

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

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APRIL 1995

## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

### *Writing and Teaching*

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

From its inception, the Center for the Writing Arts has sought to improve on Northwestern's already excellent education in writing. The University's great diversity of resources seemed to offer the possibility of productive interaction leading to new courses and new ideas about teaching. What would happen if Medill instructors in journalistic writing interacted with experts from Speech in screenwriting, CAS creative writing teachers, and composition experts from the Writing Program and University College? How radically different are the approaches of people teaching the diverse modes of writing?

Somewhat to our surprise, we discovered a remarkable consensus on a few key issues. Most faculty firmly believed that the teaching of writing should be approached as an intellectual, rather than a purely technical, endeavor. Good, clear expression goes hand in hand with clear and precise thinking, and the two improve in tandem. To take just one example, the English Major in Writing offers the unusual approach of teaching students how to compose fiction and poetry by having them learn how novelists and poets read. Subtlety of expression requires care in registering impressions—of the world, of people, of language. One cannot teach writing without teaching reading, and careful reading in turn requires refined thinking. These views proved widespread around the University.

No less important was a shared emphasis on the process of revision. Like thinking, good writing is above all processual. It involves repeated recordings followed by inspections from the point of view of a potential reader, whose imagined questions and irritations lead to another round of revisions and imaginings.

One might expect that the stylistic preferences of journalists, screenwriters, essayists, and poets would clash, and to some extent, they do. But at Northwestern, at least, professors seem to embrace a genuine pluralism. There is no one way to write well, and anyone will profit from commanding a diversity of genres, modes and forms of rhetoric, each suitable for a particular purpose, occasion or audience. A writer better understands a preferred mode by being aware of its alternatives in specific circumstances.

It was with these premises in mind that the Center's Curriculum Committee, chaired by Prof. Kenneth Seeskin of the Department of Philosophy, designed a new two-quarter course on The Modes of Writing. Funded on a trial basis by the Provost's office, the course is presently being reviewed by appropriate CAS committees and, we hope, will be given during the 1995-96 academic year. Students will meet together for a series of lectures on a topic that lends itself to a diversity of writing exercises. (The inaugural subject will be "ideas of free speech through the ages"; in subsequent years, other topics will be chosen.) The class will then break into a series of small workshops in which students will practice writing in a diversity of genres, from autobiographical and journalistic to critical and analytic. Faculty will be drawn from across school lines. Given our diversity of resources, this course truly reflects the University's strength and identity.

Additionally, the Center also sponsors courses (open to both undergraduates and graduates) taught by Visiting Writers, which are given in each writer's particular form, and, jointly with the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence, hosts a series of faculty workshops on the teaching of writing. We are looking for ideas—your ideas—on curricular innovation. ♦



## MARK YOUR CALENDAR..

You are cordially invited to the following events featuring Tracy Kidder (winner of both a Pulitzer Prize and an American Book Award), Northwestern University's Writer in Residence for the Spring 1995 term:

**Wednesday, April 26, 4:30 p.m.**, "A Reading." Following reception hosted by the Medill School of Journalism. Harris Hall 108.

**Wednesday, May 17, 4:30 p.m.**, Lecture: "Courting the Approval of the Dead." Following reception hosted by the Northwestern University Press. Harris Hall 108.

**Thursday, June 1, 12:00 p.m.**, Brown-Bag Lunch: "Writing Nonfiction: What It Is, What It Ought to Be." Fisk Hall 207.

## RECENT CENTER EVENTS

### *Food for Midwinter Thought*

*By Michael Denner*

The Center for Writing Arts enlivened January and February with a variety of colloquia, workshops and readings by both Northwestern University faculty and an interesting range of visiting writers and scholars.

On January 31, Delle Chatman of Northwestern's Department of Radio/TV/Film facilitated a workshop, "Strategizing for Quality Control," which picked up from an earlier forum on the connections between writing and teaching. During the second forum, participants brainstormed solutions for many of the difficulties and challenges brought up in the first workshop.

After examining various approaches to translation earlier this academic year, CWA kicked off a second colloquium series, The Art of Fiction, with an exceptionally popular lecture on February 16, entitled "Writing on the Border: The 'Lais' of Marie de France" by Professor Tilde Sankovitch of Northwestern's Department

*Continued on page 2*

## NU'S CURRENT WRITER IN RESIDENCE

### *Tracy Kidder's Three Rs: Reading, Research and Rewriting*

By Beth McGreevy

Tracy Kidder has two goals for his stay here during the Spring 1995 quarter as Northwestern's Writer in Residence: to teach well and to figure out what book to work on next. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for *The Soul of a New Machine*, which also received the American Book Award. His most recent book, published in 1993, is entitled *Old Friends*.

Although his class is called "expository prose," Tracy Kidder would prefer to use the term "narrative nonfiction" to describe what he writes and what he will teach this Spring. Along the path of John McPhee, Norman Mailer and new writers like Darcy Frey, Kidder wants his students to do in-depth research outside their own life experiences, and then to find interesting ways to write about the world around them. "I think that what's always of compelling interest in any piece of writing is capturing the reflection of human character on the page. It's also the most difficult thing that any writer tries to do. But some of the most lively, interesting—and, I think, most literary—stuff being written today is being done in this form. Also, there is a market for it, and the market for fiction is shrinking."

Kidder's way of teaching will follow the axiom: write the truth, and write it well. The three R's are reading, research and rewriting. "The only way you learn to write is by writing and reading," Kidder

says. For pleasure, he's an eclectic reader of both fiction and nonfiction, recently including Tolstoy, Graham Greene and Edmund Wilson. But most of what he reads is material on what he's writing at the time. "As I get older, I like more and more some of the kinds of books I would not care to write myself; that is, ones that deliver to me a lot of information."

Sometimes called a practitioner of the New Journalism or literary journalism, Kidder says his style of writing isn't "new" at all. "It's strictly factual, though I do a lot of research and then use devices and techniques of story-telling that fiction also uses." Before writing his most recent piece for *The New Yorker*, for example, Kidder spent one and a half months in Haiti with the U.S. soldiers, just taking notes. He says that after researching, he first writes by hand and then turns to the typewriter or computer. "But I'm not very fond of computers. They can be very insidious machines. They do entice you sometimes into a very lazy kind of rewrit-

ing." And rewriting is Kidder's real creative process. When given the luxury of time, he likes to write quickly and spend his time vigorously rewriting: "When you only had a typewriter, if you wanted a nice clean copy, you had to put a piece of paper in and start all over again, and sometimes you had to confront those parts that are deficient. Real rewriting often requires that you throw out a lot of what you've done before."

Kidder is looking forward to teaching at Northwestern. He has taught at the Iowa Writers Workshop and Smith College, and he regards one of his undergraduate professors at Harvard, Robert Fitzgerald, as a model to follow in the classroom. "He was a poet and a great translator, and he was a really wonderful teacher. He was kind but very stern. Though he was sort of an *eminence grise*, one of the things he always did was pay students the great compliment of taking them seriously." No doubt, Kidder's NU students can expect the same. ♦

*Continued from page 1*

### RECENT EVENTS...

of French and Italian. The lecture was introduced by Leon Forrest of Northwestern's African-American Studies Program and the Department of English. According to CWA Director Saul Morson, future lectures in this series will continue exploring "writing and its relation to broader cultural symbols."

Visiting Writer in Residence Ward Just treated the Northwestern community to three public appearances during February. In the first, on February 8, Just let the audience peer into the working mind of one of America's most well-regarded writers when he read from a work in progress. The "Third Thursdays" brown-bag lunch series continued on February 16 with a lecture and discussion by Just entitled "Noise, Unadorned." Ward's presentation was an extension of an earlier brown-bag discussion entitled "Writing in the Age of Cyberspace" by Dean Roy Pea of the NU School of Education and Social Policy and Dean Michael Janeway of the Medill School of Journalism. Just, who hammers his novels out on a non-electric typewriter, critiqued the worship of the new technology and its

effect on writing. In his final appearance on March 1, Just discussed the difficulty of writing realistically about the goings-on inside the Washington Beltway—which at times, he pointed out, seem anything but real. The title of his lecture was "If You Could Put That in a Novel, No One Would Believe It: Notes on Washington Fiction."

And in the final event before the CWA Newsletter went to press, Kenneth Seeskin, chair of Northwestern's Department of Philosophy, discussed the often-uncertain relationship between writing and truth in a March 16 "Third Thursday" brown-bag lunch entitled "Style as Argument: How Presentation Affects Veracity." Stressing the diversity of genres in which philosophy has been written, Professor Seeskin raised the possibility that journalism might risk using a wider range of forms to convey the truth about complex social situations. This suggestion led to an exceptionally lively discussion about why journalism is practiced as it is and about the ways in which the choice of a given genre of writing shapes in advance the meanings to follow. ♦

The Newsletter of Northwestern University's  
CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

Publishing Director: Saul Morson

#### Editorial Contributors:

David Abrahamson, Michael Denner,  
Robert Gundlach, Tracy Kidder, Paul Larson,  
John Lee, Beth McGreevy, Molly Petersen  
Lindsay Sargent

Design Director: Hayward R. Blake  
Medill School of Journalism

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## TRACY KIDDER AN EXCERPT...

*What follows is an excerpt from  
Old Friends (Boston: Houghton  
Mifflin, 1993):*

That first tool, the seventy-eight-year-old Millers Falls hand drill, was like the fertilized egg of Lou's memory. It seemed to carry all the information Lou needed to reconstitute his long life. The drill took him back: Lou finishing up eighth grade on Thursday in 1914 and skipping the graduation ceremony in order to start his first full-time job. Turning over his \$3.50 paycheck to his mother, who somehow managed always to put food on the table for a large family. His father's delivery service that ended in failure, like all his other ventures, in this case when his horse went lame. The restaurant and boarding house in South Philadelphia, Lou's father's voice calling to his mother in the kitchen, speaking about a man who had ordered beef stew, which cost a nickel, "Take the beef out, the bum's only got three cents." Shutting his eyes tight, Lou described Philadelphia, in whole and in parts, and repopulated it, with that Irish cop with a voice like Joe's and that hawk-er down in the Tenderloin....

The first times he heard Lou repeating himself, nearly a year ago now, Joe had decided to say nothing about it because Lou seemed like a nice guy, and he was old, really old. Joe felt differently now. He liked to hear Lou repeat his stories. He actually liked to hear them again.

There was something beautiful about Lou in the act of storytelling, opening up his storehouse of memories and bringing them back to life. He summoned up his memories with what seemed like the force of necessity. Telling his stories, he sat quite still in his chair but his hands became animated, and if he was interrupted midcourse, by a visit from an aide or a nurse, he would stop. He might even chat with the intruder, but his fingers would stroke the arms of his chair or drum lightly upon them, and when the intruder departed, he would pick up his story just where he'd left off.



GABRIEL A. COONEY

Joe recalled the old story about two prisoners locked up together so long that they no longer tell each other jokes. One

simply says, "Thirty-six" and the other at once begins laughing hysterically. Maybe he and Lou resembled those prisoners, two old pensioners who had run out of new things to say to each other. It was true that local news was scant. Around here, what qualified as a news story usually had to do with someone's new ailment. Lou's stories were more entertaining than most contemporary local ones. Heard only twice, Lou's memories could seem monotonous. Heard many times, they were like old friends. They were comforting. They lent stability to Joe's life in this room, and there was little enough of that around here, in many rooms in this building. Lou's memories seemed like an immortal part of him. They existed right now forever. Lou's memories contained such a density of life that in their presence death seemed impossible. ♦

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### UPCOMING EVENTS...

**Thursday, March 30, 4:15 p.m.,** Writer's Colloquium: "Writing from the Body: Disease, Disability and the Language of Fiction" by Helen Deutsch (English). NU Library Forum Room.

**Tuesday, April 13, 4:30-6:30 p.m.,** Writing and Teaching Workshop: "Making Reality Real: Converting Raw Experience into Narrative Forms in Journalism, Film-making and Creative Writing, and Their Effect on Teaching Methodologies" with Fred Shafer (University College), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film) and Leon Forrest (African-American Studies, English). Jointly sponsored with Searle Center for Teaching Excellence. Harris Hall 108.

**Tuesday, April 18, 4:00 p.m.,** Poetry reading by poet and feminist Alicia Ostriker. Introduction by President Henry S. Bienen; jointly sponsored by CWA and TriQuarterly. Harris Hall 108.

**Wednesday, April 19, 12:15 p.m.,** Brown-Bag Lunch: "Writing About Politics" by Garry Wills (History). Fisk Hall 207.

**Thursday, April 20, 4:15 p.m.,** Writer's Colloquium: "Eliot's Four Quartets" by David Tracy, University of Chicago School of Divinity. NU Library Forum Room.

**Wednesday, April 26, 4:30 p.m.,** A Reading by Tracy Kidder. Following reception hosted by the Medill School of Journalism. Harris Hall 108.

**Wednesday, May 3, 12:00 p.m.,** Brown-Bag Lunch: "Worlds from Words: How Does Writing Matter?" by Carl Smith (English). Fisk Hall 207.

**Thursday, May 4, 4:15 p.m.,** Writer's Colloquium: "The Jew, the Woman and the Authentic Person: Ideological Constructs and the Truth of Fiction in Zola" by David Joravsky (History). NU Library Forum Room.

**Wednesday, May 17, 4:30 p.m.,** Lecture: "Courting the Approval of the Dead" by Tracy Kidder. Following reception hosted by the Northwestern University Press. Harris Hall 108.

**Thursday, May 18, 4:15 p.m.,** Writer's Colloquium: "Utopianism" by Michael Williams (Philosophy). Norris University Center Room 2D.

**Tuesday, May 23, 4:15 p.m.,** Writer's Colloquium: "African-American Historical Fiction: Notes for a Philosophical Novel-in-Progress" by Charles Johnson, University of Washington. Following reception hosted by the Center for the Writing Arts. NU Library Ver Steeg Lounge.

**Thursday, June 1, 12:00 p.m.,** Brown-Bag Lunch: "Writing Nonfiction: What It Is, What It Ought to Be" by Tracy Kidder. Fisk Hall 207.

INTERVIEW:

GUNDLACH ON WRITING AT NU...

*Robert Gundlach is a founding member of the Center for the Writing Arts. He has directed the Writing Program in the College of Arts and Sciences since its inception in 1977 and is also a member of the linguistics department, where his interests include children's language development and the uses of writing in childhood and adolescence. Since 1980, he has directed Northwestern's Summer Institute on Thinking and Writing: Teaching Writing in the Secondary School.*

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

**Robert Gundlach:** I was a member of the committee convened by the Provost in the fall of 1993 to discuss how we could highlight Northwestern's strengths in the teaching of writing and to consider how we might build on those strengths. The group proved to be remarkably energetic, and several projects were launched quickly—including a wide-ranging set of seminars, lectures, and informal discussions on various aspects of writing and a new series of undergraduate courses taught by distinguished visiting writers. In the committee's initial discussions, I emphasized the importance of making the activities of the Center as inclusive and inviting as possible. We wanted to design the offerings of the Center not only for students hoping to pursue careers in writing, but also for those who, whatever their interests and goals, will be well served by the ability to write clearly, persuasively and imaginatively.

**CWA:** Were there other ideas you emphasized?

**RG:** As plans took shape, I also joined several colleagues in suggesting the value of creating a place in the activities of the Center for various kinds of expository writing—writing that explains, analyzes and argues. We have made a start on this. Our Visiting Writer this spring, Tracy Kidder, is teaching the Center's first special course in writing nonfiction. Next year we hope to offer a cluster of courses for freshmen that help students learn to write well and that underscore the value of writing as a way of thinking and learning. I hope that link-

ing instruction in expository writing to students' intellectual development in this way will reinforce a point that we make in the CAS Writing Program—namely, that the teaching of expository writing is far more than a remedial enterprise.

**CWA:** Could you briefly describe the work of the CAS Writing Program?

**RG:** We teach introductory, intermediate and advanced courses for undergraduates from programs across the University. Listed as the "O5" series in the English Department (A05, B05, and C05), our courses enroll about 800 students each year. Some students come to us with very little writing experience; others are really quite experienced, and they welcome the challenge of tackling ambitious projects that stretch them as thinkers and writers. Along with our courses, we run a busy peer tutoring operation in the Writing Place, located in the University Library. We also consult regularly with instructors from several departments in CAS who teach freshman seminars, and we have recently begun collaborative projects with faculty in the engineering school. In all of our work, we often point to the value of revision. We teach revision as a practical step in improving the quality of the piece in progress, of course. But at the same time, we also want to cultivate revising as a habit of mind, so that students become increasingly adept at using writing not

only as a means of communication but also as an instrument of thought—as a tool, that is, for putting an idea on paper, reflecting on it, developing it, and connecting it to other ideas.

**CWA:** How is the CAS Writing Program organized?

**RG:** Our program has been a separate unit in the College of Arts and Sciences since 1977, and this has been a very productive arrangement for sustaining what outside reviewers from other universities have told us is an exceptionally strong program. Because the Writing Program is a distinct administrative unit, we are able to make teaching writing our top priority, and this has helped us maintain a talented and dedicated faculty, which currently includes Marcia Gealy, Penny Hirsch, Phyllis Lassner, Frances Paden, Barbara Shwom, Edith Skom, Jean Smith, Ellen Wright and Charles Yarnoff.

**CWA:** What directions would you like to see the Center pursue next?

**RG:** In the short term, I hope the Center will complement its current activities with more attention to diverse forms of nonfiction, including the various kinds of writing scientists and engineers do. In the long run, I hope the Center will be seen as a place that in a very practical way takes a stand for the possibilities and richness of writing as a human activity. ♦

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 to:

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

(708) 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: g-morson@nwu.edu

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

Saul Morson, Director (Slavic Languages)

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David Abrahamson (Medill), Kenneth Alder (History), Bud Beyer (Theatre), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film), 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), Ken Seeskin (Philosophy), Barbara Shwom (Writing Program), Hilary Ward (University College), Nicolas Weir-Williams (Northwestern University Press) and Michael Williams (Philosophy).