

THE ROLE OF THE WRITER IN THE ACADEMY

by Clay Reynolds

"Speaking as an academically trained professional, what do you think the specific relationship should be between the writer and the academy?"

The question sounded innocent enough, coming as it did at the end of my lecture on the "role of the writer," which I had interpreted in broader, more generally sociological terms for a mixed audience of faculty and students at a well-known private university highly regarded for its academic standing. But I knew the question was loaded. It came, I knew, from a published writer--a poet--and I knew that the department of this particular university had no formal creative writing program and did not, as a faculty, want one. What creative writing classes that were offered were conducted by older professors who had published little if any creative material at all. The word was that they taught them eagerly, as seniority-earned respite from freshman composition and sophomore surveys.

Uncharacteristically, therefore, I took a moment to formulate a response. While I rapidly discarded quick, flippant, or stock answers, my mind also sorted through a catalogue of pertinent but unrelated conclusions I hold to be true if not valid:

--Academics are notoriously hostile to writers. The reasons for

this may be as various as the numbers of academies and writers are large, but the often unacknowledged fact is that in liberal arts and humanities disciplines, writers are not ordinarily welcomed as colleagues, as teachers with equal faculty status to the tenured scholar-professors of the department.

Colleges of law, business, engineering, and even departments of science and technology routinely solicit faculty members with demonstrable records of success in those disciplines. But the liberal arts, especially English, often despair of the presence of anyone who pretends to practice the art and craft of literature. In general, they seem to subscribe to the corollary of the old maxim, "Those who can't do, teach," by quietly adhering to the philosophy, "Those who can do, shouldn't teach." --Creative writing classes and workshops cannot be equated with academic course work. Whereas one can teach a student to write a three-part essay, to demonstrate a level of competence in research, mechanics, grammar, form, style, one cannot--or should not--attempt to evaluate creative work for grade. About all an instructor can do is to "contract" for a grade; that is, if a student completes a prescribed number of creative assignments with alacrity and punctuality, a passing grade can be assigned, then adjusted for such details as attendance, workshop participation, or even attitude.

But creative writing instructors who put A, B or C on stories or poems have exceeded their authority, set themselves up as arbiters of literary quality and commercial viability. They

also run a terrible risk of being dead wrong.

I wonder, sometimes, how those instructors who do grade students' creative work feel when a C or D story or poem finds--even without prescribed revision--publication in a journal or magazine superior to any in which the instructor has published. I also wonder what most instructors' reaction would be to a submission of a story by Amy Tan, Ann Rice, John Barth, Joseph Heller, or Thomas Pynchon. I believe that in most instances, if a young William Faulkner submitted the opening chapter of The Sound and the Fury for grade assessment, it would probably not have earned even a D. The instructor might well have responded, "I can't make any sense of this. There's no clearly identified character or situation or setting. The chronology seems off, and the point of view is confusing. Can't you write in complete sentences?" What, I also wonder, would be the instructor's response to something like Ezra Pound's Cantos, to Finnegan's Wake, to A Clockwork Orange, The Satanic Verses?

--Creativity cannot be taught. I duck when I even so much as think this, anticipating the "slings and arrows" of my fellow writers and creative writing teachers around the country. But if they've taught any creative writing at all, they know it's true. Any drama, dance, music, or art instructor will verify it; even an assistant water boy knows, "You can't coach speed."

What can be taught is technique, and student performers can be directed while they practice and hone their skills, applying their innate talents and expanding their personal limitations in

a laboratory environment. A creative writing workshop can provide a forum, an opportunity for student writers to practice their craft, showcase their work, exchange criticism with one another, broaden their experience, improve their techniques, and avoid the pitfalls of banality and error. But if they aren't creative writers when they walk in the door, they won't be creative writers when they leave. You can't coach talent, either.

--In contemporary America, writing is a business first, a profession second, and a matter for artistic concern last. There may be numerous other priorities that come before art. I used to write on the blackboard on the first day of every workshop: "Art don't sell." If writers cannot sell (meaning publish, even for no more remuneration than a few off-prints or tear sheets) their work, then the endeavor is futile.

Some student writers assert at least sometime in their careers that they "don't care" if they publish or not. This is a lie, and I wouldn't want any writer in my workshop who wasn't avowedly interested in publishing. All writers want to publish, to have others read and, they hope, admire their work. I can think of no writer, even Emily Dickinson, who didn't desire publication. Even semi-literate gang members who scrawl profanity on the trains and brick walls of the inner city are exercising this fundamental desire of the writer: to be published, to be read.

Some writers do say--and with a certain degree of conviction--that they would prefer not to publish rather than

pander their works to the lowest common denominator of the commercial market. They sneer derisively at "category" fiction: romances, westerns, spy thrillers, crime novels and the like. My experience has been, though, that these writers shun the profit-conscious publishing moguls of New York in favor of small, "literary" or university presses, often if not usually after numerous rejections from those same money-minded New York publishers. They also are the first to complain when their books don't do well. They gripe if their work is not reviewed in major publications, if their books aren't available even in their local shops, and if their sales figures remain woefully low and they can't get another contract or publish another book. They don't understand why their novels and short story and poetry collections aren't heralded as the literary masterpieces they, their friends, and their publishers believe them to be.

The answer, of course, is that the very heralds who are ignoring them are blissfully (and sometimes deliberately) unaware of these quiet additions to the nation's literary canon. There's enough sensational stuff coming out of market-conscious commercial houses in any given month to overstock bookstore shelves, fill magazine and newspaper book review pages, and occupy the buyers for major marketing chains. Why should they go searching among the small presses of the hinterland for an occasional gem among the heaps of books that were probably rejected by large commercial presses in the first place?

Thus, when a workshop instructor turns attention away from

the "art" of writing and concentrates on the "business" of the profession, there is an impression that something academic has been violated. English departments--be they ossified by tradition or perpetually waiting in the three-point-stance of cutting edge, progressive thinking--all share one misapprehension: that all literary utterance should aspire to be art. They refuse to accept that every writer from Homer to Hemingway to Heller to Whoever publishes next week wants success--financial success--and so do their publishers. The very idea that Othello or In Memorium or even The Canterbury Tales or Ulysses were published with monetary--commercial--success in mind sends many of these idealists into paroxysms of denial. These works, after all, are "literature," and certainly none of the great writers of western civilization was interested in filthy lucre. Right.

And this attitude is understandable. After all, if dedicated academics admit that, as one writer I know asserts to the horror of his academic colleagues, "Shakespeare was the Neil Simon of his day" (He wasn't; the analogy won't hold.), they somehow deny the integrity of what they're doing for a living to say nothing of the high mindedness of the object of their life's devotion: literature. To admit that they spent a third of their lives studying the craft of interpreting something that was designed to be as ephemeral and popular as the latest TV sit-com, sort of negates their own value as arbiters and critics of great art. There's no quid pro quo.

Hence, all that remains is ego, and few academics are

willing to acknowledge that even their most serious scholarly work was written less to contribute to the greater body of knowledge in the world than to satisfy some self-motivated desire merely to be read.

But the problem cuts both ways. Academics may be hostile to contemporary writers because they are jealous of their apparently easier task of dealing with creative material instead of library stacks, documentation methods, and freshman comma splices; they may regard the encouragement of students to write "for money," rather than for the general advancement of knowledge and scholarship to be crass, lowbrow, and anti-intellectual; they may be justifiably wary of the notion of teaching creativity at all. But writers also are hostile to academics.

"In critick's hands, beware thou dost not come," wrote Ann Bradstreet, and she was right. Much as they may hate to admit it, academics are critics. Their job is to interpret, find fault with, and point out the virtues of published literary art. When they do this with a bunch of old, dead writers, there is no problem; even when they do it with well established (and literarily lauded) living writers, there's little difficulty. But dealing with an emerging writer is quite a different matter. This is especially true if that writer hangs around the faculty lounge and sips coffee, teaches literature courses right down the hall three days a week, and expects promotion and merit raises and powerful committee assignments right along with the rest of the faculty.

Veteran writers know that these Ph.D.'s--scholars, critics, academicians, colleagues--will resist reading their works, for the most part. If they are shamed into doing so, they often will mouth the right platitudes about it to the writers' faces, then privately, they will say, "That's just commercial trash," or, the worst academic curse of all, "It's not bad for popular fiction." Even if they admire it, their compliments, however genuine, are often tainted by the suspicion that the writer's achievement was somehow accidental.

More often, academic readers are eager to point out flaws in a colleague's work. Comments might range from the casually benign, "Are you aware of the fact that digital watches were not in common use prior to 1970?" to the pointedly critical, "Why do you shift point of view five times in three chapters?" to the righteously indignant, "Do you actually know people like that?"

(Poets often have it easier on this score, for no one has actually to read a poem to comment positively on it. One can say, "Hey, great use of imagery and metaphor," and be on reasonably safe ground with any published poet, who knows, just as the prose writers do, that the commentator hasn't read the work at all or has only skimmed over it lightly.)

Writers also suspect that their earnings from their writings (if they have any and poor though they might be) make them liable for smaller raises, less choice office space, poorer opportunity for advancement. And in some institutions, they are often right. They think, in short, that their academic colleagues are

suspicious of them and envy their roles as dilettantes--pampered artists--in the academy. And they resent it.

It's also widely held--and not without some justification--among scholars that most writers lack the necessary academic credentials to serve as qualified professors on a university faculty. Even those who hold Ph.D.'s or M.F.A.'s rarely have a body of critical work to take out and show off when promotion and merit raise time comes around. They've spent their time writing fiction and poetry, after all. They haven't had the time (or the interest) to work up articles for the PMLA or Philological Quarterly. Many have dissertations and theses that are, in their colleagues' eyes, anyway, "nothing more than a collection of short stories--and bad ones at that," or perhaps an unpublished novel.

Such factors often give writers a sense of being on the "outside" of properly academic status unless they have established themselves in some conventionally acceptable literary arena. Otherwise, they are merely "wannabes," men and women who strive for literary or commercial recognition, but who make their livings as faculty members until that happiness is theirs. In the meantime, to coin a phrase, they may be "in" the department, but they are not "of" the department; rather, they are visceral appendages, which in the minds of many academics, the greater body--to say nothing of the mission--of the university would probably be better off without.

As a result, some writers tend to regard their academic

colleagues as myopic, naive, and befuddled, if not viciously envious. As another well published writing instructor I know put it, they are "disappointed seekers," people who have failed to become actively engaged with the very substance of their vocational lives, and who find themselves on the periphery of literary endeavor, as a result. They pen academic work, publish it in well regarded journals and reviews, but it is not original, "creative" work in most writers' eyes; it's merely an exercise in scholarly polemic which these academicians learned in graduate school and continue to practice for want of tenure and promotion.

Dedicated academics are, many writers feel, as unwilling as they are unable to admit that writers belong in a pedagogical setting, and what they write and publish themselves (scholarly essays and articles) will, most likely, remain unread except by ambitious graduate students seeking footnotes for dissertations and theses. But when writers presume to publish criticism on their own, academics seem to be offended. They tend to regard scholarship as their own special province, one not to be violated by those who also write creatively. A writer who is also a critic works constantly under the assumption that he has a conflict of interest, particularly if he lacks the proper degree from the proper institution.

This mutual hostility, which I think is more real than apparent, can create an animosity and sense of inferiority among the writers on any faculty, especially when they hear (as I often have done) some scholarly individual on a promotion committee

attempt to deny the worth of a volume of verse or collection of short fiction as a bona fide publication. The curmudgeons might say, "Anybody can write a poem." Though few of them have done so.

Thus, I pondered this question closely while these conclusions rammed against themselves in my mind. I finally formulated this answer, but I'm not sure it's right, and I'm fairly certain it wasn't satisfactory. It is, however, honest.

"If a department can afford it," I said, "having a writer on the faculty is a good idea. Writers can offer insights into the composition of prose and poetry that are unique to their professional activity. It's not impossible for a writer to be as good a scholar as any other faculty member, although I have to say that I think only some scholars make even half decent novelists or poets. That's because creative writing requires an application of academic learning to what in the final analysis is a commercial process.

"Scholars rely on the same impulses as creative writers--talent, discipline--but they seek success of a far different--and often far more abstract--kind. They tend to measure accomplishment in terms of the lengths of their professional stature. Writers measure their success, for the immediate future at least, in monetary terms: sales, contracts, royalties. This is contrary to the avowed and pronounced aims of the academy, which are to study and learn and publish for the sole sake of expanding knowledge. The penultimate goal, of course, is to disseminate the same knowledge to students.

"So it may be that the writer doesn't belong there except as some sort of curiosity, some extra-curricular potential which those schools who have the budgets--and the student interest--may wish to employ.

"But creative writing is not an academic discipline, and it shouldn't be confused or equated with such. One can teach a student how to be a scholar; one can teach a student how to be a scientist, an engineer, a journalist, even a jet airplane pilot. But one cannot teach a student how to be an artist. Not even the great art institutes and academies of the world try to do that. One does not stroll out of Juilliard with a diploma in hand and walk up to the stage door of Carnegie Hall or a theater on Broadway and demand to be allowed to perform. One does not move from the life drawing classes of the Sorbonne to the Louvre automatically. Students do not take writing degrees and show up on the stoops of Random House or Norton with a diploma in one hand, a manuscript in the other and demand--with any serious expectation, anyway--to be published.

"I don't know of a single writer who has ever achieved permanent, lasting success merely by taking a degree or even a course in creative writing. I know hundreds of scholars who have achieved permanent, lasting success because they took a degrees in their chosen academic fields and then have gone on to satisfying careers as teachers, as published academic scholars. Although there may be exceptions--but not many in the past century or so--I don't think it's possible to become a successful

teacher or scholar without academic training and a formal degree. I do think it's possible to become a successful writer without so much as a high school diploma. In fact, this has been done, and often. But I also suspect more well established writers hold academic degrees than hold graduate diplomas in creative writing.

At the same time, some writers benefit from the advice they've received through workshops, from specific mentors with whom they've worked. But the academy isn't required for that kind of thing. One doesn't need a university setting to work with a writer or to become a writer. One mostly just needs time and money, the desire to write and the determination to publish; above all, one needs talent.

"Most writers have achieved what they've achieved by virtue of their abilities, their imaginations, their application of hard work and determination to what can only be described as uncanny luck. Except for the luck, I think these are the same applications a good scholar must make, by the way. But luck--and a good head for business--makes a big difference to the writer. Scholars generally succeed completely by virtue of the quality of teaching, the volume and quality of their academic work, arbitrary as student evaluations and "peer review" often are.

"I suppose from this you might infer that I don't think the writer belongs in the academy at all. That's wrong. I do. But I think the role us a highly specialized one, and no writer should be brought into a department to teach--even if the only course is creative writing--as a regular member of the faculty unless that

writer also has academic credentials, has been through the education process, and has learned to abide by the stricter and more formalistic rules of scholarship.

"By that same token, no teacher should ever be put in charge of a creative writing class unless that teacher has published some writing, has been through the editorial procedures and the marketing processes required for creative work. Commercial success isn't necessary; indeed commercial failure might have more instructive merit in an experiential sense; but the experience of the business of publishing original creative work is as unique as the experience of preparing to write a thesis or dissertation is to scholars. I don't think either can be taught from second-hand learning.

"Departments should also realize that most students who go through a workshop will never publish their work. Some will wind up dealing with the business of publishing, with the practical applications of commerce to art, or vice-versa. Some will become editors, publishers, book company representatives and publicists. A good writing instructor will know about these vocational alternatives to writing and will teach these things, too.

"This doesn't mean that universities should hire only major 'name brand' writers, either. Even very successful writers are not generally special people. They're not usually celebrities. But even if they were, that should make no difference; they should have the credentials. Few universities would hire Mark McGwire as professor of composition and rhetoric and hitting

coach, although he's arguably one of the best baseball players in the major leagues and might do wonders for a team's batting average. Few would want Emmitt Smith teaching courses in British Literature in addition to coaching the team's offense, however well he might teach the school's running backs the best ways to find holes in a defensive line. I don't think Madonna or Michael Jackson would be likely candidates to instruct eighteenth century poetry and French drama for half their course loads, even though they probably could fill workshops on showmanship, song, and dance.

"So, why should any university bring in successful writers simply because they are successful writers, then saddle them with academic courses they aren't qualified to teach, academic responsibilities they aren't qualified to fulfill? But schools do it all the time. They pick a writer because of the writer's success--financial success--or for name recognition and celebrity status, not because of the writer's commitment to higher education, scholarship, or the profession of academics. Then they become upset when the writer doesn't want to play the game, won't cooperate on matters academic, and refuses to tailor courses and exams and even dress and attitude to fit the academic mold.

"One dean of my acquaintance recently complained, 'I don't know what to do. We hired this guy, gave him an endowed chair, tenure, and a great salary. Made him the centerpiece of our creative writing program. But he's only here eight weeks a term, spends all his time on tour, in New York, London, on some movie

set someplace. He won't keep office hours, won't meet with students, just barely reads their work. He won't serve on committees, won't help organize any part of the program. He only makes a few classes and then sits there and talks about his own books and all the famous people he knows. But he's doing us no real good at all. He has no idea what being on a university faculty is all about.'

"The Liberal Arts are not the Fine Arts. There's no traditional place in the humanities for pure performance. It must be blended--and well mixed--with scholarship. But that doesn't--or at least shouldn't--preclude performance, either. It has to be a blend, you see.

"Thus, having a writer on faculty is a luxury and requires a certain degree of tolerance. If a school can afford to become a patron for writers' efforts--and that's all--can provide practicing artists a sinecure where they can write, meet with a few students, and go about from time to time to 'show the flag' of the school, then the writers benefit, the students benefit, and the school can also benefit. But it's a relationship that should be entered into deliberately, one that cannot be automatically generalized; each writer, like each school and its program, is unique to the situation.

"The important point is to recognize that the writer and the scholar must develop a symbiotic reliance on one another. Without critics, there would be no literature, and without writers, alas, there would be no critics. Mutual respect, I suppose, is the

major requirement.

"I have, from time to time, taught as either visiting or permanent faculty member in departments where my presence was regarded by my colleagues with wariness and even open contempt. Although among my publications more than three-fourths are critical, many scholarly, many more scholarly than creative, my definition insofar as my traditionally minded colleagues was concerned was 'writer.' I have heard, through my students, that my conclusions on matters of literary interpretation were 'suspect' and probably worthless, as I was a 'writer,' not a 'scholar' and thus had no right to make critical pronouncements, especially if they were contradictory to what was being taught down the hall. I have heard these same colleagues cavil that the existence of creative writing programs as 'the thin end of the wedge' that would eventually sunder scholarship and render higher education fragmented and overrun with dilettantes.

"I think there's merit in such arguments, although I don't agree with them. But there is another danger as well. On the opposite extreme, for example, I have been regarded by some colleagues as being one who has some special insight, some artistic vision, some privy information about the internal mysteries surrounding literary art. This point of view is as absurd as the other. I'm just a writer, one who has been lucky enough to publish, and one for whom the mystique of publishing my own work holds no special secrets. I write books and stories; most of you write articles and critical studies. In a way, it's

different, but in most aspects it's the same thing. And, to be honest, I think we all find our motivation in the same places: personal ego and the desire for professional advancement.

"If there's a danger of the creative writing degree--or even emphasis--though, it is that students see it as an opportunity to become writers without having first become readers. They become the manufacturers of literary utterance without having first become experts on the literary forms they want to create. The best writers, I think, are first the best critics, not of their own work, perhaps, but of the medium in which they endeavor. In short, writers must understand their own product. Or in other words, a good writer has read--and studied--both the traditional and the non-traditional works that provide the basis of literary distinction.

"But I do think there is a place for creative writing in the academy, and I think that the place should be fulfilled by a writer, a published writer. I think the focus of creative writing should be on production, on success in publishing, on the business of writing, not on the manufacture of 'art,' however it's defined. Creative writing instructors should direct, focus, correct, and counsel their students. They should offer them a model, not for their work, but for their achievement. And they should encourage them to become the best scholars they can become while they ply their trade as writers, always searching for knowledge, for critical response, for depth as individuals and, forgive my use of the term, as intellectuals. That, I think, is

the proper role for the writer in the academy."

I'm not at all certain that my answer pleased my audience. I know they expected me to come down four-square on the side of the artist's right to own a set of keys to the Ivory Tower, even to attack the curmudgeons who would wish all writers dead, especially those whose works they have to teach. But I think such a response would have been wrong. It would have denied the validity of the special tie between artist and critic, between artist and patron, between a writer and reader that forms the basis for all learning and, if I may say so, for wisdom.

The writer's mission, if there is one, is in many ways the same as the scholar's: to illuminate the human experience. But the writer applies the light of imagination, filtered not by documented fact or prescribed attitudes, but rather focused on critical aptitude and a sense that what is written, what is published, is always in danger of becoming the meat of the academic matter.