance Olsen

I'm not at all sure that that's what we're doing—i.e., teaching creative writing, whatever "creative" writing (and hence its opposite) might mean—especially in light of the fact that most of our students won't become what we think of when we say the word *author*, published or otherwise. Rather, I believe what we're teaching (if by "teaching" we mean "re-learning," and if by "we" we mean "I") is a method of reading. I'm re-learning with my students various strategies for experiencing textuality from the inside out. Re-learning with them how to pay attention to narrative dynamics by practicing narrative dynamics, to what makes a poem poemoidal, a fiction fictionoidal, and how, and why. Re-learning how to slow down one's perceptions, deepen one's contemplation, of what makes a text by attempting to generate universes of discourse that simultaneously refer and do not refer to what we imagine when "we" say the word *world*. I'm not running tutorials in pop psychology or holding therapy sessions. I'm not coaxing students to write the fiction I like. Rather, I'm asking them to theorize narrativity collectively, re-see it as a possibility space, an *as if* space, where everything can and should be conceived, felt, thought, complicated, challenged, and made to fail. When we find ourselves speaking about Freytag's Pyramid, we are, I urge them, speaking about how to undo it, redo it, ask why in one sense it exists and in another it doesn't, why our culture structures certain narratives in certain ways so often that we begin to take them as truths about what we used to call the human condition. When we speak about characterization, we are speaking about how our culture constructs identity through us; about a mode of feelthinking that allows us to become not ourselves and not not ourselves;

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about the limitations of the Freudian model. We are daring ourselves to envision a selfhood beyond conventional selfhood while contemplating the devices by which we tell, retell, and untell ourselves. We are remembering Czesław Miłosz's sparkling observation: "The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person." Remembering Ludwig Wittgenstein's: "One of the most misleading representational techniques in our language is the use of the word 'I.'" Re-learning what Samuel Beckett, Kathy Acker, Ben Marcus, Young-Hae Chang, Patrik Ouredník, et al. have already taught us...but from within the text we are scripting instead of from without. Re-learning that every narratological move we make, every technique we employ, carries with it philosophical and political consequences, whether or not we can at first articulate them, whether or not at first we are even aware of them. Every time any of us speaks in a "creative" writing classroom, we also challenge us all to reflect upon the institutional framework in which our words sound—what a "workshop" is; what it might be; how it exists within the power fields of a given department; what economic purposes it serves, and what cultural; how the university expresses itself through it and us; how the larger culture does; how that might change; why we teach creative writing...

Lance Olsen's next novel, *Head in Flames*, will appear from Chiasmus this fall. He teaches innovative narrative theory and practice at the University of Utah and serves as chair of the Board of Directors at FC2, associate editor at ABR, and fiction editor at Western Humanities Review.

Act Truly Julie Shigekuni

Years ago, a therapist friend jokingly defended her style of handling interventions: "I decide what's true, and I act accordingly." I'd wondered how she could bear to hear people's problems all day long, and I've continued through the years to reflect on her insight revealed to me in jest. I offer it here as my response to the question, "Why teach creative writing?" I can think of different responses, such as Richard Hugo's smart assertion that a good creative writing course saves the young writer time and effort by teaching the writer early on what *not* to do—or the stance taken by several writers to whom I've posed this question that goes something to the tune of how the well being of any culture can be measured by its production of literature. I find both positions edifying; it's hard to sidestep the appeal of a solid, altruistic answer. But the question for me remains personal, and I find that my friend's half-joke's half-truth provides a better, if more selfish, answer. As a writer, I decide what's true, and I act accordingly. Decisions I make on the page often send me spiraling into a conundrum. I teach creative writing because engaging with students is my way out. Students don't tolerate self-deceit. They're hungry for discourse that feels satisfying, and in interacting with them, I must change the way I think—often in surprising ways, always in ways that I had not imagined on my own—and thereby must change what I write.

In the years since I began teaching, I've come back to the position that led me to teach creative writing in the first place. I write having tried other things and failed. I wish I could sing, or dance, or spend my days in a white lab coat. But since I don't have the talent or the training, I write. I observe what other people do, and I document what I see in a way that makes sense to me. And when I emerge from this difficult task of attempting to set myself straight, I enjoy the company of other writers who have been

similarly preoccupied. Writers need writers, and writing programs offer writers a venue.

This clustering of writers who are necessarily solitary creatures leads to other questions that concern me: such as what does it mean when a good poem written by a woman of color becomes a better poem if she is also gay; a good memoir must be written from a victim's perspective; a good story is 5'9", has large breasts, and tight skin. Writing programs, like other disciplines, have their pitfalls. But good ones, I believe, spring up out of a necessity felt by individual writers who believe that other writers offer them something they could not have gotten on their own.

Julie Shigekuni teaches creative writing at the University of New Mexico where she serves as director of the creative writing program and development director of a new Asian American Studies program. Shigekuni is the author of three novels: *Unending Nora* (2008), *Invisible Gardens* (2003), and *A Bridge Between Us* (1995). She is the director and co-producer of *Manju Mammás & the An-Pan Brigade*, a sixty-minute documentary sponsored by the California Council for the Humanities, and is currently at work on a short story collection.

War of the Words Steve Tomasula

Why creative writing?—the question answers itself: the fact that anyone would question the teaching of writing as an art (or painting or film, for that matter), demonstrates an urgent need for creative writing (or painting, or film, for that matter). For the question proposes a world where all value is pegged to the dollar, and education is synonymous with job training. What the question really asks, then, is what's the practical value of creative writing? So, okay, a story with, as we like to say in workshops, much at stake:

Near the end of *The Two Towers* (2002), one of the movies based on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit Frodo worries that their war against evil is not only wearing him down but also corrupting his character. Sam, his sidekick, urges him to keep fighting because there is "good in the world...and it's worth fighting for!" Viewing this movie in the run up to war after 9/11, it was easy to understand why the patriotic Middle-America audience I was in burst into applause at that line: everyone wants to live in a world where great stories make it easy to draw a line between good and evil. Or as Peter Beinert put it in *The New Republic*, after 9/11 "ambiguity became impossible" and "dissent...immoral."

A stable viewpoint is needed for citizens to see themselves, as Sam urges Frodo, as heroes in their own story. And this is true whether those citizens are members of the Coalition of the Willing off to disarm WMDs in Iraq, Palestinians martyring themselves, or Hitler's brown-shirted youth smashing windows for the good the Fatherland.

If the events since 9/11 have taught us anything, though, it's that all sorts of entities create narratives for us to inhabit. Some come from those we would most like to trust: the manufactures of our toothpaste, our generals at the UN, our bankers and financial advisors.... Words create worlds, or so the Constitution would have us believe. So what better way to see how words can undo us than by undoing words? That is, given the multitude of worlds proposed by the many authors we are exposed to, what could be more valuable than acquiring the sophistication with language inherent in a course on how to write poetry? What better way to learn how language can be manipulated to create effects—get us to vote, buy,

feel sympathy or anger—than to learn by doing in a creative writing classroom where manipulators and their audience meet face-to-face and feedback is immediate? What better way to learn how narrative is created than to create narrative?

The noblest *raison d'être* for creative writing lies among those reasons associated with the uselessness of art. But in a world where The Eternal Verities are so often turned against us, at a time (always) when we can only shape the narratives we inhabit out of the raw materials of narrative—melting glaciers, Dolly the Sheep, shape-shifting allies and enemies, wars on nouns and jihad—it is also easy to ask, what could be more pragmatic?

Steve Tomasula is the author of the novels *TOC* (2009), *The Book of Portraiture* (2006), *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (2004), and *IN & OZ* (2003). He teaches in the program for writers at the University of Notre Dame.

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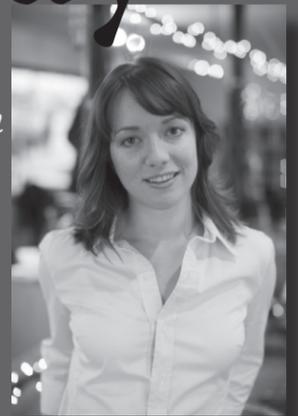


Photo credit: Mary Sledd

This year's contest

**Begin accepting entries:
15 August 2009**

**Deadline:
Postmarked no later than
1 November 2009**

**Complete rules & guidelines:
Visit <http://fc2.org> or
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