TEACHERS & WRITERS

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Passing On the Gift

The Importance of Literacy in America

by Robert Hass

[*The following is an edited transcript of a talk given at Teachers & Writers Collaborative's Center for Imaginative Writing this past December by Poet Laureate Robert Hass.*—Editor]

EARLIER THIS EVENING I WAS TAKING A CAB across Manhattan, which I always love and is always a shock and always fills me with a mixture of affection and loathing I feel toward life itself, and I was thinking "How does anyone run this place?" Just think of the many tons of provisions required daily and the tons of waste that have to be disposed of. At my hotel, where we had made the reservations three months ago, there was no room. The Moscow Symphony, whose reservations also hadn't been honored, were standing in the lobby enraged and stranded. Then I started down to T&W and noticed a bunch of tourists all with identical tote bags standing in line for a movie called *Anal Maniacs*. And across the street was a flashing sign that read BEAT THE HEAT: LEARN TO DANCE, IT'S COOL INSIDE. This in December. Then we passed the studio where they stage the David Letterman show, the humor of which suddenly seemed terribly trivial in the face of all this appetite, greed, energy, and craziness, and horns were honking and sirens were going off, and I was searching around for some place to *be*, and I thought of a poem that I love, by Bashō, written while he was travelling. He had stopped at a hermitage. The poem goes:

> A cool fall night—
> getting dinner, we peeled
> eggplants, cucumbers.

One of my favorite poems! I felt I could just stay there for a while, while the horns honked and I repressed the fact that I would have to give this talk in just a few minutes.

The work we do is about making such a place in the imagination. I've never been to T&W before, but in the middle of the madness of this city, this space is a complete amazement. Money had to be raised, it had to be founded, it had to be maintained. Like the Bashō poem, it provides a place for the imagination. I'm reminded of a line by Adam

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IN THIS ISSUE

Zagajewski: "And poetry, after all, ladies and gentlemen, is a very small Noah's ark." This is the ark, right here, this is the place.

I want to talk about a couple of things tonight. I know it's preaching to the converted, and I've always tried to ruffle my audiences since I've been giving talks as Poet Laureate, but I can't think of any way I can offend you! So you'll have to bear with me.

At the beginning of the 19th century, not very many people in the world could read. The development of technology required that a lot of people learn to read and write, which promoted certain things: individual inwardness, rather than communal listening, and the ability to grasp complicated ideas and to hold them in one's head. But at the beginning of the 19th century, only 40 percent of males in England could sign their own names. About 20–25 percent of the women could. In France only 25 percent of the population could produce a signature. Protestant countries generally had higher rates of literacy.

In the history of the world, literacy is a relatively new thing. In the past, people found their energy for poetry in storytelling, in folk music, and in the oral recitation of poetry, energy that has to stay alive to sustain the written word, which, without that energy, goes dead, a dry abstraction.

In our culture, it's the written word we're concerned with. Literacy was a painful acquisition. The United States developed a high rate of literacy because it was a radical Protestant country. In 1800, almost 90 percent of white males in New England could produce a signature. About 44 percent of women, which in comparison with the rest of the world—except for Scotland and Sweden—was outstanding. This literacy came about because people felt that you had to be able to read the Bible to save your soul. The literacy rate was high in New England, but in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York, the rates were no better than those in Europe, and out on the frontiers and farms literacy was a luxury. And of course black Americans, who formed about a third of the population in 1800, could get killed for learning to read.

Over the course of the 19th century, this country taught itself to read. We've lost any sense of the heroic nature of that achievement. It's astonishing: adults and children, city by city, county by county, learning to read. Of course, it was partly due to pressure from publishing companies. Every time somebody bought a printing press, they agitated for public education, more or less the way computer companies agitate for computer literacy. This capitalist stake in teaching people to read took the form of a religion of citizenship: if you were going to have a democracy, people had to be able to read and sort things out. As the power of religion weakened in the 19th century, and as skepticism arose, a second idea arose beside it, that the arts, which until then had been the "high" arts that literate people experienced, could suddenly become available to everyone. So in the 19th century there was a convergence of ideas that we're still the inheritors of: the idea that you have to learn to read to save your soul, which of course wasn't true, though it might be true now in our society; that you can't have a serious democratic citizenship if people can't read; and that art could belong to everyone, and that this could happen through education. These three ideas are at the core of the progressive movements in American education since about 1810. This space [at T&W] is one of the places where those ideas operate, in relation to this huge, disorderly, violent, greedy, libidinal, crazy city. Spaces such as this allow people to hide, to absorb the city and give it back altered, to complicate and tame rage, to complicate fantasy.

By the end of the 19th century, American men and women could read in equal numbers. Black people and white people could read in equal numbers. It took a lot of work! The story of Abraham Lincoln teaching himself to read by candlelight isn't repeated much anymore; it doesn't have that much pathos for us. But for the 19th century it had powerful pathos, because they were teaching themselves to read.

In California, which in 1973 had the lowest ratio of children per classroom, there is now the highest ratio of children per classroom. Before 1978, California spent more money per child than any other state in the union. Then they passed the proposition that froze property taxes, out of sheer meanness and stinginess on the part of the electorate. California is now ranked 48th, between Mississippi and Louisiana. The most populous state in the country is, by most measures, doing the worst job of teaching its kids to read. In Texas, the most recent tests suggest that only 50 percent of schoolchildren have achieved literacy by the seventh grade. Fifty percent! This is happening, of course, while there's massive middle-class flight to private schools, and the gap in income between the rich and poor is growing at a rate that rivals a similar trend in England during the Industrial Revolution.

For us, literacy—the work we do—represents the ideal that everybody can not only get a job but also save their souls, that everyone can be a citizen because they can master complicated ideas, and that everyone can find more powerful and less brutal places in their imaginations because they inhabit these worlds that we all share, worlds that the imagination makes possible. We're all here tonight because of something that happened to us. With me I think it was *Heidi*. I remember very distinctly reading, in such a hallucinatory dream, Heidi's meeting Peter and the Alp grandfather in that pastoral 19th-century sentimental novel, that when I came downstairs to my family sitting at the dinner table, it was as if I were looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope. They looked very far away, and I felt a weird combination of guilt and exhilaration, because something had cut me off from them. The nurturing that was in that scene in *Heidi* gave me a place to be, a place to measure what I didn't have. As Lewis Hyde says, "I was given a gift and I was *gifted*." Once you get one of those invisible gifts, you have to pass it on. I assume everyone in this room has been in that position, of having received a gift, been transformed by it, and passed it on. We each have hundreds of such moments: what we know about sexuality from reading this book; or what we know about rage from reading that book; what we know about dreaming. When Li Po sent Tu Fu his poems, Tu Fu, who was maybe the most elegant mind ever, wrote back, "Thank you, my friend. I read your poems. It was like being alive twice." We operate on the idea that

not only do we have to pass on the gift, but also that it can make a difference in the lives of other people, the way it's made a difference in ours, as well as make a difference in the level of civility in the world. Almost all the political forces in our society at this moment militate against that. And the forces in the world the kids are turned loose in also militate against that.

What I'm talking about tonight is not new visions, but old visions, not reform but struggle. There is a belief, based on anecdotal evidence but few hard studies, that there were other times and places where people really read a lot and in great numbers. Every few years a conservative poet writes a book saying that the reason people don't read poetry the way they used to is that poets aren't writing good, plain poems with meter and rhyme. But how do we know how many people were reading books in 1864? We don't. There's very little empirical evidence on the subject. What there are are a lot of Golden Age fantasies—that people really read poetry in Victorian America or in the 1910s or during the paperback revolution in the 1950s, etc. They are fantasies, built on impressions, anecdotal evidence, but they are rooted in the old Fabian socialist or American populist dream that we can make vivid and living art available to everyone in society.

We have no way, currently, of measuring how we're doing in the fight to make this dream real, to know comparatively how we're doing in the fight for literacy and for access to real works of art (and not to fantasies of the kind that make everybody miserable). Evidence from studies commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts suggests that 12–15 percent of American adults read serious literary books regularly. Twenty to twenty-five percent read novels regularly. More people read poetry than go to plays. More people read poetry than short stories. More people read novels than any of the above. As of 1980. A study was done around 1990, and sociologists have tried to generalize from these two studies, but they are probably too close together to be useful in that way. You know the story about Emily Dickinson's poems? When they appeared in 1890 they became a monstrous bestseller. The first edition of 400 copies sold out in a second. The next edition, 500 copies, sold out in a second. It went through eleven editions. So it sold about 5,600–6,000 copies in a population of 50 million. In comparative terms, Plath's *Ariel* sold better than that. But nobody thought of it as a bestseller. Certain of our poets who have other constituencies, such as Adrienne Rich or Gary Snyder, sell in better numbers than that, but aren't bestsellers. One thing we can say that might give us hope is that there are more people reading poetry and serious fiction and nonfiction than ever before in our history. But in terms of the dream, it's a small number. Which means that we have work to do. The struggle to enlarge the space of imaginative freedom and sanity and sacred craziness in our society—as opposed to the usual craziness—has to be expanded increment by increment, classroom by classroom, small arts institution by small arts institution, all over the country. It makes me think of what Simone Weil said about Karl Marx, that he was right about everything except he had the unfortunate fantasy that the struggle ever stops. We wake up every day and it's the same thing: you just have to keep at it. It's paradoxical: on the one hand, more and more people are going to colleges and universities, partly because it's a babysitting operation for a society that isn't providing jobs in such numbers, but not only for that reason. Part of it is people who believe in a democratic society are putting money where their mouths are. So in that sense we're doing okay. But it's not good enough. And it's under siege. If we had any real sense of the magnitude of the achievement of a whole population's attaining literacy, we wouldn't be letting it slip away, the way we are, out of voter grumpiness, meanness, stinginess, and class and racial rancor and resentment. It's totally destructive.

Part of the solution is clear enough: people have to pay for it. We have to pay for what we have, to keep it from slipping away. Can you imagine any politician standing up and saying, "We have to raise taxes to pay for our schools"? Instead, we're paying less and less in adjusted dollars, per capita. We're creating a greater gap between the rich and poor. And people like us haven't found a collective way to stand up and say, "Look what's happening!" We lowered our taxes, we had a big boom in takeout food because people have disposable income in their pockets, and in effect we've been eating our children for the past 20 years. With arugula and smoked salmon. If we'd just stop doing that and pay to educate our children, many of our social problems would be mitigated. In the city of Newark there are something like 300 teenage gospel choirs, with 15–20 kids per choir. Six thousand teenagers in a city that has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. Those were funded by Challenge Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. But then the NEA got cut. The NEA music program got cut by 40 percent this year, then 10 percent next year, then is to be phased out altogether. There are people who are doing this not because they are malicious or stupid. There are actually philosophical arguments in conservative circles about whether literature and music are federal or local concerns. Some say that literature is federal, but that music is local. These arguments are being conducted by people who have jobs and enough to eat. Meanwhile the people who are affected by the cuts are going to be in trouble and mostly they are the people who need help the most. And this at a time when the main impact of the so-called Republican Revolution is simply the consolidation of wealth. This is craziness, not the anarchic craziness of Manhattan on a Friday night in the middle of winter, but organized, self-righteous, destructive craziness and we haven't found a voice to address it. And that is certainly one of our tasks.

Poetry Resource List for Teachers

April 1996—The First Annual National Poetry Month

The Academy of American Poets
584 Broadway, Suite 1208
New York, NY 10012
(212) 274-0343

Publishes quarterly newsletter, with recommendations of recently published poetry; essays by poets; regular features on prosody; information on poetry prizes. Gives prizes to college student poets. Publishes poetry anthologies and sells audiotapes.

American Poetry Review
1721 Walnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19103
(215) 496-0439

Prints contemporary poetry and articles by poets. Gives poetry prizes. Lots of ads for writing programs. One-year subscription (6 issues) $16.00; single copy $3.50. Inquire for special classroom adoption rates.

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4800 Calhoun
Houston, TX 77204
(713) 743-2998

Publishes *Americas Review* (3 times a year), which prints the first work of U.S. born writers of Hispanic heritage. Also publishes many books.

Associated Writing Programs
Tallwood House, Mail Stop 1E3
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030
(703) 993-4301

Publishes the *AWP Chronicle,* which includes articles on contemporary letters and teaching writing, primarily at college level; profiles of poets; and lists of writing programs and contests. Holds annual writing conference.

Association of American
University Presses
584 Broadway, Suite 410
New York, NY 10012
(212) 941-6610

Publishes *University Press Books for Public and Secondary School Libraries.* (Note: the university presses publish a substantial amount of contemporary poetry.)

Council of Literary Magazines
and Presses (CLMP)
154 Christopher St.
New York, NY 10014-2839
(212) 741-9110

Publishes annually *The Directory of Literary Magazines*, which lists 600 magazines from the United States, Canada and Europe.

Curbstone Press
321 Jackson St.
Willimantic, CT 06226
(860) 423-5110

Publishes *Curbstone Ink* biannually, a free newsletter featuring authors' interviews and work. Publishes books and runs a national speakers program.

Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
163 Madison Ave.
Morristown, NJ 07962-1239
(201) 540-8443 ext.116

Sponsors the biennial Dodge Poetry Festival and Dodge poets-in-the-schools programs in New Jersey. Contact James Haba, Poetry Coordinator, for information.

Dustbooks
PO Box 100
Paradise, CA 95969

Publishes useful resource books, such as *Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses, The Small Press Review,* and *Directory of Poetry Publishers.*

Educational Press Assoc. of America
Rowan College of New Jersey
201 Mullica Hill Rd.
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701
(609) 863-7349

Publishes (in conjunction with the International Reading Assoc.) a listing of *Magazines for Children and Teens*, some of which invite submissions of original student poetry.

Hanging Loose Press
231 Wyckoff Street
Brooklyn, NY 11217

Publishes a literary magazine, *Hanging Loose* (with a high school writers' section), three times a year, and two collections of writing by high schoolers: *Smart Like Me* and *Bullseye.*

HarperCollins Publishers
10 East 53rd St.
New York, NY 10022
(800) 331-3761

Carries the wonderful audio recordings of poets put out for years by Caedmon, as well as its own recordings. Call for a catalogue.

Hungry Mind Review
1648 Grand Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55105
(612) 699-2610

Features book reviews, articles, profiles, often by and about poets. Lots of ads for poetry books.

Latin American Writers Institute
Hostos Community College
500 Grand Concourse
Bronx, NY 10451
(718) 518-4195

Publishes *Brujula/Compass*, a bilingual literary magazine devoted to Latino literature in the U.S.

Lannan Foundation
5401 McConnell Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90066-7027
(310) 306-1004

Produces Lannan Literary Videos, a series of videotapes of 46 contemporary writers—including many poets—reading and talking about their work, and an anthology tape. Free catalogue.

The Loft
66 Malcolm Avenue Southeast
Minneapolis, MN 55414
(612) 379-8999

Sponsors readings and workshops in Minnesota and publishes *A View from the Loft*, a journal with articles by and about writers, book reviews, listings, and ads.

National Book Foundation
260 Fifth Ave., Room 904
New York, NY 10001
(212) 685-0261

Bestows the National Book Awards, coordinates literary educational programs across the country, and publishes study guides to NBA-winning authors—interviews and lists of books that most influenced them. Send SASE for a list of all winners in poetry since 1950.

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Rd.
Urbana, IL 61801-1096
(217) 328-3870

Professional association for English/Lang. Arts teachers (K–college). Publishes *Language Arts* (elementary), *English Journal* (secondary) and *College English*. Publishes books on teaching writing—including poetry. Write/call for NCTE catalogue. For Poetry Month kit for teachers, contact: Maria Drees, ext. 290.

National Public Radio
Audiences Services
635 Massachusetts Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 414-3232

NPR doesn't currently have a printed catalogue, but if you call them they can do a topic/name search of their taped programs, and send a tape of a poet they've aired.

National Writing Project
5627 Tolman Hall/Educ.
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720
(510) 642-0963

Headquarters for writing projects located at universities across the U.S. Publishes *The Quarterly* and a monograph series on research in teaching writing.

The Paris Review
541 E. 72nd St.
New York, NY 10021
(212) 861-0016

A quarterly literary magazine with lots of poetry that regularly features in-depth interviews with writers.

Parnassus
205 W. 89th St. #8F
New York, NY 10024

A magazine of "Poetry in Review." In 1995 published its 20th anniversary issue (Vol. 20, nos. 1 and 2), a collection of poems, essays, prose poems, and poetic fiction.

PEN American Center
568 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
(212) 334-1660

The Readers and Writers program sends authors and books to literacy programs nationwide (free). Publishes: *Grants and Awards Available to American Writers*; *PEN Newsletter* (quarterly); *Readers and Writers Program Newsletter* (semi-annually); and *Liberty Denied: The Current Rise of Censorship in America.*

PEN Center USA West
672 S. LaFayette Pk. Pl. #41
Los Angeles, CA 94720
(510) 642-0963

Publishes newsletter with interviews and work by writers and sponsors public events.

Poetry
60 Walton St.
Chicago, IL 60610
(312) 255-3703

Oldest poetry magazine in U.S., published monthly since 1912. Produced the 14-part *Poets in Person* audio series and *Listener's Guide*. Call/write for information.

Poetry Flash
PO Box 4172
Berkeley, CA 94704
(510) 525-5476

A poetry review and literary calendar for the West Coast, with articles about poets and calendar for California events.

The Poetry Project
St. Mark's Church-In-The-Bowery
131 E. 10th Street
New York, NY 10003
(212) 674-0910

Publishes *The Poetry Project*, which contains book reviews and articles by poets, and *The World* literary magazine. Sponsors poetry readings, lectures, workshops, and symposia.

Poetry Society of America
15 Gramercy Park
New York, NY 10003
(212) 254-9628

Publishes *PSA Newsletter* (biannually), which has articles about writers and writing activities, poetry contests (some for students) and a catalogue of national readings. Sponsors subway/bus poetry posters (available at NYC Transit Museum).

Poetry & Literature Center
Library of Congress
Washington, DC 20540
(202) 707-5394

Coordinates the appearances of U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass and holds literary events. Hass is supporting "River of Words," a national environmental poetry contest (K–HS) for poems and/or posters on the theme of watersheds; for info: (510) 848-1155.

Poets and Writers
72 Spring St.
New York, NY 10012
(212) 226-3586

Publishes *Poets and Writers* magazine, with articles by and about writers and listings of awards, writing programs, grants, etc. Publishes *Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers* and *High School Writers' Resources List*. Also provides telephone information on writers' addresses.

Poets House
72 Spring Street
New York, NY 10012
(212) 431-7920

An extensive poetry library in New York City. Publishes *The Directory of American Poetry Books* (third edition, 1995) which lists most poetry published since 1991.

Poetry Center & American Poetry Archives
San Francisco State University
1600 Holloway Ave.
San Francisco, CA 94132
(415) 338-1056/2227

One of the oldest reading series in the country. Archive of videotapes of readings—poetry, fiction, playwriting, memoirs, etc. for sale and rent. Catalogue available ($5); call to inquire about specific writers.

Quarterly Black Review of Books
625 Broadway, 10th Fl.
New York, NY 10012

Publishes reviews and articles about African-American books and writers. Has World Wide Web site (http://www.bookwire.com.qbr).

Small Press Distribution
1814 San Pablo Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94702
(510) 549-3336

Much contemporary poetry is published by small presses, and is available from this distributor of 300 literary small presses. Free catalogue.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative
5 Union Square West
New York, NY 10003
(212) 691-6590
(212) 675-0171 fax

Publishes and distributes books on teaching writing, including many on teaching poetry, as well as the bimonthly magazine, *Teachers & Writers*. Write/call for free catalogue. Runs writer-in-residence programs and operates the Center for Imaginative Writing—a library and meeting place. Has a World Wide Web site (http://www.twc.org).

University of Michigan Press
Box 1104
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
(313) 764-4394

Publishes two series: *Poets on Poetry*—collections of critical works by contemporary poets, including articles, interviews, and book reviews; and *Under Discussion*—collections of reviews and essays about individual contemporary American and English poets.

Watershed Foundation
6925 Willow St. N.W., Suite 201
Washington, DC 20012
(202) 722-9105

Their Poets' Audio Center offers many audiotapes of poets reading from their own work. Free catalogue.

Waterways Project of Ten Penny Players
393 St. Paul's Ave.
Staten Island, NY 10304-2127
(718) 442-7429

Publishes *7 Heuristic Elements of Poetry* (two-page interdisciplinary curriculum for K–college); *Streams,* young adult anthologies; books to teach writing; monthly magazine *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream.* Free catalogue.

Writers' Conferences & Festivals
P.O. Box 102396
Denver, CO 80250
(303) 759-0519

Publishes transcripts of writers' conferences.

YMCA National Writer's Voice–Westside Y
5 West 63rd St.
New York, NY 10023
(212) 875-4261

Coordinates writers' workshops in Y's throughout the country and develops links between Y's and communities. Publishes free newsletter.

Videos and Multimedia Resources

The following companies and organizations are a few we've found that distribute videos and multimedia resources on poetry, including programs aired on PBS such as *Voices and Visions:*

- Annenberg/CPB Multimedia Center, PO Box 2345, South Burlington, VT 05407-2345, (800) LEARNER.
- Electronic Arts Intermix, 536 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, (212) 966-4605. Leading international distributor of artists' videos including tapes that merge poetry/music/art. Catalogue—$15.
- Films for the Humanities & Sciences, PO Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053, (800) 257-5126. Their English catalogue lists tapes and CD-ROMS—including a CD-ROM on English poetry.
- Mystic Fire Video, 524 Broadway, Suite 604, New York, NY 10012, (212) 941-0999.
- PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Pl., Alexandria, VA 22314, (800) 424-7963.
- Video Data Bank/School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 112 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 312, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 345-3550.
- VideoFinders, (800) 343-4727.
- Voyager, PO Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407, (800) 446-2001. Distributes CD-ROMs as well as videos—including *Poetry in Motion* and *Poetry in Motion II.*
- WGBH Video, PO Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407, (800) 255-9424.
- World Wide Web: Those with access to cyberspace can get a general index of educational/literary arts resources (http://www.yahoo.com). Other resources include the Electronic Poetry Center in Buffalo (http://wings.buffalo.edu.epc), The Institute for Learning Technologies at Columbia (http://www.ilt.columbia.edu) and Teachers & Writers Collaborative (http://www.twc.org).

Note: This is only a selection of what's available nationally. We welcome additions to the list, which will be updated periodically. Send additions to Teachers & Writers, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306, fax (212) 675-0171, tel. (212) 691-6590.

Suggested Poetry Activities
For National Poetry Month (April 1996)

- Read and write poetry with your students.
- Bring your favorite poems to class and read them aloud and talk about them.
- Publish your students' poetry in their own books, a school anthology, a school literary magazine, the local newspaper, or the school web site.
- Have your students make poetry cassettes for their friends and families.
- Encourage colleagues and parents to add a short poem to the message on their phone answering machines.
- Set up poetry displays in class, the hallway, and the library.
- Get local bookstores and public libraries to feature poetry books and to host readings.
- Invite a poet to your school for workshops, talks, readings, etc.
- Play poetry audiocassettes and poetry videos for your students.
- Ambitious? Organize a poetry festival.
- Arrange volunteer poetry workshops in senior centers, recreation programs, civic groups, and social agencies.
- Outside of school, meet with your colleagues and friends to read poetry aloud and talk about it. With food and drink.
- Ask your local newspaper to write about your activities during National Poetry Month.
- Coordinate Poetry Month activities with your state or local arts council.

Taking Students to the Trailhead
The Influence of Home

by Joyce Dyer

WHEN DO WE BECOME THE WRITERS WE WILL essentially forever be? What are the experiences that determine the subjects we choose, the words that drift into our imaginations, the rhythms, sounds, and metaphors that set our lines to song? Willa Cather felt that "most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen."

But few young writers believe this. Cather's observation is risky. It suggests that important things happen in people's lives very early and that these things must be honored. Students often deny that anything unique or significant occurs in their lives from one day to the next. More important, Cather's assertion carries with it a pressing obligation. If those things that have been most influential in forming our writing occur very early on, is there any excuse for delay? Is there any reason not to get down to business?

Other writers have said the same. Short story writer Lee K. Abbott, for example, finds that the authority of voice so essential to a writer "comes from the crossroads where you learned what you know." For Abbott, these crossroads exist in his youth: "In 1979 I understood that all I knew, and could therefore type about, was Heibert's Drive-In, the Pit Stop where rock and roll was learned, the rivalry our country club had with the Elks' version of gentility, skiing on the irrigation canals, skinny-dipping at the flumes, persuading older, wiser sorts to buy hooch for us at the Cork and Bottle—all given meaning by the chitchat they were lived in." Vance Bourjaily claims that youth is simply what writers are stuck with, what writers must draw on "for the rest of our lives."

For the rest of our lives. It is what T.S. Eliot so eloquently understood in *Four Quartets*: "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

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I was thirty before I had the courage to admit that this might be true. I was thirty before I began to understand that the Appalachian mines and locutions of my family—outmigrants to the tire factories of Akron, Ohio—were my real heritage as a writer and that my own voice was good enough after all. Why does it take us so long to find our way home, to "know the place for the first time"? And what could I do to prevent such ignorance in my college freshmen, such devaluation of their own experience as material for writing?

I decided to ask them to explore the influences on their own writing, no matter how difficult that task might seem. Two sources inspired the assignment: words of the wise—the Cathers and the Abbotts and the Eliots—as well as my own history of being afraid to believe that growing up where I did was the best and most significant thing in my whole life. I grew up in a neighborhood full of unkind jokes about briers ("What's the capital of West Virginia?" Answer: "Akron!"), a neighborhood with a giant bronze statue of Harvey Firestone in my back yard, a neighborhood where housewives listened to the 12:00 Hymn for the Day while they ironed and fed kids Campbell's alphabet soup. These are the things that I should have written about from the start, and will never stop writing about again. I knew this could be a good assignment. It was one of those rare topics that seemed to matter.

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But enthusiasm and inspiration are only starting points. I needed, first of all, to show students that what I was asking them to do was reasonable, "real," and part of an essay tradition. I was fortunate that a book called *In Praise of What Persists* (Harper & Row, 1983) had recently drifted into my hands. It consists of twenty-four excellent essays about the question of influence.

We read and discussed several essays in the volume so that my students would understand the range of possibilities for their own essays. Tess Gallagher said her writing came from the memory of her mother's love letters to her father, from her father's alcoholism, from the rain and fishing boats on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State, and from the traumas of a brother's death and an uncle's murder. For Carolyn Forché poetry began with the brutal experiences of two years in El Salvador. David Bradley traced his writing to the black churches where his father preached. Raymond Carver warned against the simple notion of literary influence—the influence of a specific writer, of a specific book. "Influences are forces," said Carver, "circumstances, personalities, irresistible as the tide...often mysterious at first glance, sometimes stopping just short of the miraculous."

JOYCE DYER's essays, including one in *The T&W Guide to Frederick Douglass*, have appeared widely. *Choice* selected her first book, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, as one of the best books of 1993. Her *Tanglewood: Inside an Alzheimer's Unit*, will be published by Southern Methodist University Press in the fall of 1996. Dyer is Director of Writing and Associate Professor of English at Hiram College.

These models also gave students ideas about technique. Tess Gallagher framed her essay with segments set in the Dewitt Ranch Motel—the motel she checked into in order to write her piece for *In Praise of What Persists.* John Gardner used spacing to avoid conventional transitions and to provide the deliberate disjointedness associated with memories and impressions.

The models we studied were never intimidating. After all, their most dramatic and eloquent message was that every voice, every past, was absolutely unique. The models were important for student writers, but they were only the trailhead of a path whose direction, angle, and elevation would be decided by each writer alone. It was at the trailhead where they would take their bearings and hear a few important warnings from writers who had gone before. But, finally, each student would have to pass beyond it and make the journey alone.

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Students were now in a better position to understand their task. I phrased the topic for them, using reference points we had established together: "Explain and discuss the most important influence(s) on your writing. You are not being asked simply to name authors who have influenced you. Like Carver, Gallagher, Gardner, and Gilbert Sorrentino, you are being asked to think, as well, about central events and experiences in your own life that consciously, or unconsciously, control decisions you make about writing (such as style, tone, content). Your purpose is to convey, honestly and thoughtfully, where writing comes from. Write in the essay style, but let some of the essayists we've read help you think about original ways to arrange and organize your discussion."

Soon after I gave the assignment, I scheduled a workshop session to permit students to read their essays aloud in small groups of four and receive suggestions. A few days later the full class assembled, copies of revised essays in hand, to exchange papers with other students for careful written commentary and close editing. The students quickly discovered that no two people in the class had walked the same path in the same way. They continued to gain confidence in their own approaches and choices of material, feeling no threat to their originality from other writers. They became eager to help one another produce the best papers that were in them.

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There were a few students who entered their essays through the avenue of literary influence. These students genuinely felt that reading was part of their inheritance as writers and a necessary part of apprenticeship. Andy's essay "Sweetie-Pie" tells about consuming obsession with Stephen King and Peter Benchley:

> Reading Stephen King (and later that year Peter Benchley's *Jaws,* my first novel) almost always terrified me at first, but the terror wore off, leaving me feeling exhilarated—and like bragging to my friends. It was the only thing I could brag about. I wasn't good at sports; my father wasn't a C.E.O. of a major company; I couldn't even talk to people about movies because my parents forbade me to go to anything more intense than *Star Wars.* I therefore began lugging my book-in-progress to school every day. During the sixth grade, I would rush to complete my work so I could reach into my black backpack and pull out *Cujo* or *It.* Because of the profanity and adult content of the novels, I even became cool in the eyes of the Beavis and Butthead clone bullies in my class. It wasn't long before I began writing my own little horror stories.

Andy recognized that this once overpowering influence had taken an interesting and subtle turn recently. "It would be safe to say that I write from the darker side of the spectrum. Yet I firmly believe that underneath the darkness there is almost always a comic subtext, especially in my expository writing. My fictional humor is buried very deep, but you usually find it."

This comic subtext, which Andy later called "irony" or "cynicism," also had an identifiable source—or, at the very least, a fairly sharp beginning. Andy called it "The Carl Affair."

> Carl is a very, very rich born-again Christian. He is almost as rich as he is obnoxious—I have never seen him without a dinner-plate-sized "Jesus Saves" button on his shirt and a stack of corny religious comic books in his hand. And his voice. You could always tell when he was in the building because he tried to convert everyone he met by yelling scripture at them. Anyway, Carl invited my family to his house (actually, it's more like a fort) for a dinner one day. It was a dinner I will never forget. About nine other born-agains were invited, so you can imagine what fun a seventeen-year-old who hadn't been to church since the second grade had with that bunch. I sat between two pastor-like guys, and they talked my ear off about how Jesus saved them on September 3, 1983, at 3:34 A.M. and how their lives have changed ever since. I mean, it was frightening. Anyway, I was really getting hungry, and when the food finally arrived at the table I grabbed my fork and was about to dig in when the two pastor-types grabbed my hands. Then Carl began to pray, or say grace, or whatever born-again Christians do before a meal.
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> The man prayed for forty-five minutes straight.
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> I stared at the plate of spaghetti getting cold in front of me, listening to my stomach growl underneath the ravings of my father's boss. My dad, by the way, quit his job soon after this eventful meal. But here's the best part—during Carl's rantings, a mosquito landed on the arm of one of the pastor-types. I watched it fill itself up, until finally the pastor-type noticed and slapped it off his arm, muttering "Goddamn bugs" under his breath. It was at that moment that I knew that if I got out of there before I starved to death, I had a great story on my hands.

Andy had more than one great story on his hands after "The Carl Affair." In his fiction, remnants and rumors of that haunting spaghetti dinner began to stalk his pages—sometimes on the edges, sometimes at the very center. "After that incident," Andy continued in his essay, "...virtually all of my

stories have had a subtext of religious satire." Andy admitted that perhaps his frequent return to the theme was the result of influences other than Carl. "This satire is definitely also helped along by my upbringing on Monty Python and my love for Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide* books." Yet Andy did not choose to diminish the influence of "The Carl Affair" too much. He ended his essay on a stubbornly comic note. "If it weren't for Carl, I'd still be writing about serial killers."

In "3 A.M." Maria also identified cynicism as a key trait of her writing, but she traced her bitterness to the deep and happy memory of a place, not to an isolated event. Oddly, in the face of such memory, the world's changes seem too wrenching to bring either Maria or her prose much serenity.

> I had forgotten about Avery...I had forgotten, simply forgotten.
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> My parents returned to the United States from South Korea, with yours truly, in 1976. They returned home to Avery, Missouri, where both of them had grown up. I was almost a year old and Nicki was two. Avery had the huge population of twenty-one in the 1980 census; I think I was related to everyone within a thirty-mile radius. My parents bought what was left of a seventy-year-old house and remodeled it. We lived there for ten years. I can remember so many things that I had forgotten: Gram's garden full of luscious sweet corn and ripe red tomatoes, blackberry picking with my mom and the resulting blackberry cobblers and pies, homemade ice cream, fishing with my dad, winnowing with my brother, hiking with my oldest sister to find an old Indian burial site, checking the henhouse for eggs but always hoping to find snakes, watching Gram butcher a chicken and fry it up for dinner, feeding the cattle, lunches during haying time when the table was heaped with honest-to-goodness homecooked food, and sitting on the back porch listening to the whippoorwill and seeing fireflies flashing in the night. It all came back one memory after another like drops of rain falling into a puddle, creating a ripple effect, a rush of memories.

Her paragraph moves toward an unexpected conclusion. Why had such a childhood, a childhood close to nature and loving people, not left Maria content and self-assured? "The innocence of that time is what makes me cynical," she continued. "I know that things will never be that simple or pure again. The world has changed too much and so have I."

Through her essay called "Unearthing," Sarah, an artist and ceramist, came to understand that her writing was another version of sculpted clay. Her urge to sit behind a computer screen was inspired by the same force that drew her to the painter's palette and the potter's wheel.

> My biggest influence can be confined to the space of one very small word: Beauty. It catches my eye the way that sparkly things catch a baby's glance. As a child I would find something beautiful along the side of the road, pick it up and save it in my special box. The things I found held no beauty for others, especially grown-ups. They would look at my collection of feathers, pieces of plastic, paper bits, and butterfly wings and not see their value.

Sarah next remembered trips with her father to the Cleveland Museum of Art, where she stared forever at the huge painting of Monet's *Nymphaeus.* And then she brought us to the present:

> For me, beauty is art, and art is something that is continually creeping into my writing. Sometimes it will take over a paper—a massive coup that shakes my comfortable topic and changes it forever. Other times its appearance is cloaked and remains subterranean, like my influences themselves.

As she wrote, Sarah came to understand herself as an organic writer who was not afraid of surprises. "Even when I am writing strictly guided assignments," she explained, "my influences creep in. It happens. I think I'm getting used to it now."

John, though a very different writer from Sarah, also learned about the influences on his writing because the assignment forced him to think about them. His "Biglittleboy" is about beauty, but in a very different way from Sarah's. He dared to name the deep frustrations in his life and his writing, caused by his unusual size. His classmates in nursery school called him "the gentle giant" because, as he explains, "I was such a big little boy, yet so docile and easily made victim by the other pre-schoolers, a trait that stuck with me far into high school." He remembered all he had to put up with: "the number of 'wedgies,' 'Indian rope burns,' 'wet willies,' 'noogies,' and other tortures I have endured while growing up."

Writing had always helped John to connect where connections had not been possible, to carve out a place for himself where there was no room, to tame his awkwardness.

> I began to feel like the character Edward Scissorhands in the movie of the same title by Tim Burton. Edward, the creation of a well-intentioned scientist, is left with only scissors for hands when his creator suddenly dies before his completion. Stuck in a world in which he can either create beautiful forms or destroy with his hands, Edward inspires laughter in his absurdity but is never able to make true human contact with anyone. And so, when I could I set out to create something beautiful with my lumbering, often destructive hands by writing and pouring myself into the works of others. And it was at the worst time of my life—my junior and senior years in high school—that I read some of the best authors: Faulkner, Joyce, Hemingway, Shakespeare, and Fitzgerald. I created some beautiful things with the help of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* and *The Sound and the Fury.*

Although John was one of the most gentle people I have ever taught, he was able to see that destruction sometimes must precede creation. "But my hands," he wrote, "unlike Edward's, did not find substance and strength in my personal sphere until I began to destroy." And the journal was the place where this could happen—where this had to happen in order for beauty to push to the surface.

> My journal is a regenerative playground... The husky pencil dances with Faulkner. My first sexual experience

> gets a sparkly star.... And John, more often than not, has scissor hands that sometimes create, sometimes destroy, and sometimes let run free the questions and the visions running through his head. My journal is what Natalie Goldberg describes as a kind of creative compost heap and the more I write the richer it becomes. My black spiral notebook is the rich soil where my influences have bloomed and where they continue to grow. It is the mirror that allows me to see the places that my writerly eyes often cannot.

John's essay about influence—along with his other essays, stories, and journal entries—added further nutrients to the compost heap he spoke of.

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This assignment took my students where they had once come from, where they were now (at least in memory), where they would eventually go, and where they would forever be. It took them home.

Scott Sanders, premier writer of place, understands the bright side and the dark of our origins. He recognizes that we are under no obligation to love what formed us—to love home, in other words. And yet, if we ever hope to write, we are under every obligation to admit its influence on us. In his essay "After the Flood," he wrote, "One's home ground is the place where, since before you had words for such knowledge, you have known the smells, the seasons, the birds and beasts, the human voices, the houses, the ways of working, the lay of the land, and the quality of light. You may love the place if you flourished there, or hate the place if you suffered there. But love it or hate it, you cannot shake free. Even if you move to the antipodes, even if you become intimate with new landscapes, you still bear the impression of that first ground."

PLUGS

Susan Engel's *The Stories Children Tell: Making Sense of the Narratives of Childhood* is not only a good, solid overview of the function of stories and their relation to the ways children develop, it is also a clear and personable book that is a delight to read. Along the way, Engel provides advice for teachers and parents. Although the focus is on pre-school and elementary school children, the book should be interesting to anyone who teaches imaginative writing. Published by W.H. Freeman and Co., the 244-page hardcover is available for $22.95.

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For teachers interested in modernism and experimentation in poetry, there are two delightful recent anthologies. *The Dada Market*, edited by Willard Bohn, is the most comprehensive collection of Dada poetry ever assembled (253 pp.). The selections are brief, but the number (42) and geographical range (Europe, North America, and South America) of the contributors is impressive. The bilingual selection also includes twelve attractive black-and-white illustrations by Dada artists. *The Dada Market* is available from the Order Dept. of Southern Illinois University Press, PO Box 3697, Carbondale, IL 62902-3697 (tel. 618-453-6633, fax 618-453-1221) for $14.95 paperback or $34.95 cloth. Add $2.75 for postage and handling.

The other delight is *The Cubist Poets in Paris*, an anthology edited by L. C. Breunig. Breunig, who passed away recently, was a leading scholar on the writing of Guillaume Apollinaire. Like Bohn, Breunig includes many lesser-known writers in his collection, providing a context in which to place major poets such as Apollinaire, Cendrars, Jacob, and Reverdy. The selections tend to be longer than those in Bohn's collection, but Breunig is presenting fewer poets. Although Breunig was not a poet himself, the translations are sturdy and reliable, because he was thoroughly knowledgeable in his field, as his helpful commentary in this volume demonstrates. The 326-page volume, a handsome hardcover accented with good illustrations, is available from the University of Nebraska Press, 312 North 14th St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0484 (tel. 800-755-1105, fax 800-526-2617). The price is $35 plus $4.50 for shipping & handling.

Both *The Dada Market* and *The Cubist Poets in Paris* are brimming with good selections and commentary, but also youthful energy and a joy in playing with words.

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T&W now has a World Wide Web site (http://www.twc.org).

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In a shameless act of self-promotion—and to fill up this little bit of leftover space—the editor of this magazine announces the publication of *New & Selected Poems* by Ron Padgett, available from David R. Godine, Publisher, Box 9103, Lincoln, MA 01773 (800-344-4771). The hardcover edition is $20.95 plus $4.50 shipping and handling.