

AUTHOR

In his lecture to the Royal Society of Literature in April 1995, novelist Russell Celyn Jones (1995–96) captures both the surprise of British writers that authors should take up residence in institutional spaces and the U.S. construction of creative writer as wild and woolly outlaw of an identifiable sort:

Americans do not look on institutionalized creativity as an oxymoron at all. The creative writing course is an industry there, with thousands of students attending poetry and fiction sections each year. . . . Anyone who has ever attended such a course can tell you that the American writers' workshop is a party. The problem sets in when the party never ends. . . . The writers' workshop was pioneered by Paul Engle at Iowa City in an attempt to replicate Parisian café society. I met Engle in 1983 whilst a student at Iowa. He asked me how my workshop was going and I complained it seemed a little over-polite. "Your prayers have been answered," he said. "We've got Barry Hannah coming next semester. He just got fired from Alabama for bringing a loaded revolver into class. Of course we snapped him up." The story that got about was that Hannah, a chronic alcoholic and native of Mississippi, turned up to teach class, drunk and with a Colt .45. He placed the weapon on the table, saying "This morning I got up and read a \$50,000 tax demand from the IRS and a \$20,000 alimony bill from my ex-wife. The third thing I read was this piece of shit that someone done turned in. I don't know which is worse."

British writers—who these days are also finally investing in academic creative writing programs—are not alone in imagining the only good writer is the bohemian iconoclast touched by madness and genius in

bewildering mixtures and measures. Several sources feed this imagistic river. Linda Brodkey investigates the modernist scene of writing—"a solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle . . . in which the writer is an Author and the writing is Literature" (1987, 396)—and outlines the many problems involved in this construction of authorship and writing, primarily, of course, all that it leaves out. For much of the last century, this author was not only solitary and literary but white and male. Equally, this version of writing process was one in which "solitude is at once inevitable and consequential, the irremediable human condition from which there is no escape . . . a vicarious narrative told by an outsider who observes rather than witnesses life" (398). In this image of writing, there is waiting (for inspiration) and arrival (at expert final product); there is no drafting, no collaborating, no circulation of text through an economic production system (publishing). When writing does happen, "the writer is an unwilling captive of language, which writes itself through the writer," or, as T. S. Eliot would have it, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (1975, 8). What writer wouldn't, along with Barry Hannah, vault from the desk and roar into action in order to make up for his mad isolation, his raw deal with the muse?

For different reasons, film images of writers have contributed their share of dramatic failures, white male writers in search of a story. In all these images, due to the nature of film, writers are doing everything *but* writing alone. This is because the act of writing is eminently unfilmable: a relatively boring internal action, aside from a few voiceovers or papers ripped in tiredness from a typewriter platen. Instead, filmmakers substitute a new scene of nonauthorship, reporters buzzing after a story (*The Front Page*), writers on the road (*Almost Famous*), writers not writing Literature (*Barton Fink*), writers pursuing their demons during writer's block or as charismatic teachers (*Wonder Boys*), writers seeking admission to a writing program (*Orange County*), or being forced to write (*Misery*). In *Finding Forrester* we find a mentor and a writer of color; in *His Girl Friday* we find that a woman writes, but such sightings are few and far between.

If, as Katherine Haake argues, "before you can remember who you are [as a writer], you must identify your own private writing demons, and then dispense with them, one by one" (2000, 191), the writer who wants to challenge received images has a lot of work before him or her. First, if the modernist writer is always writing alone, living *la vie bohème* and working to join the literary tradition, she has to work against "the unexamined

assumptions that this and only this moment counts as writing” (Brodkey 1987, 399) and that these and only these sorts of texts count as valuable. These writers must buck a long misreading of the romantic tradition that suggests that “[t]he romantics, of course, privileged emotions, imagination, synthesis, less linear forms of discourse and logic, and the importance of non-academic setting in which to learn—usually nature” (Gradin 1995, 92) while forgetting that they also were deeply concerned with educational processes. The “myth of the inspired writer,” argues Gradin, has become “a negative romantic legacy” (93). Romantics, she continues, believed that both imagination and genius were innate and too often educated out of individuals, whereas Wordsworth and others were searching for a method to draw both forth (955).

If novice writers seek to become like the writers they admire, if they move into the profession of writing by seeking writers’ identities, as argued by Robert Brooke, then the danger lies in what images of authorship and writer they are receiving. “Writers learn to write by imitating other writers,” Brooke argues, “by trying to act like writers they respect” (1988, 23). If this is so, the inspiration for young writers is crucial. If they are offered film types—master writer, madman, writer who doesn’t write, action hero, flustered female—certain responses to the scene of learning to write are predictable. If they are offered a walk in the dells or a garret in Paris, certain other responses are likely. At either pole of behavior—isolation or mad camaraderie—a number of questions are ignored. While T. S. Eliot suggests all successful authors learn from and join the tradition, Roland Barthes suggests—equally problematically—that the Author is more likely a site of contestation: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (1968, 149).

Given the choice of chaos or certainty, most writers would opt for the latter, but they do so by relying on received images that certainly leave a number of would-be authors out of the picture or forced to remake themselves into writer types that won’t serve them well. Katharine Haake (2000, 191) reminds us that “we turn out the way we are by virtue of our experience in culture, in class, in gender, in race, in family, in history, in being” (see also “Identity Politics”), which predicts that novice writers—perhaps all writers—need two things: the chance to interrogate the scene(s) of writing that have been offered them and the encouragement to ask hard

questions about the politics and economics and current cultural practices affecting authorship in the United States and in world cultures.

Robert Brooke argues, “Composition teaching works, in the modern sense, when it effectively models an identity for students which the students can in some way accept. It works when part of their identity becomes a writer’s identity, when they come to see that being a writer in their own way is a valid and exciting way of acting in the world” (1988, 40). In creative writing, it has long been assumed that the modernist scene of writing is the scene we should be accessing, that the writer in graduate programs undergoes certain recognizable and necessary stages of education, acculturation, and identity formation. However, changing literary realities suggest that an interrogation of our assumptions may be in order. The challenge to dominant genres (see “Creative Nonfiction”), the consolidation of the power of publishing houses, the loss of funding for the arts and humanities, the threat to university presses, the proliferation of degree programs, the change in student demographics—all suggest writing programs and writers might do well to consider a by now fairly well-known set of theoretical questions: “What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?’ And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: ‘What difference does it make who is speaking?’” (Foucault 1969, 187).

Who is an author? We are not arguing that we shouldn’t attend our conferences in blue jeans or have a drink at the bar after the reading or that we don’t want to write excellent texts and have them widely read, but we do want to consider where our field is going, whom it includes, how well it trains those new to the scene to do their work, and with what sorts of inclusivity or diversity. When we laugh at Grady Tripp’s 2,000-page second novel blowing into the water (*Wonder Boys*), when we wince at Paul Sheldon forced to write another romance novel by Annie Wilkes (*Misery*), when we see Shaun trying to gain admission to Stanford’s prestigious writing program despite his dysfunctional family (*Orange County*), when we long for a mother as humorous and supportive as William Miller’s (*Almost Famous*) and pride ourselves on knowing the story behind *Finding Forrester*, we are tapping into the authors we have all been constructed to want to be as well as into the authors that some of us are or will be.