

# WRITING MATTERS

VOL. 10 NO. 1

Fall 2009

## SPECIAL EVENTS ON CAMPUS



### Alex Kotlowitz

Writer in Residence, Center for the Writing Arts  
Medill Senior Lecturer

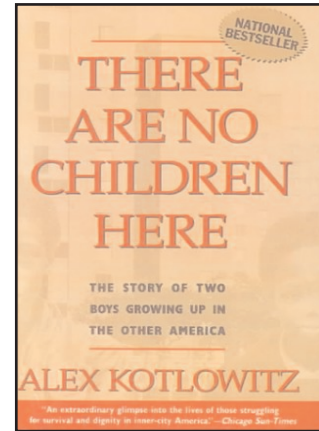
### Reading from Various Works

**Tuesday**

**January 26, 2010**

5:30-6:30 pm

University Hall 201, Hagstrum Room  
1897 Sheridan Road, Evanston



### Robyn Okrant

Author of *LIVING OPRAH: My One-Year Experiment to Walk the Walk of the Queen of Talk*

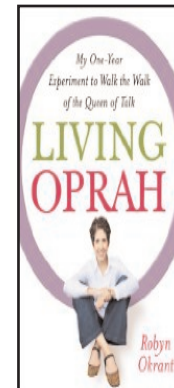
### Speaker in our Series: From BLOG to BOOK

**Thursday**

**February 11, 2010**

5:30-6:30 pm

(Light refreshments will be served)  
University Hall 201, Hagstrum Room  
1897 Sheridan Road, Evanston



All events are **FREE** and **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

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**NU CENTER FOR THE  
WRITING ARTS  
ADVISORY BOARD  
MEMBERS**

**2009/2010**

**Center for the Writing Arts Mission Statement:**

*The purpose of all CWA activities is to create, support and further undergraduate and graduate opportunities for the study of writing at Northwestern, both within CWA itself and across the university; to facilitate a continuing discussion in the university community about how best to foster and situate writing as a crucial part of a university education; to help coordinate the university's multifarious courses and programs in writing across departments, programs and schools; and also to welcome audiences from the metropolitan area to the rich array of public events on campus that are focused on writing.*

**Reginald Gibbons**

*Director of the Center for the Writing Arts  
Professor of English, Classics, and Spanish and Portuguese  
Co-Director of the MA/MFA in Creative Writing (SCS)*

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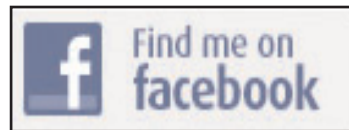
*School of Communication,  
Performance Studies*

**Charles Whitaker**

*Medill School*

**Patti Wolter**

*Medill School*



**Find out about our events on FACEBOOK.**

**Read our latest BLOG entries: Writing,  
Reading, Learning and Teaching**

<http://writing-arts-blog.northwestern.edu/>

**PLANNING WRITING EVENTS THIS QUARTER?  
LET US KNOW!**

Just a reminder that the Center's biweekly e-mail announcement, *NU Writing Event Digest*, highlights NU writing events and reaches students, faculty, and staff via the Center's growing email list. If you know of an upcoming event related to writing, whether it be an author's visit, departmental program, or even an off-campus event involving NU students or faculty, please let us know! We will do our best to publicize all writing-related programming. If you would like to receive the electronic *NU Writing Events Digest*, please send an email to: [words@northwestern.edu](mailto:words@northwestern.edu) or call us at 847-467-4099.

**WRITING MATTERS**

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Editor: STACY L. OLIVER

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The Center for the Writing Arts presents a variety of distinguished writers from both on and off campus. For future events and an archival listing visit: [www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/](http://www.northwestern.edu/writing-arts/)

AN INTERVIEW

Northwestern alumna HEIDY STEIDLMAYER (B.A. 1991) has received a 2009 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Awards. The \$25,000 award is given annually to six women writers who demonstrate excellence and promise in the early stages of their careers.

Heidy Steidlmayer lives in Vacaville, California, and has recently completed her first manuscript of poems entitled FOWLING PIECE. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, and *TriQuarterly*, and she received the 2007 J. Howard and Barbara M.J. Wood Prize from *Poetry* magazine. She received her B.A. from Northwestern University and her M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College.



Heidy Steidlmayer

*What have you done as a writer since graduating from NU?*

I worked in journalism for a number of years, then I went to Warren Wilson College for an MFA in Poetry.

*What would you say to undergraduate writers about learning how to write?*

Read the dictionary! Words undergo agonies and ecstasies just like we do -- they tell us about ourselves. Twenty years ago when I was an undergraduate in the writing program at Northwestern, Mary Kinzie encouraged me to keep reading the dictionary — and she was right. Today when I am most lost in a poem I often look to the meanings of words for a sense of direction.

*What are some books you've recently read and why?*

I recently read a small book called *Word-Hoard* by Stephen Barney because I was interested in his discussion of Old English terms for color. Many of these terms are based on chroma (brightness, amount of light) or intensity, but not necessarily hue. Terms like "dun," "wan," "sallow," "bleak," "dusky," and "swarthy" illustrate this point. The Anglo-Saxons also had a useful verb "sweorcan," meaning "to grow dark."

And while reading *Beowulf*, I came across an interesting old term meaning "bright." The term is "swegl."

*What is it about poetry that you find engaging?*

I think poetry allows you to make discoveries about yourself that you couldn't make in any other way. And while it is often a solitary act, I think the process of writing connects you, more definitively, to the world.

This poem by Steidlmayer originally appeared in *Poetry* magazine, June 2007.

Scree

I have seen the arrested  
shrub inform the crag with grief.  
Lichens crust the rocks with red.  
Thorns punctuate the leaf.

Sorrow is not a desert  
where one endures the other—  
but footing lost and halting  
step. And then another.

## WHAT ARE YOU READING?

We asked these questions: 1) What scholarly/professional book or article are you currently reading? 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure? 3) What is the next book you hope to read (for work or pleasure)? 4) What do you wish all your students would read? 5) Has any book you've recently read changed your thinking about your own work? How?



### Janet Burroway

Author of eight novels, and also plays, poetry, essays, texts for dance, and children's books. Her *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, is the most widely used creative writing text in America, and her multi-genre *Imaginative Writing* is in preparation for a third edition. She is Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor Emerita of the Florida State University.

#### 1) What scholarly/professional book or article are you currently reading?

William Lhamon's *Turning Jim Crow* traces the image from its origin in an ironic and subversive minstrel song, through its appropriation as an icon of segregation, up to the election of Barak Obama. He sees the image as having retained the paradoxical power of its twisted history.

#### 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure?

I've just finished Lorrie Moore's *The Gate at the Stairs* and am 30 pages into Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. It's delicious to have back-to-back new novels from these two very different sensibilities -- both, along with Lessing, Atwood and Munro, among the best writing fiction today.

#### 3) What is the next book you hope to read (for work or pleasure)?

I want to read Dexter Filkins' *The Forever War*. I keep putting it off -- but I won't forever. These are also on my "to read" shelf: Tom Piazza's *City of Refuge*, Hans Fallada's *Every Man Dies Alone* and Graham Farmello's *The Strangest Man*, about the life of Paul Dirac, who was my colleague at Florida State, though I didn't know him.

#### 4) What do you wish all your students would read?

William Golding has fallen totally out of favor and off the canon (he'll be back), but I wish all my students would have the arduous pleasure of his evocation of the beginnings of deductive reasoning and art in two neanderthal victims of genocide -- *The Inheritors*.

#### 5) Has any book you've recently read changed your thinking about your own work? How?

Ann Truitt's *Day Book* had two thought-provoking and useful revelations for me: the narrative power of what is essentially a diary, as long as the writer has a passionately pursued goal; and Truitt's unabashed certainty of the worth of her pursuit, the significance of (what she unselfconsciously refers to as) her art. That others didn't get what she was after hurt but didn't faze her. That I don't myself get her sculpture -- that it leaves me, precisely, cold - - makes this attitude all the more admirable and desirable.

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## Angela Jackson

Author of the critically acclaimed new novel, *Where I Must Go*, a portrayal of African-American students at a university greatly resembling Northwestern, during the 1967-68 school year. Trying to reconcile their individual aspirations and dreams, their social conscience with violent and tumultuous historical moments of struggle against racism, the students choose different paths toward the future.

Angela Jackson was born in Greenville, Mississippi, raised on Chicago's South Side, and educated at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. Her book *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses: The Beatitudes of the Spinners*, winner of the 1993 Chicago Sun-Times Book of the Year Award in Poetry and the 1994 Carl Sandburg Award for Poetry, and her selected poems, *And All These Roads Be Luminous*, are both published by TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press.

### 1) What scholarly/professional book or article are you currently reading?

I am currently doing a slow read of *The Regal Theater and Black Culture* by Dr. Clovis Semmes. I proceed slowly in nibbles for it is a rich and nutritious dish. The Regal Theater, that historic Black entertainment center, formerly on 47th and King Drive, was less than two miles from where I grew up. I never went inside to witness its legendary stage shows --- James Brown, Jackie Wilson, The Temptations, The Miracles, et al. (I was too young and not allowed to go.) But its impact resonates with generations of African-Americans.

Clovis Semmes (WCAS, 1971) was a sophomore when I was a freshman at Northwestern; he is a friend and I am excited and proud of his achievement. His writing has fluidity and accessibility. And it has a serious bottom of scholarship and experiential wisdom. The book is chronologically and thematically organized. Two photos evoke the quality and style of the Regal Theater audience in its heyday.

Because I am now recreating in fiction (novels and short stories) a city not unlike Chicago and a unique African-American community not unlike Chicago's, Clovis Semmes' book sends out deep echoes to me. It is a sound that I need to travel toward to arrive at my mythic truth. More importantly for more people, it is a book that offers ideas and lessons for following generations.

### 2) What book are you reading at the moment largely for pleasure?

I am reading *Song Yet Sung* by James McBride to my mother. She is visually impaired and loves when I read from this novel set in slavery time. It has action, plenty of it, interesting, well-drawn characters and a premise with undercurrents about African-American life today. The gift of prophecy is intriguing; it offers a way to comment on the present with a clear moral barometer.

When I first heard of this book on *The Tavis Smiley Show* a couple of years ago I decided to avoid it as it has a "Dreamer" character similar to a character in my novel. A poet/essayist called me and convinced me to read it. She said people were catching on to it by word-of-mouth. So my mother and I are taking part in its spell and I have found the similarities between McBride's Dreamer and mine distant.

What I like about *Song Yet Sung* is the large cast of characters who are converging in unpredictable ways. I appreciate the structure where each chapter focuses on a different person, yet moves the story forward. Harriet Tubman, Black Moses, is woven into the tale. Her goodness is offset by a host of evil characters in an evil system of slave trading and slave tracking. I love the Resistance of Black Folk and the gospel train to freedom. I find myself talking back to the novel --- McBride's take on the future is grim and comic thus far. But I want to see how it turns out.

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**3) What is the next book you hope to read (for work or pleasure)?**

I'm going to be reading poetry in the main for a while. I haven't selected what. Whatever I pluck off my library shelf or discover in the bookstore. There's always something wonderful. I've been meaning to read all of Ai, as her dramatic monologues are so daring. My friend, writer and artist, Cornelia Spelman, gave me the novel *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga of Zimbabwe. I am finding it harder and harder to resist delving into it immediately.

**4) What do you wish all your students would read?**

*Blacks* by Gwendolyn Brooks. This book holds most of Brooks' oeuvre --- most of her poetry and her classic novel *Maude Martha*. I find Brooks' *Blacks* essential because of its linguistic dexterity, its acute observation, and its absolute devotion to the exploration of the everyday lives of African-Americans. *Blacks* is a place to explore language and the human heart and mind. In addition, Chicago is the backdrop of the adventure that is the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. She knows her people. And because she knows her people we may know our shared humanity. Years ago Toni Morrison said that without Gwendolyn Brooks her work would have not been possible. It is so. Add Zora Neale Hurston to the mix and we are well-equipped women and men.

*Native Son* by Richard Wright was published in 1940. It was deemed somewhat gruesome and sensationalistic by some middle-class readers. By today's standards it is (I hope) still shocking but not far from the experience of the imagination of any one who watches the news or reads it. But Wright is great not because he shocks, but because he makes us feel and think, ask questions.

The last time I read *Native Son* I was teaching in Massachusetts. It was a snowy day and I was isolated in my little, stark apartment with that book. I felt as if someone had seized me by the throat. I was in some powerful grip. I had to keep reading. My life depended on it. I hope that students will feel that way too. And be seized by a clear-headed understanding of the Bigger Thomases of this world whom they had too little to do with legislating, ruling, exploiting. Too little to do with making it better as they became better and self-conscious, redeemed Biggers.

**5) Has any book you've recently read changed your thinking about your own work? How?**

Not recently. I have been shaped over time by many books, some of them living. I have been informed and charged by many stories and poems. I have been kept alive by poems, guided by their whispers. Stories have helped me to understand, to make sense of the messy stuff of life. I hope the books I am writing now will help me as I continue to ask questions and seek answers. I hope I will be led to books by others that will take me by the hand in fellowship and guidance.

## WRITING AND THE WEB

A new feature section that exams the world of writing and how it relates to the world-wide web as it pertains to mixed-media formats.

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Our first contributor is Chris Wallace, a writer, designer, and media specialist with NUIT / A&RT's NU Advanced Production Studio. In addition to his technical training, he has an MFA in writing from the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Chris's writing has appeared in *Elimae*, *Word Riot*, and *Bound Off* as well as numerous blogs. Chris is a member of the Hart & Halloran Word Factory Archive ([www.wordfactoryarchive.com](http://www.wordfactoryarchive.com)) where he acts as principal cinematographer.

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### How has the internet changed (if at all) your writing and reading habits (webzines, journals, blogs, etc...)

The web has not affected how I write (or produce photographs and films) as much as it has shaped what I do with those products. Because the Internet can distribute information through such a wide range of methods and can do so with such immediacy, it encourages the exposure of experimentation and process. It handles smaller bits of information well. I often take short selections from two or more pieces of fiction and lay them alongside one another to see how they react. Originally this was just a way to breathe new life into the writing of longer, narrative pieces. I eventually understood that projects like these have value beyond personal practice, and I discovered that this type of work has a natural home on the web.

Internet consumers' expectations differ from consumers of print, TV, radio, and film. They expect smaller and more interactive packets of information. They also expect content authors to release control more than in other outlets.

Perhaps, that's what the Internet really is – loss of control. Creators are able to quickly publish to the world using the web, but once released, that information can never really be penned in again. Through projects like the **Word Factory Archive** ([www.wordfactoryarchive.com](http://www.wordfactoryarchive.com)) I've been able to engage in work that blurs some lines of media and genre – not in a polished manner but as part of the exploration of the raw materials such as text and image that assist story-telling.

### How has it tapped into your creativity and passion for writing?

The web has a good way of leading you outside of your normal zone of activity without your knowing it. At times this is an annoyance, but it has brought me in contact with exciting ideas I would not have otherwise found. I enjoy landing on short animations and visually engaging presentations in particular. I also subscribe to feeds of photography and artwork such as *FFFOUND!* Visual work often influences my writing, and I regularly check image feeds such as *FFFOUND!* and *Booooooom* as well as blogs on design and architecture.

My first web-published work was released as part of an audio podcast in the literary audio magazine *Bound Off*. I created and submitted the work as text, but the end result was a recording of my reading of the piece. While this type of presentation is not revolutionary, it helped me understand that writing can wander down a variety of paths very easily when the destination is the browser. This potential for exploring a range of media and mixed media spoke to my interests in writing, photography, music, film, and web design. In that regard, I suppose it allowed me to tie various creative outlets together.

### Are there favorite writing links you'd like to share?

I do read a few literary sites regularly, including:

- [Elimae \(http://www.elimae.com\)](http://www.elimae.com)
- [Failbetter \(http://www.failbetter.com\)](http://www.failbetter.com)

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- **Brevity**  
(<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity>)

I generally use the web to get inspiration from non-literary related sources:

- **FFFOUND!** (<http://ffffound.com/>)
- **Boooooooooom** (<http://www.boooooooooom.com>)
- **Various Tumblr feeds**
- **TED - Technology, Entertainment, Design**  
([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com))
- **Tiny Gigantic** ([www.tinygigantic.com](http://www.tinygigantic.com))

I also regularly read blogs on topics I'm just personally interested in, like biking and web design.

**As a specialist in creating blogs and Internet content, do you have any tips for those who want to create their own blog or publish on the web?**

It's a lot of work. We often tell new clients that building a blog is easy. Keeping a blog fed is not. The pressure to produce is probably familiar to most writers, so the real challenge is publishing content quickly and letting it go. Blogs are not meant to be streams of watertight thoughts. They are imperfect. In the most effective cases the initial post is primarily the opening statement in a conversation.

Web publishing occupies a strange position in the world of content delivery because web content is both transitory and undying. Most blog posts deal with current events and today's thoughts, and while in the ever-increasing data pile the majority of those musings effectively fade away, the words are always discoverable, accessible, and reusable by anyone with a keyboard and a little time. Google makes certain of that. Other bloggers make certain of that. As I mentioned before, publishing to the web requires that you let go of some amount of control.

The value of the Internet is not just that information publishing is immediate and easy. The Internet's strength is the ability to incorporate any thought into the web and form relationships with other bits through discussion, aggregation, and re-purposing.

**What do you see as the future of the web and writing?**

Writing is already responding to the strengths of the web as a platform. People are experimenting with new forms of story telling, the mixing of genres and formats, and interactive and community-driven content creation in ways that only dynamic technology can support. Although people have been working in these directions for a while, works such as complex non-linear narratives, timeline-based presentations of text, the merging of gaming and storytelling, cell phone novels, and community novel writing are all benefiting from the collaborative environment of the web. Many of the results of these explorations probably won't stick in the long run – online collaborative novel writing seems to have already lost much of its appeal while short video essays are becoming a distinct form – but the questions they raise will shape writing and all creative processes.

The web and the forms of communication that grow out of it seem to be paring down our word counts. Flash fiction, sudden fiction, and micro-blogging are trends well suited to the bite-sized consumption we associated with email, social networking, and RSS feeds.

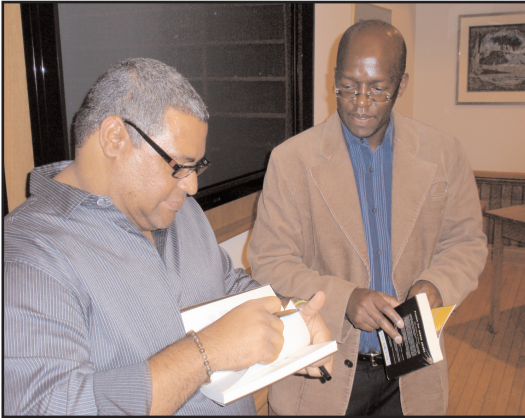
Additionally, there is simply more access to writing and publishing outlets. New online journals appear every day. Most of these are small, have very clear identities regarding their content, and are very approachable, which makes the concept of one's self as a writer feel much more possible. As with news producers, writers will probably find that their audience is largely composed of themselves. The surprise will be that this is actually a large and legitimate audience. The audience is not shrinking. The number of people engaging in the process is growing. The process itself just looks a little different.



## WRITING NEWS FROM AROUND CAMPUS

The MFA in Writing for the Screen and Stage at Northwestern, a two-year program offered in The School of Communication, just graduated their second class last year. On the film front – one of the grads, Erik Gernand, has had multiple film festival acceptances for a short film he made. Another grad, Jenny Hagel, has been awarded a National Board of Review grant for her short and has with her \$5,000 program grant (which every MFA student receives) sold her film to MTV. This fall, seven MFA scripts will be filmed by advanced production classes as part of Northwestern's innovative Short Film Collaborations Program.

In terms of new faculty, this program has welcomed TV writer Regina Stewart and screenwriter/playwright Weiko Lin. Faculty member Rebecca Gilman saw her play, *The Crowd You're In With*, premiere at the Goodman Theatre and her film, *Spinning Into Butter*, starring Sarah Jessica Parker, released to theatres and on DVD. Her new play, *A True History of the Johnstown Flood*, will be premiering at the Goodman in March. One of our adjunct faculty members, Mia McCullough, has had her play, *Lucinda's Bed*, premiere at Chicago Dramatists to critical acclaim. And another adjunct faculty member, Kat Falls, has sold her Young Adult novel, *Dark Life*, to Scholastic in a two-book deal. (*Dark Life* will arrive in bookstores in May 2010.)



**Chris Abani**, CWA's Visiting Writer in Residence for fall quarter 2009, signing books after his November 11th lecture. (Left to right: Chris Abani and Evan Mwangi, Assistant Professor of English.)



Chris Abani as the special guest of the CWA's Masters Tea with Residential College students.

Chris Abani, a native of Nigeria, is the author of *The Virgin of Flames*, *GraceLand*, *Masters of the Board* and *Becoming Abigail*, and four collections of poetry. He has received a 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship in Fiction, the PEN USA Freedom-to-Write Award, the Prince Claus Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a California Book Award, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and the PEN Hemingway Book Prize.

Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and editor of *McSweeney's* magazine, has said, "If you want to get at the molten heart of contemporary fiction, Abani is the starting point."

**Writing 303**  
**Winter Quarter 2010**  
**THE ART OF NONFICTION**  
Writer in Residence  
**ALEX KOTLOWITZ**  
Mondays  
2:00-5:00 pm



This course will--through both reading and writing--explore the art of what is often called literary journalism, narrative nonfiction, or what John McPhee calls "the literature of fact." The best of nonfiction narrative wields a fierce power, poking and prodding our preconceptions of the world, pushing us to look at ourselves and others through a different prism. What makes for a compelling story? (What tools might we borrow from fiction?) Why employ the use of narrative? How does it help form our view of people and events? We'll explore the craft of reporting, and research which borrows from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, history and sociology--and work with rigor and discipline on the art of good writing. We'll read nonfiction narratives--both books and magazine articles--on a host of subjects, ranging from war and poverty to the environment and sports. We'll work in this class as a professional writer might,

from draft to draft. There will be regular writing assignments, and students will be asked to craft a longer narrative on a subject of interest to them.

**Alex Kotlowitz, CWA Writer in Residence for Winter Quarter 2010. Award-winning author of *There Are No Children Here, The Other Side of the River, and Never a City So Real.* Contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and public radio's *This American Life*, Alex Kotlowitz is renowned for his narratives of particular individuals whose concrete life experiences illuminate broad aspects of our nation's social and political landscape.**

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**WRITING MATTERS**  
NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTER FOR THE  
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Stacy L. Oliver, Editor  
Northwestern University  
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