

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

VOL 2 NO 2

627 DARTMOUTH PLACE, EVANSTON, IL 60208

APRIL 1996

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Looking to the Future

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

The Center for the Writing Arts began as an effort to make visible the excellent resources in writing that Northwestern already possesses and to create interaction among units that had functioned largely in isolation. I think everyone involved was impressed from the outset by the degree of enthusiasm on the part of many people trying to make Northwestern known as "the university of writing." Faculty and administrators from Medill, the School of Speech, Education and Social Policy, the College of Arts and Sciences, University College, and the Graduate School worked together on a wide range of initiatives.

For the University and the outside world, the Visiting Writers proved to be the most noticeable of these initiatives. This quarter, two prominent writers, novelist Larry Heinemann and dramatist/cartoonist Jules Feiffer, will be on campus at the same time. Both have proven extraordinarily amenable to a wide range of activities beyond the explicit terms of their contracts. In addition to teaching their classes, they will be speaking in numerous forums, large and small, and to undergraduates as well as faculty. The community will also have a chance to see Feiffer's play, *Knock-Knock*, staged under the direction of David Downs.

Especially gratifying was the large number and the high quality of applications from students eager to take courses with the Visiting Writers. Indeed, the present year has seen undergraduates taking a wider role in the Center. Whereas our lecture series at first drew its ample audiences primarily from professors, more and more students now attend. Kathe Marshall came up with the idea of arranging a students-only lunch with well-

known writers who come to campus for a lecture, and students expressed great appreciation at the chance to talk in this way with novelists Joyce Carol Oates and Andrei Bitov. Three students from the CAS Scholars program are now serving on the committee planning a series of lectures on Writing and the Sciences.

The single initiative that probably involved the most time and effort was the new experimental freshman writing course now underway, "The Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent." Designed by the Center's Curriculum Committee chaired by Ken Seeskin, the course is taught by Barbara Shwom, Robert Gundlach, George Harmon, and Seeskin. It is no secret that we hope this course will eventually prove to have been the starting point for ensuring that Northwestern students as a whole are recognized as superior writers.

In a larger sense, what we have in mind is creating a writing *culture* at Northwestern. When I was a Yale undergraduate, I was struck by the fact that students whose majors were as remote as possible from English would still attend readings by prominent poets who came to campus, because an awareness of literature was central to what a Yale College education was all about. We have taken the first steps to making writing—in all its modes—central to the Northwestern education, still more, the Northwestern identity. At a time when public figures and private employers lament the decline in writing abilities among the educated, Northwestern will, we hope, stand out as a welcome exception and, perhaps, the initiator of a new trend. ♦



MARK YOUR CALENDAR...

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

Tuesday, April 23, 1996, 1:00-2:30 p.m., Panel Discussion: "Different Audiences, Different Realities. Does Editorial Quality Really Matter?" with Jules Feiffer, 1996 NU Writer in Residence; Samir Husni, author, *The Guide to New Consumer Magazines*; Karen Schaffner, Shore-Varrone; Alison Scholly, Tribune Media Services; and the 1966 winner (to be announced) of the Eighth Annual John Bartlow Martin Award for Public-Interest Magazine Journalism. Moderated by Pat Clinton (Medill) and jointly sponsored with the Medill School of Journalism's Magazine Publishing Program. Norris University Center, McCormick Auditorium.

Thursday, May 16, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m., Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation by Larry Heinemann (1996 NU Writer in Residence). Fisk Hall 311.

RECENT CENTER EVENTS

Vernal Awakenings

By Kathe Marshall

Much of the bleakness of the late winter in Evanston this year was dispelled by a flurry of activities at the Center for the Writing Arts. The wide variety of events in February and March provided a number of opportunities for the Center, its staff, students, faculty and friends to meet and to hear writers and teachers.

After many weeks of preparation, faculty hosts for the Center's Writers-in-Residence, Jules Feiffer and Larry Heinemann, completed the selection process for two writing courses offered in Spring 1996. Reginald Gibbons, editor of *Tri-Quarterly*, worked with Heinemann to sort out the candidates for "Writer's Work-shop." Bob Gundlach, director of the CAS Writing Program, poured over the manuscripts submitted for Feiffer's course, "Humor and Truth" and then worked by fax with Feiffer in New York to finalize the list.

Two brown-bag lunches highlighted the talent on NU's Performing Arts faculty. On

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NORTHWESTERN'S NOTABLE WRITERS

Jules Feiffer: Humor and Truth

By Aimee Crawford

An award-winning cartoonist, writer, and playwright, Jules Feiffer is perhaps best known for the distinctive cartoons he has contributed to the *Village Voice* since 1956. An NU Writer in Residence for 1996, he is also the author of the plays (and subsequent screenplays) *Little Murders* and *Carnal Knowledge*, as well more than a dozen books, including Jules Feiffer's *America* and *The Man in the Ceiling*.

Jules Feiffer's creations have mirrored our "foibles, fashions and mad ways" for nearly 40 years. Now the Pulitzer prize winner is bringing his wit and wisdom to Northwestern to share with another generation of aspiring humor writers. Long known for his revealing commentary on human folly, Feiffer's work has graced everything from *Playboy* to *The New Republic*. Syndicated in 100 newspapers, his home base has been the *Village Voice* for 40 years.

The man responsible for *Little Murders* and *Carnal Knowledge* will lead a class of 16 undergraduates on a 10-week journey through "Humor and Truth," a Spring quarter writing course that will examine the application of comicality to the many literary (and visual) forms he's mastered. Students will write stories and plays and essays each week—and offer them up for Feiffer's critique. He plans to supplement class discussions and lectures with film screenings and visits from other humor writers. "We'll cover whatever forms of writing the students are interested in," he says. "I like the challenge of working within different forms and taking them and stretching them."

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

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The essential Feiffer is perhaps best revealed in his cartoons, which a *New York Times* review once termed "musings on the cesspool or urban man's mind and the beauty of his neurosis." The cartoons will go on "until I run out of ideas," says Feiffer. "It's the cartoon that forces me to get out of bed each day. If I didn't do this, I wouldn't be following politics. It's too depressing these days."

After 20 years of writing plays, Feiffer says the pleasure he once felt in writing for the theater has been replaced with pain. Upon completing *Elliot Loves*—first produced at the Goodman Theatre Studio in 1990—Feiffer gave up playwriting because "what I thought was my best work was so badly received. My kind of theater was about confronting adults with truths they didn't want to hear."

The "truths" he foretold in 1967's *Little Murders* render Feiffer prophetic today. His black comedy outraged audiences with its depiction of a "normal" American family embracing the "disintegration of society with a gleeful plunge into urban combat." Feiffer said he wrote the play because of a his growing conviction that "something had gone seriously wrong in this country. I saw a

country on the edge of nervous breakdown." His most famous script, *Carnal Knowledge*, was originally written as a play. Feiffer turned it into a screenplay at the urging of the movie's producer, Mike Nichols. The film, which became a classic, also generated a landmark ruling on obscenity by the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1993, Feiffer turned his attention to writing for children. He has since produced two children's works, with several more picture books in the works.

The course here will be his second foray into education. Feiffer previously taught a course in playwriting at the Yale Drama School in the early 1970s, where he inspired students such as Christopher Durang. "Teaching writing is a little like parenting," says the 66-year-old father of three daughters. "I hope I've learned something about patience and nurturing over the past 20 years."

Feiffer says he also looks forward to re-establishing some of his many ties to the Chicago area. In addition to the Goodman production of *Elliot Loves*, Second City performed Feiffer's first play, *The Explainers*, a collection of cartoons put into a revue, in 1961. *Knock-Knock*, one of Feiffer's first plays, will be produced here on campus in May. ♦

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Four Celebrations of Writing

By Kathe Marshall

This spring, the Center will offer a mixed bouquet of events, activities, and lectures for students, faculty, and friends of the Writing Arts. The arrival of our two Writers in Residence will be cause for both celebration and relief. Jules Feiffer and Larry Heinemann are teaching independent sections of "The Art of Fiction" in spring quarter. Feiffer—editorial cartoonist, screen-writer, and humorist—has 16 eager undergraduates from four different NU colleges enrolled in "Humor and Truth." Larry Heinemann—fiction writer and valued teacher of that craft—has an equal number of delighted students enrolled in "A Writer's Workshop: The Storyteller's Point of View". Each of these courses, offered by the Center to enrich and broaden the creative writing experience for undergraduates in the university community at large, produced a deluge of applications. And both Feiffer and Heinemann actively participated in choosing from among the many qualified students. While they are in residence at the Center, Feiffer and Heinemann will give both formal and infor-

mal public presentations and readings of their work under the auspices of Medill, Speech/Theater, and the Residential Colleges. Although "The Art of Fiction" courses are strictly limited in size, there will be ample opportunity for students and faculty to hear and to interact with the visitors during the term.

The second quarter of the Freshman Writing Seminar "Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent" will feature weekly speakers as diverse as Stephen Chapman (*Chicago Tribune*), Tilde Sankovitch (French and Italian), and Martin Redish (Law). In the breakout sections with their writing instructors from CAS and Medill, the students enrolled in this significant new course (designed especially by the Center Curriculum Committee for NU freshman) produce essays with an immediate and substantive focus.

The "Narrative and History" Colloquium series organized by Peter Hayes (History) has been so successful that it continues through spring quarter with lectures by Caryl Emerson (Slavic, Princeton) and Lisa Allen (Slavic, Bryn Mawr) on issues of history and ethics in Russian literature to complement earlier speakers on similar issues of history and ethics in America and Germany. ♦

JULES FEIFFER, AN EXCERPT...

What follows is an excerpt, "Across the Sea of Screams and into the Mountain of Malice," from A Barrel of Laughs, A Vale of Tears. Copyright 1995 by Jules Feiffer. All rights reserved.

Roger flew backward. He knew no other method of reaching his destination. He flew backward through heavy rain, dense fog, thunderstorms, and blizzards. He flew backward over the Sea of Screams, which was one of the awful places J. Wellington Wizard warned he must pass on his quest. Fearful cries of "Help!" rose up at him from the green-black sea, whose churning waves looked like they were writhing in torture. Roger started down, his eagle eyes skimming the sea's surface. He was there to help, but saw no one who needed help.

Whitecaps spattered like outstretched hands pleading for rescue. The screams came with desperate urgency. "Who's screaming?" Roger wondered. Were the waves screaming? Did waves need his help? Roger dipped lower for a better look. A green-black wave unwound like a serpent and coiled around his legs.

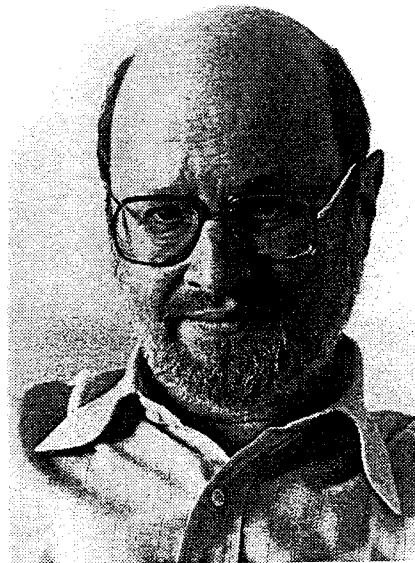
Roger pumped his wings and pumped again and broke free. The sea screams turned to whimpers. Sobs of "Help!" Moans of "Help!" But who exactly was Roger to help? The roiling, broiling, stained-dark sea gnashed its waves like teeth.

"You cry 'Help,' but you don't mean 'Help.' You mean you want to swallow me!" Roger screamed back at the Sea of Screams and flew away backward. If he couldn't trust cries of help, if cries of help could swallow and drown him . . . Roger's sense of right and wrong felt dishonored. If this was meant to be a lesson, he didn't want to learn it.

He flew backward across the Mountain of Malice, another of the wicked places J. Wellington had warned him about. Stones flew up at him, grazing his feathers. Who was throwing them? No one. The mountain itself was throwing them. Small boulders zoomed up at Roger with the velocity of cannon shots.

The first rocks didn't come close; but then, as if the mountain had adjusted for Roger's height and speed, they narrowed the distance. Rocks started bouncing off Roger, his head, his chest, his wings. Big and fast though they were, they stung more than they bruised. Smaller rocks bounced off him harmlessly. But thirty or forty rocks bouncing harmlessly off an eagle in a span of five minutes can do real harm. Roger's pace slowed. He grew dizzy. But it would be fatal to surrender to his dizziness.

He altered his flight pattern in an attempt to confuse the mountain. He flew in circles, high, low, forward, and backward again. He swooped and soared, glided and shot straight



SCOTT WALTERS

up. His strength was returning — and, at the same time, the mountain appeared confused. The velocity of the rocks weakened. As battered as Roger was, now he had no trouble evading the flying missiles. He noticed something different. A barrage of rocks came up at him with notes attached.

Why notes? Roger could not help but be curious. Were these messages? Were they for him? Or for any bird who happened over? Through practice, Roger became adept at darting his beak forward and picking the notes off the rocks. Not all, there were too many, but soon he held an untidy collection crumpled in his talons.

Night was coming on. Roger was less clear a target now. The barrage wavered, hesitated, stopped. Roger plucked one last note off one last rock and flew backward onward, out of the reach and soon out of sight of the Mountain of Malice.

He hurt all over. He needed to rest, to eat, to sleep. But before anything else, he needed to read the notes. He found himself within sight of a farm. In the distance, he saw the lights of a neighboring village, but Roger was too exhausted to investigate. He headed for the roof of an old barn and set himself down.

His weary eyes took in acres of land, ripe to feast on. But later, he thought, after he read the notes. First the notes, then a hearty meal (a pumpkin patch lay directly below, and to the east, row upon row of corn). Following his feast, he would have a good night's rest. No sooner had Roger fixed this schedule in his mind than he changed it entirely by falling asleep.

He awoke to the cry of roosters. Dawn was rising, probably in the east — but Roger was so bruised and confused that, for all he knew, dawn could have risen in the north, south, or west. He discovered a brook nearby and bathed his wounds and bruises while snapping down a sampling of trout and bass. He was beginning to feel like himself again — that is, his noble eagle self. He was battered but not seriously hurt. He

was convinced that his pain would be gone in a few hours. He remembered the notes. He flew back to the roof of the barn, uncrumpled and read them. His pain returned. Worse than before. Worse than anything he had endured.

It would be needlessly cruel to print all of the notes, but here's a sample:

"YOU ARE A VAIN AND SELFISH LOU." "YOU CAN'T HOLD ONTO YOUR FRIENDS." "YOU CANNOT BELIEVE THE AWFUL THINGS THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT YOU IN THE FOREVER FOREST." "THEY DESPISE YOU." "THEY WILL TEAR YOU TO PIECES WHEN THEY SEE YOU." "YOU ARE MORE OF A LAUGHINGSTOCK NOW THAN WHEN YOU WERE A PRINCE." "LADY SADIE IS DEAD, AND IT'S YOUR FAULT." "PRINCESS PETULIA WAS RESCUED WEEKS AGO BY A BRAVE KNIGHT. THEY ARE LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER." "YOUR QUEST IS A DISASTER." "TOM WILL KILL YOU."

At last, Roger understood how the Mountain of Malice had come by its name. The wounds inflicted by the notes hurt worse than the rocks. Each one contained a crushing truth. Certainly, they had the ring of truth. Roger believed them to be true. Rocks don't lie.

He sat atop the barn, all his will to rescue fading. All his will to continue his quest, or for that matter, his life fading. Nothing was worth this torment. If he were still a prince, he would have wept. Eagles may not be able to weep, but they can brood. In the history of eagledom, no eagle brooded as did Roger during the seven days and nights that followed. He did not eat or sleep, he brooded. He had suffered a mortal wound from the Mountain of Malice. All he wished for now was for his misery to be at an end. He perched shrunken and hunched, atop the roof of the barn, half-dozing, half-dying. The farm birds and animals steered clear, out of respect for his condition. Cows slept in the fields at night, birds diverted their flight paths to avoid going over the barn.

Nine full days of this, and on the tenth morning his blurred vision spotted a man. The first being of any sort he had seen since he had taken to his perch to die. Roger was too weak to see clearly, but his hearing remained sharp. Although the man was a quarter mile away, Roger had no difficulty making out his shout, repeated again and again as he came closer.

It was: "Come out, come out, wherever you are! Come out, come out, wherever you are!" ♦

INTERVIEW:

GOLDMAN ON WRITING AT NU...

Jerry Goldman is associate professor of political science. He served as director of the Program in American Culture from 1989 to 1995 and in 1992 was one of four professors chosen by the University to hold the Charles Deering McCormick Chair of Teaching Excellence. Goldman joined the Center for the Writing Arts shortly after its founding. His interest in the ways in which multimedia and computing applications can be applied to writing and the creative process adds a special dimension to the Center's mission.

CWA: Your interests are somewhat afield from many humanists here. What do you see as your role?

Jerry Goldman: I guess I'm a gadfly. I know that our world is changing rapidly. Advances in computing technology and the growth of the information superhighway will alter the very fiber of academic life. Most of us do not realize the nature and extent of these changes, but I know they will change everything we do.

CWA: Could you elaborate?

JG: Consider writing, the focus of this wonderful center. We sometimes envision writing as a means of communicating ideas through the medium of words. Hypertext—the ability to link words to other words—is a modification of the writer's craft. While writers who employ hypertext links are still writers, their works do not follow the linear character of a written work. A novel or a short story begins at the beginning and then goes on, page after page in a predetermined order, until the reader reaches the end. Hypertext writing branches off, taking the reader in a different direction at each link. At its simplest, a link might be a footnote. In a more complex version, the link might take a reader to a new "layer" of the story with a different set of characters.

CWA: What follows from hypertext?

JG: The natural extension of hypertext is hypermedia. The astounding success of the computer story/game "MYST" is a case in point. The authors created a mystery using images, sound, and still images to move through different worlds. The game aspect of the activity held less appeal to me than the ability to integrate images, text, and sound into the story. It was a very powerful piece of work that has motivated all hypermedia developers. Interestingly, the MYST authors signed a major book contract after

the success of their multimedia project.

CWA: How will these technological advances affect the Center and its work?

JG: The World Wide Web will likely have the greatest impact. At the moment, it is largely a text-based environment with some pictures to add interest. Now we are creating documents that invoke audio files and link them to text. In the near future, we will be able to link video with text. I've seen some early virtual reality examples on the web. I find it all very exciting because it dramatically expands the writer's "palette." While words were once the only elements, now writers can invoke other media to tell stories, argue positions, invoke empathy, or

generate scorn. By invoking sight and sound along with text, we will heighten the reader's (or should I perhaps say "the viewer's"?) experience.

CWA: Don't you think, at least on some level, this may be just a bit far-fetched for academics?

JG: Perhaps you're right. We live in a cocoon. The pressures that confront others outside our sheltered environment may be stopped by the collective force of academic will. But that resistance cannot hold back the flood forever. Eventually, all of us will be carried along by the tide of technology. It is inevitable. I would add that it is an exciting adventure. Fear not. Surf on. ♦

Continued from page 1

RECENT EVENTS...

February 15, Frank Galati (Performance Studies) dazzled the mid-day crowd with "The Art of Adaptation" and his portrayal of parts in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Then on March 28 David Downs (Speech/Theater), currently rehearsing his actors for a five-day run of Jules Feiffer's *Knock-Knock* in May, discussed "Expressing the Non-Verbal in Words," the problems of writing in and for the theater from the actor's perspective, from the director's perspective, and from the author's perspective.

The "Narrative and History" Colloquium welcomed Professor Emeritus Bernard Crick (University of London) on Thursday, February 22 for a lecture, "Narrative and Biography," about biography in general and his biography of George Orwell in particular. Crick explained how very trying the "art" of biography can be for an author who has to cope with a truth shaped by the estate of a deceased subject.

He suggested that a chapter on widows—whose influence over and control of what ends up in the text can be profound—might serve as a warning to biographers who undertake the task unaware of the difficulties they will encounter.

In addition to the brown-bag lunches, the Center sponsored another lecture in the "Narrative and History" series at 4 p.m. in late March. Caryl Emerson, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at Princeton, widely known for her grasp of personalities and greatly admired by the Slavic students and faculty at NU, lamented the strategic complexities of "The Possibilities of an Ethics of History" because she tackled the two most gifted and difficult historical thinkers in the Russian 19th century, Pushkin and Tolstoy. A small but well-attended reception to honor the speaker followed each lecture. ♦

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
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(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 (847) 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).