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## FERTILE TIME FOR CREATIVE WRITING: MORE COLLEGE COURSES EVERY YEAR

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**BALTIMORE**— ON a bright, cold day recently at the Johns Hopkins University campus in Baltimore, the novelist John Barth - a tall man with a bald head, a blue beret and a vocabulary the size of The Oxford English Dictionary - steered his graduate class in creative writing through what he perceived to be a "rather supportive" literary post-mortem of a student's short story, while the author hugged her sides. His blue-jeaned students, a baker's dozen sporting thermal undershirts, wool hats or neorevisionist Farrah Fawcett hairdos, chewed over details in the piece. Is the character of the photographer using his equipment correctly? Do the leaves on a sugar maple really turn these colors? Are the two main characters sleeping together or just flirting?

"This is all second-draft stuff," Mr. Barth told the class, "which she can clean up easily the next time around." Then he closed in for his main thrust: "Is this really a story at all, I wonder," he asked, "or just a series of small shocks?" The student, fingers digging into her ribs, concluded that she "put in too much loaded stuff, and it got away from me."

The class breaks before beginning the dissection of another student's work, and Professor Barth roams the corridors, talking numbers. "There are 237 writing program like this around the country," he said, doing quick quantum hops to produce the writer's version of math anxiety. "Together they've probably turned out 75,000 official 'writers.' "

In point of fact, there are more than 300 undergraduate and graduate creative- writing programs in the United States today. If each turns out a minimum of 10 students (and Columbia's master's in fine arts alone turns out five times that number), there are more than 3,000 academically sanctioned writers rolling into the marketplace each year.

Furthermore, the numbers are booming: today's figure of 303 creative-writing programs is up from 256 in 1980 and up from a mere 15 in 1967, when the Associated Writing Programs at Old Dominion University in Virginia started keeping count. At that time, any graduate of the Iowa's Writers Workshop, 48 years old this year, was practically guaranteed a teaching position; now its graduates scramble along with everyone else's.

They tend to scramble up, however - along with graduates from four or five other well-known schools, toward the top of the heap. An M. A. or M. F. A. from Brown, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Iowa and the Washington University at St. Louis will bring a student closer both to academic openings and the publishing profession, and will almost certainly guarantee a writing in one of countless literary quarterlies bought, read and later edited by fellow students.

What it will not do, said Professor Barth - stellar attraction, at the Johns Hopkins M.A. program along with the poet David St. John, the playwright Edward Albee and the Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Jonathan Yardley - is "inject talent." Instead, he views his stewardship as a kind of one-year master/apprentice relationship with a handful of students, helping them to hone and polish their craft.

The 12 to 15 chosen few in Mr. Barth's classes are harvested from 10 times that number of applicants, he says, usually on the basis of a "smashingly good writing sample." This outshines but does not override an applicant's evidence of "some literary acquaintanceship and academic proficiency" and a decent Graduate Record Examination score.

There are any number of programs, some of them excellent (Stanford's, for instance), that care not one whit whether a student has read anything or has an undergraduate degree, as long as he or she has talent.

Some of those trying to squeeze through the Johns Hopkins door see the application as a kind of writer's litmus test, says the department head, John Irwin, "trying to find out if they have enough talent and will to write for a living." Writers must prepare for a life of penury and jobs other than writing, say the professors.

"A writing program almost guarantees a nonliving," says Daniel Halpern, the head of Columbia's program.

Considering the dim prospects and the cost of a good graduate degree (roughly \$10,000), why are students flocking to these programs? Ask them and you get a curious mix of the practical ("I was looking for a quick master's, and Johns Hopkins takes only a year") and the romantic ("I couldn't do anything but write - it wouldn't let me alone").

ACCORDING to Eric Staley, executive director of the Associated Writing Programs, "Many students are finding that a liberal- arts degree will qualify them for a job in the corporate world, especially if they can show a strength in writing."

For some, like Mary Robison, a Johns Hopkins graduate and twice-published novelist who now teaches at Harvard, going for the M. A. was "a way to see where I fit into the literary landscape. If you are writing for yourself, that can be very depressing - you don't have any gauge. So you go through a program to get a peek at the competition and find out where you fit on the esthetic

map."

There's also, say the directors, something healthy about exposing students to massive doses of literature. So most programs require one or two seminars each semester in literary subjects from Dante to the Romantics, and current favorites among the literati - we've recently passed through a John Irving phase, says Iowa's John Leggett - are passed around and savored by students.

Acquaintance with current writing trends, says one graduate, keeps students from pouring themselves into what they think is original work only to find out it was last year's overdone technique.

"Obviously, you can be successful without going through a writing program," said Professor Leggett, "but you don't have the audience. Here, you get instant feedback - it's like being published every time you write. It's a kind of incubator."

The cradle, say the professors, works equally well as a crucible. In most programs, weekly seminars tear through students' work line by line, giving criticism that may or may not be constructive. "You're really naked here," said Professor Barth, himself a graduate of Johns Hopkins, though not of the M.A. program, "and if you've botched it, it's there for all to see."

"It was fiercely competitive," said Miss Robison of her year at Johns Hopkins, "though now those students are like family. But it took pounds off me."

By focusing strengths and eliminating flaws, many think such criticism by fellow students can take "10 years off your development time," said Prof. John L'Heureux, the head of Stanford's writing program. And although an M. A. or M. F. A. in writing from one of the top schools seems to give applicants a leg up, what schools and editors are really looking for, says Columbia's Professor Halpern, is a "fine publishing record." To get that, you need contact with the publishing world, a commodity amply available at a place like Columbia in the heart of publishing land, where editors and agents compete for student talent, he said.

Professor Barth says he has helped students get an agent "where it was appropriate," while Professor L'Heureux, a former editor at Atlantic Monthly, says he brings in editors regularly. And many of the now famous graduates of such programs, like Iowa's Flannery O'Connor, point to early, crucial work that emerged from homework assignments for the writers' programs.

Although a surprising number of published writers - John Irving (Iowa), Philip Levine (Iowa), Richard Price (Columbia), John Gardner (Washington University), Russell Baker (Johns Hopkins), Raymond Carver (Stanford) and more - emerged from these programs, not all graduates have by any means gone into writing. A peek at recent Johns Hopkins graduates found lawyers, teachers, doctoral candidates and a fellow climbing mountains in Borneo. For

those who work as writers, a coveted job for many graduates, say directors, is editing a city magazine; others wander into public relations and in-house corporate publications.

Several schools, Johns Hopkins included, have moved to make the creative writing M. A. a "more marketable degree," Mr. Staley said. Johns Hopkins, contending that "quality writing is the same wherever it's found," teaches science writing, criticism and journalism, and cooperates with local newspapers in running internships. Other schools - notably the University of Southern California - are teaching "managerial and technical writing, screenplays and scriptwriting," Mr. Staley said.

Preparing would-be writers are some of the country's literary landmarks - Stanley Elkin at Washington University, Wallace Stegner (an Iowa grad) at Stanford, and Doris Grumbach at the University of Iowa, for example, who act for their students, in the words of Mr. Barth, as "a coach."

Of course, not all good writers are necessarily good teachers, but if your goal is simply to breathe the same air as well-known writers, the rule of thumb seems to be: get close to New York, or get close to money. Columbia University, for instance, draws in writers "who have business in New York with their agents and publishers," says Professor Halpern, and uses the talents of everyone from Erica Jong, a Columbia graduate, to Jorge Luis Borges for its seminars.

Good students shop around for the schools with the best-paying teaching assistant positions, making writing programs an increasingly upper-middle-class exercise, directors concede. The winners of the money-shopping game go to Stanford, where all 30 students are floated on the generosity of benefactors - whose ranks Professor L'Heureux must continually labor to supplement.

Selecting worthwhile applicants is not the problem, said Iowa's John Leggett, "but choosing which ones will receive T.A.s and fellowships is pure agony."

Competing with Iowa for funds from the sort of places that like to support writers are "dozens of state universities," says Professor Leggett, "who want to start creative-writing programs." Some, like the University of Arkansas, have built excellent programs; many are created simply because graduates from other writing programs come to teach, and want to start what they perceived to be a good thing.

But most of the programs extant are finding what Mr. Staley points out: that in nearly every school that includes a writing program in its English department at least half of the students are enrolled in that program, "and it, in effect, floats the rest of the English department."

For whatever the programs are worth, Professor Halpern believes that most published young

writers have gone through a writing program, the Greenwich Village of the 80's.

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