

Celia White

Buffalo, New York

CELIA WHITE is a poet, fiction writer, and librarian in Buffalo, New York. A teaching artist for groups from age seven through adulthood, her expertise is in poetry and journal writing. The author of several chapbooks and one full-length poetry collection, *Letter* (Ambient Press, 2007), she has also published work internationally in journals, newspapers and zines. Several-time winner of the Best Poet award in both *Buffalo Spree* and *Artvoice* reader polls, she was also co-founder of the city's only poetry marathon, *Urban Epiphany*. She is an active member of Just Buffalo Literary Center.



Gary Earl Ross photograph by TK.

GER: How long have you been writing poetry?

CW: I wrote my first poem at age seven, on break from school, about the Easter Bunny. Around age eleven, I began to keep a daily journal, and many poems emerged from that. I wrote ghost stories and maudlin poems at first, then more wide-ranging

pieces as I matured.

GER: Why poetry and not fiction or drama or creative non-fiction?

CW: I have written a great deal of fiction, which few people have seen—several novels and many short stories. I have not pursued publishing these, though, I suppose because they're not quite up to my own standards, and because poetry has always come easily and the poet identity has been primary for me most of my life. At one time in my youth, I thought I might be a music journalist—Annie Leibowitz with words!

GER: You're a librarian by training. What put you in the classroom?

CW: Teaching was the first thing I did, actually. I had always thought I'd be a college English professor, but I found it less appetizing, close up. I fell into teaching from a love of poetry and of writing practice. I revived the City Honors High School writing group, Writer's Circle, and ran that for a few years. High school students are still my favorite group to write with. I also created a journal writing workshop which I taught through the Just Buffalo Literary Center, the Mental Health Association of Western

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Teaching Artist Snapshot

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CW: *Did you ever attend an MFA program? How did you become a teacher of writing?*

GER: I majored in English as both an undergraduate and graduate student, earning a secondary teaching certificate in the process. I never took part in an MFA program because by the time I was ready for one, I was teaching to support a family and writing at night.

CW: *What originally drew you to do this kind of work?*

GER: After I left the secondary classroom for the university, I found I missed teaching children. As I was turning thirty, publishing more and more stories, and reading publicly, Just Buffalo Literary Center approached me about becoming a Writer-in-Education. I jumped at the chance to work with kids again, especially since it meant I could focus on creative writing without the responsibilities of offering a full curriculum.

CW: *What's your favorite age group to work with?*

GER: I don't have a favorite group. I have favorite moments from working with every group. Some of those moments are serendipitous. Once in a seventh-grade class I was impressed with the writing of the smallest student in the room, and later learned he got special permission from his fourth-grade teacher and the principal to sit in on my visits because he wanted to be a writer. During one visit to a fourth-grade class at another school, the teacher confronted a boy who refused to write. She moved away, angry, as he sat pouting. I approached the boy, who was wearing a Superman T-shirt, and unbuttoned my own shirt enough to reveal the Superman tee underneath. His eyes widened and he smiled as he picked up his pen.

CW: *Where do you get your ideas for teaching writing?*

GER: My teaching ideas come the same way my writing ideas do, with unexpected realizations or flashes of inspiration. The trick to writing and teaching is knowing your material well enough to take advantage of the ephemeral opportunity that presents itself.

CW: *What is the hardest part of what you do—either as a teacher or a writer?*

GER: I have never found teaching or writing hard. Each is a challenge that requires I shift gears constantly and remain flexible and open. In class and on the page, work is easier if you're willing to try another way.

CW: *Who are some teachers who inspire you? Writers?*

GER: My junior year high school English teacher was the first who truly saw the writer in me and helped me get into AP English for my senior year—a contested placement because they thought my inner city grammar school couldn't possibly have prepared me for AP in the city's leading high school. But it had, thanks in part to a wonderful seventh-grade English teacher. In college, novelist Carlene Hatcher Polite said only those she thought should earn their living writing would get an A in her creative writing class. I got an A. I read 70 to 100 books a year, on all kinds of subjects. Some of my favorite writers are Joyce Carol Oates, John A. Williams, James Baldwin, Walter Mosley, Robert B. Parker, Alice Walker, Allen Moore, and, of course, Ray Bradbury.

CW: *Do you have any advice for writers who might want to teach?*

GER: My advice to writers and teachers would be what I tell my students. Everything is connected. Keep your eyes, ears, hearts, and minds open enough to see and use those connections. 🍷

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Teaching Artist Snapshot

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New York, and at other schools. At the same time, I substitute taught in high schools and worked as a nanny. Occasionally I'd be paid to read my poems as the opener for music acts around town.

GER: *Is there a connection between librarianship and what you do in the classroom?*

CW: I became a librarian when all the cobbling together of part-time jobs became unsustainable. I loved the freedom of it, but wondered if library work would end my poet identity. I do some teaching as a librarian, but it is closer to training than the exploring and guiding I do leading students into writing and literature.

GER: Describe one of your favorite writing lessons?

CW: I begin most of my classes with an exercise called "26 Things You Should Know About Me", which was the first assignment in Jim Duggan's sophomore English class at City Honors. It's long enough that students run out of simple facts and get into the truly interesting details of the self, which is what good writing employs. Another prompt I like is: Think of a secret you have, or had. Convey the atmosphere of having the secret, using all five senses and descriptive language. Do not tell the secret.

GER: *How long have you taught writing? How have you evolved as a writing teacher?*

CW: In nearly two decades of teaching writing, I've only changed a few things about my approach: I comment less, and use more silence and re-reading. Leaving space around a piece read aloud (a requirement in my class) makes obvious what doesn't work, and such problems are usually quickly solved, often by the poet herself. The other thing I hold to is what I've always known: Keep doing it. Write enough, and you'll find your own voice and what it has to say.

GER: *As a teacher, have you ever stepped out of your comfort zone and tried a daring lesson that paid off?*

CW: Once, when I was teaching groups of fourth-graders at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in a program called "A Picture's Worth," my group got stopped in the Asian sculpture room, with only a few minutes to work, not enough time to sit down and do a lesson. Instead, I directed the kids to stand near a sculpture, and take on the pose depicted. I then went around the room, interviewing them: the horse, the dancers, the Buddha. We were all full of the delight of creation as play.

GER: *Who are some of your favorite teachers and writers?*

CW: James Baldwin, Sharon Olds, Laurie Colwin, Robert Hass, Truman Capote, Patti Smith, Rumi, Rilke. I've also studied with the poet Jimmie Gilliam, and with Paul Jenkins at Hampshire College.

GER: *What advice do you wish you'd gotten from a teacher or writer?*

CW: I think I was told all the true things: you may not make a living from writing. There will be times when you won't write at all. Try many styles and forms. And the advice I give my own students: keep doing it. 🍷