

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

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DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Writing and Thinking

By Gary Saul Morson
Frances Hooper Professor of the
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Northwestern's most recent Avalon Professor of the Humanities, Stephen Toulmin, argued famously in *The Uses of Argument* that, while some aspects of sound argument are "field invariant," others are "field dependent," and that to evaluate arguments in diverse fields it is necessary to appreciate their differences. These differences are typically reflected in specific idioms, which may serve as clues to the nature of a field's questions, the use of evidence, and ways of arriving at knowledge.

For example, whereas logic textbooks may insist upon the transformation of certain propositions into the form *All A's are B's*, Toulmin writes that "a biologist hardly ever utters the words 'All whales are mammals,' though sentences such as 'Whales are mammals' or 'The whale is a mammal' might quite naturally come from his lips." This way of phrasing reflects the fact that the backing for such an argument would come not from statistical observations but from taxonomic considerations. "Our choice of idioms [in various fields], though perhaps subtle, reflect these differences fairly exactly," he concludes.

Extending this insight, one might arrive at a few ideas that seem to be shared by many at the Center for the Writing Arts: There is a close connection between forms of expression and forms of thought; it is worth attending to subtle differences in disciplinary idiom; and one may learn a good deal about both thinking and writing from attending to such differences. These considerations partially explain a number of the Center programs: for example, why our new freshman course in writing designed by a committee led by Kenneth Seeskin will bring together instructors from different schools; why our colloquia are structured to create interaction from diverse fields;

and why we have made an effort to choose Visiting Writers who specialize in diverse modes and genres.

This past fall we have been fortunate to have Ann Beattie, a fiction writer with amazing precision in capturing the small details of ordinary experience. During the winter term Ward Just, well known as both a journalist and a novelist, reflected on the differences between these two forms of expression. Tracy Kidder, our Writer in Residence this spring, is of course distinguished for a mode of extended nonfictional writing that probes social space in a way recalling the techniques of great realist novels. Next year, we will be hosting dramatist and cartoonist Jules Feiffer at the same time as novelist, essayist, and screenwriter Charles Johnson. We hope to create occasions for dialogue among fields and idioms so as to generate surprising and useful ideas.

A similar hope has guided our "Third Thursday" brown-bag lunch series. The boundaries of disciplines have been addressed in different ways by Mike Janeway, Roy Pea, Ken Seeskin, Garry Wills, and Carl Smith. In each case discussion brought out the ways in which considerations pertinent to particular traditions, genres, and disciplines of writing precluded certain practices natural to others—and often for very good reasons. In the pedagogy seminars organized by Deie Chatman in conjunction with Kenneth Bain of the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence similar questions repeatedly arose when writing teachers from various schools compared experiences.

Mikhail Bakhtin, my favorite literary theorist, was fond of showing how given modes of expression carry with them a whole sense of experience. He also explored what happens when the favorite subject matter of one mode is approached in the language of another. In such cases, a discipline or genre

begins to see itself through the eyes of another discipline or genre, and so forever loses what Bakhtin called its "naïveté"—that is, its sense of its own inevitability. The insights that accompany such a loss of naïveté, which our activities have provided, have reminded us of the special benefits that may accrue from bringing Northwestern University's diverse kinds of excellence into contact. ♦

RECENT CENTER EVENTS

Diverse Interactions

By Michael Denner

The wide variety of colloquia, workshops, and readings sponsored by the Center for the Writing Arts during March, April, and May shared a concern with the diversity of writing and the range of experience it may represent.

In the third CWA pedagogical workshop of this academic year, "Making Reality Real," faculty members Fred Shafer (University College), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film), and Leon Forrest (African-American Studies and English) discussed the approaches that writers take in transforming raw experience into narrative forms in fiction, journalism, and film-making and how these approaches affect teaching methodologies. The workshop was jointly sponsored by CWA and the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence.

Continued on page 2

MARK YOUR CALENDAR...

Tuesday, May 23, 4:15 p.m.,
Writer's Colloquium: "African-American Historical Fiction: Notes for a Philo-sophical Novel-in-Progress" by Charles Johnson, University of Washington. Harris Hall 108.

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.



NORTHWESTERN'S NOTABLE WRITERS

Garry Wills: A Matter of Distance

By Beth McGreevy

Currently an adjunct faculty member of Northwestern's Department of History, Garry Wills has written, over the last three and a half decades, almost twenty books on a wide variety of subjects. Three of his best known works might include *Nixon Agonistes* (1970), *The Kennedy Imprisonment* (1982), and *Reagan's America* (1987). More recently, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* was awarded the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction.

The inevitable difficulties of writing about politics are not something Garry Wills professes to have solved. But merely identifying them has made it possible for him to walk the fine line between being too close and being too far from the political scene. An adjunct professor at Northwestern, Wills is best known for his penetrating writings over the last 30 years on contemporary cultural and political phenomena, as well as for insightful forays into the nation's historical past. His nineteenth book, published last fall, was about Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The dilemma of finding the right distance from his subjects is an issue with which Wills has struggled from the start of his journalistic career under Harold Hayes at *Esquire* in the 1960s. Assigned to cover political campaigns

alongside the newspaper and broadcast journalists, he quickly learned the dangers of being too close to the subject and to deadline. Speaking to an audience of students and faculty at a Center for the Writing Arts brown-bag lunch presentation in mid-April, Wills reflected: "In daily journalism, your interest is to find something that's new and important—and to prove that what you found is new and important. So you tend to exaggerate the newness and importance of every little thing that happens in your small sector because that's how you get the editor's attention. It's also how you prove to yourself that you're not wasting your time." With politics in particular, often the most difficult task is find a way to cover the details "without being irrelevantly relevant."

Wills used his experience as a classics professor at Johns Hopkins in the 1960s and as the Henry R. Luce Professor of American Culture and Public Policy here at Northwestern in the 1980s to illustrate how a writer can also be too far from the subject. Academics tend to approach topics after they have been sifted through by both journalists and historians. "The virtue is that you are not distracted by all the minute particulars, so you get to see

larger patterns. The disadvantage is that if there is something really new, you might miss it because it wouldn't fit into the patterns." The challenge, in his view, is to cover subjects with "a certain remove without becoming detached."

Wills concluded his presentation with a few observations on the conflicts he has encountered between up-to-the-minute political coverage and historical writing. "Often the contemporary perceptions of someone and the historical record don't mesh at all," he said. For example, he recalled that the opposition press in the late 1940s regarded Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, as a Communist sympathizer, but the historical record later proved that he was in fact a very tough Cold Warrior. Addressing the other journalists in his audience, he noted, "It's often said journalism is a first draft of history, and that historians will come along and fix it up." But this task can bewilder the historians, who are sometimes unable to fill in the gaps between the conflicting perceptions surrounding some historical personalities or events. Major interpreters of our present and past—such as Wills himself—thrive in the ground between immediacy and distance. ♦

Continued from page 1 RECENT EVENTS...

In April, two internationally known authors treated the community to readings. Alicia Ostriker, widely considered one of America's finest poets, read from her newest book, *Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*. The reading was introduced by Northwestern President Henry Bienen and was co-sponsored by CWA and *TriQuarterly*. On April 26, a series of readings by Pulitzer Prize winning author and Northwestern Writer in Residence Tracy Kidder was particularly well received.

The Center's monthly "brown bag" series of informal lectures and discussions on the subject of writing, jointly sponsored with the Medill School of Journalism, continued during the spring quarter. The speaker in April, Garry Wills from Northwestern's History Department, considered "Writing About Politics." In early May, Carl Smith of Northwestern's Department of English explored different

philosophies of writing in a talk entitled "Worlds from Words: How Does Writing Matter?"

The CWA continued to examine the relationship between writing and broader cultural symbols and issues in its second colloquium series called "The Art of Fiction." On March 30, Helen Deutsch of Northwestern's Department of English spoke about "Writing from the Body: Disease, Disability, and the Language of Fiction." In April, theologian David Tracy of the University of Chicago discussed the religious thought in T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" in the context of his distinction between religions of "manifestation" and of "proclamation." Finally, David Joravsky of Northwestern's History Department presented an extract from his work in progress on Zola, Chekhov, and Freud: "The Jew, the Woman, and the Authentic Person: Ideological Constructs and the Truth of Fiction." ♦

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GARRY WILLS, AN EXCERPT

What follows is a portion of "The Visionary," which appeared in the March 23, 1995 issue of the New York Review of Books. Kind permission to reprint is gratefully acknowledged.

They seem like fated antagonists, each the other's evil twin. Pudgy and pugnacious men in their early fifties, they are creatures of the House—Newt Gingrich is in his ninth term, Barney Frank in his eighth. Products of the Vietnam era, both had student deferments during the war. They are considered the intellectuals of their opposing forces—Gingrich with a doctorate from Tulane, Frank with a long Harvard connection (undergraduate, teaching assistant as a graduate student in the political science department, J.D. from Harvard Law, fellow of the Kennedy School). Frank, with a scholar's mind, looks and talks like a street tough. Gingrich looks like a car salesman affecting professorial airs.

Frank and Gingrich share cognate complexities. Gingrich is not a homophobe like Dick Armey, or a racist like Jesse Helms. And Frank is not a bleeding-heart liberal like George McGovern or Ted Kennedy. One might expect Frank to be the ultimate outsider—as a Jew, a homosexual, a man whose district includes Brookline, the turf of Michael Dukakis. But he is a pragmatist, a deal-maker, a man who likes to get things done. His moderation has angered some gays, to whom he says: "Would you mind letting me support you without managing to offend everyone else on earth?"

His advice to Democrats includes a controversial claim that they should give up on gun control in the many places where they cannot win that argument. Democrats can fetter their ability to accomplish any other good things if they guarantee their own defeat at the polls on this one issue (which was Lincoln's attitude toward abolition in the 1850s). Frank is also a man of roots. Though born in Bayonne, New Jersey, he has lived his whole adult life in Boston politics, as an aide to Mayor Kevin White, a member of the Massachusetts legislature, and the representative in Washington of the state's fourth district.

Gingrich, who represents the traditional South, is not a southerner. Born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he grew up as a rootless "army brat," following his step-



STEVE LEONARD

father, a career army officer, from camp to camp—in America (Fort Riley, Fort Benning) or abroad (Stuttgart, Orléans). For long periods, the stepfather was away in Korea or Vietnam, and Gingrich, now an advocate of orphanages, was a semi-orphan himself, living with his dead father's sister and her husband, or with his maternal grandmother, while his mother held a job....

No matter where the Republicans begin, they are in trouble—which led Frank Luntz [an influential G.O.P. pollster] to say: "If everyone is giving up something at the same time, you're okay...We've all got to go together." David Frum [a former editor of the *Wall Street Journal*] heartily agreed: "I would say that on a single day this summer we eliminate three hundred programs, each one costing a billion dollars"—which would still not balance the budget, "but, boy, do they [the cuts] make a point."

Can politicians take the screams of outrage such a move would provoke? It will require a toughness most people have not suspected in their delegates. William Kristol said: "If Republicans get spooked the first time someone tries to demagogue that issue [fairness], we will be in deep trouble. Republicans will need to have thick skins to survive the fairness attack." The big thinkers psyched themselves up for this bloodletting. Frum: "There is no way that the Republican Party is going to be able to remain true to its principles without being accused of being callous. In the current environment, being accused of callousness might even be to our advan-

tage." Mike Murphy, the "hot" political consultant running Lamar Alexander's presidential campaign, agreed: "We have to whip our guys up into a warrior-like frenzy, or they're going to back off on day fourteen." If that should happen, said Kristol, it is Apocalypse Time:

If Republicans fail on Capitol Hill, then you could have genuinely chaotic post-modernist, deconstructionist politics in America... Maybe a year from now we'll be back into chaos and into Perot squared... At this point, I think those are basically the two alternatives: Republican success or political chaos.

In short: here's another fine mess Newt's gotten us into. And remember that these gurus were fighting over *symbolic* cuts. No one was talking, yet, about retrenching Social Security and Medicare, though they all know that will be necessary if the budget is to be balanced by 2002, the Contract's target date.

Behind the talk of "whipping ourselves into a frenzy" is a realization that the Rush Limbaugh wing of the party is ruthlessly unforgiving to backsliders. Already some talk-show hosts are attacking delegates who went back on a term limit of six years for representatives in the House. The talk shows, with their hard-core callers, live in a world of absolutes. There is no compromise possible with the devils Bill and Hillary. And behind the talk shows lie the mobilized and mobilizable Christian fundamentalists who make the Republican primaries so dangerous to Republicans who waver. Frank says, "The Republican primaries have a lower turnout than Democrats. Moderates who will vote Republican in the fall do not necessarily even think of themselves as Republicans in the spring. So you combine a low turnout with a disproportionately high number of hyperactive fundamentalists...." Fanatics are useful allies for attacking those in power, but they become hard to satisfy when they put their own in office. ♦

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INTERVIEW:

CHATMAN ON WRITING AT NU...

Delle Chatman is a founding member of the Center for the Writing Arts. A writer of television, film, and theater, she came to Northwestern in 1990 and has since 1991 directed the Creative Writing for the Media Program anchored in the School of Speech. She has had several plays produced, written dramas and comedies for network and public television, and penned a screenplay for Columbia Pictures. Her film, Madame Secretary, a half-hour narrative written and directed here at Northwestern, received an Award of Excellence from the National Fine Arts Video Competition in 1994.

CWA: What has been the main thrust of your involvement with the Center?

Delle Chatman: As director of the Creative Writing for the Media Program, I was one of the dozen or so faculty the Provost called together to incubate the creative and pedagogical possibilities of a "Center for the Writing Arts." After gleefully submitting a rather ambitious proposal for all that the Center might become, I gravitated toward those activities which addressed the creative and educational challenges faced by writing faculty. The Center has given me an opportunity to help build a sense of community among writing instructors throughout Northwestern's diverse schools and disciplines.

CWA: That's a tall order. Describe a few of those initiatives.

DC: Beyond my contribution to the formulation of the Center's new brochure, it has been my great pleasure to organize and facilitate workshops co-sponsored by the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence. Working in tandem with its director, Ken Bain, we've provided a forum in which faculty discuss new teaching methods and seek ways of stoking their creative fires. During the winter quarter, we inaugurated a series of Writers' Salons, Sunday afternoon gatherings off-campus where faculty share their writing in a

convivial and yet discriminating atmosphere. We wanted to create a "safe" place where writing could be enjoyed for its own sake.

CWA: How do you do that?

DC: Gathering at someone's home helps. Everyone brings a pastry, paragraph, page, or five-minute portion of something they've written, but they don't put their name on it. These writings samples are placed in an envelope as they walk in the door. After talking and chomping on copious calories for a while, the work is distributed around the room, read out loud, and critiqued without the author ever having to reveal his or her identity. That way feedback is unencumbered by certain assumptions or agendas.

CWA: Can you briefly describe the Creative Writing for the Media Program?

DC: In the spring quarter of their sophomore year, interested students submit writing samples and are interviewed by myself and another instructor. Twelve are selected to spend their junior and senior years studying with professional writers, honing their craft and their business savvy in preparation for a career writing film, television, and

theater. The sequence begins with a comprehensive overview, examines the challenges of various genres, and incorporates instruction in short fiction, video journalism, and adaptation. Students assemble a varied portfolio of work and receive a Certificate in recognition of their accomplishment. It's blinking hard work actually. The program is unabashedly vocational by nature. These students fully intend to pursue writing as a career, so the curriculum must embrace the challenges of the professional world, while developing their skills as artists and thinkers.

CWA: As an immigrant from that professional world into the academy, what has teaching here meant to you?

DC: It has given me an opportunity to celebrate and explore screenwriting as an art form. It's the newest form of writing, you know, an art in its infancy actually and already extremely powerful. Unfortunately, this writing-child is being raised in the armpit of commerce. As a teacher, I can incubate my best ideas about what is possible for visual storytellers, and then share my best wisdom with students who will carry this work into the next century. ♦

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:

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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)

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), 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), Michael Williams (Philosophy).