

THE NEWSLETTER OF NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

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DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Who Should Learn Writing from Whom?

*By Gary Saul Morson
Frances Hooper Professor of the
Arts and Humanities
Professor of Slavic Languages
Director, Center for the Writing Arts*

Parents who read to their children rapidly develop opinions about the quality of children's literature. They may be distressed that children like what parents regard as foolish or benighted. What makes children's literature good? Should parents like it? What do children look for, and what should they look for?

Children's literature is written by adults, which raises a more general problem: How does one write for other kinds of people? So phrased, this question has more general applicability. Dostoevsky commented on books written for newly literate peasants. Science writers try to convey ideas to the layperson. A shock of recognition struck me when I realized that, as a voracious consumer of science books for the nonscientist, I am in a position similar to that of my daughter reading Tolkien or C. S. Lewis. We both have considerably less information than the authors we read. And since none of us are experts in everything, we are all, at one time or another, in this position. Our reactions to such situations may tell us something about writing for children, whether in the form of textbooks or stories.

These thoughts have led me to a tentative conclusion: Bad children's writing tacitly presumes that children are stupid adults. It condescends, is frequently humorless, and has the feel of a wiser person telling a reader what to think. These traits are easily recognized in the didactic writings of a century ago, when the values being inculcated

were so different from our own. But when we encounter children's books with current values—saving the planet by recycling, let us say—we often overlook the same oppressive features.

By contrast, good children's writing treats its readers as if they are just as smart as adults. They are not dumber, they just have less information. A writer has to adjust to the information the audience already has, as good science writers do; but that does not entail the presumption that kids or laypeople are somehow dumber. Children have a sense of humor, although they may not have heard some of the jokes or puns we have seen many times; they know when they are being treated as mere passive receptors, into whom someone else's right ideas have to be poured; and they can sense when something has been added to a story that is irrelevant to its source of interest but constitutes what the author thinks of as the real lesson. Kids can separate the sugar coating from the pill. They often draw conclusions an adult might consider eccentric or "immature," but which in fact result from their own intelligence applied to what really interests them.

I imagine it is generally good advice to put oneself into the position of one's reader. We need to imagine how our readers feel about the dialogic situation we create. We cannot make ourselves children again, but we can easily recall experiences in which we were, in effect, in a childlike position. In such cases, the last thing we want is to be treated as dumb, or incapable of a worthwhile response, just because there is something we do not know. In this sense, good writers learn from children, as much as children do from the writers. ♦



RECENT CENTER EVENTS

Autumnal Occurrences

By Kathe Marshall

On October 19, the Center for the Writing Arts welcomed David Hackett Fischer, Professor of History from Brandeis University, as the inaugural speaker in the Writer's Colloquium series, "Narrative and History." This series of lectures is organized and hosted for the Center by Professor Peter Hayes of Northwestern's History Department. The lectures presented in "Narrative and History" explore issues associated with the writing of history and its methodology. Fischer's lecture on "The Braided Narrative," addressed a considerable audience in Harris 108. He spoke about

Continued on page 4

MARK YOUR CALENDAR..

You are cordially invited to the following events sponsored by the Center and open to the public:

Thursday, November 16, 1995, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation: "Doctors' Writing: Narrative in Medical Knowledge" by Kathryn Montgomery Hunter (NU Medical School). Fisk Hall 207.

Thursday, January 18, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation: "The End of Style: What Has Happened to History Writing?" by Peter Hayes (History; German Languages & Literature). Fisk Hall 207.

Thursday, February 15, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation "The Art of Adaptation: Finding the Play Inside the Novel" by Frank Galati (Performance Studies). Fisk 207

Thursday, March 21, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Brown-Bag Lunch Presentation tba.

Thursday, April 18, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation by Jules Feiffer (Visiting Writer). Fisk Hall 207.

Thursday, May 16, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation by Charles Johnson (Visiting Writer). Fisk Hall 207.

NORTHWESTERN'S NOTABLE WRITERS

Michael C. Janeway: A Measure of Art

By Aimee Crawford

Currently serving as Dean of Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, Michael Janeway has special interests in political communication, standards of news journalism and the art of writing. He is the former editor of The Boston Globe, and prior to that was executive editor of The Atlantic Monthly. Before coming to Northwestern he was executive editor of the Trade & Reference Division of Houghton-Mifflin.

One of the marvelous things about journalism, says Michael Janeway, is that we can talk about it in a broad, cosmic context, or the narrower one of a professional discipline. Journalism is an artform for the ages, both public and private in its essence. One of the challenges today for traditional, organized journalism is to engage an increasingly distracted public in the face of what Janeway refers to as the "anarchy of undifferentiated media."

In his view, "There exists a nebulous 'communications revolution.' Many prominent players in the media environment are not journalists in the sense of practicing a professional discipline, but get confused in the public mind with those who are. They appeal to people who feel alienated from the messages and traditional messengers of news and; they feed, and feed on, confusion, anger and alienation."

Faced with this challenge, Janeway says, "mainstream journalism tries to be more experimental and open to alternative

voices. The success of Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* as a reporter, writer and columnist is an example. At the same time, the anarchy of undifferentiated 'media' means that mainstream journalism must be more rigorously defined and disciplined than ever as to what it is, and is not."

Janeway continues, "We have a set of standards as to how journalists research stories, how they find and cite sources, bring rigor to their interpretations, and keep faith with readers and viewers in their methods and presentation. TV news tried edging into staged 're-enactment' of events, audiences expressed disgust and TV news backed off."

"We've reached an uneasy truce," he suggests. "On the one hand people believe they need the information journalists give them. They also resent the hell out of the news media's intrusiveness. They reserve a high degree of suspicion of the watchdog."

"Literary journalism is strongly rep-

resented in our time—and in our sense of the Center's agenda," he says. "Both meditative and reportorial, it offers many possibilities for voice beyond the confines of daily or weekly news journalism, or of history or biography. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his great account of the lives of sharecroppers in the South in the 1930s, James Agee's voice ranged from reportorial to Joycean."

Today's literate reading public may be a shrinking group, but will remain significant, says Janeway. He believes demand for written and analytic news in some form will always exist. "Print journalism has been declared dead several times in this century, first because of the coming of radio and film, and then of television. It will change forms, certainly, as it has. The new truism, however, is that the new information technologies are dazzling, but still need order and coherence brought to what they traffic in. A lot of what you find on the Internet is people asking each other where to get reliable information on this or that." ♦

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

A Unique Course, Plus Two Visiting Writers

By Kathe Marshall

In the Winter of 1996, the Center for the Writing Arts will offer the first of a series of Freshman Writing Seminars, planned by Professor Kenneth Seeskin and the Center's Curriculum Committee, to address the needs of the emerging undergraduate writer in new and innovative ways. The course title, "**Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent**," reflects the intent and content of this experimental course, which will be team-taught by Seeskin (Philosophy), Robert Gundlach (Linguistics), George Harmon (Medill), and Barbara Shwom (CAS Writing program).

The readings will range from Sophocles's *Antigone* and *Maimonides* to contemporary works such as Catherine MacKinnon's *Only Words*. The emphasis in the course will be on revision and critical analysis. Moreover, each student's work will be judged and examined by more than a single teacher. The student writing assignments will focus on a common theme of general interest, values and

free speech, and will be composed in descriptive, narrative and analytic modes. Above all, the course will stress the intimate connection of clear thinking and effective writing. The Center is very proud to present this course, unique in the college and the University, under its sponsorship.

In the Spring of 1996, the Center will host two Distinguished Visiting Writers, **Charles Johnson** and **Jules Feiffer**. Both visitors are cartoonists of national reputation, as well as prize-winning writers. Mr. Johnson, who is a native of Evanston, won the National Book Award in 1990 for *Middle Passage*. He has contributed fiction, non-fiction and cartoons to a broad range of periodicals for which he has been cited by the Pushcart Prize Award committee. Mr. Feiffer, who has been a cartoonist for more than fifty years, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for editorial cartooning. His career as a playwright, for both stage and screen, has been honored with an Obie Award.

Professor David Downs of Speech/Theater at Northwestern will be directing a production on campus of Mr. Feiffer's play entitled *Knock, Knock*. The scheduled performances will run from May 3 through May 12. ♦

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Publishing Director: Saul Morson

Editorial Contributors: David Abrahamson, Aimee Crawford, Michael Janeway, Paul Larson, John Lee, Steve Leonard, Kathe Marshall, Hilary Ward

Design Director: Hayward R. Blake
Medill School of Journalism

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MICHAEL C. JANEWAY, AN EXCERPT...

What follows is an excerpt from a talk presented under the auspices of the Center for Writing Arts in January 1995 entitled "Writing in the Age of Cyberspace."

In journalism today, it's increasingly necessary for people of my age and sensibility to state less defiantly than apologetically, "I am not a techie." Not as in Nixon's "I am not a crook," so much as in The Good Soldier Schweik's "Officially, I am an idiot." That is, in the matter of the emerging interface between technology and writing, I must be impressionistic—or, if you prefer, ignorant. Or as we might finally agree, in both the old Russian and contemporary senses of the word, "idiotic", in that I am not a techie.

I'm aware of, even intrigued by, the computer-driven, future-shock writing forms. I experienced the social and creative kick of them in the first wave fifteen years ago, as e-mail hit the newsrooms. Those initial e-mail exchanges smacked at once of elegance, intimacy and funkiness. In the already free-form setting of a large newsroom, they underscored speed and spontaneity, the possibilities for group dynamic. Newsrooms have rituals—the copy desk's sardonic, world-weary commentary on the antics of prima-donna reporters; younger reporters' lampoons of journalism's clichés. E-mail meant that these could be shared as very modern tribal rites; ways of bonding or maintaining morale in the face of tedium or adversity. This latter-day tribalism and invention of ritual is evident now in the customs of initiates of the Internet; a fusion of John Stuart Mill, the Age of Aquarius and technology....

Those of us involved with organized or traditional journalism are of course committed to another kind of voice, one more formal and even formulaic. This voice is public, and private only on the margins, as in opinion columns and arts criticism.

Think of journalism as you do the former Yugoslavia. The news ranks of organized journalism are holding to a fragile truce with some hearty enclaves of the public, a truce based on absurdly pre-post-modern faith in objectivity, or some agnostic version of that faith. That is, this faith holds, although arguably there is no such thing as demonstrated objectivity, certain values such as balance, fairness, credible sourcing and the like are worth



STEVE LEONARD

striving for, even if all too often violated. With barbarians of ideological fundamentalism right and left at the gates of an embattled traditional news journalism, an anarchy of other "media" within gives us Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern and Connie Chung.

The fate of this fragile truce between mainstream journalism and its thin audiences can hardly be hazarded. Perhaps it will ultimately generate small bands of pathetic linear print-freaks in the hills, living off the land, waiting for a samizdat signal from exiled, guerrilla New York Times reporters....

Writing as an art form—writing for the ages—is, among other things, about a creative tension but a relatively secure one between private and public voice. If you or I write something, aspiring to art, we may or may not make it, and anyone may make of it what they will, build it up, tear it down, damn it, satirize it, rewrite it, do all of these and more at once, as Joyce does with the classics in *Ulysses*. But whatever its worth or worthlessness, the work is the writer's, in more than the copyrighted sense. Providing it isn't plagiarized, it has at least a grain of sacred integrity—of art—to it, in that the writer created it. It's also private in that it's created, and public in that it is published, and shared.

For the most part the Internet seems to me talking, not writing. Or, as Truman Capote said of Jack Kerouac, it's not writing, it's typing. It's "now," spontaneous, interactive, lots of Good Things. But it's not writing. It anticipates exchange, and impact, which is fine. It's speech, if you like. But it's not writing. There is, to get really old school, a mystique to what's printed, committed, left for a later age, as

against the fleeting provenance of much of what's dropped into the cybermoment. The latter is sometimes inspired, democratic, and also found, but it's unformed, unfinished, cannot command a context. Typed, not written.

We come then, by boring old linear sequence, to deconstruction and the status of texts. We note the cybernovel, in which options for plot and character development are left to the reader, who may choose, interact, participate, or cut. The idea, I guess, is that every/anything is work in progress, work in space, to be inter/under/cross-cut. The "sacredness" of texts is a foolish myth, the dead hand of cultural tyranny. Call the cybernovel a shrewd and faithful reflection of post-modern reality, no less than Joyce and Faulkner saw stream of consciousness, as against familiar narrative form, reflective of modern reality.

Call it "creative" with a capital C; I call it "nihilistic" with a capital C for Capricious; a triumph of interactive relativism in the name of realism. Which seems to me, ultimately, dust to dust. A conversion of the potential for art to totally random fate.

Finally, where lies the future of printed word? In all of this, I may be revealing the shakiness of my footing on the slopes of post-modern culture, my official idiocy, but I believe print won't die, either in newspaper, magazine or book form. It will shrink; it shrank long ago. Literacy takes other forms. Today's book industry, or virtual book industry, is into "sequels" to *Gone With The Wind*. Aldous Huxley's nightmare meets Danielle Steele's wildest dreams. But this underscores that those who care, really care about writing, will continue to care. Techies have not yet accurately predicted social behavior; they tend to generalize much too broadly, as if everyone were as techie as they. The literate reading public sees words and writing not as mechanization, but as art communicated. ♦

INTERVIEW:

WARD ON WRITING AT NU...

Hilary Ward is a founding member of the Center for the Writing Arts. She has been part of University College since 1984 and has served as assistant dean since 1986. Her responsibilities include overseeing UC's expository writing program and its Thirty-Hour Certificate in Writing program. She is also a lecturer in UC's English department, with a research interest in twentieth-century productions of Shakespeare. She is currently co-chair of NU's Committee on Women in the Academic Workplace and is a former chair of the Northwestern University Staff Advisory Council.

CWA: How have you been involved in the development of the Center?

Hilary Ward: In the fall of 1993, then-Provost David Cohen assembled a group drawn from the many schools and programs within Northwestern that teach writing. His idea was that if the various constituencies worked together to strengthen the writing community at NU, the university's influence as a place where good writing is emphasized and supported could be more widely known. I was delighted to be included because University College is often better known in the greater Chicago community than it is at home. "Only connect," Forster's great theme in *Howards End*, has long been a guiding principle for me. Consequently, my work for the Center has included co-chairing with Bob Gundlach a committee which ferreted out the many places within the University where writing is taught. We learned that writing courses exist for students with a wide variety of interests: those who want to sharpen their writing skills as a basis for their work in other disciplines, those who want to pursue an avocation in writing, and those who wish to make writing a central part of their lives and future careers by majoring in journalism or writing. We also learned that NU teaches writers of all ages, from children enrolled in the Center for Talent Development to traditional undergraduates to working adults attending UC to members of the Institute for Learning in Retirement who publish their own journal. One tangible result of our research has been a brochure aimed at prospective day school undergraduates which informs them of the wealth of writing resources at NU. Another has been a series of events which bring together teachers of writing from throughout the institution.

CWA: Say a little more about University College's writing courses.

HW: Our undergraduate program emphasizes writing skills as a crucial

component of a liberal arts education. We have an open enrollment program which makes matriculation into our degree and certificate programs dependent on the first four grades earned at UC. We expect about a B average and one of those first four courses must be in expository writing. (Our graduate programs follow a traditional admissions model.) Since University College acts as a sort of clearinghouse for the University to bring its resources to adult students, we offer a microcosm of the courses available during the day. Our English department offers several poetry and fiction courses, as well as a course in nonfiction writing. We have a number of journalism offerings, a screenwriting course, and a playwriting sequence. Students may earn a Thirty-

Hour Certificate in Writing. Often this is a post-baccalaureate credential, since close to half of our 2300 students already have a degree. Other students enroll in our individual courses out of interest and a desire for a structured writing experience or as preparation for graduate writing programs. At the end of each semester, I emcee a reading night at which students read their own work and then have a little wine and cheese. It helps to foster community and provides the opportunity to cite students' publication credits or acceptance into graduate programs. Through the CWA, I will continue to work on forging connections within the larger NU writing community. ♦

Continued from page 1

RECENT EVENTS...

the task of interweaving various lines of narrative in historical writing and emphasized the inescapability of narrative structure. Fischer is the author of several books about historical narrative, including *Historians' Fallacies* and *Paul Revere's Ride*.

On October 26, Robert Lerner, a distinguished member of Northwestern's Department of History, delivered a lecture in the Forum Room of the University Library entitled "Calling for the German Vespers: A Debate about the Writing of History on the Eve of the Third Reich." Professor Lerner discussed the debate over a book of 1927 in Medieval history that was written by a Jew but admired by the Nazis and given as a present by Goering to Mussolini. The debate, as well as the author's later career, helped Lerner bring into sharp focus perennial issues about strategies for writing history and whether one starts with the premise of "scholarship

as calling." Both speakers were introduced by Hayes, a member of the Center's Colloquium Committee, and were honored with brief receptions following their lectures. Presentations in the series will continue into the Winter of 1996.

As part of a general celebration of the work of Joyce Carol Oates in a fall festival arranged by Northwestern University President Henry Bienen, the Center for the Writing Arts and *TriQuarterly* sponsored a special lunch on October 30 for Oates and twenty invited undergraduate students from writing courses in the College of Arts and Sciences. Ms. Oates, who has twice been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, won the National Book Award for her novel *Them*. At lunch, the students had a unique opportunity to talk individually with the author about her work and about the pleasures and challenges of a writing career. ♦

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

To find out more about the many programs, courses, seminars, lectures, colloquia, and readings aimed at furthering the study and practice – indeed, celebration – of all forms of writing at Northwestern University, please call or write:

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS
627 Dartmouth Place,
Evanston, IL 60208

(708) 467-4099, After Jan 1, 1996 (847) 467-4099

Suggestions for new programs from all interested parties are warmly welcome. Please contact Prof. Saul Morson, Director, Northwestern University's Center for the Writing Arts at (708) 467-4098; or by e-mail: gmorson@nwu.edu

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

Saul Morson, Director (Slavic Languages)

We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the following members of the Northwestern University community, who are serving with generosity and distinction as members of the Center's various committees:

David Abrahamson (Medill), Kenneth Alder (History), Bud Beyer (Theatre), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film), David Downs (Theatre), Elizabeth Dipple (English), Jack Doppelt (Medill), Joseph Epstein (English), Leon Forrest (African-American Studies), Reginald Gibbons (English), Jerry Goldman (Political Science), Robert Gundlach (Writing Program), George Harmon (Medill), Peter Hayes (History), T.W. Heyck (History), Mary Kinzie (English), Michael Janeway (Medill), Frances Paden (Writing Program), Roy Pea (Education and Social Policy, on leave), Ken Seeskin (Philosophy), Barbara Shwom (Writing Program), Hilary Ward (University College), Nicolas Weir-Williams (Northwestern University Press) and Michael Williams (Philosophy).