

The Newsletter of Northwestern University's Center for the Writing Arts

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Director's Letter By Gary Saul Morson
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Although Northwestern possesses unparalleled resources in writing, few individuals inside or outside the University have a clear picture of the extent of its wealth. From our celebrated school of journalism to our renowned programs in drama and screenwriting; from *TriQuarterly* magazine and our University Press to our excellent creative writers; and from superb composition instructors in CAS, University College, and elsewhere to a multitude of faculty concerned with language, writing, and the teaching of writing at all levels, the University offers an extensive range of opportunities to practice writing of all kinds and to think about and study writing as well. Provost David Cohen, recognizing these strengths, conceived the idea that has become the Center for the Writing Arts. The Provost realized that, even on campus, almost no one was aware of the closely related activities of other schools or departments. Interaction held out the promise of synergy. Promoting the centrality of writing at Northwestern might bring increased attention to undergraduate programs, attract better students, and inspire new intellectual endeavors among faculty. As a first step, in the spring of 1993 the Provost asked me to chair an inter-school committee, which originally included Timothy Breen (History), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film), Reginald Gibbons (English), Robert Gundlach (Director of the CAS Writing Program), Michael Janeway (Dean of Medill), Mary Kinzie (Director, English Major in Writing), Kenneth Seeskin (Philosophy), and Hilary Ward (University College). This group, which soon added David Abrahamson (Medill), Jerry Goldman (Political Science), and Roy Pea (Dean of Education and Social Policy) was to implement some preliminary ideas and develop new ones.

The academic year 1993-94 was to be the planning year, but considerably more than mere planning went on. The Colloquium committee, chaired by Mary Kinzie, organized a series of lectures on "The Language of Experience." It also arranged for a series of books, devoted to writing and the teaching of writing, to be published by the University Press. The Visiting Writers committee, co-chaired by Mary Kinzie and Michael Janeway, arranged for three prominent writers to come to campus and teach a course during the 1994-95 academic year: Ann Beattie, who was here in the fall, Ward Just, who is here now, and Tracy Kidder, who will come in the spring. The Curriculum committee, chaired by Ken Seeskin, created a new bundle of courses, designed to teach freshmen writing in an exciting and innovative way. And a Strategy committee, co-chaired by Robert Gundlach and Hilary Ward, which began by gathering information about Northwestern's diverse resources in writing, is also producing a brochure for the admissions office, has organized joint pedagogical seminars with the Searle Teaching Center, sponsored a Writer's Tea, and is exploring many other activities designed to bring people together.

By the time we were established as a Center in the fall of 1995, it was evident that the group shared a number of key beliefs. First, we believe in the intimate connections between good writing and clear thinking. Second, unlike narrower programs elsewhere, we are interested in the many very different modes of writing and their potential interaction. And third, we appreciate that the energy to sustain this initiative must come not "from the top" but from as many members of the community as possible. Each committee is interested not in imposing a vision, but in serving as a locale in which new ideas can be presented and new initiatives fostered. We hope to thrive on your input.

Ward Just, An Excerpt...

What follows is an excerpt from *Ambition and Love*
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994):

She wrote to her sister--one of those letters which alarm the recipient, as they are surely meant to do consciously or not--"I am never happy to see the dawn. I watch for it patiently, with appreciation, because I am painting it. But I am not eager to see it because it means my working day is ended. I make a desultory stroke here and there, and mix the paint again. The room fills with gray light and I know now that I must give it up and return to my nest like any nocturnal bird. I must cover the canvas, put away my tools, swallow aspirin, and prepare for bed. As morning light fills the room, I see that my general is taking form, though not the form I expected. I am not disappointed because the painting is acquiring a life of its own. An outsider cannot understand this, that a work of art is no different from a life. With each brush stroke, the choices narrow. Things are done that can't be undone; if you undo them, you have a different work, perhaps better, perhaps worse, but anyhow different. And the canvas remembers. You begin with a man, tallish on horseback. He has a certain cast to his face, the sum of victories and defeats, some courage, some vainglory, some honor, some cowardice; and the art is knowing which is which. Of course as an artist you make mistakes that can be corrected--recovered, as a human being recovers from injury or emotional distress. But the scars remain. At the end of it the general is no longer himself, or the sculptor's, or mine. In a practical sense he is you--the witness--since he will be seen with your eyes, meaning your vision, imperfect and biased as it is bound to be. However, he belongs to me." And finally, in a hand that wandered the page, in places barely legible: "Water rushes through the pipe in the hall. Somewhere in the building a door slams. I can hear voices, traffic in the street, an ambulance siren far away. I pull off my sweater and step out of my jeans, hanging them on the doorknob. I could be anywhere, except for the morning noises that are particular to my building and my street in Paris. Anticipating insomnia, I commence my bedtime rituals, beginning with my hair. I wear it short again, for convenience, but still I brush it fifty times, staring into the mirror. Then I take a final look out the window, say my prayers (the same ones our father taught us when we were children), and try to sleep. I do or I don't sleep. If I

don't, I take a glass of Calvados--and, in a few moments, another. I love its bouquet, the flavor so light on my tongue, then the catch in my throat as the liquor works its way down, thickening, spreading itself throughout my body. My fingers fill up with it, my will wanders, and I am able to begin my American dialogues, imaginary conversations with absent friends. Before long I am in deep sleep, resting easily, surely smiling."

Georgia's postscript, not written but spoken to her absent friends: "This is not a life that most people would choose, yet I can imagine many that are much worse and people who are unhappier by far than I. Despite appearances I am not lonely. I am fatigued, but that is a natural condition. My work is demanding: grazing is not as effortless as it looks. I have resources enough for the way I live, which is after all my own choice. No one forced me. I have elected to live as a fugitive among strangers, remote from the life of my own nation, unconnected to the life of this one. I have my work and my reflections, my prayers, my American dialogues and my French time; and I believe that even God is lonely, and perhaps God most of all. I am trying to live without disorder so that I can discover my next step, when it will be and in what direction. It could be that I will remain where I am; there is no law against it and I am content here after my own fashion. In a manner of speaking, I am waiting for instructions. I am waiting for a convincing voice, either my own or another's. Just yesterday I read that in many mosques around the world the Imam has the use of a strong-voiced interpreter. The Imam speaks quietly from the maqsura, and the interpreter shouts his words to the congregation gathered in the courtyard. Sometimes this is only a version of the Imam's words. The devout call the interpreter the Exaggerator. Sins exaggerated, consequences exaggerated, forgiveness exaggerated. There is wit to this. I am in rue Blaise listening for the Imam's true voice, but I cannot hear him above the shouting of the Exaggerators. A common enough complaint; you hear it all the time. It is a plague of the modern world."

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Interview: Kinzie On Writing at Northwestern

Mary Kinzie is a founding member of the Center for the Writing Arts. A poet, critic, teacher and editor, she has been at Northwestern since 1975, and since 1979 has directed the English Major in Writing, the undergraduate creative writing program. Kinzie has published numerous volumes of poetry as well as criticism, and has just finished a textbook called *Learning to Read and Write Poetry* for Northwestern University Press, the first in a new series to appear from the Press and the CWA. CWA: How have you been involved in the creation of the Center?

Mary Kinzie: I was contacted by the provost, who had seen the strengths of the many writers and writing programs here, and wanted initially simply to speed conversation among us. Our group began meeting in the early fall year before last. We soon discovered that our interests often converged, giving rise to plans for collaboration. Since Northwestern does not yet have a creative writing school or degree program, I put on the table a proposal I had been working on for an M.A. in Writing and the Teaching of Writing. So this is something now being actively explored. And it's this possibility--of founding a new kind of rigorous creative writing M.A. here, with an ambitious pedagogical component--that most of my other proposals lead back to. I see the colloquium series and the idea of an intellectual journal, which the Press is considering, as further steps toward drawing attention to the links between Writing and Thought, as we hope the journal will be called.

CWA: What steps are you taking toward rethinking writing education and planning for a possible master's program in creative writing.

MK: We are taking steps toward it by beginning a textbook series whose first volumes--on reading and writing poetry and fiction, and on the practice of the longer poem and novella--draw attention to a somewhat unorthodox

idea about teaching writing in the context of literary creation and the life of the mind. This idea is that the only way to read what the artist writes is to imitate in the act of writing what the artist wrote; you pretend to be the writer of this very poem, of this novel, before you. Teaching in this way tries to make conscious the act of surprising and then domesticating the moments when the writer does what you would not have done. But the taking-over, rather than being just another aggressive and egoistic critical act, is one that only the particular work of art can dictate to you.

CWA: What else is unique about the way you teach writing?

MK: Articulating the stages students need to go through. We are the only program that pays this kind of attention to form in poetry and fiction, to literary tradition, and to the effort of explication from within. What we have done on the undergraduate level, we hope to do on the graduate, and in the process to draw upon the many faculty at Northwestern who have long upheld the need to connect writing with thought and genuine intellectual work.

CWA: How do the other initiatives from the Center reflect this commitment?

MK: What I find most heartening about the work of this last year is the extraordinary good will that has been generated, and the speed with which promising ideas are now getting around and gathering momentum. I am grateful to have been able to meet faculty and administrators from other departments and schools who share a concern with learning, thought, and the word. It turns out that Northwestern has not only notable professional schools but also a long-standing commitment to good writing in the humanities, and there is a general feeling that, with a little help from our friends, we can make this university an innovator in the blending of intellectual enterprise with the arts of expression.

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Recent Center Events From Sumeria to Cyberspace: Events at the Center for Writing Arts

By Michael Denner

The diverse activities of the Center for Writing Arts this academic year have showcased the Center's interdisciplinary approach to excellence in writing. Events conducted under the auspices of CWA have included writing courses at Northwestern, a series of colloquia, pedagogy seminars, literature and poetry readings, and a new book series. This year's colloquium series, *The Art of Translation*, explored different approaches to translation in its broadest sense: across media and culture, as well as across languages. "Translation," according to Dr. Saul Morson, Director of the Center, "provides a particular model for something writing in general does: convey meaning across a divide."

The series began in September with the renowned translator Michael Heim, best known for his work with Milan Kundera, discussing the various approaches and difficulties of translating literature into English. In October, Irish poet Eavan Boland spoke on her difficulties as a poet in forging a language of one's own out of the imposed languages of country and tradition. In November, Johnny Payne, Professor of English at Northwestern, discussed translating contemporary Latin American fiction. Later that month, Tony Eprile, visiting Assistant Professor of English, explored the politics of translation in South Africa and the hidden renaissance of Afrikaans literature. In January, Andrew Wachtel, Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature, discussed the connection between Russia's insatiable appetite for translated foreign literature and its strong nationalism. Finally, on January 30th, in an event co-sponsored by the English Department at Northwestern, poet and translator David Ferry will read from his own poetry and later that day speak on his celebrated translation of the Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*.

On January 19th, the Center's new "Third Thursdays" brown-bag lunches began with Professors Michael Janeway from the Medill School of Journalism and Roy Pea from the School of Education discussing new approaches to writing and publishing made possible by technology in "Writing in the Age of Cyberspace."

In October, Delle Chatman facilitated a pedagogy seminar, "Writing and Teaching: Two Sides of the Same Educational Coin," co-sponsored by the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence. "During those two hours," explained Delle Chatman, "we shared the rewards and challenges of teaching writing while pursuing our own creative and professional agendas." Participants also discussed professional issues like grading philosophies and writing exercise. A second workshop to be held January 30th will be a brainstorming session addressing the challenges discussed in the earlier workshop.

The CWA also sponsored several public readings by internationally recognized authors. Visiting writer Ann Beattie, author of 11 works of fiction, gave two public readings from her short stories and novels, the second of which was co-sponsored by the Northwestern University Press. In November, Israel's leading poet, Yehuda Amichai, read from his poetry at a presentation co-sponsored by the Program in Jewish Studies.

The Center has also begun the initial steps towards publishing a series of textbooks and critical works in conjunction with the Northwestern University Press entitled "Learning to Read and Write." Mary Kinzie, a board member of the Center and Director of the English Major in Writing Program at Northwestern, will be the author of the first book in the series on how to read and write poetry. Future volumes in the series are currently in the works. The center also plans to begin a journal, *Writing and Thought*.