

The New York State Summer Writers Institute: A 30th Anniversary Retrospective

By Robert Boyers (Director, NY State Summer Writers Institute)

Like every other literary person back in the mid-1980's I marveled at the sudden celebrity of the novelist William Kennedy. Bill was an Albany journalist and sometime fiction writer who had labored in obscurity, then wrote a great book called IRONWEED which was rejected by just about every publishing house on the planet, and suddenly struck gold when the book was finally published and won for Bill the acclaim he deserved: Pulitzer Prize, MacArthur "Genius" Award, other prizes. Next thing we knew he had moved to set up a writers institute at The State University in Albany, and contacted people at Skidmore College to see about starting a New York State Summer Writers Institute in Saratoga Springs. Why not Albany? "No one will want to come to Albany in the summertime," Bill responded, "whereas Saratoga Springs will be as compelling to aspiring writers, young and old, as a summertime destination as it's always been to me." So that the deed was done, and Skidmore College became the home of the summer writers institute that celebrates its thirtieth anniversary in July of this year.

Of course there were jolts and obstacles involved in the setting up of the institute. A year before the program began accepting students and running classes, Bill decided to throw a public launch party on the Skidmore campus, inviting a few of the best writers in the country to address an overflow crowd and get them excited about what was to come the following year. The only trouble was that the day he and Special Programs Director Don McCormack chose for that event turned out to be the worst August day in the history of the town, with monsoon winds and rain that for the first time in history forced the cancellation of the races at the famed Saratoga track and made the walkways leading up to Filene building a sea of mud and, in some places, knee-high water. Between the water and the mud and the power outages all over campus it seemed a miracle that the event went off, though we all thought it was not a very good omen as we looked ahead to the opening of our program.

Before I took up my duties as Director of the new summer program I spoke with many people about what we might do to differentiate ourselves from other programs and to establish a firm foundation for a long future. Of course I knew that such a program could prosper only if I managed to hire a faculty that included some of the best, and best-known, writers in the country, and I succeeded in lining up in that first year novelist Russell Banks and short story writer Amy Hempel, poets

Robert Hass and Richard Howard, and non-fiction writer/ poet Katha Pollitt. But the senior person I hired to teach Non-Fiction was a noted woman of letters named Doris Grumbach, a biographer, memoirist, critic and the literary editor of The New Republic magazine. A great catch, we felt, and in fact, when we began accepting applications, we found that her class filled up immediately with terrifically gifted and promising people.

The only trouble was, less than 48 hours before the beginning of that first summer season, Doris phoned me to say that “something” had come up, “something” she couldn’t describe, and that, sorry though she was, she would have to withdraw from her obligation to teach the four weeks of that senior non-fiction workshop she had been hired to teach eight months earlier. I’ll not rehearse the several choice words that flew from my mouth right at that moment, once I ascertained that no health issue was involved in this astonishing withdrawal. Nor will I say much about the phone calls I made to more than a half dozen distinguished people, not one of whom I was able to persuade to drop everything and move up to Saratoga Springs on the following day to begin teaching fifteen eager students in a four-week writing workshop—and for a very tiny salary.

So that, faced with disaster in that first summer, and with a thousand new challenges to handle over a projected month of strangeness and excitement, I decided to take on the Doris Grumbach non-fiction workshop myself. After all, I was an experienced teacher, had published several non-fiction books of my own, and had been editing the quarterly magazine *Salmagundi* for more than twenty years, so that I figured I could respond to student manuscripts and satisfy expectations. Not to mention the fact that no one else with comparable experience was willing to tackle the thing.

In truth, I think that the teaching worked out quite well, and my wife Peg only said once or twice each week that she thought I was on the verge of having a nervous breakdown.

Of course the teaching, and the juggling of that with my other responsibilities, would have been a good deal more manageable if I had not been deluded about what would be the best way to schedule classes in such a program. A few older writers with whom I conferred about my hopes and plans suggested that really students would be happiest if we scheduled workshop meetings five days each week from 1 to 4 PM. When I presented the plan to Russell Banks and Robert Hass, the first two major writers I hired, both expressed astonishment but decided that perhaps this would be worth a try. But by the end of the second week both confessed that their own

energies were flagging, and that students enrolled in their workshops were complaining about having to prepare student manuscripts for discussion five days each week. It was clear that people were making progress in their work, but the cost had begun to seem high, and student evaluations at the end of the four-week session indicated that faculty and students were in complete agreement that our five-day per week experiment was not a good idea.

By the time we convened for a farewell evening on a Friday evening at the end of July in the home of Don McCormack, both Banks and Hass announced that they would “never ever return to teach in the program” if we continued with a five days a week schedule. And of course I quietly stated that I would under no circumstances, even with a three day a week schedule, return to teach while running the program, delivering introductions each night at public readings, and entertaining staff and visiting writers at my house each weeknight before public readings.

So much for a rocky start. And this is not to mention the hundred other things we might have foreseen. Though I will mention one other. In a workshop with fifteen students enrolled, it was necessary to stipulate a page limit for student manuscripts, so that the teacher and those in the class might actually read the work of each student carefully and prepare for each class scrupulously. But in the very advanced fiction workshop taught by Russell Banks, aspiring novelists were disappointed or, in a few cases, incensed, when they brought him entire novel manuscripts to read and he had to inform that they he could not and would not read them or respond to them. How could he? So that on that wrap-up night, when Russell and Hass recited their demands for future summers, Russell included in his own list the requirement that in future we hire people who would read complete novels and meet with their authors to discuss them. I'll never forget the look on the face of Russell when he told us about those tense encounters with students in his workshop, who really would not accept the fact that he was really unable to satisfy that particular demand on his time.

Of course I have a thousand stories I might tell about close and dangerous and hilarious encounters during the thirty years of our program. About the male student, thirty years old, from San Francisco, who had driven across the country in a run-down VW van, but felt that he could not afford a room on campus, and thus decided to spend the month living in his tiny van, which he parked in a lot near the athletic center. Only problem there was that he “had an aversion” to showering in “public facilities” and thus began, after a week or so of classes, to stink, so that students in his workshop had to complain, first to their instructor, and then to me. The young man was not at all pleased when I offered him a full refund of his tuition if he would

simply leave our fair campus, and he settled in the end by promising that he would “take care of it” his own way and provoke no further complaint about his body odor.

I remember well the middle-aged man who brought to a workshop taught by Francine Prose a long story which seemed to celebrate, with a special relish, the violence visited upon several women by the central male protagonist of the piece. Most of the class thus informed Francine that they would not attend the part of a class session in which that particular work was scheduled, so that Francine had to tell them that of course that was their business, but that if they wished to remain in the workshop they would need to mark up the man’s story and turn in their comments and suggestions, so that she might hand him what every student in the class had a right to expect, which was the feedback of everyone enrolled. That demand was met, though the session in the workshop was attended only by Francine herself and two other students.

Or I might recall an incident from the summer of 2014, when former Poet-Laureate of the US Robert Pinsky selected for screening on a weekend evening a classic Italian comedy called “Seduced and Abandoned,” which he and I would then discuss with students that night. Little did Robert or his host expect that some hell would break loose on that evening, when several students rose to complain that they didn’t find the film at all funny, that the misogyny displayed in the film was not amusing, and that even if the film was intended as a comic attack on misogyny, they should not have been subjected to such a display in a summer program. I don’t see how the director of a program like this can possibly have billed such a film as a comedy, one young lawyer enrolled in a workshop yelled at me that evening. And as for Mister Pinsky, well, another person said, unwilling to finish the sentence. Fortunately, with well over a hundred people present that evening, such complaints came only from five persons, and neither Pinsky nor Boyers was required to defend themselves at length, given that many students in the program rose to say that they were not at all offended by the film, that they laughed like hell at it, and didn’t think that humorless people should think that they could impose their own standards on everyone else. One young woman enrolled in a poetry workshop even rose and read from her laptop a few sentences from a NY Times review of the film, in which it was described as an “uproariously funny Italian comedy.” Another student raised his hand to say that “satire isn’t always kind or pleasant. But I thought we were supposed to be able to deal with all sorts of things in a program like this.” Yes, I thought. Leave it to the students themselves to get this right.

When in 2015 I asked Robert Pinsky whether he wanted to do another film evening with me at the summer writers institute, he said “sure, but no more Italian

comedies. How about we do ‘The Wizard of Oz’ or ‘Bambi.’ Something like that. Something that even a 35-year old New York City lawyer won’t be offended by.”

But let me not suggest that the stories I have to tell are mainly stories of conflict. Dozens and dozens of students return to study at the summer writers institute year after year. One, named Julia Suarez, has been enrolled in the Poetry Master class for the entire thirty years. Peg Boyers, who teaches a poetry workshop in session two and is the author of three volumes of poetry published by the University of Chicago Press, has been enrolled in Frank Bidart’s session one Poetry Master Class for eighteen years. Dozens of our students have gone on to publish successful books, and a number of them are now teachers in the program. In 2016, those former students include Pulitzer prize winning novelist Paul Harding (*Tinkers*) and Cuban author Cristina Garcia (*Dreaming In Cuban*), both of whom were discovered at the summer institute and were put in touch with the editors who published their first books by faculty members at the institute.

Most recent success stories include Garth Greenwell, whose first novel *What Belongs To You* was given a rave review by James Wood in a winter issue of *The New Yorker*, and Helen Ross, still a student at the summer institute, whose novel *What Was Mine* has been winning acclaim all over the country.

Of course I want to go on, and on, and speak about the great miracle of this program, namely, that we have been able to attract the best writers and the best students to be with us all of these years. But I’ll end there and invite anyone who is interested to be in touch with me and to discover that I really do have hundreds and hundreds of good stories to tell, most of them entirely true.
