

MFA (MASTER OF FINE ARTS)

The Master of Fine Arts in creative writing is a studio degree that invites comparison with terminal fine arts degrees in dance, theater, and the visual arts. Consequently, the MFA privileges writers as artists while minimizing their standing as academics. Although nearly all MFA writing programs emphasize participation in workshops (along with enrollment in at least a few literature courses), degree requirements vary widely. Options

range from low-residency MFAs, in which most teaching is conducted electronically, through the mail, and via telephone and can be completed in two years, to programs that require sixty or more semester hours of coursework and may necessitate up to four or five years in school. In nearly all cases, though, the final product is a book-length work of poetry, fiction or creative nonfiction, or a full-length play. As is the case with a creative dissertation (q.v.), MFA students typically defend their thesis before a panel of faculty members before the degree is granted.

For many years, in its “Guidelines for Teachers of Writing,” the Associated Writing Programs (q.v.) specifically endorsed the MFA as *the* terminal degree and “the appropriate credential for the teacher of creative writing” (Fenza et al. 1999, 317). However, recently the organization changed that endorsement to support both the MFA *and* the PhD with a creative writing emphasis as terminal degrees. If the MFA was once the cornerstone of the creative writing industry, it has begun to look as though its foundation is sinking. Indeed, while the vast majority of creative writing professors in American colleges and universities hold the MFA as their terminal degree, a number of factors have conspired to make these teachers wonder if it may now be too late to save their professional credentials from obsolescence (see “Creative Dissertation” for an alternate view of the situation outlined in this entry).

As D. G. Myers shows in his exhaustive study *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* (1996), American creative writing programs in the early part of the twentieth century benefited from a progressive movement in education that argued that students could become more effective writers when they were engaged in writing that maximized their expressiveness. The valorization of creative writing in both secondary schools and institutions of higher learning bore its most significant fruit at the University of Iowa in the 1930s. Under the directorship of Norman Foerster, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop offered the first Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing, with Paul Engle, later director of the workshop, the first American to receive a graduate degree in creative writing for a book of poems (see “Workshop”). Foerster believed that the writers who made the literature were more than qualified to teach it, and that belief found widespread acceptance from the 1940s on. Ironically, though, the antiacademic bias that has become the MFA’s millstone was there from the very beginning. In one speech, Foerster declared that “I would have a writer go to college . . . but I would not have him become what we call an ‘academic’” (Myers 1996, 134).

Nevertheless, many writers did go on to become academics. Poets especially, because they could not earn a living wage from their work the way novelists could, flocked to the university, and even a partial list of these writer-teachers makes for an impressive (though gender-biased) list of postwar poets: Randall Jarrell, John Crowe Ransome, John Berryman, Howard Nemerov, John Ciardi, Robert Hayden, Anthony Hecht, Karl Shapiro, Philip Booth, Donald Justice, and many others. As Jed Rasula (1996) points out, the earliest of these writers held MA degrees in literature (the MFA was not yet the dominant degree it would become), but there was an MFA boom in the 1960s and 1970s, propelled by a high demand for creative writing classes, which resulted in an abundance of jobs for writers and a shortage of writers with graduate degrees. In 1967, the growth in creative writing programs was given a professional imprimatur with the foundation of the Associated Writing Programs by R. V. Cassill. In "Theory, Creative Writing, and the Impertinence of History," R. M. Berry sites some rather astonishing figures: "John Barth has estimated that by 1984 Creative Writing programs had turned out over 75,000 literary practitioners . . . and Liam Rector, former director of the Associated Writing Programs, estimated in 1990 that around 3,000 poets and fiction writers were graduating from Creative Writing programs each year. (For comparison, doctoral programs in English average around 800 graduates yearly)" (1994, 57). Through the end of the millennium, most of these graduates would have had MFAs: the ninth edition of *The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs* published in 1999 lists eighty-three member programs conferring the MFA degree.

Unfortunately, as more and more young writers went from undergraduate to graduate programs in creative writing, scarcity replaced plenty for those who hoped to become teachers. Today, a tenure-track job in creative writing at any reasonably solvent institution of higher education is likely to attract anywhere from several hundred to a thousand applicants, many of whom are more than qualified to fill the position.

One response by English departments to the changed circumstances has been to give administrators what they have wanted all along: PhDs. Programs offering the English degree with a creative dissertation grew almost sixfold in fifteen years: from just five in 1984 to twenty-nine in 1998. Perversely, some of these programs grant both the MFA and the PhD, pitching the MFA as a terminal degree to one group of students while simultaneously selling the PhD with a creative dissertation to another. Indeed, the dearth of academic jobs and the complete

“identification of poet with teacher,” in Dana Gioia’s words (1991, 102), has led some creative writers, even those with MFAs, to give up on the MFA as a terminal degree.

If this resignation gains widespread acceptance—as it appears to be doing—there would, in fact, be several notable advantages. For one, tenured writers with guilty consciences would no longer have to pretend that they were training their future replacements. Programs could openly market the degree to people who weren’t quite sure what they wanted to do with their lives and just needed a few years to kick back, hang out, take things easy. (Cynics would say that these are the very people who *are* currently attracted to MFA programs.) This creative-writing-as-vacation approach would be a much easier sell than trying to convince serious students that the MFA is a necessary way station, albeit a very time-consuming and expensive one, on the road to the PhD. It would help counter the charge of bad faith by those who accuse institutions of marketing the MFA as a terminal degree despite their belief that it is not. Finally, it would relieve proponents of the PhD from their convoluted attempts to denigrate the MFA thesis in comparison with the creative dissertation, even when both are nearly identical book-length works of original creative writing.

Certainly, job candidates who hold the PhD in creative writing would prefer that their degree be given preferential treatment by hiring committees. Similarly, English departments who have invested heavily in advertising their options for a creative dissertation have a significant financial stake in the outcome of this debate. Nevertheless, the MFA is not likely to disappear overnight, and when one considers not only the many talented students who still receive MFAs each year but the many experienced teachers with MFAs who have no plans to return to graduate school, it’s worth investigating a few ideas that might help at least partially postpone the demise of this terminal degree.

In *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, Mary Rose O’Reilly writes, “How can I honor both the intuitive and analytical aspects of my mind, [while] silencing neither?” (1998, 3). MFAs generally do a good job of honoring the former; it is the latter they need to focus on. One of the obvious ways MFAs can increase respect for the degree is by becoming more active scholars who publish not just creative work but also articles and books in literature and rhetoric and cultural studies. Similarly, teaching classes other than creative writing forces MFAs to think more critically about their pedagogical assumptions. While this transition

to a new, expanded role may be contentious at larger universities, rare is the faculty member at a small college *in any discipline* who doesn't eventually teach courses for which she has had relatively little graduate school preparation. The institution relies, in large part, on the faculty member's native intelligence and willingness to learn, and neither of these qualities is exclusive to PhDs.

Moreover, since the struggle of MFAs to retain some dignity and power in the early part of the twenty-first century looks very much like a class conflict, unity among degree holders is essential. (The MFA Special Interest Group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication was founded with this goal in mind.) MFAs must respect each other rather than capitulate to the conventional wisdom that the holder of a PhD is in some sense an essentially superior being—an assumption that is particularly galling when it is made by PhDs putatively committed to Marxism, multiculturalism, and other egalitarian ideologies. Stuart Hall is right, “hegemony is maintained when dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range,’” (1977, 77) so when they are involved in hiring decisions that include equally qualified candidates whose only difference is their degree, MFAs must step forward and refused to be marginalized.

Finally, if there is strength in numbers (as compositionists have learned), creative writing MFAs should connect with MFAs in other departments on campus. They should look for common ground with and mutual support from actors, painters, sculptors, and dancers. At the same time that they expand their credentials as scholars, MFAs must also remember their roots as artists. It is, after all, the “F” in MFA that originally convinced administrators that the degree was terminal.