

American

BOOK

Review

Introduction: *Mirror, Mirror*

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The game is easy: rattle off the names of formulaic, high-profile, “workshop-style” writers—Irving, Smiley, Canin. Include those contemporary kids pouring out books—Nathan Englander, Adam Haslett, Thisbe Nissen, among others. Their names all come easily, and the association is equally effortless: Aha! we cry. They’re those quasi-Updike writers! Those pantomimes who esteem Cheever (Cheever!) above all others! I know *them*—they’re those lameasses from the Midwest with their singular notion of perfection. The *ideal* story. Cold, manipulated, clean, efficient. The assassins of literature: Iowa Workshop Grads.

Problem is, the game is easy to flip. Here are more Iowa graduates: Tom Grimes. Peter Orner. R.M. Berry. Charles Smith. Denis Johnson. Try and match them with their influence, with each other. Try and shape them into a single aesthetic. Go ahead. Try.

Rattling names is easy. Thinking is a bit different.

On a given Tuesday in Iowa City, the air smells like pigshit, and it is in this fecundity that, at four PM, tramp 50 or so youngish fiction writers to a sagging building with wooden floors, a worn banister, and radiators that click to eternity. They file in, chat nervously, and, at half past the hour, they tread down the hall or up the stairs to sit in four or five classrooms, in small circles, discussing one another’s forays into writing. They are taught by authors whose work is varied: Marilynne Robinson, James McPherson, Frank Conroy, Ethan Canin. They talk for two hours, maybe three, about a couple of stories, maybe three, and then they either go home to spouses or out to bars and get snookered. The rest of the week, those other 165 hours, they may dip their heads into a writing seminar. Many teach. Others have fellowships (i.e., play video games).

Two, three hours a week. That’s all—and this is how people think it happens. In two, three hours, the minds of these intelligent men and women are magically warped into clones.

The logic of this is fleeting. The myth of the Iowa story, the Iowa writer—the existence of the myth, the commonness—is surprising and disappointing. The concept is that twenty months in the Midwest somehow “forms” a student of the Workshop. The timing of the twenty months hardly matters; in theory, those spent in 1987–1989 are exactly equal to those spent right now, which means that writer Vinnie Wilhelm, class of 2004, despite his obsessions with nudity and farting, will one day write novels eerily similar to John Irving’s.

Strangely, though, as we’ll see in the reviews that follow, similarities are often fleeting: how can Stuart Dybek be a “Chicago” writer if he went to Iowa? Why is Tom Piazza so interested in folk music? Is *this* what they teach at Iowa: obsessions with Bob Dylan and El trains? How is it possible that a young Iowa writer, like Julie Orringer or her husband, Ryan Harty, both under review here, can somehow write stories that are... (gulp)... different?

In other words, smart, ambitious reader: do you really think that all people who go to school in the same place, at different times, in different settings, with different teachers and peers and cultural surroundings, are going to emerge the same?

Well, maybe.

Notable Trend #1: Yearly, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop invites one or two visiting fiction faculty. Here’s the roster from the past four years: Chris Offutt (graduate), Samantha Chang (graduate), Elizabeth McCracken (graduate), Stuart Dybek (graduate), Jennifer Vanderbes (graduate), ZZ Packer (graduate), and... Edward Carey. Wait? Not a graduate? But Carey *did* attend the International Writing Program, located all of one block away. Of the permanent faculty, all have been on board for over ten years, save for Ethan Canin (graduate).

In other words, there is stasis at Iowa: the new writers were taught by the old... the new return with the same lessons as the old... everything is old, old. To ignore this trend, to argue that education is an individual’s making, that the potential cycle of stagnant instruction is only smoke and mirrors, is tempting. It’s similar to saying Plato would have been the Plato we all know and love, even if his name was Jack Smith and he was born in Ithaca in 1982.

That Socrates fellow? Well, he had nothing to do with it.

Institutionalization. An ugly word with implications mean and sweeping. And while institutionalization is not absolutely pervasive and *true* at Iowa, the notion carries the threat of the small-truth, the shadow, the possibility. But how does institutionalization happen? To whom? And in this time of MFAs, how can it best be avoided?

Notable Trend #2: All students in any setting, in any serious program, see how certain people and styles are consistently rewarded. At the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, rewards are doled out in the form of contests, postgraduate grants, and second-year financial aid, most decided by faculty. If the same people consistently win, everyone knows.

As is bound to happen, the same people *do* win: say an incoming student wins a lauded Maytag Fellowship, which pays the student about \$14,000 for his first year at Iowa. He has no obligations. No teaching, no work, no nothing: fourteen grand and time. This same student, unlike his working peers, can actually focus on writing, and his application for second-year financial aid will be stronger, pol

ished... and those same faculty members who awarded him the first fellowship now bestow upon their fair knight a second.

His second year, he teaches fiction and—watch this—*rates incoming applications*.

Summary: His style has been enjoyed—and rewarded—by the faculty. He has been given money to keep up the good work (ain't broke, don't fix). He is given more money *and* the opportunity to judge applying students. Those applications he likes he scores well, and those who score well are, like him, admitted and given one fellowship and then another, and they judge the next class, and....

How does institutionalization happen? Quite easily. But who does it happen *to*?

Notable Trend #3: Many Iowa Workshop students are egotistical and one-minded and simply don't care about awards or teachers or anything, really, other than their prose.

And these are the high-minded jerks who do fine.

The problem is that there are also those students who go to Iowa with no sense of a "writing self," students who easily follow the lead of instructors and peers. This happens naturally, as a result of *young* people seeing what "works" and what is "liked" and then striving for those things. Anyone who has taught has had those desperate students who *really really* need to know how "good" they are, and that type of student gets into Iowa, and when they find the formula for success (You liked me? You *really* like me?), they stick to it and do quite well.

The problem is that they aren't succeeding on their own terms, as they don't actually have terms. They become mirrors for their instructors. *These* students are "Iowa writers." They are mimics—oftentimes master mimics—and they write clean, efficient books that seem eerily familiar to other books, books by teachers and forbears, clean and efficient books that have no life, no risk, books that slowly, steadily, give their program a reputation for sterility.

Last: how to change the problem.

Notable Trend #4: The director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop is Frank Conroy, an older man with a gruff manner who has little patience for students with no sense of history. You say Thom Jones, he says Flaubert. You say Cormac McCarthy, he scowls and says Malcolm Lowry. "Invisible prose!" he cries. "Third-person narration!"

There are legends of Frank's diatribes—nothing romantically violent like Barry Hannah, but moments with plenty of devastation. Once, a student turned in the first twenty pages of a novel he'd worked on for a year, and when he showed up for class, Frank began by taking the first ten sheets and tearing them in half. This, he said, is no good.

Another: Frank picked up a story, said, "This isn't a story." Set it down. Class over.

Again: "What's metafiction? Metafiction is nonsense."

It's easy, from a distance, to say, Stand up to the old man! Give him the what-for! But sitting in a tiny room on a winter evening, while a man large and singular and focused sits before you, growling—well, it's easier to let it go. Next time, instead of wasting your time, why not just turn in a different type of story? Something more traditional?

At least then, you'll get a workshop out of it. At least then, people will talk.

And so it goes. Students sometimes choose not to submit certain stories to workshop because their instructors often give the impression that they *will not discuss them in a worthwhile manner*. At Iowa, it happens. Say that Marilynne Robinson seems to step around more explicit, sex-related stories, while Frank has issues with "voice," and Ethan Canin distrusts more literary pieces. Maybe students hold off on a story, maybe put it in the drawer for a while... use something else, something more... ordinary. That way, the boat ain't rocked. And once again, it's happening: nothing.

To be fair, these instructor prejudices are not an evil conspiracy. Instead, they are simply human: professors are writers, and writers, while often intelligent and bold, are madly subjective and one-minded. Aren't you? If something crosses your path that insults your aesthetics, isn't it hard *not* to crush it, or dismiss it, or at the very least *condescend* to it? We do it all the time. To pass judgment on art is an easy thing, especially when standing before a class. People are gathered around to listen to you—why not tell them what you know?

Because, lest we forget, writing isn't about knowing.

The professors at Iowa, and probably at all MFA programs, have intricate and thoughtful and passionate aesthetics, beliefs that they rightly and rigorously defend and hone and believe in with all their souls... and it is this certainty, finally, that is the greatest drawback to the study of writing. When aesthetics align, when a faculty shares a similar vision, and when visiting faculty are of the same mind, there is suddenly no breathing room for students who deviate, students who wish to rebel. In sameness lies the peril of the workshop.

Maybe this can be avoided. Maybe a program famed for postmodernism, say, could invite stodgy old Tobias Wolff for a semester. Or a program that tends toward the traditional, like Iowa, could ask Ben Marcus or R.M. Berry to teach, someone who *resists* tradition. Some might say that any teaching of fiction *must* encourage innovation, that a bookshelf only has so much space, and the more closely one book resembles another, the less likely a reader will make room for it; these people might criticize programs like Iowa for not focusing on newness—but, remember, newness changes, and, to be honest, writing is rarely new.

The threat is not realism or modernism or postmodernism, but of a place where one tradition is *the* tradition, according to all. As obnoxious as it might be to have a colleague whose aesthetics you *loathe*, aesthetic diversity is the only way to ensure *artistic* diversity.

For now, there is a lack—at Iowa, at other institutions. Young student-authors must lay in wait, enter their workshops with suspicion—with open minds, of course, but equal parts suspicion. They must cherish their weird, flaming visions and keep these visions glowing, even if they stay hidden for two or three years. They must be sensitive to the nature of their surroundings, and, ideally, in the future, the actual programs, the faculty and

the administrators, will be sensitive to their *own* nature and will take it upon themselves to self-correct, to deviate from standardization, to offer up diversity. Otherwise, the study of writing becomes just another lesson, rote, easily memorized, as flat and dull as... an Iowa story.