



BROWSE



Benevolent Workshop Power

Angela Ball

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Page 3 May–June 2009 Why Teach Creative Writing? Introduction to Focus: The question should be, “Why not teach creative writing?” We don’t need to doubt, question, or defend ourselves. Tom Grimes’s trenchant observation above was the first, almost immediate, response to the call for papers that went out on the subject “Why Teach Creative Writing?” Grimes, the director of the creative writing program at Texas State University, apologized for his prickliness but stood by his statement, as would any professor who senses someone, in asking why one teaches a given subject, might be dubious, to say the least, about said subject. But if we offended anyone in posing that question and establishing this Focus for American Book Review, we’re sorry. Because the impetus behind the question was ABR’s recent attendance at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) annual conference, held this year in Chicago, during a not-too-chilly but flu-ridden long weekend in February. They were heady days, it should be said, as we here at ABR got to mingle with our peers from Fiction Collective Two, NewPages.com, Starcherone Books, and the many creative writing programs in the US, Canada, and UK. Surrounded by like minded Hotel on Michigan Avenue?

Well, that's what we wanted to talk about after AWP ended. The same kind of things that Richard Hugo dealt with in *The Triggering Town* (1979)—a much cited source in the forthcoming essays. About why creative writing teachers do what they do, knowing that many insist still that creativity of any kind cannot be taught. About what they do when clods like us ask such boneheaded questions. About what methods seem to work. About what joys result. Or what agonies. Whether what might be good for students might not be as good for instructors. And so we sent out the call for papers to a select number of creative writing teachers and program directors. And what we gathered is this rather remarkable number of short essays, far more than expected, from a range of people that demonstrates just how varied the world of creative writing in the university is. Poets and short story writers. Experimental wordsmiths and traditional evokers of scene. From snowy Utah to balmy Mississippi and many points in between. Furthermore, we like to think that this is only the beginning. We hope that those of you who visit ABR online will take this opportunity to add your voice—in assent or dissent—toward those arranged here. So let's get the conversation started. folk, no one ever wonders why creative writing is taught. The answer seems obvious when one steps into the book fair: Everywhere one looks, there are independent presses; journals small and large; writers' colonies; and reading series and readers, readers, readers galore. Yet if an AWP member stepped out of the book fair—a rather insular space—she or he might be asked by a security guard or other hotel guest, "What's this convention about?" As soon as one mentions writers, the layperson expects to hear Stephen King or J. K. Rowling would be delivering the keynote address instead of Charles Baxter or Marilynne Robinson. Of course, anyone with a degree in creative writing, or anyone who ever completed a creative writing course, has put up with this kind of inquiry for some time now. Always it seems there are two worlds of writing: the popular and the literary, and everyone knows that Anne River Siddons and E. Lynn Harris or Elmer Kelton and Anne Rice didn't have to go to school at Iowa or Hopkins or Houston to learn how to write a good book. And if James Alan McPherson or Ann Beattie are so good, why are her or his books out of print? In other words, why learn how to write when all it might get you is the approbation of the five thousand souls pressed together in the Hilton Responses Delightful Jibber-Jabber Lee K. Abbott I am tempted, given the givens that are my character, to provide the flippant answer: Why not? More seriously, however, I'd like to quote the late John Updike, in particular from his...

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folk, no one ever wonders why creative writing is taught. The answer seems obvious when one steps into the book fair: Everywhere one looks, there are independent presses; journals small and large; writers' colonies; and reading series and readers, readers, readers galore.

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Responses

Delightful Jibber-Jabber Lee K. Abbott

I am tempted, given the givens that are my character, to provide the flippant answer: Why not? More seriously, however, I'd like to quote the late John Updike, in particular from his introduction years ago to the summer fiction issue of *Esquire*: fiction (and by extension all creative writing) is the best instrument we have to show how it is "to live in the here and now" (which sentiment I've modified to note "no matter the where and no matter the when" in order to include, say, historical fiction as well as speculative and science fiction). At worst, I see little wrong in trying to understand the world by throwing some English at it (or Urdu or Tagalog, or whatever is your tongue of choice). At the very least, we make our talents, the talented and not-so, better readers. We improve their ability to assess the work a sentence (or a line) does; we make them sensitive to the choices a writer makes with the "willed word"; and, yes, along the way, we reacquaint them with their own humanity, however indifferent over time they've become to it. For more able students, we provide them the skills to make their own magic, and we give them opportunity after opportunity, courtesy of the demands of the page, to make real those "things about to disappear." The very best of our students, happily, contribute to the delightful jibber-jabber that is literature, whenever and wherever it is written.

Lee K. Abbott is the author of seven collections of short stories, most recently All Things, All at Once: New & Selected Stories (Norton). His fiction has appeared in nearly one hundred periodicals, including Harper's, The Atlantic, the Georgia Review, Epoch, the Southern Review, and Bottegare. His work has been reprinted in The Best American Short Stories, The O. Henry Awards, The Prize Stories, and the Pushcart Prize series. Twice a winner of fellowships

from the National Endowment for the Arts, he has published essays and reviews in The New York Times Book Review, The Miami Herald, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times Book Review. He is Arts & Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at The Ohio State University, where he teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing.

Benevolent Workshop Power Angela Ball

Workshop on a good day is power become benevolent, become playful. The teacher's and reader's roles as judges are transformed to those of co-conspirators in a detective mystery. Where is the poem's best self? How can it be ferreted out, down what passageway or out what window or across what dizzying rope bridge?

My favorite thing about Workshop is the communal brain that can develop. A brain entirely devoted to the work at hand, and possessed of adaptive urgency. The poem appears in front of us. Something is wrong—something to do with word choice, angle of approach, structure, music. Suggestions arise. Some immediately fall away, like bowling balls trying to decorate a hut. Only a beat is lost—or not even that, because the not-useful detritus paves the way to ideas—just as when a single writer works alone. Thoughts proceed out of each other till some suggestion is immediately recognized as right. Everyone shares in the idea, augmenting, and editing. Understanding, spontaneous and universal, radiates from the project at hand. The poem begins to assume an undeniable presence, an identity. And just when it seems that all is decided, a devil's advocate appears with a cogent objection that leads to another strengthening change.

Workshop brings everyone's best brain—the generous, flexible, problem-solving, playful brain—

out of hiding. There's a "let's put on a show" brand of joyful resourcefulness, a happy discovery of the magic that can be made from the simple materials at hand.

The writer participates, too—sometimes directly, sometimes just by silently steering the group, through her reactions, towards or away from ideas. The teacher is a similar figure—a rudder of sorts on the ship of exploration.

My favorite time in Workshop is when I sit back and listen to my students being helpful, saying useful things, collaborating—having forgotten their egos and the petty prejudices that come with living, using their best and purest skills in service of poetry.

Lindsay Walker has been part of our graduate program for five years, both as an MA and PhD candidate, so I enlisted her help in describing what happens in class. Here is what she has to say:

The size of our workshops (usually between eight and twelve) is ideal, I find. We have the opportunity to introduce and receive feedback on our work almost every week. There's a wide diversity of background, style, and taste, and I really enjoy the various perspectives through which I get to see my poems.

There's something very diplomatic about the way our workshops are run here at Southern Miss. The work is the focus, not the personality of the author or the reciprocal, and it seems that by taking egos and competitiveness out of the equation, there's a real generosity of spirit that surfaces in the class. The overall quality of the poems is taken into account, but the focus is always on how to improve regardless of what stage a particular poem is at.

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