

WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 8 NO. 3

Spring 2008

SPECIAL EVENTS ON CAMPUS

So You Want to Write...A Song with the Grammy Award winning band OK GO



Friday, May 16, 2008
Doors open at 11:30 a.m.
Event runs from Noon-1:15 p.m.
McCormick Tribune Center Forum
1870 Campus Drive, Evanston Campus

This series of events offers a special opportunity to learn from professional and highly acclaimed singer/songwriters the art of songwriting. Join members of OK GO, who are making their musical mark nationally and internationally, as they share their journey and process for writing songs, and most importantly, getting them heard. There will be Q & A, plus performance by the band.

OK GO has been called by Ira Glass, the host of the public radio program *This American Life*, "living catnip," and he has described their songs as "part indie rock, part stadium rock, part straight up pop with the occasional whiff of Weezer or The Cars or Elliott Smith." OK GO is a rock band originally from Chicago, now residing in Los Angeles. They won a Grammy Award for "Best Short-Form Music Video" in 2007. The band has two cds, *OK GO* and their smash follow-up recording, *OH NO*.

You can also catch OK GO for a FREE full concert open to the public, the same evening at Grant Park in Chicago for the Manifest Urban Arts Festival at 8 p.m. For more information contact: http://www.colum.edu/Student_Life/Manifest/

A Conversation with
author E. Benjamin
Skinner about his new
book *A Crime So
Monstrous: Face-to-Face
with Modern-Day Slavery*



Thursday, May 15, 2008
12:30 p.m.-1:30 p.m.
University Hall, Hagstrum Room 201
pizza and refreshments will be provided

From the publisher's description:

There are more slaves in the world today than at any time in history. After spending four years visiting a dozen countries where slavery flourishes, Skinner tells the story, in gripping narrative style, of individuals who live in slavery, those who have escaped from bondage, those who own or traffic in slaves, and the mixed political motives of those who seek to combat the crime.

Skinner infiltrates trafficking networks and slave sales on five continents, exposing a modern flesh trade never before portrayed in such proximity. From megaharems in Dubai to illicit brothels in Bucharest, from slave quarries in India to child markets in Haiti, he explores the underside of a world we scarcely recognize as our own and lays bare a parallel universe where human beings are bought, sold, used, and discarded. He travels from the White House to war zones and immerses us in the political and flesh-and-blood battles on the front lines of the unheralded new abolitionist movement.

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**The Department of English Announces its
Annual Writing Competition!**

Students from every department and school
within Northwestern
are encouraged participate.

Prizes are cash awards ranging from \$50-\$500.
Deadline for entries is 3 p.m. on Thursday, May 8, 2008.

Coversheets, eligibility and rules for submission can be found
on the Department's website, or in University Hall 215.

<http://www.english.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/writing.html>

**CWA WEBSITE GETTING NEW LOOK--
WE WANT YOUR SUGGESTIONS**

The Center for the Writing Arts web site is being
redesigned. We are excited about being able to offer more
content, more frequently updated information, new fea-
tures, including blog posts, and other new elements. Please
take a moment to view our site and let us know what
you'd like to see on it. The website is listed below. Your
suggestions are most welcome.

**PLANNING WRITING EVENTS THIS QUARTER?
LET US KNOW!**

Just a reminder that the Center's biweekly e-mail announce-
ment, *NU Writing Event Digest*, highlights NU writing events
and reaches students, faculty, and staff via the Center's
growing email list. If you know of an upcoming event related
to writing, whether it be an author's visit, departmental
program, or even an off-campus event involving NU students
or faculty, please let us know! We will do our best to publicize
all writing-related programming. If you would like to receive
the electronic *NU Writing Event Digest*, please send an email to:
words@northwestern.edu or call us at 847-467-4099.

The Center for the Writing Arts presents a variety of distinguished writers
from both on and off campus. For future events and an archival listing visit:
www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/

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DIRECTOR'S LETTER

By Reginald Gibbons
Professor of English, Classics, and Spanish
and Portuguese
Director, Center for the Writing Arts

First, some news of CWA writers. At the end of April, **Ed Roberson**, who was the Visiting Writer in Residence at the Center for the Writing Arts last fall, was awarded the 2008 Shelley Memorial Award by the Poetry Society of America. This award has been given annually since 1929, and has been awarded in the past to such poets as Gary Snyder (who visited Northwestern under the auspices of the CWA in the fall of 2006), **Angela Jackson** (who was one of the participants in Ed Roberson's fall 2007 symposium on Black Arts poetry in the context of the Civil Rights movement), Kenneth Koch, Lucille Clifton, Denise Levertov, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich and others. Our Visiting Writer in Residence this quarter, **Mary Anne Mohanraj**, will be taking up a position at UIC next fall. And our future Visiting Writer in Residence, **Sefi Atta**, who will be at Northwestern in the fall quarter of 2008, will be the first anglophone African writer to hold this position. Atta's novel *Everything Good Will Come* was awarded the inaugural Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. (It was reissued in paperback in the U.S. last year.) This novel narrates the coming of age of a young Nigerian woman whose loyalties are tested, as in many nov-

els about coming of age, by family and generational difference, but also by expatriate opportunity versus the love of homeland, and by both the everyday workings of patriarchy, and the overarching impunity of political and military dictatorship. Through her main character, Atta portrays both how "things fall apart," to use Chinua Achebe's celebrated title (drawn from a line of a poem by Yeats), and how, in a fast-changing African context, and especially between women whose origins, class and allegiances are different, some things also hold together, even under great stress. Ms. Atta's new books are a novel, *Swallow*, and *Lawless, and Other Stories*, both to be published in Nigeria. She has written radio plays broadcast on the BBC, and has also won the David TK Wong Prize from PEN International (PEN is the worldwide organization of and for writers). Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria and was educated there, in England and in the United States. Some of her short stories and interviews are available on her web site

(<http://www.sefiatta.com/>).

I am grateful to my English Department colleague **Evan Mwangi** for first telling me of her work. Finally, **Alex Kotlowitz**, one of the leading nonfiction writers in the nation, has been appointed to a new five-year contract and will continue to teach during winter quarters as Visiting Writer in Residence at the CWA and Senior Lecturer in Medill,

and, beginning in 2008-09, will also teach one course for the MA/MFA in Creative Writing in the School of Continuing Studies, in either fall or spring quarter each year. Teaching in two different Northwestern schools and for the CWA, Kotlowitz is a model of a cross-school resource for Northwestern students. In fact, he has already worked with students in the Feinberg School of Medicine, also, and will do so again.

And an announcement: Happily, "Modes of Writing"--the CWA-sponsored undergraduate course that combines the small scale and intensive writing of a freshman seminar with the overall intellectual guidance of lectures by an outstanding Northwestern professor--will resume in 2008-09 after a year's hiatus. The lecturer will be Gary Saul Morson of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and the seminar teaching staff will be Robert Gundlach, Marcia Gealy, and James O'Laughlin.

And finally, a thought about something we might be discussing more as we go about our teaching, research, writing and participation in the life of the university: the place and the use of writing as a fundamental element of undergraduate education. Writing is also a relatively new graduate focus in the School of Communication (MFA in Writing for Screen and Stage) and the School of Continuing Studies

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WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We asked these questions: 1) What scholarly/professional book or article are you currently reading? 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure? 3) What is the next book you hope to read (for work or pleasure)? 4) What do you wish all your students would read? 5) Has any book you've recently read changed your thinking about your own work? and how?



Charles Whitaker

**Sector Head, Magazine; Charles Deering McCormick
Professor
Medill**

1. I can't say that I'm reading any "scholarly" book or article, since I am not exactly an academic (though I play one during the day). As far as industry publications go, I do scan *Advertising Age*, *Mag Week*, *Folio* and *MIN* (Media Industry Newsletter), which all have insider dish on the magazine industry. And lately, I've been poring over a lot of the publications produced by the Magazine Publishers of American, an industry group for which I conduct an annual "census," in an effort to spur more diversity in the employment ranks.
2. I'm reading two simultaneously: One is *The Nine* by New Yorker contributor Jeffrey Toobin about the inner workings of the Supreme Court. It's a wonderful read -- really humanizes the justices. The other is a pure guilty pleasure co-written by a Medill alum, Tannarive Due and the actor Blair Underwood. It is called *Casanegra*.
3. For my birthday, my wife and kids gave me *Schulz and Peanuts*, the voluminous biography of the cartoonist and "Peanuts" creator Charles M. Schulz, who, by all accounts, was a very complex man. I am a huge Schulz fan. (Probably, because a part of me always identified with Charlie Brown as a kid).
4. As a journalist, I am obsessed with the work of those storytellers who write non-fiction in a way that employs some of the techniques of fiction. So I love Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. It's a masterwork. But I would also commend Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to students. It's a wonderful evocation of life in America filtered through the lens of race.
5. I don't know about books, but whenever I read the work of really good narrative non-fiction writers, say our own Alex Kotlowitz or someone like Kate Boo, I marvel at their ability to capture exquisite detail and tell compelling stories without sacrificing clarity or accuracy for "writerly" flourishes. I feel so inferior when I read them, but do everything I can to inspire my students to be like them.

Center for the Writing Arts Mission Statement:

The purpose of all CWA activities is to create, support and further undergraduate and graduate opportunities for the study of writing at Northwestern, both within CWA itself and across the university; to facilitate a continuing discussion in the university community about how best to foster and situate writing as a crucial part of a university education; to help coordinate the university's multifarious courses and programs in writing across departments, programs and schools; and also to welcome audiences from the metropolitan area to the rich array of public events on campus that are focused on writing.

NU'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS INTRODUCES
2008 FALL QUARTER VISITING WRITER IN RESIDENCE,
SEFI ATTA



SEFI ATTA

Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria. She was educated there, in England and the United States. Her short stories have appeared in *Los Angeles Review* and *Mississippi Review* and have won prizes from *Zoetrope* and Red Hen Press. Her radio plays have been broadcast by the BBC. She is the winner of PEN International's 2004/2005 David TK Wong Prize and in 2006, her novel *Everything Good Will Come* was awarded the inaugural Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa.

AN INTERVIEW

As the Fall Quarter 2008 Visiting Writer in Residence, what kind of fiction workshop do you plan on teaching? How do you hope to open the world of fiction writing to your students?

I don't intend to *teach* this workshop. I will *work with* students who are interested in improving their craft and developing their stories, which is exactly what I do as a writer. I will encourage students to participate. When you encourage participation, students discover how much fun a fiction workshop can be.

What do you enjoy most about teaching?

I enjoy getting students enthusiastic about learning. As a teacher, you have to be passionate about your subject and enjoy being with your students to achieve that.

Do you have any advice for students who are aspiring writers on how to pursue their dream?

Get into the habit of reading and

writing. I meet a lot of people who want to be writers, but they don't read or write enough.

Is there a writer's credo you live by?

No. I have broken all of them. I remind myself about the most important to me, which is artistic integrity.

Are there pitfalls they can try to avoid?

I made a lot of publishing mistakes with my first novel and I would advise writers to be guardians of their works at all times. You must pay attention to the business side if you invest time and energy in the creative side. For me, that means making sure agents and editors do their work.

Who are some of the literary icons you admired growing up as you discovered your passion for writing? As you've become a more seasoned writer, who are your mentors now?

Growing up in Nigeria, I read a lot of comic books like Archie and Charlie Brown and paperbacks by Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie. We had all the British and American literary classics at home,

but I was not interested in most of them. I remember reading *Oliver Twist*, *Huckleberry Finn* and some Jane Austen. In my teens, I was in school in England and I studied Camus's *L'etranger* in French. It was a challenging experience but the novel had a profound impact on me. I started writing at the age of thirty when I moved to the United States. I began to read works by writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo, Jamaica Kincaid, and Edwidge Danticat. Now, I read works by writers like Grace Paley, Milan Kundera, Graham Greene, Gabriel García Márquez, J.M. Coetzee, James Baldwin, J. D. Salinger and Ernest Hemingway. They have all taught me something about voice, humor, elegance and economy.

Any new projects you're working on that you can share with us?

I have two books coming out in Nigeria in April. *Swallow*, which is my second novel, about a Nigerian woman who gets caught up in the drug trade, and *Lawless*, a collection of short stories set in Nigeria, England and the United States.

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(MA now several years old; MFA awaiting approval of The Graduate School). I hope to explore, with the Advisory Board of the CWA and any other interested faculty and students, how the undergraduate and graduate writers might be put productively in touch with each other. I mention this because I think that, beyond our interest in how we teach writing, to whom, and to what ends, we must reflect on how writing as a practice in our university inevitably shows the effects of what becomes of writing in our society as a whole. The constant changes in media and technology, on the one hand, and on the other, the unceasing human necessity of story--since narrative is

one of our principle ways of thinking about experience, history, and the meaning of both--are creating effects so broad and so numerous that we scarcely are able to register them, much less think them through. For example, the way a compact narrative of failing (real or apparent) appeals to the human appetite for scandal is everywhere on display in the sphere of political media, while scarcely at all in the sphere of the ethics of policy choices. We are all very familiar with what kinds of stories fill the "mental environment," as *Adbusters* magazine has called all the word-and-image noise in the media, along our

streets and in other public spaces, and ingrained in us by our culture. Might there be sufficient interest among students and faculty for us to discuss this large issue across the university? And might that discussion take some new form, we welcome suggestions from everywhere in the university.

In the coming months, I hope to be able to announce a few new ways in which to foster student interest in learning how to write better, in a number of disciplines.

NU Medical Writers Round Table as a Resource for Medical Student

Alison Christy, a student in Northwestern's Medical Scientist Training Program, pursuing both an MD and a Ph.D. in Immunology. In 2005, she won the Alpha Omega Alpha Helen H. Glaser award for her essay on the 16th-century anatomist Andreas Vesalius, which was then published in *Pharos*. She has also written for the AMA's online bioethics journal, *Virtual Mentor*.

Every doctor writes:

HPI: 36 y.o. female with history of IDDM presents to ER complaining of "burning chest pain for the past 24 hrs." Patient states pain begins at mid-sternum and radiates to RUQ. Pain rated 8 on scale of 1-10. Patient denies loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting. Doctors have to write -- to record the condition of a particular patient, to

document a bizarre case, to inform colleagues of a novel technique. While they have a tendency to write in a specialized foreign language comprehensible only to other doctors, they still do it. Every day, physicians process their patients' stories and record them for other physicians. Like writers.

But some of us want to tell a wider audience about our strange patients, ethical dilemmas and daily life. And there are more of us than you'd think.

Last summer several student writers joined faculty from the Northwestern University Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program to develop the Medical Writers Round Table as a resource for medical student writers. We planned for



(left to right) Amanda (Mandy) Redig, MSTP '10; Karen Rembold '10; and Alison Christy, MSTP '11.

speakers to talk to students about the writing life -- physician-writers, editors, literary agents, and more. We designed a website, accessible through Blackboard, with links to interesting articles and literary events in Chicago, information about places to publish and writing contests for medical students, and a

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forum for students to post their work for review by their peers.

And it has amazed us all how many students turned out to be writers. Some majored in English or Creative Writing as undergraduates. Some secretly work on novels, poetry or translations in their free time; others came to our first meeting brimming with ideas for television shows or radio programs. Some have published and even won awards for their writing. And many have never written much outside of their undergraduate classes but plan to write something, someday: a novel, a memoir, a piece on practicing medicine in Mexico or the ethics of cadaver donation. Over one hundred students have signed up for access to the website. Now the group meets weekly to discuss the pieces we're working on, the issues we feel someone should write about or the things we've recently read.

We shouldn't have been surprised at the turnout. There seems to be something of a renaissance in physician-writers lately. You might have heard of the novelists Khaled Hosseini, Ethan Canin, Perri Klass, and Chris Adrian; poets Rafael Campo, John Stone or Peter Pereira; or the many physician-reporters, including *The New York Times'* Lawrence Altman and Abigail Zuger, *The Washington Post's* David Brown, and Atul Gawande and Jerome Groopman, who write for the *New Yorker*.

Or maybe the renaissance is occurring in the readers of physician-writers. Maybe readers, who have become increasingly involved in their own healthcare, want to know more about the thoughts of the strangers

who decide whether or not they are sick and what treatment they should undergo. Maybe it's due to the success of *ER* and *Gray's Anatomy*. Regardless, writing by physicians can be found in virtually every section of the bookstore – from memoirs and critiques of the health industry to medical thrillers and romance.

With such interest in the writing of medical practitioners, we encourage the students in our writing group to publish their work outside of the medical school. Some scientific medical journals have sections for medical-related personal essays and poetry: Mandy Redig, MSTP '10, published an essay in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2006, and Neelam Vashi '08 published one in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2007. The American Medical Association hosts an online bioethics journal called *Virtual Mentor*, which chose Mandy Redig as a guest editor for issues in 2004 and 2006; she also won their yearly bioethics essay contest in 2006. The national medical honor society Alpha Omega Alpha holds yearly student poetry competitions and essay competitions (I won the essay competition in 2005, and Lori Soni '08 won third place in 2007). Both Lori's prize-winning essay and a poem by Daniel Shumer '08 are featured in the Winter 2008 issue of the Alpha Omega Alpha quarterly journal *The Pharos* (accessible at www.alphaomegaalpha.org) There are at least three literary journals in the U.S. devoted entirely to writing on health and medicine, and the Northwestern medical school sponsors its own literary

magazine, reborn this year under the name *Chiasma*.

So how are more and more doctors – and medical students – finding the time to write? Of course, this question could be asked of anyone who writes. Who has free time to sit down and put words on paper? We're all busy, all the time. The real question is why we find the time to write. If you had twenty textbooks to memorize cover-to-cover, why would you waste your time writing about how you felt about the whole thing?

This winter I taught a class on creative nonfiction to first-year medical students, many of whom had never tried this kind of writing before. A few weeks after the final class, one student told me that she missed our weekly writing assignments. It wasn't too much work? I asked. On top of everything else? She said that she didn't mind it. Writing gave her a chance to slow down and reflect on everything happening around her and how medical school was changing her life. Things were happening so quickly, she said, and she hadn't gotten a chance to stop and think about it.

Doctors – and medical students – write for the same reasons anyone does: to record, to reflect, to make sense of things, to say something that needs to be said, to remind themselves that medicine is about people and not about textbooks.

Surely that helps us become better physicians as well.

**Writing 301
Fall Quarter 2008**

**THE ART OF FICTION
with Visiting Writer in Residence
SEFI ATTA
Mondays & Wednesdays
2:00-3:20 pm**

This course is open by application only to undergraduates.

This course is designed for students who want to learn the craft of writing fiction. Students will present their work for critique and will participate in critiquing each other's work. In addition to required texts, the instructor will provide handouts periodically and recommend further reading.

The handouts will be essays on elements of craft and interviews with a variety of writers discussing their works and writing processes. I will encourage and expect all students to participate actively in the workshops and to submit their work on time. We will pay attention to the main elements of craft, such as voice, story form, characterization, showing versus telling, point of view, setting, simile and metaphor. Students will write and revise a short story or a portion of a novel and will also complete very brief writing assignments. A final revision of the short story or novel excerpt will be due at the end of the quarter.

Applications are available at:
The Center for the Writing Arts
Kresge 4-315, Evanston Campus
OR
Email: words@northwestern.edu
You can also find the application online at:
www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/



WRITING MATTERS
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