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Writing Can Be Taught
M.F.A. PROGRAMS 2014

PW surveys the wide world of creative writing programs
BY JULIE BUNTIN
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In a recent post on the New Yorker’s Page-Turner blog, Junot Díaz (Cornell ’95) writes, “These days you got fifth graders that can talk your ears off about M.F.A.s.” He’s being hyperbolic, but maybe only a little. In a publishing climate where a collection of essays like “MFA vs. NYC,” published by highbrow intellectual magazine n+1 (run, notably, by a bunch of M.F.A. grads) can get nearly as much media coverage as newly minted Pulitzer winner Donna Tartt, it’s pretty safe to say that not only are M.F.A.’s everywhere—they’re inextricably woven into the fabric of the contemporary world of American books.

The Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa is widely considered the foremost institutionalized creative writing program. Established in 1936, the program has nurtured so many poets and writers that are now household names that it’s almost silly to begin to list them all: Jane Smiley, Paul Harding, James Tate, Ann Pachetta, Charles Wright—there’s a high chance that a book by at least one graduate or faculty member from this intensely competitive program (it accepts an estimated 2% of total applicants, making admission more competitive than top-notch medical schools) lives on your bookshelf.

Graduate-level writing programs began to appear across the United States, booming particularly in the 1960s (corresponding with a surge in government funding for the arts), when respected and well-running programs like UNC-Greensboro, Brown University, the University of Oregon, and San Francisco State University began welcoming writing students and professional writers—tutored-professors into the academic fold. By the 1990s and early 2000s, you’d be hard pressed to find a major university that didn’t offer a creative writing curriculum of some kind, if not an M.F.A. program proper. M.F.A.

degree-granting programs have continued to thrive—new ones, like those at Arkansas and the University of Arkansas-Monticello, an online-only program—pop up every year.

M.F.A. grads are writing the books on the new and notable tables at Barnes & Noble. They’re teaching high school poetry or running your local newspaper or giving reality TV recaps on New York magazine’s website or editing stories for this very publication. Narahita ‘trethewey, U.S. poet laureate, has an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Even TV characters are getting M.F.A. ’s: according to the season two finale of Lena Dunham’s HBO show Girls, protagonist Hannah Horvitz is headed to Iowa for season three. Any M.F.A. programs, like it or not, in essence, are a critical part of America’s literary culture and the publishing industry at large. The literary world is populated

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Denis Johnson

From The Best Place to Eat in America (69)
I had to break my dietary law (and heard you could get a small salad on the side) and remember being served oysters from The Modern kitchen (pit) and a delicious poutine from the table containing an MFA student, aovable professor, a butcher, and a belt dryer.—Walt Whitman
by writers whose M.F.A. applications can be interpreted as major career turning points.

As programs continue to proliferate, they develop new ways to compete for the attention of potential candidates. While Iowa, Cornell, the University of Texas-Austin's Michener Center, Columbia, and such institutions will always have their allure, many programs are changing the structure of their curriculums to appeal to nontraditional writers and students, or those resistant to limiting coursework to just one genre. In addition to the traditional players, this issue of PW spotlights a number of programs rethinking what it means to get an M.F.A.—either by excelling at the old model or offering writers an entirely new way of studying a craft no longer considered unattainable.

Rigoberto González

I didn't admit to my family that I was in school to "become a writer" for the duration of my graduate education. As far as they knew, I was in school to "become a teacher," which was something closer to what they understood and farther from my own antipathy, which was to write those books on the bookstores shelves. I was convinced I could do enough work to support an author's needs and caprices. But the more carefully I listened while I was an M.A. student at UC Davis (where I specialized in poetry) and an M.F.A. student at Arizona State University (where I specialized in fiction), the clearer it became that a cold reality awaited me just after graduation. But instead of becoming anxious about that uncertain future, I sharpened my sense of purpose about the present, asking myself why I was enrolled in a creative writing program?

The immediate answers to that question: I was there to expand my knowledge about contemporary literature; I was there to be part of a community of artists that would celebrate and commiserate with me; I was there to interact with the professors who, by example, showed me it was possible to have more than one profession, whose passion for writing, whose love of books was contagious enough to send me home to the desk. The long-term answer was more resonant: I was enrolled in a writing program to imagine a cultured life, not just to dream of the rewards of being a writer.

Interestingly enough, I resisted returning to the M.F.A. program as a professor for many years—not mostly because I had learned how to eke out a living doing a series of part-time day jobs that covered (just barely) my basic expenses. But eventually I found my way, home to Rutgers-Newark, where I have been teaching since 2008. As a mentor to my graduate students, I keep reminding them that they're writers first, that the conversations in the classroom and among their peers are the most valuable part of their education; that learning how to articulate ideas and critical thoughts are skills they will use in a number of roles—as essayists, book reviewers, teachers, etc.; that becoming versed in contemporary literature will orient their own visions as artists. Poets, in particular, I encourage you to learn to write prose that will communicate with clarity the complexities of their work, which becomes useful when applying for grants, fellowships, or writing residencies. In short, the experiences I find helpful as an M.F.A. student and the information that I wish I had been given have shaped my supplementary lesson plans as a guide toward the profession. Sometimes advice is imparted during office hours, sometimes in the classroom at an opportune moment, but those practical exchanges are necessary in case my students decide that, like me, they too want to imagine themselves inhabiting the literary community long after they leave the place where they nurtured their first intimate circle of writers.

Rigoberto González is a writer and critic living in New York City. He's associate professor of English at Rutgers-Newark.
Not only are M.F.A.s everywhere—they’re inextricably woven into the fabric of the contemporary world of American books.

Pre-M.F.A Programs
Getting into is the hardest part. To Google M.F.A. acceptance rates is to open a Pandora’s box of anxiety—blog after blog racking acceptance and rejection stories. Of the many programs, the UCLA Extension Writers’ Program is designed to help writers gain covered acceptances to their first choice M.F.A. program. This open-enrollment program circulates upwards of 5,000 students annually who enroll in a wide variety of short-term creative writing courses that range from $330 to $3,500, depending on duration and faculty involvement. These classes can help writers hone their craft and prepare them for the intense environment of the M.F.A. Lou Matthews, a longtime faculty member, has seen many students leverage their training at the UCLA Extension Writers’ Program into M.F.A. gold. “A fellowship as a top program is worth in excess of $100K,” said Matthews. “Two students in two years, Rachel Kenko and Danni Fast, have gotten full rides at the Michener Center. That’s a three-year package worth about $150K—nearly a win on a $1,400 investment for two of our courses.”

The University of Wisconsin—Madison Continuing Studies’ Writers Program also offers a comprehensive array of courses and resources to help writers improve their craft, often before applying to as M.F.A. program. Its Write-by-the-Lake Writers’ Workshop and Retreat draws more than 130 authors from around the country who partake in five days of rigorous craft discussions and master classes with tities like “How to Create Non-Stereotypical, Three Dimensional Characters” and “Best Words, Best Order: A Poetry Workshop.”

Low-Residency
Low-residency programs are increasingly popular choice. Typically, these programs require students to come on campus for 10 to 14 days twice a year; in the interim, students and faculty correspond via email or postal mail, exchanging comments on each other’s work and sometimes engaging in group chats. Warren Wilson College is the oldest such program, boasting graduates like poet Cornelius Eady, as well as New York Times bestselling novelist David Wroblewski (The Story of Edgar Sawtelle). Parsleigh Lovekorn University’s two-year low-residency program offers a degree in one of five disciplines: the standard poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, as well as writing for children and literary translation. During two 10-day residencies, one held annually in England and the other on FDU’s campus in New Jersey, students participate in a smorgasbord of literary events and meet with faculty and fellow students—the rest of the year they are in constant, one-on-one contact with mentors and classmates online. Program director René Steinke adds, “We are the only low-residency M.F.A. connected to a well-regarded literary magazine with a 57-year history (the Literary Review, for which PBG’s director of digital operations Craig Morgan Teicher serves as poetry editor). Students have the opportunity to work on the journal while they are in the program.” Alumni of the program include James Weatherford (Hot Parking on Wall Street, Mariner Books) and Marian Guerret, whose translation of Sankya, a novel by Russian author Zakhar Prilepin, is forthcoming from Darsey Books.

Like FDU, Converse College’s low-residency M.F.A. program is structured around two nine-day residencies that take place on its South Carolina campus. The program has seen graduates publish novels with Morrow and Simon & Schuster and poetry collections with Negressivity. Its students fill the pages of major literary magazines like Colorado Review, Shondaland, and the Southern Quarterly. Converse has recently developed the C. Michael Curtis Publishing Internship—a paid internship in which a fourth semester student works with the university press in all facets of publishing and marketing.

Because low-residency programs often require faculty on campus a couple of times a year, they are often able to draw first-rate writers hesitant to commit to full-time university life. Leslie Jamison, the

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Why I Teach Writing

Three snapshots of my M.F.A. at the University of Virginia:

1. Me, writing at a shabby card table in a basement apartment.
2. In the seminar room with Charles Wright, who is talking about the poetic line as if it’s a mystical entity. Me with hair rising from the top of my head from the electrical pressure of all the ideas.
3. A dinner party with my M.F.A. student, friends. Over the pasta and red wine, we’re shouting about a novel by Jane Bowles. Next to our chairs, manila envelopes containing manuscripts that one or another of us has line-edited for the other.

In the intervening years, I moved from writing poetry to writing novels, and although the scenery has changed and I have a real desk, this is pretty much what my life as a writer looks like, even now. Obviously, Picture 1 is the most important: because a writer is only a writer so long as they’re working, but Pictures 2 and 3 have kept the work going.

On 2: my M.F.A. taught me how to put my love of literature into action, or in other words, how to work really hard at writing by learning to read more deeply. A writer has to live to live with failure a lot of the time, and during those dry periods, it’s often the love of a novel or a poem or a story—the larger project of literature apart from one’s own successful or unsuccessful attempts—that is sustaining. Now, as a teacher myself, I tell my students not to be afraid of the work. But, in fact, to embrace it, to learn where to look for the next wave back into the story.

On 3: right now, I’m reading All I Have in This World, a beautiful novel by my former M.F.A. classmate Michael Parker. It’s thrilling to see how much of him is in the book. His humor, his Southern poetry, his singular perspective on music and cars and love. The best writers find a way to access the subject matter and voice that is unique to them, and it’s kind of ironic that this uniqueness is often forged within writer friendships, perhaps one of the most undervalued gifts of a good M.F.A. program. Writer friends play their pieces off of one another; they argue; they talk about one another’s work; they try to help the other see his or her blind spots, and particular strengths. All of that can help a writer find his path. In the M.F.A. program at Fairleigh Dickinson, it’s been important for us to foster an engaged, diverse, and tight-knit community of writers, because, in both profound and mundane ways, community can help a writer do his best work.

When poet Pam Karash visited our M.F.A. residency a few years ago, he said he didn’t believe so much in talent anymore, but more in the idea of having a vision and working like hell to realize that vision. That rings true; an M.F.A. should create a space where it’s actually possible for all that to begin, both the vision and the work.

René Steinke is the author of the novels The Fires and Holy Skirts, which was a finalist for the 2005 National Book Award. Her new novel, Friendswood (Riverhead), will be published in August. She lives in Brooklyn and is the director of the M.F.A. program in creative writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University.
M.F.A. SURVEY 2014

like British or American literary history and studies in Latino literature.

Overseas
One frequent complaint about M.F.A. programs is that they teach future writers to read and write in an American tradition that turns a blind eye to the rest of the world’s literature. Schools like NYU and the University of Nevada have recently developed overseas programs to engage their students in their traditional M.F.A. with courses abroad. But what of schools that function as international low-residency in their own right?

Cedar Crest College’s Pan-European low-residency M.F.A. program is the first of its kind. Over the course of two years (there’s also an optional three-year track) students participate in three residencies—in Dublin, Barcelo
ta, and Viaeha/Brazilian. Each year the residency locates rotating, so that students can study in each location. In keeping with its nomadic nature, this program is highly interested in writing about place—and each residency is tai
red to take maximum advantage of its European setting.

Online
In response to an increasing need for flexibility, some M.F.A. programs are taking up permanent residence online. In addition to its residential M.F.A. program, the University of Texas-R. Pao offers a track that students can complete without ever setting foot on campus. All of the program’s courses take place over email and university-facilitated message boards, as well as the occasional Skype call.

The University of Arkansas-Monticello, whose first class will graduate this summer, is another online-only program. Eighteen students are currently enrolled in the M.F.A. program, undergoing immersive virtual creative writing training from faculty members Diane Payne (Burning Tulips) and Mark Nicholls, among others. The program does offer graduate assistantships to offset tuition costs, and students can earn up to six credits by attending writing conferences nationwide or completing publishing internships in their community.

Intercultural
Since Iowa’s earliest days, most M.F.A. students focus on a single genre, defying literature’s long history of writers who excel across disciplines—D.H. Lawrence would have needed six or seven M.F.A.s to cover his output. Chatham University’s program in Pittsburgh, Pa., allows students the option of a dual genre focus and the possibility of an additional concentration in such novel (in M.F.A.-term) categories as travel writing, publishing, teaching, and na

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- University of Oregon
- Fort Lewis College
- University of California, Riverside
- Marist College
- Brown University
- University of Texas at Austin

The literary world is populated by writers whose M.F.A. applications can be interpreted as major career turning points.

Writers in Residence program, which will bring Dinaw Mengestu to campus in 2014. And best of all, UW fully funds every student accepted, including tuition waivers, annual stipends in excess of $11,000 in addition to a summer stipend, and funding for travel and publication submission costs.

Full Funding
Fully funded programs are the holy grail of M.F.A.s. Most aspiring writers are advised not to go into debt for an M.F.A., a degree that’s doesn’t necessarily promise a future job or a book deal. Programs that can afford to bankroll their students are the ones worth nothing. The largest number of programs every year.

No doubt because of the extremely competitive nature of admissions, many fully funded programs have an outstanding roster of writer-alums. Cornell’s M.F.A. program, which accepts around six students a year, awards each M.F.A. candidate a stipend of more than $25,000 annually. Students can also apply to stay on for two additional paid summers as post-degree English lecturers after their two...
year M.F.A. is completed—according to the administration, most students take advantage of that opportunity. Junee Délis, Tea Obreht, Lorrie Moore, Melissa Bank, and Stewart O’Nan are all graduates of Cornell’s program.

Other notable fully funded programs include Washington University in St. Louis, which offers full and equal funding for every student; University of Oregon, which offers health insurance waivers and annual stipends that increase by $3,000 in the second year; and the University of Virginia, where all accepted students receive the same $16,000 fellowship—essentially getting paid to be taught the art and craft of writing by writers like Rima Dove, Greg Orr, and John Casey.

Children’s/YA

In the last couple of years, the New

Matthew Shenoda

My own years as an M.F.A. student felt at the time a bit narrow and lacking the kind of expansive and divergent experiences I had hoped to gain from graduate school. But many years later as I have taught in various M.F.A. programs, I have come to understand that the elements I felt lacking in my own educational experience have been the primary movers in shaping my pedagogical philosophies as well as classroom and mentoring practices. James Baldwin once said, “The paradox of education is precisely this—that, as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” This seems a profound precept for the writer; but also a sentiment that would hold true for all the educational institutions that exist in a given society. So I have come to adopt this as my mantra: that I believe in a critical education, in an educational process that seeks to evolve social institutions by engaging in the complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship of being both a critic and beneficiary of these institutions and the societies that cultivate them.

The fundamental ideas of the rigorous and focused practice and study of writing that underpin the value of the M.F.A. degree seem to me to hold true to a set of artistic goals such as discipline, a mastery of craft, and ultimately a yearning for artistic innovation and a desire to evolve the art form. These goals have long been a part of many global traditions. That we have often deviated from these principles should not be surprising to anyone who has had to navigate 21st-century higher education practices. The pressure to create curricular pathways that lead to codified and tangible outcomes—such as jobs and book publication, in the case of M.F.A.—after graduation is all too real, but the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of why we teach, make art, and study it must remain central to our practices and, dare I say, we must maintain the idealistic belief that if one is trained to think critically, discipline oneself in craft, and manifest the imaginative and creative to fruition the writing, that this may lead to positive outcomes in the realms of publishing and employment.

I work vigilantly to avoid speaking with any singular set of values about the incredible art of writing. I read as diversity and subtly as I can in order to serve my students, not with a road map to do as I’ve done but with the ability to discover their own artistic lineage and to develop an aesthetic palette that always seeks to engage the complexity that Baldwin alluded to, to make art that reflects the expansive consciousness that education inspires. And as I do these things, I realize more each year that the discipline of creative-writing education is still very young and that my effort to fill gaps that felt gaping when I was a student is a step toward a more deliberate and holistic education. My hope is that the students I mentor may, too, discover my deficiencies in ways that I cannot see and one day fill those gaps in their own teaching and mentoring practices so that, with each generation of this discipline, we may come closer to learning just what it means to truly educate a writer.

Matthew Shenoda is the author of the books Somewhere Else, Seasons of Lo- tus, Seasons of Bone, and the forthcoming This Salt. He serves on the editorial board of the African Poetry Book Fund and is a contributing associate profes- sor in the Department of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago. For more information visit www.matthewshenoda.com.

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School Writing Program's faculty and alumni have published more than 50 books. To celebrate the news, the M.F.A. program launched a new annual tradition—a book party to honor publishing achievements from graduates and faculty throughout the program's 20-year history. Many of these achievements occurred in the realm of children's literature—the New School has long offered a popular writing for children's book series, in which M.F.A. candidates can enroll in children's literature course and workshops. New School alum Carla Carter has a second teen literary novel, My Best Friend, Maybe, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in June, a follow-up to her successful debut, Mo, Him, And It. Jess Ventil recently published My Life After Now with Sourcebooks Fire, a highly praised YA novel about a girl who is diagnosed with HIV.

Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, offers both an M.A. and M.F.A. in children's literature, and has just begun a new degree-granting M.F.A. program in children's book writing and illustrating. This unique curriculum requires students to embark on an independent study of art in addition to English and writing courses; they will be instructed by notable author, editors, and illustrators like Julie Pfeiffer and Brian Attebery, among others.

Programs to Watch
Between the twoas and the up-and-comers, many M.F.A. programs contain in the steady graduate fine-art writers and attract award-winning faculty. The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD, has long been counted among the very best M.F.A. programs in the country. Established in 1947, the program has nurtured writers like John Barth (who later taught there), Chimamanda Adichie, David Lipsky, and ZZ Packer. No more than four poets and four fiction writers are accepted every year, and each incoming student receives a full-tuition scholarship and a teaching assistantship. Program alumni make waves in publishing almost every year—Bloomsbury just released alum Poufinia Khalipour's The Last Illusion, in May.

Columbia College Chicago has also seen a sizable number of graduates publish early and well. The program offers an M.F.A. in one of three tracks—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—but all students also take a range of specialty classes during their time on campus, in subjects like science fiction, historical fiction, and even playwriting. Audrey Niffenegger, author of The Time Traveler's Wife, is among the faculty, as well as Jenny Doodly, Gary Johnson, and more. But perhaps most notably, Columbia College's program provides a

Fully funded programs are the holy grail of M.F.A.s.
range of publishing opportunities that help alumni get noticed. Graduate students run a lively blog, Marginalia, that gives prospective students a taste of what they can expect if they choose Columbia. The program publishes an annual fiction anthology called Hair Trigger, composed of student writing and edited by students as well, providing a much-needed experience. The anthology has racked up 26 major awards, and the students that appear in its pages have gone on to win over 100 awards of their own. Finally, the department-run F Magazine is devoted to novels-in-progress.

For writers who also have a pronounced interest in small press publishing and literary magazine editing, the M.F.A. at Boise State University offers strong programming. Boise is home to Absaroka Press, run by poet and teacher James Holmes. Over the past decade, it has become an increasingly important presence in the experimental poetry scene, publishing such well-known authors as Saphie Strickland and Betsy Morrison. M.F.A. students not only help run the press; they also complete internships and graduate assistantships with the press and the program’s literary magazine, the Idaho Review. The M.F.A. at Boise State University also offers students a variety of academic opportunities to assist with the press, the Center for Literary Publishing, and a magazine, Colorado Review.

The University of New Orleans offers both a low-residency program and a two-year residency program. Students who decide to pursue a degree in fiction, nonfiction, screenplay, poetry, or playwriting while living full-time in New Orleans are given three free tickets to area literary events each year, where they can meet editors and agents and take master classes. These meetings must be working, because graduates have published books with Henry Holt, Doubleday, Vintage, P.S., and Hyperion, to name just a few of the publishers who have signed alumni from this program.

Writers interested in studying under the literary hub of New York City, but who would prefer to actually live a little outside the city’s hectic teeming might consider the M.F.A. at Sarah Lawrence (in the suburbs of Bronxville, N.Y.) or Rutgers-Newark, just across the river in New Jersey. Sarah Lawrence is riding high right now because faculty member Vïa Sheshadri just won this year’s Pulitzer Prize for poetry. But the program houses a large list of famous faculty members, including Myla Goldberg, Marten Harvey, and Nelly Reifer. One of the features of the Sarah Lawrence program is a great deal of one-on-one time with faculty.

Though Rutgers-Newark established its M.F.A. program less than 10 years ago, it was one of the most innovative, and has been repeatedly reaccredited by the NAAL Association, and students who have completed the program have gone on to win a number of awards. The program is known for its creative writing, many students being published in the literary magazine at the school, The Lion and The Unicorn. The program is also known for its commitment to diversity, and for its efforts to support students from all walks of life.

What’s the Big Deal? M.F.A.s make writers into authors

BY JULIE BUNTING

I n 2010, it was Yea Obreht (Cornell ’09) with The Tiger’s Wife. In 2011, it was Chad Harbach (Virginia ’04) with The Art of Fielding. In 2012, it was Karen Russell (Columbia ’06) with her Pulitzer-finalist Swann’s Last Stand, and a year or two from now, it will be Gai trail Hallberg (NYU ’06). Knopf recently purchased the 34-year-old author’s 900-page debut novel, City of Fire, after a bidding war escalated the closing price to nearly $2 million. How much does an M.F.A. have to do with a writer’s success?

Nicholas Butler, whose Shotgun Losses is one of the most anticipated fiction debuts this spring, credits his M.F.A. for his success. He started the book while enrolled in Iowa’s M.F.A. program. There, Butler met agents Rob McQuillan, who were on to negotiate the sale of Butler’s first book to Katie Gilligan at St. Martin’s Thomas Dunne Books. Danielle Evans, author of the acclaimed short story collection Before You Suffocate Your Own Face (Riverhead, 2010), also met her agent, Ayeshah Pandol, during a program meeting, she learned the program was one of the few M.F.A.s that didn’t have a residency component.

Exposure to agents and editors is often one of an M.F.A. program’s major selling points. The New School, UC-Irvine, Columbia College, Michigan, and Howard all make no secret of their efforts to introduce students to industry insiders. Sonja Condit first made contact with her agent, Jenny Bent, when Bent was visiting Condit’s college’s M.F.A. low-residency program while Condit was a student there. Storrier House, Condit’s debut, was published by Morrow in December 2013.

Lorrie Moore, who taught in the M.F.A. program at University of Wisconsin-Madison for 25 years and recently began a new gig at Vanderbilt, has watched many students transition from apprentices in the classroom to highly successful published authors. “A surprising number of my students do go on to become writers,” she says. Two of her former students, Emma Straub (The Vacationers, May) and Chloe Benjamin (The Anatomy of Dreamus, Sept.), both thank Moore in the acknowledgments of their upcoming books. Moore, too, is an M.F.A. graduate; her first story collection, Self Help, is largely composed of pieces from her Cornell thesis. Stony Brook’s M.F.A. program has seen a recent spate of graduates go on to publish evolved versions of their M.F.A. thesis manuscripts. Helen Sirowitz’s beer-drinking novel, Major Pez–tiggin’s Last Stand, began as her thesis; fellow alum Victor Gianni recently inked a deal to publish his M.F.A. thesis, Conquer, with Silverthought Press. The University of New Orleans also boasts an award-winning roster of M.F.A. alumni, including former Stinger Fellow Skip Horacek, who won the Wakefield Literary Prize and has published titles with Counterpoint and Mariner Books.
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Agents and Editors Talk M.F.A. Programs

BY PAIGE CRUTCHER

any agents and editors use M.F.A. programs as resources for finding new talent. "Like all agents, I probably put Iowa at #1", although given how much commercial fiction I represent, that does not necessarily fit my life," says Alexandru Machinist of the Parnassus Agency. "I do have positive views of Michigan, Virginia, and Notre Dame. My last one would have to be a tie between Irene and Johns Hopkins, although I have seen amazing material from both, and I see great fiction out of Columbia, but it is inconsistent." Ethan Nosworthy, editorial director of Graywolf Press, agrees with Machinist on Iowa, Johns Hopkins, and Michigan. "It’s a fun city and Columbia and UT Austin, and Notre Dame. In no particular order, these places catch my eye, but really, great writers emerge from all sorts of programs, or they emerge without a program."

Some editors, such as shake, echo this sentiment: "As an M.F.A. graduate myself, from Washington University in Saint Louis, I have to say that in one way those programs mean everything, and in another way, the largest, way that all matters is the writing, regardless of how it came to be. I am intrigued to see how specific teachers are influencing and mentoring new writers, especially in poetry." His top four, which include a few Graywolf authors as teachers, consist of Washington University in St. Louis, University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins, and University of Iowa. "Differences between programs contribute to what makes an M.F.A. program stand out. Sam Huray of the Rights Factory says his favorite is the New School, from which he once rapped five M.F.A. grads. Great talent certainly endures an agent to a school. "Hunter College is by far my favorite M.F.A. program, because not only has it given me brilliantly talented students such as Scott Chesnut (High as the Horse's Bridle), Holt's, Katrina Greenidge (We Love You, Charlie Frances Anagnos), and Carmelle Bonaventure (The Sorrows of Claire Bihan, Dinkan), but it continues to foster new bright literary talent," says Carrie Howland of Donaldson & Olson. "Columbia's M.F.A. presses not only boasts a brilliant faculty, but it does an excellent job engaging agents. Between the thesis anthology, which is emailed to agents each year, and the annual agent/advisor mixer, they really help bridge that gap between agent and writers."

There are also less obvious programs seen as hidden literary gems. Rob Quillin of Lippincott Massie McQuillin says, "I first became acquainted with the M.F.A. programs at the University of New Orleans through my client Amanda Boyden, who attended the program along with her husband, Giller Prize-winner Joseph Boyden, and eventually taught there. Our agency has gone on to work with several of her students, including young adult novelists Jen Violi and Lidi McBride, a finalist for the Morris Prize in Young Adult Fiction."

These are other M.F.A. programs flourishing below the Mason-Dixon line. Barbara Epler, publisher of New Directions, says, "I've been much more interested in the University of Florida in Gainesville, with the great Michael Hofmann, and the one at Brow University, long under Forest Gump's sway, and my favorite, with my good experiences living in the excellent Wyat

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From Workshop Table to Editor’s Desk: M.F.A.s Train Editors

BY JULIE BUNTIN

While many M.F.A. candidates are looking for their future editors through the traditional combo of query letters and blind luck, others might be on track to become those editors. In 2009, Andy Hunter and Scott Lin- denbaum, two recent graduates of Brooklyn College’s M.F.A. program, decided to found a new quarterly literary journal. They both worked on Brooklyn College’s M.F.A. student-run publication, the Brooklyn Reader, and were disappointed by institutional restrictions, which didn’t allow them to sell copies—the journal was essentially used to decorate student and faculty lounges. They called their new literary publication Electric Literature, and it has since become one of the most forward-thinking literary publications, produced for digital-first consumption.

“The Brooklyn College M.F.A. program doesn’t have a lot of emphasis on how to get published the way that, say, Columbia does,” says Halimah Marcus, another Brooklyn College M.F.A. grad and current Electric Literature editor-in-chief. “We just weren’t focused on that kind of thing in class—we were focused on improving our writing, and less on making waves in publishing.” Electric Literature, which now publishes the popular digital magazine Recommended Reading, is financially stable enough to pay its writers, who have included Ben Marcus, A.M. Homes, and other notable names. Michael Cunningham, a professor in the Brooklyn College M.F.A. program, was published in the very first issue. “The M.F.A. was very much the environment that contributed to this publication being created,” says Marcus, whose former co-editor, Benjamin Samuel, also holds an M.F.A. from Brooklyn. Marcus began at Electric Literature as an intern—she found out about the open position via the Brooklyn College literature soon after she was accepted, and started at the same time as she began her classes.

Barbara Jones, an editor at Henry Holt, also got her first editing job thanks largely to connections she forged as an M.F.A. candidate in fiction at Columbia University in the 80s. “I came out of my M.F.A. and immediately began working as an editor at the literary magazine Grand Street,” Jones says. “The M.F.A. program tossed me into the literary world.” The job at Grand Street was the start of Jones’s 20-year career as a magazine editor—she returned to book publishing in 2008. “In my editing I carry with me a sense of sympathy toward the writer’s life,” she says. “I remember editing work for class and afterward the writer would take me aside and thank me. In retrospection it was like, duh, yes, this is what I should be doing.” Jones no longer writes her own fiction, but a number of M.F.A.-careers who work in publishing still straddle both sides of the desk.

Maguerie Weisman, an assistant editor at Morrow, holds an M.F.A. in fiction from the New School and has no plans to give up writing for editing—or vice versa. “I see my goals as a writer and editor as connected,” she says. “The more I work as an editor, the better of a writer I become. I can’t imagine coming into this job and never having practiced writing and editing.” The idea that an M.F.A. is an education in the critiquing and editing of literature as much as the writing of it is commonly promoted in the workshop, and working editors agree. “You don’t get taught how to write an editorial note,” says Marcus. “Sometimes I steal from other editors when I have a chance, but there are definitely useful tools that you learn in an M.F.A. that can be applied to editing.” Perhaps because of their proximity to big free publishing, New York City M.F.A. programs do seem to result in a formidable number of grads who go on to careers in the industry. The New School’s program has seen many students rise through the ranks in houses big and small; Kannosh Hashemadeh, editor at Jawiwi Books; Christopher Belta, deputy editor of Harper’s; Melanie Gerke, associate publishing director at Knopf; Elisabeth Koch, founder of Black Bunny Books; Emma Komlin-Hotzky, assistant editor at Tin House; Justin Marks, a founder of the poetry press Ends LLC; all of them earned New School M.F.A.s, and there are more. The New School M.F.A. grads also appear in high-level arts-administrative roles; Jen Ernka, executive director of the Academy of American Poets, received a New School M.F.A. in poetry.

Though publishing institutes are popping up everywhere, for a certain editorially inclined writing student a New York City M.F.A. program might be an even better choice—where else can you simultaneously rub elbows with a future publishing comrade and someone who might become the first author on your list? Or don’t, if the city is still too alternative paths have worked for Kelly Link (Greensboro), who founded Small Beer Press in Baltimore in 2000; Noah Eil Gordon (University of Massachusetts-Amherst ’04), the brains behind Boulder, Colo.’s Subito Press; and Jeff Shorr (Washington University in St. Louis), executive editor at Graywolf. Editors with M.F.A.s are making their mark in publishing.

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