40th Anniversary

Still a Writer-in-the-Schools

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS

My family's business was teaching, and we often taught by telling stories. I began to write stories when I was seven, and as I got older, decided I would be a writer and a teacher and also fight for justice like the heroes in my books and comic books. I became part of the P.S. 75 writers-in-the-schools team as an MFA student. Teachers & Writers was already about three years old, having been founded in a time rich with ideas about setting children free through language and imagination while undermining the oppression of schooling. There was already a system in place for sending writers into the schools to teach poetry and then publish journals about their experiences. The young institution had as its logo a creature that was half walrus and half dragon, sporting a bushy mustache and an iconoclastic attitude. Vergil the Monster looked a lot like the poets who were going into the schools to work with kids. The best narrative of how all this happened can be found in the T&W anthology *Journal of a Living Experiment*, edited by Phillip Lopate.

It turned out that I had actually made a stab at tapping into the organization before I joined the P.S. 75 team. I had been living on the Lower East Side and volunteering with a local community action group called C.U.A.N.D.O. I had been a VISTA volunteer, and then a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at Columbia University during the student strikes of 1968, and I was trying to re-start my personal activism. I had the idea I could get Teachers & Writers to funnel money into C.U.A.N.D.O.'s little street school. Teachers & Writers turned out not to see itself as a conduit of funds to street academies, and I went back to school at Columbia's MFA program, which is where Phillip Lopate sought his team of writers for P.S. 75.

Looking back, the link between personal expression and revolutionary change is no longer so obvious to me, but the idea was not at all uncommon among artists throughout the twentieth century—that a revolution in art or expression would cause a change in the way the world worked. We all yearned for our art and our daily lives to have deep meaning and broad impact. I still believe that artists and teachers and teaching artists are part of something big, but now it seems to me that there is a greater distance between the act of helping a child express an image and the creation of a just world. Positive change is real, but less direct and inevitable than we believed then.

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When I joined the Living Experiment, Teachers & Writers people included Steve Schrader and Miguel Ortiz in the office and Ron Padgett and Bill Zavatsky and Phillip and others in the field. Everyone spoke respectfully of the founders, who included Herb Kohl and Grace Paley and Anne Sexton and June Jordan, as if their work had taken place in the distant past instead of a few years earlier. Everyone I met at first seemed to be male, except for a secretarial assistant who typed up our diaries, and of course my co-graduate students and me. What seemed to be happening was the formalizing of a method of teaching poetry to kids. I remember a lot of hair: Bill Zavatsky's hair was astonishingly long and blonde and wavy. Phillip's mustache filled his face. Richard Perry had an afro. It was months before I began to realize that not everyone associated with T&W was a poet. Richard and Miguel and Steve and Wesley Brown were fiction writers. Nancy Larson (now Shapiro) arrived from Minnesota with a background in teaching and administration—and the second most beautiful blonde hair I've ever seen. More women came on board too, including visual artist Barbara Siegel and dancer Sylvia Sandoval, and more people from other disciplines including painter Bob Sievert.

And of course, Phillip Lopate's big idea was not turning the children of P.S. 75 into New York School poets, but to turn P.S. 75 itself into a laboratory of expression and creativity in all the arts. I had first thought that I was being put into the school as a kind of spy dropped behind enemy lines, but I had to admit that most of the teachers at P.S. 75 were on our side. The principal was one of our biggest supporters. Indeed, part of Phillip's success was in choosing a school where the resources Teachers & Writers brought were matched by the enthusiasm of the administration, teachers, and parents: P.S. 75 was the wonderful fruit of Upper West Side diversity and creativity and integration in race, income, and ethnicity.

Of course, I was thrilled to breathe in that heady atmosphere. We were engaged in finding out just how far you can go with children in the arts. Our work with the students ranged from writing and putting on musicals and making kung fu movies, to publishing novels by children, creating animations, and spending two years making comic books with four-color separation and full production with a printing professional on staff. One year we created our own radio station, and, the year after I went off on my own, Phillip produced *Uncle Vanya* with fifth- and sixth-graders. Phillip created a persona for himself of brilliant, kindly maniac, the master of pushing the envelope and melting the glue that held the envelope together. He was the maestro of the great opera that was P.S. 75 in the 1970s.

I was full of admiration and terribly jealous.

It was hard for me to separate my jealousy from my personal ambition from a genuine critique of what we were doing. I was secretly critical of us for failing to take on a really hard-core school. Phillip was right that we needed all the resources possible

to make something happen, but I wondered, What about the millions of kids who don't get to be part of the P.S. 75 vanguard? We are proving what can be done with kids, but will it ever be done again? What if there were no funding? And of course, funding for that kind of intense arts program in a single public school did largely dry up. Money, private and some public, has remained for writers-in-the-schools programs as enrichment of language arts, but the yearly upping of the ante that Phillip engaged in ("Okay, we've done comics, what about a radio station?") did not continue.

I left the team before that happened, though. Until my very last year at P.S. 75, the principal was still confusing me and Karen Hubert, using our names interchangeably when he greeted us. Teri Mack stood out because she was tall and carried a camera. I wanted to be in a school where I was the main event, the face everyone knew. I was curious to see what I could do personally, but also I wanted to know what could be done with limited resources, what could be spread to other schools.

The other thing I wanted to do was to figure out how to use my own kind of writing. For my first five years as a writer-in-the-schools, I had been teaching poetry in a style I didn't write or else helping kids use media that were as new to me as to them: video, radio, comics, fotonovelas. I had staked out as my area at P.S. 75 the bilingual classes, not because my Spanish was good, but because no one else was working with those classes, and because the teachers were very welcoming. We did movies with the kids and Spanish versions of poetry lessons out of *The Whole Word Catalog: Yo me recuerdo* and *Mi sueño es...* I borrowed and translated and imitated: activities that I was a little ashamed of then, but now recognize as at least as much a part of the human project as innovating. Or is it that innovating is a fancy name for translating and imitating? But what I didn't do until I left P.S. 75 was to teach the kind of writing I did myself.

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In the new schools I had shorter residencies, and some of the schools were so traditional that the teachers made the kids sit quietly. In these classes I found myself subverting the rules and regulations by what I asked my students to imagine and write, rather than how the classroom was organized. To my secret shame, I found that sometimes I liked working with kids who at least pretended to listen when I talked.

I also got better at doing the entertaining that is required to keep the attention of a large group. I had been in my father's science classes in high school, and what I admired most about him as a teacher was that he could teach anyone—he would combine story telling and jokes with powerfully lucid explanations. He used a multiplicity of strategies to bring everyone forward—working-class kids who intended to be coal miners like their fathers, kids who would get pregnant and drop out and never finish high school, kids who would be doctors and college presidents—all of whom were in my classes.

In these new settings, I began to experiment with the fragments that are often at the source of my own writing: a face, a memory, a scrap of overheard dialogue. Out

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of my work at several schools in Manhattan, at P.S. 321 in Brooklyn, and also in the adult fiction-writing classes I had begun to teach at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies, I came up with a method for teaching fiction writing that seems obvious to me now—breaking it down into elements that can be equally useful as starters and as enrichment and for revising. The description of place, for example, is not merely a "setting" for verisimilitude, but also a mood setter and a quasi-meditative practice that, as you slowly recreate the place, allows new ideas to arise. Dialogue, the dramatic heart of the scene, can be drafted words first, with gesture and tone, etc. added later. I learned not to ask children to write a story, having discovered that their responses to such a request would often be simply to summarize a television plot or maybe tell a folktale. These are good possible approaches to story structure, but not the way to come up with new material.

To my great satisfaction, this method worked equally well with adults and kids. For second-graders, you might be describing a monster made of food, but you still use sense details to do it ("Okay, now say how it smells."); in advanced novel workshop we may be looking at sex scenes, but we're still using the senses ("Sex scenes get pornographic when they're strictly visual—how does her lover smell?").

Also deeply satisfying was the affirmation from the folks at T&W who let me turn this into a book, *Personal Fiction Writing*, which has been in print since 1984, with a new edition in 2000. And even though I am a novelist first, it is a good feeling to know that one of my nonfiction books has been and continues to be read and used.

It was not that my ideas were unique. You can find similar approaches and exercises in many of T&W's publications and on the shelf in the bookstore. But I was part of something, a movement really, that has been instrumental in improving the teaching of writing. I am proud to be doing it still. I still teach at NYU; I still visit fourth-graders. I still believe that writing is the best way to think. I still believe in spreading these things to as many people as possible.

The teaching of writing as it is done now is far superior to what was being done in 1970. Writing is no longer something kids automatically groan over, but rather a familiar activity that they wait and see about—is this going to be interesting writing or boring writing? The work of Teachers & Writers, and Poets & Writers, and the New Jersey Writers Project, and all the other arts-in-the-schools programs made an enormous impact in the schools themselves and in the teachers' colleges. More of our children write more, write better, and write more willingly than they did forty years ago.

On the other hand, it is also clear that while Teachers & Writers and others improved the pedagogy of writing, we did not overturn the school system let alone create universal justice. We contributed, along with others, to how language arts is taught and to how the arts in general are used in the school. I believe we also contributed immensely to the lives of individual children, although the effect on individuals is never

Meredith Sue Willis working with writing students n a 1970s Brooklyn classroom.
Photo from the Teachers & Writers archives.

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truly known. Actions are dropped into the pool of collective human experience, and the circles spread, but we don't know how far or how our circles are changed by other spreading circles.

Yet I do believe that writing and teaching writing can change the world. It is just that they are not enough. We also have to contribute money and demonstrate to stop the war. I work in my local community for an anti-racism/pro-integration organization. I try in my teaching to discover, create, and model a kind of rich human relationship that includes laughing and listening and mutual critique. I try to integrate all of these things into my own writing. I try not to sip too often at the poison of disappointment with the world at large or with my personal career.

I still read other people's stories with delight.

Meredith Sue Willis *has been associated with Teachers & Writer Collaborative since the early 1970s, as well as with various arts organizations in New Jersey, where she was a Distinguished Teaching Artist for the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and continues to work as a visiting writer in public schools, as well as teaching novel writing at New York University. Her fiction for adults includes* Oradell At Sea *and* Dwight's House and Other Stories, *and her novels for children include* Billie of Fish House Lane *and* Marco's Monster, *which was named an* Instructor *magazine best book. Her guide to writing and the teaching of writing,* Personal Fiction Writing, *was published by Teachers & Writers Press in 1984 and remains in print.*

Top: T&W teaching artist Gia Rae Winsryg-Ulmer and students, 2002; bottom: T&W teaching artist T&W teaching artist David Unger, 1980s. Photos from the T&W archives.

Clockwise from top: T&W teaching artist Richard Perry with students, 1980s; Dave Morice, "Dr. Alphabet," giving a presentation at T&W's Center for Imaginative Writing; T&W teaching artist Matthew Burgess with student, 2006; student in Matthew Burgess' T&W classroom, 2006; T&W teaching artist Amy Epstein, 1990s. Photos from the T&W archives.