

On Breathing Room, Validation, Literary Communities, Being a Writer, Learning the Ropes, and the View from 520 8th Avenue

Reflections from Current and Former T&W Fellows

SUSAN KARWOSKA

Brief editor's note tk

CCh: Carla Ching
CCo: Charlie Conley
LM: Laren McClung
JW: Jenny Williams
TY: Tiphonie Yanique

SAK: *What was the value of the fellowship at this stage in your career?*

LM: I would not have been able to move to New York without it. The fellowship gave me a place where I could come and focus on my writing. For me, it meant that when someone asked me what I do I could say *Oh, I'm a writer*. It was the first time I could own that.

SAK: *And why did you want to be in New York?*

LM: You don't have to be here to be a writer, but it's a great place to be to do that.

JW: I wouldn't have come to New York if I hadn't gotten the fellowship. I had just come back from living abroad, I wasn't sure what I was doing with my writing. The fellowship allowed me to come to this

mecca of literature and culture and publishing. Now I'm in the [graduate writing] program at Brooklyn College and I can't imagine this would have happened without the fellowship. It gave me a feeling of validation, the confidence to know that other people valued writing and that they valued my writing.

TY: My experience was different because I had a job as a professor. So it wasn't that I was in such desperate need of the money, although I was in need of the money. For me, it was about building a community. When I came, I had the responsibility of raising my brother... I have aunts and uncles who live in New York and there was a lot of discussion about getting my grandmother up here. I felt like I was going to get swallowed by my family, actually. I work in New Jersey at Drew University, and it's a great gig—it's tenure track and I'm really happy there—but it's far, also. I didn't have that creative community and I was afraid I wouldn't have that. Coming here gave me that community. And then running the reading series actually helped build that community.

SAK: *What about you, Charlie and Carla? It may be hard to say, since you're right in the middle—you're still*

here.

CCo: I came here after seven months at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. Both of these programs started right around the same time [in the late '60s] and having this back-to-back experience was the first time I felt part of a larger tradition. It's not about how many books you've sold. It's about a community in which people care about the writing and care about teaching.

CCh: I don't think I've told anybody this, but honestly, when I first heard about this, when I got Amy's phone call that I'd gotten the fellowship, I was really struggling. I had six jobs, was writing at odd hours, at 3 in the morning, and I just said I'm tired. I can't keep going like this.. Maybe I'll just back burner the writing for a couple of months so I can breathe. And then I got the phone call and I thought *My God! I can have a little breathing room!*

SAK: *I'm hearing that the fellowship provided some kind of a home, in whatever way. Did coming here and helping us with the work that we do change your thoughts about your future direction?*

TY: It definitely helped me think about career stuff. I already have an obvious career as a professor and I really like it, but I always thought about going into nonprofit work. Now this is on my resumé and I can always use it. For instance, I ended up helping found this nonprofit that does a similar thing in the Virgin Islands, on a little island called St. John's that's my sister island. Everything I did to help that start I learned from watching you here at T&W and talking to you. And my book [*How To Escape From A Leper Colony*, Graywolf Press 2010] just came out, which is really exciting. But when an elementary school asked me to come and read something, I was like I don't understand what you want me to do! And they said Oh, we just want writers to come, and I had a panic attack. It's been a while since I taught little kids, so I flipped through *Teachers & Writers* magazine and got different ideas. The magazine has been very helpful

in my teaching, including my college kids. I use it all the time.

SAK: *Jenny, you had another career before this in editing, right?*

JW: I had been in book publishing back in San Francisco and had written for some travel magazines, but I had not been involved as an editor. So working for the magazine and actually seeing the timeline, thinking about what made a whole magazine and putting the pieces together was a good experience. There's such an immediacy to it. And there's a sense of tapping into how people address literature in different ways, not just being a writer or being a teaching artist, but seeing the other channels that exist.

CCo: I liked the exposure I got to so many different aspects of *Teachers & Writers*. I helped with a grant, I wrote an article, I worked on the reading series... That'll be on my CV and it'll be kind of percolating as I go do whatever comes next. My modus operandi for a while, since I left my MFA program, was to hold on, basically, until I publish my first book. To do whatever it takes for a while. And I feel more productive here than I have in a long time, even more than at Provincetown where, to some extent, I could write all day every day.

CCh: I teach a college class and I am a teaching artist, and this has helped me to be more reflective about my practice and how I do what I do. I value the dialogue with all of you about how we do the work and what the work is—it's really helpful. And I appreciate being invited to things like the strategic planning meetings and the board meetings. I've been able to see how things happen here and how an organization is actually run. Last November I was asked to be artistic director of Second Generation Theater. It was really scary, but I've been able to use a lot of what I've learned here. It's transferable and I've been so grateful.

SAK: I'm curious to hear how all of you managed your time here, either in a larger sense or just day to

day. I think it's always a struggle to figure out how to separate your creative work from the other work you do. How did you balance the two parts of the fellowship—doing your own writing and also participating in the life of the organization?

JW: This was sort of an enclave. It was where I could say, this is where I'm a writer first. There were times during the fellowship when all I was doing was thinking about articles for the magazine, but then for weeks all I was thinking about was my stories. Even when I was writing some of the articles for the magazine, or editing, all of those things contributed in some way to the writing that I might do at other times. So it's really hard to say what the balance was.

TY: I would come here at night and on the weekends and do my real writing then.

CCo: Here I get in between 7:30 and 8:30 most days and I write until 10:30 or 11:00. It's like two hours every day. And it's not that every day is productive.

SAK: *But writing every day probably increases your chances of something good happening.*

CCo: Yeah, that's the thing.

SAK: *I wanted to touch on the reading series. I've heard you talk about what it was like to call people whose work you admire, to see yourself as having the right to do that, as being part of the literary community. What did you take away from the reading series?*

TY: It's vital. In some ways I think it's the most important thing that I got out of the fellowship. It's one of my jobs at Drew, to run our reading series, and I learned a lot from doing it here. I've learned to think about what the purpose of a reading series is, to think about people in the audience, and how to get people to come out for the reading. It also was a way to try things out. We had people here who we had never heard read, but we liked their work and we'd invite them to come. I made friends with people and I have an excuse to go out and contact them now.

JW: A lot of time as writers we're very into the book, the page. And actually being a writer in the world—meeting other writers and talking to them and understanding that this is also part of what it means to be in the literary world, reading your work aloud and meeting the people who have read your work—that to me was very new and very important. A whole new world opened up.

SAK: The writers I've heard read here often strike me as very generous—with their time, their willingness to help other writers.

JW: I went up to Jonathan Lethem at the NYU reading series. I thought I'm running a reading series. I'm going to go talk to him! He said that sounds really great; I'm really busy but you should get in touch on my website. Even though nothing came of it, there was still that moment when I said I'm just going to approach this person. I'm just going to say, this is what I do.

LM: I contacted Nikki Giovanni, and she was almost going to come, but then she said it was bad timing for her to travel.

SAK: *It sounds like getting an audience is an ongoing problem, especially in New York City where there are so many other things happening on any given night.*

TY: Laren and I had an established writer paired with an up-and-coming writer. That turned out to be a great crowd-maker.

CCh: I think if we had done that it would have helped build our audience, but you learn.

CCo: You learn and then you leave!

JW: It is true that you learn things, like from the reading series, and then you're gone. I would definitely do things differently this year if I were running it again.

SAK: *All of you can be the brain trust. We can have you all on speed dial. For a new fellow coming on, what words of advice, recommendations would you want to*