

## The Craft of Writing

"The Writing Program" is hardly an auspicious title, nor do the long grey corridors of Bennett Hall hold much promise of luster. But, according to English Department Chairman Robert Lucid, "What we have here, really, is a galaxy of stars."

Consider the luminaries -- among them novelist Carlos Fuentes, poet Daniel Hoffman and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tad Mosel. The program's ten writers, who teach 20 writing classes to Pennsylvania undergraduate and graduate students, go beyond the craft of writing to show their students how writing is reflective of our culture.

"In my seminars we discuss the cultural assumptions involved in making a poem. Choosing the rhythm, choosing the shape, choosing the form, choosing the level of diction -- every one of these things is a complex set of choices that reflect attitudes to culture, to the past, to the present, to literature, and to life. The same would hold in a fiction course," explained **Daniel Hoffman**, director of The Writing Program.

Last year Hoffman, Penn's poet in residence, published his eighth book of verse, *Brotherly Love*, a dramatic and narrative meditation on Penn's treaty with the Indians. This book, nominated for an American Book Award, was described by reviewer Anthony Hecht as "a spectacular achievement which handles brilliantly the mysterious relationship between spirit and flesh, history and vision . . ." Hoffman's well-known critical writings include *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, and he is editor of the recently published *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. He was the 1973-74 Consultant in Poetry of the Library of Congress, a post held by Robert Frost, Allen Tate and Robert Lowell. Hoffman is also known for and prides himself on the work of his students -- three of whom have just published their first books of poetry.

Just down the Bennett Hall corridor from Hoffman is the office of **Carlos Fuentes**, who first came to Penn in 1978 from the Mexican Embassy in

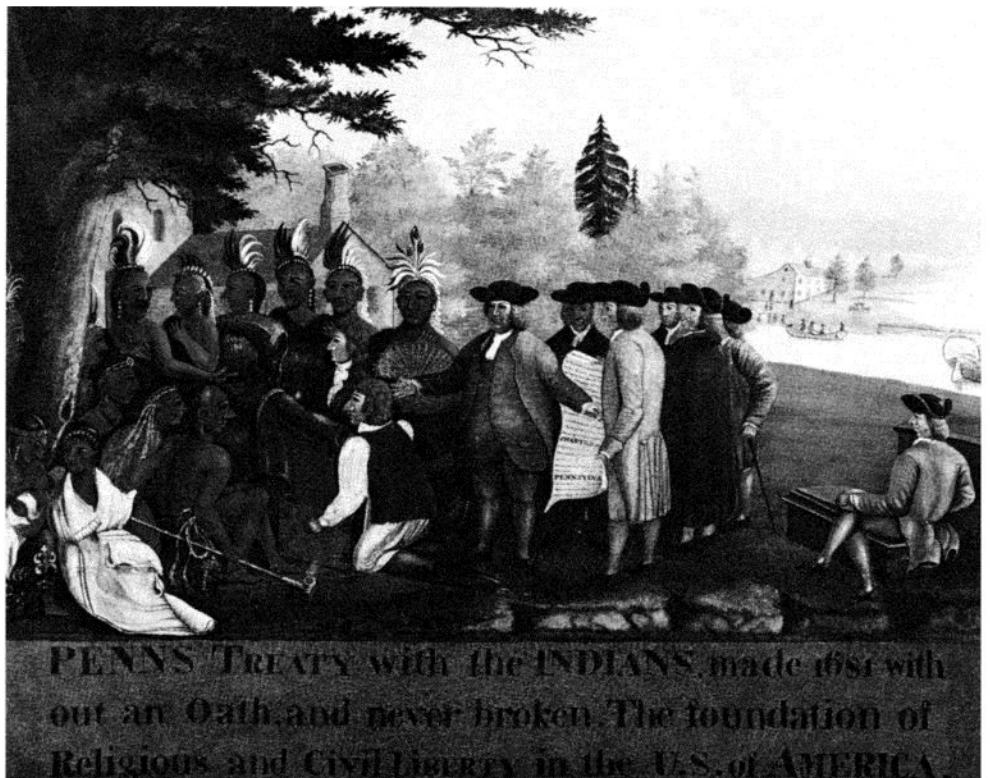
Paris. While his roles as Mexico's Ambassador to France, diplomat, and political writer are not to be minimized, Fuentes is here as Mexico's foremost 20th-century novelist to teach courses in fiction writing and film. Among his many novels are *Terra Nostra* and *A Change of Skin*, which was honored in Spain with the Biblioteca Breve Prize and later banned. His new novel, *Distant Relations*, has just come out this month.

While many of us read Fuentes' novels or his contributions to publications ranging from *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* to *Playboy*, his students can discuss with him subjects ranging from Malraux to Marxism to Bunuel. Fuentes, educated internationally as he moved with his father, a Mexican diplomat, speaks four languages and has lectured at universities from Chile to Italy. It was here at Pennsylvania, though, that he taught his first semester-

long writing course.

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Tad Mosel** can be found by climbing up to the third-floor office he borrowed from Deidre Bair (now on leave). Mosel's *All The Way Home*, a dramatization of James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, which won him the prize, was broadcast live last December on NBC television with Sally Fields and William Hurt. A graduate of Amherst College and Columbia University, he began writing for television in 1953 for the Hallmark Hall of Fame, Producers Showcase, CBS Play House, and many other programs. He is the author of two segments of *The Adams Chronicles* for PBS in 1976 and two films, *Dear Heart* and *Up The Down Staircase*. Mosel credits Katharine Cornell's performance of Shaw's *St. Joan* with leading him to writing for the theater.

"Forty years after that performance,



I picked up the telephone one day, and somebody said, 'would you be interested in writing a book about Katharine Cornell?' " exclaimed Mosel. Part of me was so astonished. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. And another part of me said, I have been waiting 40 years to be asked that question."

Three years ago he got another call from the past -- this time from his old grammar school classmate Daniel Hoffman, who convinced him to teach play-writing to Penn undergraduates.

In the same Bennett Hall cul-de-sac with Fuentes is the office of writer **Richard Elman**, who comes down from Stony Brook, New York, each Monday to teach a fiction course. Elman, whom many of us hear on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, is both prolific and diverse in his writing. His books range from a very, very funny autobiographical novel called *Fredi & Sherl & The Kids* (about growing up under the sporadically watchful eye of his extremely aspiring Brooklyn Jewish parents), to his anything but funny documentary book on Nicaragua and its revolution entitled *Cocktails at So-moza's*. As John Howland Spyker, he was the author of *Little Lives*. His next book is a novel, *The Menu Cyphers*, to be published in May by McMillan. Elman is a poet and former chief writer of the NET documentary series "Of People and Politics." He contributes to *GEO*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Harpers*, *Penthouse*, *The Nation* and many other publications.

Poet **Judith Moffett**, whose office contains a poster outlining clues to the Loch Ness Monster, is one of the few younger poets in the country who writes formal poetry. Moffett's *Keeping Time* "got extraordinary reviews," according to Daniel Hoffman.

She says of her poetry, "It differs from what most other people are doing in its traditional nature and in its interest in narrative and meditative modes, both of which are relatively out of fashion. The diction is very contemporary, but I like to put new wine into old skins."

An admirer of James Merrill, Moffett is writing a critical book called *James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry*, to be published by Columbia University Press. She has also done a widely re-

spected translation of *Gentleman, Single, Refined and Selected Poems 1937-1959* by the formal Swedish poet Hjalmar Gullberg.

In her second floor office, **Kristin Hunter-Lattany** works amid boxes containing her novel, *The Lakestown Rebellion*, and shelves lined with such classics as *The Wind in the Willows*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Her books for children and teenagers, including *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* and *Lou in the Limelight*, brought her the Drexel University Children's Literature Award last year, only the

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most recent in a list of awards that range from a National Book Award nomination to a Council on Interracial Books for Children Prize. The daughter of a high school principal and an outspoken mother who, the author says, refused to accept racism in any form, Hunter-Lattany grew up in Camden and Magnolia, New Jersey, and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1951. She teaches fiction and has developed a course in children's literature.

Those who lead students through the intricacies of nonfiction are also gathered on the second floor of Bennett Hall. **Charles Lee**, Philadelphia's film and drama critic, teaches nonfiction and review and criticism. Advanced expository writing is taught by both **Nora Magid**, former review editor of *The Reporter*, and **Geoffrey Harpham**, who is currently writing on the grotesque in art and literature.

There is something of an aura surrounding Nora Magid, generated by desolate students begging the department chairman to let them into her courses, by her reading and commenting on some 600 student papers a semester, and by her presence at such gatherings

for students as graduation picnics. As a matter of fact, it was Magid's own freshman English students who badgered the English Department until she was assigned to develop a course in advanced expository writing.

The former magazine editor has written for such newspapers as *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, as well as for literary quarterlies and journals of opinion. She has also been a consultant to the White House.

Magid says of herself, "I'm an editor rather than a writer. I get more pleasure out of being the cause of writing in other people."

Students from her class have won competitions and internships from *Time-Life*, *The Wall Street Journal* and WCAU-TV News. Her graduates now work for *Family Weekly*, *Conde Nast*, *Business Week*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Columbus Dispatch*.

"She develops relationships with her students that are extraordinary," said Robert Lucid. "She keeps track of what they are doing, especially if they are writers. She creates a kind of old person network through which the new people who come along can make contact with the world of working journalism."

The Writing Program, which has evolved into its present form over the past two decades, has had many illustrious faculty members in the recent past. They include Philip Roth (now on leave), Jerre Mangione, the African novelist and poet Ezekiel Mphahlele, Loren Eiseley, John Edgar Wideman, Paula Fox, Joseph Heller and John Leonard, novelist and chief book reviewer for *The New York Times*.

Next year novelist Tom McHale and playwright Romulus Linney will join the current faculty. McHale, who will teach fiction writing, has published six novels including *Farragan's Retreat*, *Principato* and *Dear Friends*. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1974 and was nominated for a National Book Award for fiction. Students and faculty alike can get a preview of Romulus Linney's work on campus next month when his play *F.M.* has its premiere at the Annenberg Center on May 19. Linney, who has won an Obie Award, is author of *Childe Harold*, *The Sorrows of Frederick* and *Holy Ghosts*.

Today The Writing Program has grown to the point where courses are offered on three levels in fiction and two in poetry and expository writing. Fiction students begin in a workshop with Elman or Hunter-Lattany and can then take an advanced course with Elman. Seniors can apply to Fuentes' graduate course in fiction. A fiction course is also offered in the College of General Studies by novelist **Diana Cavallo**. In poetry Hoffman and Moffett alternate teaching the undergraduate course, and Hoffman teaches the graduate seminar.

With its graduate courses in poetry and fiction well established, The Writing Program has now developed an M.A. in English and writing. This degree is available to students who have qualified for an academic M.A. in English and have met the requirements of The Writing Program. Plans are now under way to expand this M.A. in writing so that students in other departments who meet the graduate writing requirements can also receive this degree.

"Everyone following the fortunes of his own graduate students knows how difficult it is for them to get conventional jobs in teaching literature, but one area of employment that has not closed down is teaching writing," said Hoffman. "And with this in view it seemed it would be a good thing if we could give our talented graduate student writers certification that would appear immediately on a vita when they applied for a job."

The program also evolves from faculty and student interests. Several years ago, for example, Kristin Hunter-Lattany noticed that undergraduates in her fiction course wrote well about children: "I theorized that undergraduates are at the right stage of distance from childhood to remember it clearly and write about it well, and yet they have a certain objectivity that they lack when they write about their own lives. They also write without the sentimentality that older people are apt to impose on children's literature. Knowing that children could take tough writing and a publisher would take tough and honest writing, and undergraduates were doing this well, I thought, well, why not a special course in it."

Noting that writing programs at many universities are completely separate

from the English Department, Hoffman observed, "One of the strengths of the program at Penn is that it is integrated in the English Department, not isolated as a separate entity. This helps writers function in a community of the literate. Everyone in The Writing Program agrees that we don't want to teach students who don't read. We all feel that literacy and literature are necessary for a young writer."

The work of the writing faculty also has an impact on the rest of the campus. Daniel Hoffman arranges about four

## The Poem

Arriving at last,

It has stumbled across the harsh  
Stones, the black marshes.

True to itself, by what craft  
And strength it has, it has come  
As a sole survivor returns.

From the steep pass.  
Carved on memory's staff  
The legend is nearly decipherable.  
It has lived up to its vows

If it endures  
The journey through the dark places  
To bear witness,  
Casting its message  
In a sort of singing.

From *The Center of Attention* (Random House, Inc.)

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poetry readings a semester, which have included such poets as James Dickey, William Stafford, Denise Levertov, John Hollander, Howard Nemerov, Ted Hughes and John Montague. Last spring The Writing Program sponsored the Pound-Williams Conference at which scholars, admirers and family came to honor these two poets on the 75th anniversary of the awarding of their degrees from Pennsylvania. An hour-long program on the Conference has been aired by National Public Radio. And last month, Kristin Hunter-Lattany

helped to organize a display of work by Pennsylvania's black authors at the University Bookstore.

To encourage undergraduate writing, The Writing Program holds annual contests in fiction, poetry and play-writing. These have been judged by such eminent authors as Maxine Kumin, Richard Wilbur, Elizabeth Hardwick and the late Elizabeth Bishop.

Probably the greatest measure of the program's success, however, is its graduates. In addition to the many journalists who have studied writing in the program, alumni include Martin Cruz Smith, author of the best seller *Gorky Park* and David Bradley, author of *South Street* and *The Chaneyville Incident*, just chosen for the PEN/Faulkner Prize for fiction. Matt Caspari (son of physics professor Max Caspari) was awarded first prize in the last year's *Mademoiselle* fiction contest for his story, "Reasons I Don't Get Much Sleep These Days." Last year Norman Lock won the Aga Khan Fiction Prize from *Paris Review* for one of his short stories.

"We have probably the smallest graduate writing program in the country," said Hoffman. "And I just can't help but burst with pride that within the last year three of our recent alumni of the graduate course published their first books of poems."

Edward Hirsch, who wrote *For the Sleepwalkers*, published by A. A. Knopf, was the youngest poet nominated for the National Book Critic's Circle Award. Susan Stuart's *Yellow Stars and Ice* was one of four books of poetry published last year by Princeton University Press. Jeanne Murray Walker's *Nailing Up the Home Sweet Home* was published by Cleveland State University. All three have been acclaimed by reviewers. The poems of Deborah Burnham have appeared in several magazines; Darcy Cummings had work in the last *Editor's Choice*; and Beth Brown won the 1981 Creative Writing Award in poetry from *Callaloo*, a national journal of black writing published at the University of Kentucky. Penn students' poems and stories have also appeared in national anthologies of university writing published by the Academy of American Poets and the Associated Writing Program.



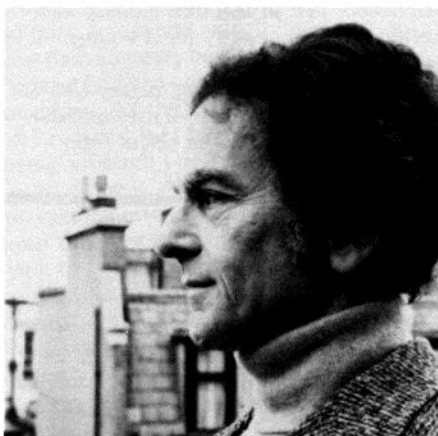
## WRITERS ON WRITING: Excerpts from Seven Conversations

**Daniel Hoffman**, poet in residence.

I began writing poems in the only way that it can happen, by necessity. I can't remember when I wasn't writing or trying to write. It's a way of confronting the chaos around you. As Robert Frost said, "A poem is a momentary stay against confusion."

Reading a poem is a complex act. So is writing one. A successful poem, whatever its form, uses language to create an experience which cannot be fully communicated in any other way. That's why no explication of a poem can take the place of the poem itself. Its meaning isn't its paraphrase. It's much more subtle and deeper than the prose sense of the words. Words are filled with overtones, phrases with rhythms, reverberations of feeling; they are reflexive with reference both within the literary structure and to the world that structure represents and transfigures. The search for words is the poet's business; he must find for each place in his poem the one word in the world that his poem requires there. The cousin of that word would spoil it.

Where does a poem begin? You explore memory, observation, whatever territory your mind and feelings can examine, looking for the spot to sink an artesian well. Lots of dry holes. But now and then a strike -- you get something, a phrase, a rhythm in the mind, a feeling that feels as though it's about to find its shape in language. It doesn't matter where you start -- sometimes you already know the shape, the form, and the search is to fill it. Or it can be the other way around, with the poem delivering the truth or its own rhythm and form as it comes. Whatever the shape, whether improvised and unprecedented, or traditional, it must have the stamp of inevitability. If you can tinker with the poem, change it, well, it wasn't finished. Of course a poem is never perfect. As Valery said, it can never be truly finished, only abandoned.



**TEACHING POETRY:** The material of poetry is the life that you've lived -- how you feel about it, how you respond to it and how you visualize it.

One cannot teach a person to become a poet. Each student brings his own individuality and who he is, to the seminar table, and what he writes will come out of that. All we can hope to do is to help a student who has talent to use his gifts with a full awareness of the resources of his art.

I hope that from what I've said about the way we teach here it will be evident that the work of art, even at the student level, is necessarily the embodiment of a whole culture, a whole set of assumptions and traditions. The techniques themselves reflect the way that people have used the language for centuries.

**Carlos Fuentes**, novelist.

I was very small. I started scribbling. At seven I was doing a magazine on my own, you know, with pencil--a magazine with pencil. Then I had my first short story published when I was 11 or 12 I guess.

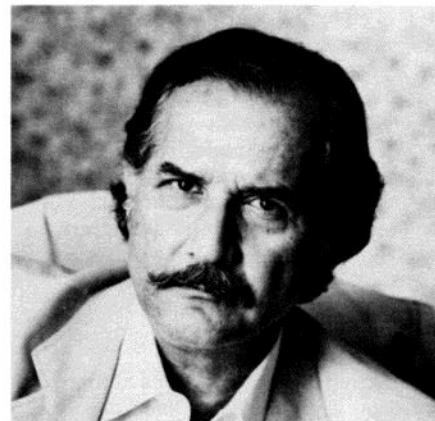
How did I learn to write? I'm still

learning, what do you mean! It took me about 25 years to learn just a little bit . . . I learned it by writing books and by finally believing that now I can write the books I wanted to write since I was 20, but couldn't write because I didn't know how . . . It's a question of technique. It's a question of life also. Both things. It's a question of having too much energy. You do many things when you have a lot of energy.

I am over 50 now. I know exactly what I want to do with the last 20 years of my life.

**A WRITER TEACHES:** I have always felt that writing is such a solitary occupation, an extremely solitary occupation, that I feel that I must do something else in order to be in touch with the world and with people and with young people. And I have always been in journalism or in films or in diplomacy, in politics. And this way I am in touch with the world in a creative fashion.

You know teaching also permits you to reread seriously, to refine your thoughts and your readings. So it's very helpful for my writing . . . To reread Proust or Flaubert with a group of very bright young people is a new experience. It's different from reading it by yourself. And this in turn certainly affects your own writing.



**CLASSES AT PENN:** I try to get a group of 12 or 15 people to read very carefully what each student presents and to provide that student with as much input as they can. We have a lot of round table discussions, plus readings that parallel the matter at hand. Instead of establishing reading programs--a sort of blind date between the students and the authors--we try to say that this piece of writing, this fragment of a novel, suggests a story by Tolstoy, and we would gain from reading it. What you are driving at is attained by the author. There is an illumination here. There is a correspondence. There is a contrast. There is an opposition to what you're doing that would illuminate your own work and all of us.

I generally have a very high caliber of student at Pennsylvania. And they have something extra in that they are from a big city. They are streetwise. I'm a very referential teacher. I like to speak of jazz and movies and politics and many things. And the students at Pennsylvania are very aware of what is going on in the world. That's why I like teaching here.



**Tad Mosel**, playwright.

It's a matter of getting something on paper, out of the head and on paper. And no matter how long you have been writing, the main reason you have a problem getting it out of the head and onto paper is the fear of failure.

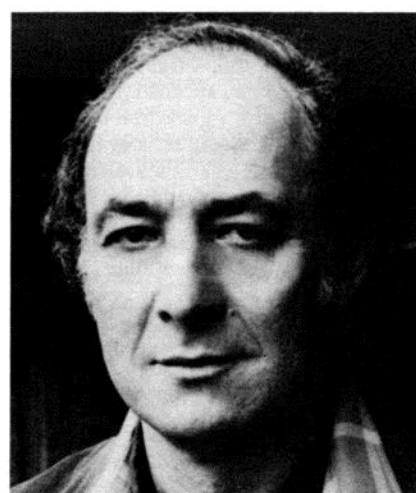
Because in the head, it's beautiful. You just want to keep it there glowing and shining and very vague. The minute you commit it to paper, you risk failing--not only risk it, you court failure. You almost always fail. And you just have to tell yourself, okay, I'm willing to fail, and put it down on paper.

**STARTING IN TELEVISION:** In 1953 I don't think anybody who was young and wanted to be a television writer could possibly complain that they hadn't been given a chance, because it was there for the asking. I was working for an airline selling tickets, and I was writing like crazy on my days off. And I wrote about 30 plays. I did what they tell young writers to do. You study the medium, and you say, oh that's what they want. Well, I did all that, and nobody ever wanted that.

And one day I sat down, and I wrote a play, not out of despair, but as a release of tension. I wrote a play that I wanted to write, not one that I thought would sell. There were two subjects that were taboo on television in those days. You could not have a play that was about either adultery or suicide. And I wrote a little play that was about both. And it was the first one I sold.

**ON WRITING PLAYS:** The whole purpose of art is to organize reality. Reality itself is confusing enough, and art is supposed to give it some kind of significance or meaning. If you want self-expression, go to group therapy. If you can't organize your thoughts, then don't be a writer.

Theater is a group effort. It's for actors and directors and the audience. If you forget that the audience is part of the production too, if you drive them away, you're not going to have theater. It's very simple. And the only way to keep them there is to present them with plays that amuse them or give them some things to think about that are well-organized.



**Richard Elman**, novelist.

Things come to me--a little tiny piece of perception that is very sharp and that I haven't seen anywhere else, and I start writing about that, and pretty soon I have a character or two. So I'll go along, and after maybe 100 pages, I'll say to myself, what the hell have I got here, and I'll read it. And I realize that it's very interesting, but it isn't much of anything yet, but I have a few interesting characters. So I junk it and take those people, who by now have a story to them in my head, and I try to write a story by the process of drafts . . . The only thing that keeps me going is that I learn from writing about these characters. I throw away a lot of novels after 50 or 60 pages because I get bored, because nothing is happening for me. I figure if it's happening for me, it's happening for the reader.

**ON FICTION AND NONFICTION:**

Fiction is the lie that you're telling a lie, and nonfiction is the lie that you're telling the truth. There is a lot of imagination that goes into the best nonfiction as well as into the worst.

**TEACHING:** I really try to bring home to the students that James Joyce was just a lower middle-class kid from Dublin

until he decided he had something on his mind. If they could be less in awe of the greats . . . They should read them and see what they did and realize that they were only reflecting on their lives and that they -- the students -- have experiences on their minds that they might try writing about . . .

Most people have this built-in piece of discouragement, which is that if they write something, that's the way it is. It's unchangeable. They submit it to class or to an editor, and it's criticized for being deficient in some respects, and they feel that they themselves are being criticized rather than the piece. And they fall into a depression and don't want to write again. What I try to give them is a professional attitude toward rewriting. I tend to regard myself more as a rewriter than as a writer. I only very rarely get it right the first time; by the sixth or seventh time, it begins to take shape.

One of the crimes of the course is that you have to give grades, because how can you grade writers? Whoever sits down to write, which is to be very, very naked in a certain way, has a great deal of courage and should probably get an A just on that basis.



**Judith Moffett**, poet.

I never thought about writing poetry as a profession. I thought very little about any profession. I found myself in graduate school as a specialist in American Lit . . . I was writing poems during that time. I taught for a couple of years in Erie after I finished my doctorate. And then I got a Fulbright to go to Sweden to do

some translations . . . When I got back, I went out to Denver and started to work on a critical study of James Merrill's work. I made a barely sufficient living as a member of the Poetry in the Schools Program. After I finished the Merrill book, I went to Sweden and England.

In England, I realized that I was tired of drifting around. I'd moved every couple of years, every couple of months, since I had gone to college, which had been more than 15 years before. My first book of poetry had just come out the previous December. All these things converged, and I realized that I wanted to write poetry although I couldn't really see my way to doing it. About six weeks later I was reading intensively in the library about the lives of poets and writers, trying to get some clues I guess. And I got a miraculous phone call -- if I were religious, I would call it the finger of God. It was an invitation to come to teach at the Iowa Writers Workshop.

#### CHANGES IN TEACHING POETRY:

An interesting thing has happened over the last 30 years since the days when Robert Lowell was teaching at the Iowa Writers Workshop. In those days everything was still formal. That is, rhyme was still viewed as one of the technical things aspiring poets needed to learn to do . . . You might not always write that way, but it was something you needed to know. That's no longer true at all. I taught at Iowa for a year, and I taught a course in forms because I could . . . Two of the three other poets on the staff couldn't.

It seems that nowadays in creative writing, kids aren't interested in acquiring a sense of where the language has been before it got to them; they limit their sense of how it was used 10 or 15 or, at most, 50 years ago, in poetry. It seems to me that that's an impoverishment . . . Of course I don't expect them to write rhyming, metrical poems, except for an exercise or two. But I want them to know something about the purposes of rhyme and meter by the time they finish the course.

Competency -- of style, image, metaphor -- doesn't really equal poetry. Although competency is really all we can hope to achieve in the workshops. And we do. And out of this universal competency, we hope that the ones with real talent rise like cream. And everyone else will be better off than they were -- better furnished for self-expression.



**Kristin Hunter-Lattany**, novelist.

I think that most good creative writers have a sort of madness. They work from a conscious design, but at some point in the writing, the unconscious takes over and unexpected, unintended things happen, which is, I believe, madness by clinical definition.

I discovered after the publication of my novel, *The Lakestown Rebellion*, that it was full of subconscious characters who had surfaced although I thought I was consciously controlling the work and writing about other people . . . One thing I always tell creative writing students is never, absolutely never, write about themselves . . . always invent characters based on other people. Now, however, I have discovered myself lurking behind the facades of at least two characters in that novel. But it did not happen deliberately . . .

One day I was autographing the book for a very good friend when it just flashed into my mind that a character named Cindy was an extreme of me when I was young, and Bella was an extreme of me now.

**ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:** I definitely feel a responsibility to black people . . . I just finished a sequel to *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*. I wanted to do it because the happy ending was criticized as unrealistic. It ends after many trials and tribulations



with teenagers forming a successful singing group. Their one recording has become a hit. And I thought that was fine at the time. And I didn't pay much attention.

In the interim I began to become aware of what's going on in the music industry, what happens to young performers, especially young female performers. I began to become aware as a black person that too many of our young people, if they're female, see performing as a way to success . . . In this book I carry the group into actual show business, and they fall into the various pitfalls that are waiting for performers.

I am still a sucker for a happy ending, and I couldn't figure out how I would get out of it, but I did get Lou out of the mess she was in. She found an alternative route. And I wanted to do that because I did not want to set up show business and a show business heroine as a role model for the black young people. It's dangerous. There's too much of that.

## Nora Magid, editor.

One of my students once said that my ideal classroom would be the Sistine Chapel, only with the walls and the ceiling covered with blackboards. When the computer in its wisdom dispenses an appropriate room, I fill the boards with passages from students papers, from the *DP*, *The Inquirer* and *The Times*. We contemplate these illogical or illiterate or graceless goodies, and we overhaul them. The range here is from the primitive (the preposition; the dangle, including that dumb hopefully) to the sophisticated (the infinite gradations in connotation and emphasis caused by minute changes or by geographic shifts within a context). Then we consider in their entirety several student papers.

Before I came to Penn, I was an editor, and before that, a very young and alarmingly inept college instructor. After *The Reporter* folded, Joel Conarroe and Humphrey Tonkin found themselves short a CGS instructor, and they persuaded me to fill in. I'll always be grateful to them and to Joe Secor of the Engineering School staff, who happened to take that first course. In figuring out the application of editorial techniques to the teaching of writing, I must have changed direction every five minutes;

Mr. Secor followed so cheerfully that he carried the rest of the group with him. At the end of the semester, he brought me one of the best presents I have ever received -- two erasers and a lot of chalk. I cherish those erasers.

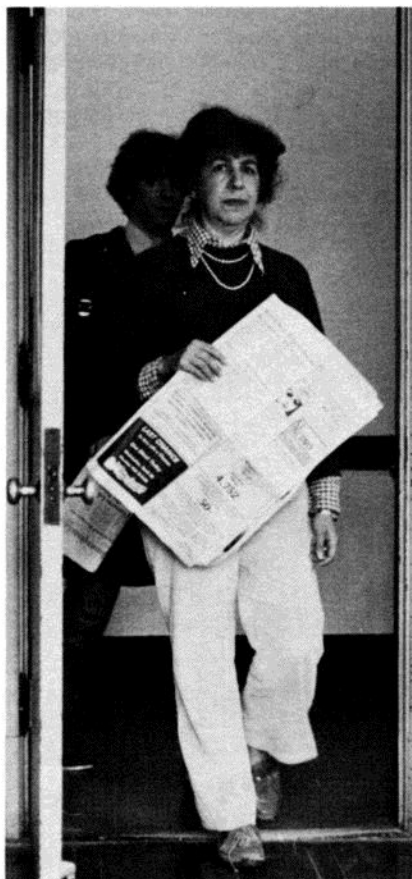
Some time later, I switched to daytime freshman comp. My 145 came about when two former 108s, neither an incipient journalist, petitioned the Department for more. I remember saying, Advanced Writing? What is it? Longer words? Longer sentences? Longer paragraphs? One of these two students is now a biologist; the other, a SAMP graduate, is a doctoral candidate in anthropology.

**PENN STUDENTS:** I love my students. They are bright and brave, funny at their own expense and blunt in their self-criticism. They are well-informed and responsible, they have political and social consciences, and they are fiercely devoted to one another. A decent and generous bunch. I see remarkable people; I also see some extraordinary

writers. They come in already writing to a professional standard, and some do indeed begin as undergraduates to publish professionally. Those with problems have in the main to be delivered from styles not their own and from peculiar passions like an abnormal devotion to the participle or to the crazy comma. Some have to learn to distinguish between the flexible and the inflexible parts of the language, some to master idiom and derivation and documentation. Some seek foolproof recipes. Some write like machines. Others, if they keep journals, write like human beings, but their sense of writing as a public act may be hazy. They have to learn to include the reader without smothering him, and they have to learn that what is unsaid is as significant as what is said. One summum laude in pursuit of a cure for thinking parenthetically diagnosed a common pattern. Most of all, students have to learn that retyping and revising are not the same thing. All this within fourteen weeks.

**CLASSES IN WRITING:** In this course, they write a paper a week, and they read a magazine a week. The magazines include *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic* and a sampling from the journals of opinion, the quarterlies and the marvelous 19th-century collection in the library. For the clientele, bulk reading works wonders. For me, it's bulk reading. When it comes to the periodicals, we examine structure, style and approach, as well as many of the assumptions that underlie American life. (I am Canadian. This fascinates me.) Most students read responsively and analytically, and if they like an excerpt from a forthcoming book, they will often buy the book. They also often subscribe to the magazines they enjoy.

Problems change. I begin to see in class what has happened in the national press -- a blurring of the distinction between the subjective and the objective and the temptation to invent or to embroider, to substitute (rotten) fiction for nonfiction. Students also seem to be less independent -- why does my office run like the HUP emergency ward? There are no emergencies in English grammar -- and to laugh less. But when I recently made sour noises about SCUE, someone turned in a parody version, a guide for the teacher in which typical students are publicly and ungenerously graded



on the basis of their personalities and performance.

**OPPORTUNITIES:** For those interested in writing or editing careers, three very attractive national competitions exist. The sponsors are Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, The American Society of Magazine Editors, and Time-Life. Our students have been winners in all three. Other students on their own have interned at the networks and at many magazines and papers. Penn itself provides excellent opportunities: At the *Gazette* we have the student column slots and at the News Bureau, the Communications Fellowship.

Graduates have been or are affiliated with Doubleday, the AP, CBS, Conde Nast, *Family Weekly*, *S&S*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Hartford Courant*, *Good Times*, *The New York Times Book Division*, technical and medical journals and the U.S. Senate. One young man who was my student twice is both a missionary and an engineer. Another is a Penn administrator. But rumor to the contrary, my students, like everyone else's, populate the graduate schools in law, medicine and MBA programs. They are at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford, Chicago, NYU, the London School, and of course Penn. I name but a few -- and so doing, I violate one of my cardinal rules: dump the laundry list.

## From *Distant Relations*

Even so, a kind of contrary compulsion, irreversible and irresistible, forces me to insist that my old friend tell me everything, as if exhausting all the possibilities of the narrative might mean the end of this story I never wanted to hear, and the resulting release from the responsibility of telling it to someone else. This is the only explanation I can offer for my next incredible questions.

"Isn't there anything more, Branly? Are you sure you aren't forgetting something? I must know everything before..."

"Tomorrow is November 11th, Fuentes. Your birthday. You see, I am not yet senile, I remember the birth dates, the dates of the deaths of my friends. No, you must not worry. You and I are living but one of the infinite possibilities of a life and of a story. You are afraid to be the narrator of this novel about the Heredias because you fear the vile demon who may take revenge against the last man to know the story. But you are forgetting something I have tried to tell you more than once. Every novel is in a way incomplete, but, as well, contiguous with another story. Take your own life. In 1945, Fuentes, you decided to live in Buenos Aires, near Montevideo; you did not return to your native Mexico; you became a citizen of the River Plate region, and then in 1955 you came to live in France. You became less of a River

Plate man, and more French than anything else. Isn't that so?

I said yes, he knew that as well as I, though at times I questioned the degree of my assimilation into the French world. He touched my hand with affection.

"Imagine; what would have happened if you had returned to Mexico after the war and put down roots in the land of your parents? Imagine; you publish your first book of stories when you are twenty-five, your first novel four years later. You write about Mexico, about Mexicans, the wounds of a body, the persistence of a few dreams, the masks of progress. You remain forever identified with that country and its people."

"But it was not like that, Branly." I spoke uncertainly. "I don't know whether for good or ill, but I am not that person."

With a strange smile, he asks me to pour him a drink from the bottle of Chateau d'Yquem beside his bed. Shouldn't he, I ask, go back to bed? Yes, he will; later, when he decides it is time. Would I like a glass of that late wine, the fruit of the autumn grapes?

I join him in a toast.

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