

Lighting Fires in Creative Minds: Teaching Creative Writing in Special Collections

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THE RISE OF CREATIVE WRITING

In his 2009 book *The Program Era: Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, UCLA professor Mark McGurl argues that, “the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history.”² McGurl’s claim is controversial, but the fact at its heart is well documented: the rise of creative writing as an academic discipline in the United States has been meteoric. The University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, for instance, began only in 1936. Seminal and still influential, it was the first creative writing degree program in the United States. Other institutions such as Cornell University and the University of Houston quickly followed Iowa’s lead and developed well-known creative writing programs.

As testament to the growth of these programs, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) currently reports nearly 500 member institutions, and there are many other post-secondary institutions that offer creative writing courses but are not members of the AWP.³

Growth in the number of students earning creative writing degrees is, not surprisingly, proportionate to growth in programs. According to statistics provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. degree-granting institutions awarded 2,333 creative writing degrees in the 1997-98 academic year (1,013 bachelor’s degrees; 1,314 master’s degrees; and 6 PhD degrees). 10 years later, the total number of creative writing degrees granted annually had more than doubled to 4,895 in 2007-08 (2,265 bachelor’s degrees; 2,618 master’s

degrees; and 12 PhD degrees).⁴ What’s more, many students not majoring in creative writing often enroll in one or more creative writing class during their academic careers. Cornell University’s *Chronicle Online* reported in 2007 that, “[m]ore than 500 Cornell undergraduates enroll in campus creative writing courses annually.”⁵

Creative writing programs offer special collections librarians unique outreach and instruction opportunities. It is commonly assumed that literature derives purely from inspiration—novels, poems, and creative essays flow effortlessly from their authors’ hands directly onto paper or screen. Because of this, creative writing students (as well as students in the visual and performing arts) rarely receive direct outreach from libraries. This assumption, however, is blind to the importance of research, craft, and publication in the creation of new literature. Special collections librarians are poised to provide important lessons in primary research, writing and editing processes, and modes of publication.

Special collections instruction for creative writing classes offers a fresh opportunity to merge traditional special collections instruction methods (such as the “show-and-tell”), the workshop approaches found in writing programs, and the bibliographic instruction goals of our general reference peers—to teach how to find, how to assess, and how to make use of information. Special collections instruction should be designed to provide the three types of participant in the room—faculty, student, and librarian—equal opportunities to participate in the activity. In order to meet a variety of learning

styles, special collections librarians need to develop a student-centered approach to leading sessions, and should encourage active learning by integrating sessions into the goals and flow of the syllabus; stressing discussion over presentation; provoking critical thinking; and selecting the most provocative/evocative materials available to them.

What follows are five examples of creative writing sessions held in the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library. Each suggests a different approach to instruction, but all are unified by their emphasis on collaborative teaching and class discussion. Such examples are always local and tied to the strengths of unique collections, but the approaches are extendable in many settings.

HISTORICAL FICTION

“[T]here is generally no substitute for knowing what you are talking about,” quipped Wallace Stegner, novelist and founder of the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University. “Many fictions, whether they involve history or some aspect of contemporary life not in the common experience... represent more knowledge, both from experience and from research, than shows on the surface.”⁶ In other words, writing historical fiction requires advanced research skills, which libraries are prepared to provide. A tale set in the 1920s, for instance, elicits countless research questions: *What clothes does my character wear? What cigarettes does she smoke? What buses or trains does she ride?*

Teaching in the University of Chicago’s Graham School of General Studies Writer’s Studio, novelist Achy Obejas visits the Special Collections Research Center annually with her students to discuss research for fiction writing. These visits have demonstrated that, for creative writing classes, it is crucial for the instructor to participate in the discussion. As a living and published author, the instructor carries an important artistic authority. Obejas narrates her own experiences with research; she may stress the importance of food in fictional scenes and pro-

vide literary examples, while the librarian provides instruction on how to research food from different cultures or time periods.

In a presentation designed by librarians, Obejas’ students are guided through formats such as historical newspapers, magazines, maps, and printed ephemera. They are also instructed in searching for narrative elements like food, costume, and transportation. As always, instruction sessions for historical fiction stress “format agnosticism” and include introductions to searching and using manuscripts, printed books, and electronic resources.

EDITORIAL INTERVENTIONS

In 2008, University of Chicago poet Garin Cycholl asked his poetry students to read Michael O’Brien’s acclaimed *Sleeping and Waking*, a volume of poetry published by Chicago publisher Flood Editions. The Special Collections Research Center holds the editorial files for Flood Editions, and Cycholl and his students visited the library to investigate the development of *Sleeping and Waking* from manuscript to published book. As a group, we examined O’Brien’s original manuscript, read aloud from recommendations for changes found in the editor’s correspondence, discovered poems cut from the published version, and discussed whether we agreed or disagreed with the editor’s suggestions.

The session was an exercise in critical thinking. Differences of opinion were voiced, and the young poets assumed the role of editor and witnessed the value of the editorial process. “The students really enjoyed working with the poets’ papers,” commented Cycholl. “I tried to impress on them an understanding of poetry as a way of being in the world, not simply work carried on alone, but a conversation with other poets, editors, and readers. The poets’ letters and exchanges developed students’ sense of this conversation.... These exchanges also influenced the workshop’s larger dynamic in that writers began to see the influence of workshop conversations on their own work.”⁷

DRAFTS

Poet Leila Wilson brought her students from the creative writing program at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago to the Special Collections Research Center to discuss the concept of revision. Wilson wanted her students to see poems by well-known poets in various drafts, which are found in the records of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, and to discern the improvements made to poems over multiple iterations.

The session was designed around drafts of poems written by poets on the class's syllabus. A sustained discussion, however, centered on two versions of Roethke's poem "Reply to Censure," which appeared in *Poetry* magazine in November 1937. Accompanying the two versions of the poem is a brief letter from Roethke to *Poetry* editor Morton Dauwen Zabel, in which Roethke says, "Thank you for... the suggestions, which I have tried to follow. I believe the piece is much stronger, for I have eliminated most of the abstract words."⁸ The class discussed how the second version of the poem was possibly less "abstract," adding to students' understanding of both Roethke's work and the more general concepts of concrete and abstract language.

The manuscripts served as evidence of the labor of craftsmanship. Successive drafts by eminent poets like Roethke make clear that the processes of writing—most specifically revision—apply not just to student writers, but to all poets, including canonical modernists.

VERSIONS

"Literature, and the making of literature, is usefully approached from the angle of its material productions," suggested University of Chicago poet Peter O'Leary after a class session in special collections. "I like bringing young poets to the archives to show them that even the greatest works of literature have undergone changes at the hands of printers, publishers, and even poets themselves, sometimes long after the works themselves have initially appeared."⁹ O'Leary visited the Special Collections Research

Center with his beginning poetry writing class to answer three stated questions: *What is it like to publish poetry? Who publishes poetry? And when something is published, does that mean it can't ever be changed?*

To answer these questions, Walt Whitman's idiosyncratic approach to composition was the session's focus. Whitman famously changed the text of *Leaves of Grass* between 1855 and his death in 1892, revising and adding to his long poem, creating a poem by accretion. To demonstrate the changes, students, instructor, and librarian read aloud from, and discussed, several editions of the poem published during Whitman's lifetime. The class also examined samples of Whitman's manuscripts in both facsimile and holograph forms. The students were challenged to consider not just the "material production" of various editions, but the quality of the poem as it grew through the years.

SELF-PUBLISHING AND ALTERNATIVE BOOK FORMS

At many institutions, little magazines, artists' books, and small press publications live in special collections. University of Chicago poet and assistant professor Jennifer Scappettone has drawn on the Special Collections Research Center for an assignment for her intermediate poetry students: "I want each of the students... to make a chapbook at quarter's end," Scappettone wrote. "[T]he idea is to expose them to small-press journal editions and chapbooks of differing proportions, materials, and scope."¹⁰

Scappettone has two stated goals, to get her students' "imagination going," and to "reacquaint their generation with the *book* as medium." These sessions are broadly historical, with an emphasis on recent poetry and handmade books. One session with Scappettone and her students began with a discussion on the history of the pamphlet and chapbook as forms, beginning with German Reformation *flugschriften*, working through 17th century English chapbooks, and ending with contemporary avant-garde publications. The group then talked

about the tradition of self-publication, from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Gertrude Stein's Plain Editions to the present. In the end, students examined how chapbooks and pamphlets were made and identified ways for the students to make quick, handmade books of their own. Important literary works are often originally published modestly, so the session stressed inexpensive printing methods, such as photocopying, and easy hand-binding, like stapling or sewing. Students were empowered to present their own work in an expressive and DIY (do-it-yourself) medium.

CONCLUSION

While this chapter focuses on strategies for the use of manuscripts and rare books in creative writing instruction, it has a second, broader message. Within colleges and universities, academic departments and areas of emphasis are born, change, and occasionally disappear. For special collections libraries to remain vibrant and relevant presences on these dynamic campuses, librarians need to identify, reach out to, and evolve innovative ways to provide services to developing user groups; the creative writing phenomenon is only one example among many (African or African American Studies, Latin American Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies stand out among them).

And finally, there is at least one value to bringing young writers to our collections that cannot be easily described: inspiration. "Though it is always helpful to the young to be steered and guided toward what may catch their interest," reflected Stegner, "I would be inclined, also, to throw open the library and let them find many things for themselves. The delight of discovery is a major pleasure of reading;

and discovery is one of the best ways to light a fire in a creative mind."

NOTES

1. The author is now at Duke University.
2. McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2009.
3. The Association of Writers & Writing Programs <http://www.awpwriter.org/membership/index.htm> (Accessed August 31, 2010).
4. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Table 275. Bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by sex of student and discipline division: 2007-08." (This table was prepared July 2009.) http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_265.asp?referrer=list (Accessed August 31, 2010).
5. George Lowery. "Cornell's Creative Writing Program ranked among the nation's best." *ChronicleOnline*. August, 2007. <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/Aug07/creativeWriting.gl.html> (Accessed August 31, 2009).
6. Wallace Stegner. "On the teaching of creative writing." *On teaching and writing fiction*. Edited by Lynn Stegner. New York: Penguin, 2002.
7. Email with Cycholl, July 16, 2009.
8. Theodore Roethke to Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse Records*, Box 40, Folder 15, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
9. Email with O'Leary, July 10, 2009.
10. Email with Scappettone, January 3, 2008.