

TEACHING ARTIST SNAPSHOT

# Peter Markus

Detroit, Michigan

NORENE CASHEN SMITH

**P**eter Markus, known in local classrooms as “Mr. Pete,” is a senior writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts Project in Detroit. He’s a poet and the author of the novel, *Bob, or Man on Boat* (2008), as well as three books of short fiction, *Good, Brother* (2001), *The Moon Is a Lighthouse* (2003), and *The Singing Fish* (2006). A new book of stories, *We Make Mud*, was released in July of 2011. He was interviewed by fellow InsideOut writer Norene Cashen Smith in April 2011.

**Norene Cashen Smith:** *When did you start teaching creative writing with InsideOut Literary Arts Project?*

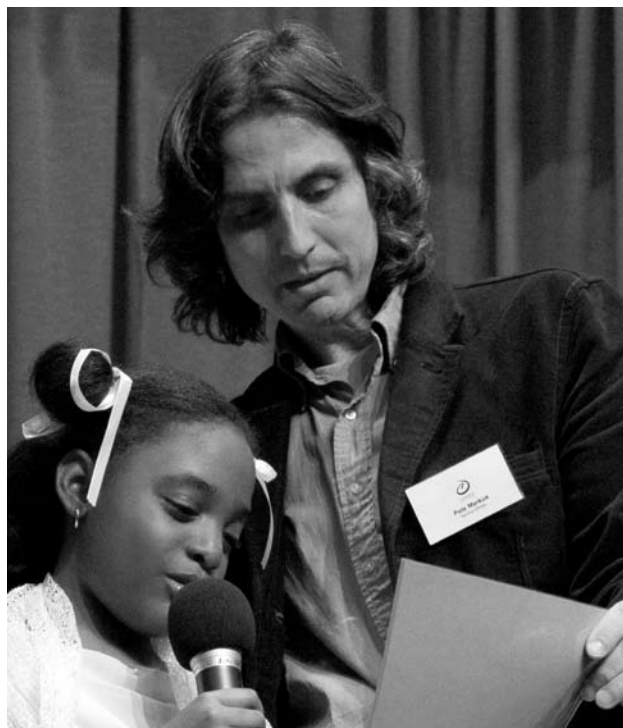
**Peter Markus:** InsideOut and I go back to its very beginnings, back to 1995, when the project was just flickering in the eye, heart, and mind of poet and founder Terry Blackhawk.

**NCS:** *What do you recall about your first experiences in the classroom?*

**PM:** During those early days in the classroom, I remember feeling like I was born to do this work.

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*Norene Cashen Smith is a writer and poet. Her reviews and articles have appeared in Detroit’s Metro Times, Jacket.com, Your Flesh magazine, and other publications. She is a writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts Project and the contributing editor for the literary journal Dispatch Detroit. Her poetry has appeared in Exquisite Corpse, The MOCAD Journal, markszine.com, Abandon Automobile: Detroit City Poets (Wayne State University Press), and thedetroiter.com. The Reverse Is Also True, her first collection of poetry, was released by Doorjamb Press in 2007.*



Peter Markus with one of his student writers. Photo by Elyne Gross.

I believed back then, as I do now, that we all have stories to tell and that telling those stories is both an obligation and a blessing. I dared students to put themselves out there, to take that risk. I gave them permission, I think, to tell it like it is. I walked into those classrooms early on not as a teacher, but as a storyteller. And even though I looked the way I did—I was just a young hippie, more of a raggedy scarecrow than a figure of standard authority—I somehow engaged students and got them to trust me.

**NCS:** *What has surprised you the most about the way students respond to poetry?*

**PM:** What I'm most surprised by, time and time again, is how open and receptive kids are to the power of language. I find very little resistance to what I'm asking them to do. "Let's take a trip" is what I seem to be offering, and most kids are eager to go. Of course, you have to make that initial invitation interesting, which I try to do by playing the role of a stand-up comedian, someone who's not afraid to act silly and to make fun of himself.

**NCS:** *How has teaching writing to young people changed you as a person and as a writer?*

**PM:** I'm not the same person I was back when I started, and that's because of my experiences in the classroom. I have become "other than" through my interactions and through the words these kids have gifted to me. Both InsideOut and I have branched out from only teaching in high schools to reaching younger schoolchildren. In these grade-school classrooms, imagination is captain. I'm always held captive by the strange worlds and images the kids conjure up through the powers of their own invention. Here is a world of magic pencils and moons that sing and fish that ride red bicycles and twelve-legged octopuses that have three teeth and haven't been to the dentist in, like, a hundred years. My own work has been altered away from the everyday and has become more mythically and musically charged.

**NCS:** *What's the most valuable thing you bring to the students?*

**PM:** I do my best to always walk into the classroom with a smile on my face. In fact, just last year I had a fourth-grader ask me, "Mr. Pete, why are you always smiling when you come see us?" He wasn't being a wise guy. He simply wanted to know the secret to my apparent happiness. And what I told him, straight from my own heart, was this: "I'm smiling, Nick, because I'm happy to see you." To quote the poet, Hafiz, "Our words become the house we live in." So

yeah, the gift of kindness, the gift that words can be. That's what I bring that is of most lasting value, I think, to these beautiful kids.

**NCS:** *In addition to your classroom time, you also work one-on-one with students. Why is that important?*

**PM:** One-on-one time spent with anybody makes for more meaning in our lives. So yes, I like to pull students from the hub or hive of the classroom and spend some quality quiet time with them and their words. Good writing gets made in those quiet spaces, and I think the students like it when I call their names and ask their teacher if I can see them for a few minutes so we can speak quietly and seriously about their poems and the possibility of making their poems public.

**NCS:** *Have characters or anecdotes from the classroom shown up in your own poetry and fiction?*

**PM:** Although childhood is a major theme in most of my fiction, I tend to draw most heavily from things that I make up. That said, I have written a book of nonfiction that sort of chronicles a year that I spent at one of my grade schools. So, the answer is yes and no.

**NCS:** *What lies ahead for you in your career?*

**PM:** I never know what's next for me or for Mr. Pete. It's how I roll, both on and off the page. I write to discover what I don't know. All I know for sure is that what I do with InsideOut matters, and that I have no choice but to do it. It's what I do and what I do best. It's who I am and who I am at my very best. Mr. Pete makes me better than I am otherwise. I realize that a shrink might look sideways at all this talk about this "Mr. Pete" guy, but in truth he's the part of me that keeps me most balanced and sane and connected with the real world. And it's a world that has a voice and a song that the rest of the world needs to hear. As long as InsideOut exists, it'll be both my anchor and my bread. ☺

# Classroom Snapshot

PETER MARKUS

It's hard for me to choose a student poem to share. It's like asking me which of my own kids do I love the best. I can't do it. I shouldn't do it.

But if I had to, I'd probably give you this poem, "Until Dark Time" by Dion Bateman, an elementary school student who made poetry out of the loss of his mother who was killed by a drunk driver.

I can't recall the activity that brought this poem into being, but it certainly wasn't "Write about a tragic event" or "Write about something bad that's happened." Yet this poem was called forth.

I still remember encountering it out in the hall as I passed from one class on my way to another. I had the feeling I was reading something that had to be written, had to be shared.

## Until Dark Time

DION BATEMAN

Back when I was five  
something bad happened.

I'm nine now. But back  
when I was five

my mom worked  
at a job

in a big black  
building. I kept on

bugging her  
that day

to let me come  
to work with her.

My mom kept saying  
no sweetheart

you can't come  
to work with me

because, she said,  
she had to work.

When my mom went to work  
that day, my mom,

she never came back.  
My brother and me, we waited

until dark time  
for our mom to come back home.

I waited and watched  
for the car

to drive up  
to drop off my mom.

My neighbor came over,  
her name is Monique.

We went inside our house  
and ate, and drank,

then I played  
with my neighbor Miranda

until Bookie came over  
with her white car.

We drove  
in that white car

to the church  
to see

my mom. At church,  
it was blue

inside there  
like the sky.

Three days later  
it was Christmas.

The bus that hit  
my mom as she waited

at the bus stop—  
the driver

of that bus  
was drunk.

He didn't even know  
what he did

when he ran  
that bus up against

the bus stop bench  
killing my mom.