

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

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JUNE 1996

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

A Note of Gratitude

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

It is now just three years since the central administration created a Committee on Writing and two years since that Committee established the Center for the Writing Arts. During this time, the Center has been an important part of my day-to-day life, because of both its exciting work and the remarkable people whom I have gotten to know, people who have worked tirelessly, efficiently and enthusiastically to fulfill the Center's missions. Since this will be my last column as Center director, perhaps I may be excused for writing in a personal way about CWA.

I am a firm believer that initiatives of this sort work best if guided by the efforts of their participants, who have nothing to gain except the pleasure of seeing good ideas realized. The director's job is then to facilitate these initiatives, to help turn possibilities into realities. Too many people have conceived of such ideas for me to name them all, but I would mention at the outset that this newsletter has been the project of David Abrahamson of Medill, who created it from nothing and made it an important means of communicating with all at NU interested in writing. David also organized our Third Thursday brown-bags at Medill, which have presented NU faculty concerned with writing in an informal and lively atmosphere.

These and many other excellent ideas were first presented in our Strategy Committee, chaired by Hilary Ward and Robert Gundlach, whose efforts for the Center have gone far beyond that committee's significant accomplishments. Students admitted to NU now receive a brochure introducing the university's superb resources in writing, and faculty have had the chance to participate in an exciting pedagogy seminar conceived by Delle Chatman. Lecture series have drawn large and intimate audiences to talks by internal and external people with unexpected insights into writing. This

year we were fortunate to have a lively first series on the writing of history, run by Peter Hayes, as well as the current series on writing and the new technology, organized by Nicholas Weir-Williams of Northwestern University Press. To the outside world, the Center's most visible activity has been our Visiting Writers program. We are now fortunate to have on campus two superb writers, Larry Heinemann and Jules Feiffer, who have shown great interest in interacting with students and the wider community. Set up by Mary Kinzie and Michael Janeway, this program has created excitement and brought considerable attention to Northwestern as the university of writing. I should also add that Mike Janeway's tireless efforts and deep support of the Center have been indispensable to its success.

In the long term, CWA's success will perhaps best be measured by its impact on the undergraduate experience. That is why I attach special significance to our newly designed course, "The Modes of Writing," created under the leadership of Ken Seeskin and taught this year by Ken, Bob Gundlach, George Harmon, and Barbara Schwom. We hope it will prove to have a significant influence on the writing culture at NU.

Next year, Ken will begin his term as Center director. Speaking personally, I can think of no one with more dedication, integrity, and ability, no one whom I would rather see guide the activities of the Center's many dedicated participants.

In most organizations, the people who really make the difference remain hidden in plain view. For two years, every activity depended on a few able graduate students, led in turn by Michele LaForge, Lindsay Sargent, and John Kieselhorst. And for the last year, the Center has been blessed with the truly amazing abilities, dedication, and good humor of Kathe Marshall. I will miss directing the Center, but I know that it is being left in the best of hands. ♦



MARK YOUR CALENDAR..

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

Tuesday, May 21, 1996, 7:00 p.m.,
A Reading by Jules Feiffer (1996 NU Writer in Residence), Harris Hall 108.

Thursday, May 23, 1996, 4:00 p.m.,
Lecture: "Copyright vs Community: The New Information Technologies and the Commoditization of Learning" by Brian Nielsen (ACNS), NU Library Forum Room.

Tuesday, May 28, 1996, 4:00 p.m.,
Lecture: "A Storyteller's Take on Writing" by Larry Heinemann (1996 NU Writer in Residence), Harris Hall 108.

Tuesday, June 4, 1996, 3:00 p.m., Lecture:
"Going It Alone: Reporting Without a Net" by Tina Rosenberg (1996 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction), Fisk Hall 311.

RECENT CENTER EVENTS

Rites of Spring

By Kathe Marshall

April may have been a cruel month for weather, but the Center provided a warm welcome for visiting speakers and for two distinguished Writers-in-Residence in the spring quarter. On April 25, in the final lecture of our "Narrative and History" series, Elizabeth Cheresch Allen (Bryn Mawr College) described "Three Suicides and a Survivor" from Russian literature's greatest narrators: Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Karamzin, and Ostrovsky.

The second Center colloquium series, "The Impact of Electronic Publishing on Scholarship," opened on April 18 with a smashing full color demonstration of modern internet publishing by Mark Amerika (Brown University) who explained "Hypertext, Web Publishing and Virtual Narrativity" to a group of enthusiastic computer scholars in the multi-media equipped Forum Room of the University Library. The next installment in the Center's "Electronic Publishing" series on May 2 turned to more serious demonstrations of the "Monograph in Peril" as described by Lisa Freeman, dynamic and outspoken Director of the University of Minnesota Press.

Jules Feiffer and Larry Heinemann,

Continued on page 4

NORTHWESTERN'S NOTABLE WRITERS

Larry Heinemann: *An Impulse to Explore*

By Matthew Wright

Larry Heinemann is the author of three critically acclaimed works, *Paco's Story*, *Cooler* by the Lake and *Close Quarters*. He is a Writer in Residence at Northwestern University for the Spring 1996 term, teaching a writing workshop entitled "The Storyteller's Point of View."

There were no books in the house where Larry Heinemann was born. Growing up he received poor grades, and he hadn't the faintest notion that one day he'd become a writer. In fact, he is a bit surprised he didn't end up as a CTA bus driver, a job he took upon returning from the Vietnam War. "I was the worst driver that ever lived. I drove my bus like a bulldozer," Heinemann says. "If it weren't for the traffic and the people, it would have been fine.

"I had what would now be termed 'an attitude problem,'" Heinemann continues, a bitter outlook sparked by his return to the United States after being drafted and serving as an infantryman in the war. In March 1968, Heinemann arrived home with his experiences permanently imbedded in his mind—and an overwhelming need to share them. He told everybody who would listen about his experiences in Vietnam.

In the fall of that year, he began working on *Close Quarters*, the first of two war novels. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated earlier in the year, adding to Heinemann's sense of displacement in the world. "I felt the war had followed me home," he says. "I felt like an

alien in my own country."

"Writing comes out of an impulse to explore a subject matter, of something that really takes your attention, something you feel strongly about," Heinemann says. "At some point, the rhetorical technicalities of writing are no longer the focus. The question is: What to write about? What are the things in life that you feel strongly about?"

But for successful writers, this is only the first step. "Writing begins as a derivative of direct experience," he says, "but eventually you move away, you gain distance. You see the subject in a much broader way. Your own participations, your own personal feelings about it are overtaken by other perceptions. You see it as a whole."

Heinemann based much of this philosophy of writing on the works of Herman Melville, who in *Moby-Dick* juxtaposed the broad issues of belief, ambition and the spiritual nature of mankind with the technical aspects of whaling. Melville placed importance on the entire picture of the enterprise and the exploits of an obsessed sea captain. Such focus on larger, more abstract issues, with constant parenthetical instructional descriptions of processes, can be found throughout Heinemann's three novels. The narrative of his second novel, *Paco's Story*, jumps from the nightmarish reality of

Vietnam to mundane descriptions of the tranquilizer-popping protagonist's job as a dishwasher in a small-town cafe.

In Heinemann's experience as a creative-writing teacher—he taught for 14 years at Columbia College before quitting 10 years ago to write full-time—most novices do not feel comfortable using such juxtapositions. Heinemann hopes he can help his Northwestern students take what is basically a nonfiction form and adapt it into fiction. "To be a writer," Heinemann says, "you really have to be a humanist, a historian, an archeologist, a librarian, a linguistic perfectionist, a poet." As a teacher, Heinemann exposes his students to the broadest possible variety of fiction, showing them "vivid, compelling, unmistakable examples of superb writing." Although a 10-week term is not a long time, Heinemann hopes that by the end, his students will know more about their imaginative capacity.

When not teaching or attending Cubs games, Heinemann is working on a nonfiction book about Vietnam, where "the most complicated piece of machinery on a farm would be a 200-pound water buffalo." He is focusing on the country's culture, history, politics, education system and "hangover from the war," all organized around the antiquated railway system. ♦

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

As Summer Beckons...

By Kathe Marshall

The final weeks of spring quarter are crowded with events, as our two distinguished Writers-in-Residence this year, Jules Feiffer and Larry Heinemann, conclude their teaching and their speaking engagements. On May 21 Jules Feiffer—journalist, playwright, cartoonist and screenwriter—will read some selections from his recent work in Harris Hall. He will be introduced by David Downs (Speech/Theater), director of Feiffer's play *Knock, Knock*, which opened at NU's Josephine Louis Theater in early May to very enthusiastic reviews.

Novelist Larry Heinemann will share his own particular version of the creative experience in "A Storyteller's Take on Writing," a public lecture in Harris Hall on May 28. Heinemann, whose book, *Close Quarters*, has been described as the seminal work on Vietnam, will explore the gathering of actual experience into narrative experience. Informal receptions to honor Feiffer and Heinemann will follow their lectures.

On May 23 the third in an exciting series of talks on "The Impact of Electronic Publishing on Scholarship" will conclude with a lecture by Brian Nielsen, network resources coordinator for NU's computing services. Nielsen will address the technical aspects of electronic publishing with a dramatic presentation, "Copyright versus Community: The New Information Technologies and the Commoditization of Learning," in the stylish new Forum Room of the University Library. This special colloquium, organized for the Center by Nick Weir-Williams (NU Press) has highlighted the difficulties of publishing and of delivering recent scholarly work to its traditional audience in the academy. A reception in the library's Ver Steeg lounge will follow Nielsen's presentation.

Before the Center goes on summer hours, we are delighted to co-sponsor (along with the Medill School of Journalism and the School of Speech) a visit on June 4 by Tina Rosenberg, 1996 Pulitzer prize winner for general nonfiction, who will talk about "Going It Alone: Reporting Without a Net." Rosenberg won the Pulitzer for her book, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts after Communism*. ♦

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

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LARRY HEINEMANN, AN EXCERPT...

What follows is an excerpt from Paco's Story (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987). Copyright 1986 by Larry Heinemann. All rights reserved.

It may come as something of a surprise, James, but Paco, for all his trouble, has never asked, *Why Me?*—the dumbest, dipstick question only the most ignorant fucking new guy would ever bother to ask.

Why *you*? Don't you know? It's your turn, Jack!

No, James, Paco has never asked, *Why me?* It is we—the ghosts, the dead—who ask, *Why him?*

So Paco is made to dream and remember, and we make it happen in this way. He would struggle back to his dingy little room after work, and flop headlong across the bed, with the sore pain of his wounds itching like the burning sting of a good hard slap.

We would slither and sneak, shouldering out way up behind the headboard, emerging like a new born—head turned and chin tucked, covered head to toe with a slick gray ointment, powdery and moist, like the yolk of a hard-boiled egg, and smelling of petroleum. We come to stand behind him against the wall—we ghosts—as flat and pale as a night light, easy on the eyes. We reach out as one man and begin to massage the top of his head; his scalp cringes and tingles. We work our way down the warm curve of his neck and the meaty part of his back, and when Paco is most beguiled, most rested and trusting, at that moment of most luxurious rest, when Paco is all but asleep, *that* is the moment we whisper in his ear, and give him something to think about—a dream or a reverie.

Some nights he dreams escape dreams: being chased, sweating and breathless, into a large and spacious warehouse with a paving-stone floor crisscrossed with narrow ore-cart tracks, enormous whitewashed skylights overhead, and dusty cobwebs hanging down as thick as Spanish moss.

And some nights he dreams execution dreams. A group of soldiers, Paco among them, is led down a narrow, well-lit corridor—the hot-water piping over-



JERRY BAUER

head plenty warm, humming; the floor glistening with wax. They are escorted into a small room of bare concrete; everyone stuffy, hot and itchy. The group consists of one man from each platoon in three battalions of infantry—chosen by lot, volunteered—to be executed as punishment for some crime never mentioned. Cowardice? Mutiny? A fragging?

But just as often, James, Paco dreams of what it would have been like to leave Vietnam on his own two feet, the 2nd squad of the 2nd platoon humping along a flat orange road in full battle dress, bristling with guns and ammunition. We come to a large, glazed-brick building in the middle of a broad plain—a theater, say, or a gymnasium with sparkling brown windows that reflect everything darkly. Paco, urged always in the dream by a sudden, excited impulse, turns abruptly aside from us. He jumps the deep and narrow ditch, brimful with stagnant, brackish water and creamy with a bubbling scum. He sheds his rifle and bandoliers, his rucksack and flak jacket and pistol. He walks on, peeling his filthy, sour T-shirt off his body, and steps into the thick pastel shade of many tall rubber trees. He hops up the low steps of the building and comes right to the entrance, feeling that sliver of ice-cold air blowing through the split in the wide double doors—that steady blast burning as though he's being sliced in two. The door springs open and in he goes, to a low, wide lobby of smooth gray carpet crowded with other homebound troops. Paco makes his way among the tight, in-facing groups of soldiers—everyone decked out in their Class-A khakis—talking casually

with their bulky greencoats thrown over their arms and their trouser creases as crisp and perfect as stitching. All of them tall and robust, faces full of color, healthy and soldierly. Paco—in the dream now, James—feels diminished, achy and rheumy with the dull, curdled nausea of heat exhaustion coming over him, his skin much reddened, hot and dry to the touch. He finally makes it through the doors under the elaborate bunting of a welcome banner and into a broad auditorium—the place sloping gently down like an Olympic bleacher, but solid, and upholstered wall-to-wall with the same gray carpet as the lobby. The place is always crammed with more GIs—these decked out in sloppy, baggy fatigues—and so crowded that you have to mind where you step. Men sleep profoundly, curled up against their duffels and seabags, sprawled across footlockers and boxes and other crated luggage ready to ship. Paco tiptoes exaggeratedly, like a ballet clown, in his clumsy, filthy boots and baggy, rugged fatigues, over the duffels and bundles and spread-out coats. And all the while a smooth, well-modulated announcer's voice calls over the public-address system in an endless roster of names, ranks, and parenthetical service numbers—like a recipe, James—paging the men to be loaded aboard the charter planes that wait outside on the tarmac, bound for home. There is a constant hubbub going on around Paco as he shoulders and urges his way to the exit. But as many times as he has had the dream, James, as many times as he has listened to that voice (always the very air around the speakers throbbing and popping, *crackling* with static; Paco's flesh tingling), never can he make out any of the names, and never does he hear his own, "Paco Sullivan, US 54 800 409, step to the door . . ."

And the next morning Paco would always waken from these dreams in the full, warm light of day with a start, tangled in the sheets and turned every which way in bed. And we, James—the dead, the ghosts who haunt him—long gone. ♦

INTERVIEW:

ABRAHAMSON ON WRITING AT NU...

David Abrahamson is associate professor at the Medill School of Journalism, where, since joining the Northwestern faculty in 1994, he has served as the director of Medill's Magazine Publishing Project. He is the editor of *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects* (Iowa State University Press, 1995) and author of *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (Hampton Press, 1996), an interpretive history of the magazine profession since World War II. At the Center for Writing Arts he has served as a central committee member, as organizer of the monthly "Writers on Writing" presentation series and as editor of its newsletter.

CWA: As a relatively recently arrived faculty member, how would you characterize the role of writing here at this university?

David Abrahamson: To my eye, the two most compelling aspects of the place of writing at Northwestern are, first, the extraordinary depth and breadth of the writing talent here and, second, the uncommon commitment on the part of so many students, faculty, staff and administrators to the goal of furthering the pursuit of excellence in writing in all its varied forms.

CWA: This "uncommon commitment" you speak of—it's still somewhat implicit, isn't it?

DA: Perhaps. I'm reminded of Saul Morson's "Director's Letter" in the last issue of this newsletter. You might recall he mentioned that, as a Yale undergraduate, it was his perception that the fundamental culture of the institution afforded a prominence to both the formal study and a less structured but no less passionate appreciation of English literature. Regardless of one's own discipline, a mastery of English literature well beyond conventional proficiency was agreed by (almost) all to be a matter of inherent importance at Yale. And it's the cultural dimension, I think, that is crucial here.

CWA: Cultural? Can you expand on that?

DA: During my own undergraduate experience at Johns Hopkins in the 1960s I sensed a similar institutional culture, related to science in general and the study of the life sciences in particular. For example, the survey biology course for non-science majors was taught by the school's very best teacher, who also happened to be a dean. Similarly,

traditional history majors braved the early registration dawn to enroll in always-over-subscribed courses offered by the History of Science Department. In effect, the underlying culture of the place said: Immerse yourself in the Hopkins milieu for four years and, no matter what your field of study, you will emerge grounded in a knowledge—and with a deep appreciation of the significance—of the biological sciences.

CWA: And how could this relate to the possibilities here at Northwestern?

DA: I suppose my views revolve around the unique potential of the Center for the Writing Arts. Simply put, our university has in the Center a singular opportunity to define its fundamental identity as one which privileges the centrality of writing in the undergraduate experience. Drawing together resources across schools and disciplines (CAS, Medill, the Writing Program, Speech

and University College); developing new courses and master classes, partial-term seminars and colloquia; organizing and underwriting student internships—in all these ways and more, the Center could become a catalyst for asserting the primacy of writing excellence in Northwestern's culture.

CWA: To what purpose?

DA: To cast this in the language of purpose, the Center's long-term goal would be to serve as the prime intellectual and pedagogical agent for an implicit warrant to our students' parents: Send us your daughter or son and, given the inherent importance of writing here at Northwestern, we can promise that four years later they will have had exceptional opportunities to develop both an abiding appreciation for and a mastery beyond mere competence with the written word. Now that, I think you'll agree, would be a worthy accomplishment, no? ♦

Continued from page 1

RECENT EVENTS...

Center Writers-in-Residence, have been busy not only with their creative writing classes, but at various public events. In late April, Feiffer participated in a panel on editorial quality for the Medill Magazine Publishing Program. He also talked to the Freshman Seminar, "Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent," during a regular session of the class in early May.

Most exciting for the Center was the gala opening on May 3 of Feiffer's *Knock-Knock* at the Josephine Louis Theater. The Center gathered a theater party, including President and Mrs. Bienen and Provost and Mrs. Dumas, to attend the opening-night performance and, afterward, the cast party honoring Feiffer and director David Downs. Hallie Feiffer, age 11, flew in for the performance and charmed everyone with her gen-

tle and attentive presence.

Larry Heinemann's reading for the Center on May 7 was introduced by Reginald Gibbons (editor of *TriQuarterly*) who paid ample tribute to Heinemann's craftsmanship: "for inhabiting, as an artist, such a difficult world, and for portraying it not only with bluntness but with grace." And "The Fragging," a new short story about the Vietnam era that Heinemann read, was everything Gibbons had promised—shocking, brutal, funny, sad, and true.

Then, at a brown bag lunch on May 16 for the Third Thursday Writers-on-Writing series, Heinemann supplemented his reading by addressing in "The Wellsprings of Imagination: Where Do Stories Come From?" the process of writing from the storyteller's point of view.

The Center will have its own rich narrative about the spring of 1996 and a plethora of events with which to finish the year. ♦

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).