

CONFERENCES, COLONIES, AND RESIDENCIES

Because the larger world is generally indifferent to creative writing, places and times where writers can concentrate on their writing lives are infrequent. Always, obligation beckons. Most creative writers must work in jobs outside their field. Many have families to shepherd through the day. The phone rings, the trash must be taken out, a friend e-mails to request a luncheon date. One after another the daily duties mount so that a writer may feel she is *never* going to get her work accomplished. This entry discusses opportunities for writers to escape their normal responsibilities, to grow and develop as writers in a space specifically designed for that purpose.

CONFERENCES

One of the easiest and most productive ways for beginning writers to meet and engage with others who are practicing the same craft is to attend a writers' conference. Conferences are held around the country (and around the world), and may last for anywhere from part of a single day to several weeks. Perhaps the most famous is also the oldest (established in 1926), the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont. The idea for the conference is attributed to Robert Frost, who hoped to bring young writers together in an inspiring setting, and this goal remains central to most contemporary conferences.

Attending a conference is not possible for all writers, as it requires time and money, but financial assistance is sometimes available. At Bread

Loaf, for example, this takes the form of reduced rates on tuition fees or scholarships that require students to serve as waitstaff during meal times. However, because there is such a wide range of offerings, most people can find one to satisfy their needs and financial circumstances. Writers' Conferences & Centers Online has the most comprehensive site on the Web; it can be found at www.awpwriter.org/wcc/index.htm.

For attendees, conferences serve a number of different purposes. New writers benefit from the guidance of established writers via workshops, craft lectures, or one-on-one conferences. They can mingle informally with these writers at parties and hear them read from their work. As literary agent Michael Seidman notes, at a conference "there is a large and varied support group waiting not only to ensure that you are not lonely, but to provide the kind of help and lessons the writer needs to grow" (1993, 102). New writers can meet influential agents, like Seidman, and editors who may become interested in their work. Prestigious conferences like Bread Loaf or the Sewanee Writers' Conference serve as a kind of fraternity or sorority for writers. Participants meet other writers who act as a support network, offer encouragement, and give advice about publication opportunities. Ideally, new writers are both nurtured and challenged, and leave the conference eager to do more work.

For writers teaching at the conference, there are also a number of benefits. It is prestigious to be asked to teach at a conference, and one conference may lead to another. If new writers hope to benefit from contacts with editors and agents, established writers have even more hope of turning their contacts into publications. Conferences provide a paid semivacation, usually in an attractive locale such as a resort or a college campus. Even well-known writers, unlike pop singers or movie stars, are generally not recognized by the general public, so the close attention of adoring fans is another stimulus.

Ultimately, some writers are put off by the occasionally circuslike atmosphere of a writing conference. At times, the art of schmoozing (q.v.) seems to be practiced more than the art of writing. Nevertheless, for new writers hoping to step into "the business," there are few comparable opportunities for such a full-throttle experience.

COLONIES

If a conference offers the chance to immerse oneself in the world of writing for a short time, a writers' colony makes that immersion long term. One of the most famous writers' colonies is the Fine Arts Work Center in

Provincetown, Massachusetts. The Work Center “provides seven-month fellowships to twenty fellows each year in the form of living/work space and a modest monthly stipend.” Writers are expected to live and work in the space provided by the sponsor. Typically, days are spent working, while nights are free for socializing with other artists.

All the benefits of the conference are increased in the residency. There is more than ample time to write. Creative energy abounds. The support from one’s fellow “colonists” is broader and deeper, and friendships made with writers in the colony tend to be long lasting. Opportunities to schmooze with visiting writers are more frequent, and the resulting encounters may be more intense. Those living in an artist rather than a writers’ colony can exchange ideas with people working in mediums other than their own.

On the other hand, colonies are impractical for most writers with work and family responsibilities. For these people, the luxury of taking seven months, or even a month, off to work solely on their writing is unthinkable. Consequently, however diverse their aesthetic points of reference may be, there is a certain group resemblance to the members of a writers’ colony. They tend to be young, highly educated, and largely unencumbered.

RESIDENCIES

While the term “residency” is sometimes applied to a stint in a writers’ colony, here we mean time spent alone, rather than with fellow artists. The residency at the University of Arizona Poetry Center, for instance, promises to provide “an individual writer with a place to create in a quiet neighborhood.” The Philip Roth Residence in Creative Writing at the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University offers “a studio in the Stadler Center, a furnished two-bedroom apartment in Bucknell’s Poet’s Cottage, meals in the University Dining Service,” and a small stipend, with all “campus academic, cultural, and recreational facilities available for the Resident’s use.” (www.bucknell.edu) Like a writers’ colony, a residency provides writers with an opportunity to write; occasionally, some part-time teaching may also be required.

One of the most interesting, and geographically wide-ranging, artist-in-residence programs is offered by the National Park Service (NPS; www.nps.gov/volunteer/air.htm). While the residency is unpaid, artists and writers chosen to participate in the program live for free in NPS-supplied housing while they work on projects inspired by their spectacular surroundings. The residencies are offered at parks ranging from Voyageurs

in Minnesota, on the shores of Lake Superior, to the Everglades in Florida, from Acadia in Maine to Joshua Tree National Monument in the California desert.

Again, the standards for acceptance at most residencies are fairly high—a writer must have some record of success and must demonstrate even more potential. Once those standards are met, however, the decision about whether or not to join a writers' colony or take an individual residency depends on the writer's own needs and personality. Writers who live far from large cities may welcome the opportunity to discuss their work with other artists. On the other hand, a parent who has somehow managed briefly to disengage herself from her family would likely cherish her every free moment to work and would prefer the solitude of a residency.