

Features

Motivation, stimulation, self-criticism:

Abbe Edelson

While many writers and artists in the past have experienced uneasy relationships with the world of academia, writers at York University can now major in creative writing.

An estimated total of 330 students are enrolled in creative writing courses at York, a programme which has been growing rapidly since its official beginning in 1976.

"We did turn people away. Although there has not been a lot of publicity, students have been transferring from other universities to enroll in creative writing. (York is the only university in Ontario that offers a major in creative writing, and one of the few in Canada.) My regret was turning away transfer students," said Mathew Corrigan presently acting as coordinator of the programme. "We have to reorganize ourselves to meet the demands."

The original impetus for a programme in creative writing came from the Faculty of Fine Arts. Between 1974 and 1976, Irving Layton, Eli Mandel, and Frank Davey were also working to set up and formalize the present programme.

Although it was originally thought that the programme would be housed through the Fine Arts Faculty, it soon became more feasible to establish the



Frank Davey of the Creative Writing department: Classroom providing stimulating environment for student writers?

programme as an interdisciplinary one.

"Students would then be able to regard the university as an intellectual cafeteria, and take courses from various areas to contribute to their writing,"

Frank Davey explained.

"Creative writing students have very individual needs," Davey said. "Students can combine writing with sculpture, music, math, English lit, etc."

However, because the creative

writing programme is a general-honours programme, it is not possible to do an official combined honours programme with another subject such as English. But because several creative writing courses are

coregistered as English credits, many students find themselves also meeting the requirements of an English degree.

When asked about the status of a degree in creative writing outside the university, Davey remarked that they found the College of Education (U of T) as well as employers "recognized the combination of courses a student takes during their years at university, rather than the degree itself."

One of the major benefits of participating in writing workshops is the opportunity for criticism from fellow writers. While the act of writing itself can be very alienating, the immediate response from an audience each week can be encouraging. "The outside stimulus for some students can provide much motivation for writing," said Davey. He feels that after students have completed their studies, it is reasonable they might suffer somewhat because the programme can provide a very stimulating environment. "This is one of the important things we discuss—why there might be dry periods, and how we can deal with them."

Classes are centered around a workshop, where students' work is open for discussion and criticism. Corrigan described the beginning of this process as

cont'd p. 9

Poet weaves tapestry of rhythm and imagery

Nadine Raciunas

For York student Kathleen McCracken a poem sometimes begins as a line: "There's a rhythm to the line and it keeps repeating itself like a commercial until I write it down."

And then there are the "abstract ideas" she has to really work on—"sit down and fill in the missing material, try to approach its centre."

Now in her second year of the Creative Writing Programme, McCracken has two volumes of poems behind her: 1978's *Reflections*, published by Fiddlehead, and *Into Celebration*, put out by Toronto's Coach House Press earlier this year.

The first poetry that caught her interest was ancient Indian and Chinese. Then, in high school, she was introduced to the works of Canadian, American, British, and Irish poets, her favourites being Yeats and James Joyce. She's also very interested in German poetry.

For the moment, McCracken's heavily involved in Canadian literature: Susan Musgrave, bp nichol, Michael Ondaatje, "and of course, bill bissett." She's putting her energies into reading lots of novels and "trying to understand drama."

At York, she takes "a lot of

English courses along with different subjects, like astronomy. I knew nothing about that subject—that's why it was so interesting." The Creative Writing department's programming also gives student-writers the time to explore other interests until the more intensive third-year workshops begin.

McCracken's own work deals with "the perception of situations", not the evaluation of them. This, she believes, involves reader participation: if a situation is presented as a hologram, an image, then "the reader can enter the poem."

Like many contemporary poets such as Musgrave and Patrick Lane, she uses natural imagery. The form this assumes has undergone many changes since she began writing. In her early works, McCracken drew on the environment that stirred the movement of things within her. This was done with that defense typical of early/mid-teens, action to climb the circular wall of isolation:

this scattered vestige/is like a chess game left unfinished,/wild horse and king/with eyes ablaze, screaming/in revenge. and in the morning light/my screams are stifled/by the thick pungence/of a reality

With the transition between her first and second books, defense has assumed a new form: the author experiences nature with a calmer command of herself and her images. There is a swirling of softness and sharpness, the two qualities oscillating between them and image:

I want to/go down dancing/Isaid and wild horses/came frothing/through my dreams I'd rather/go down dying/you said and their colts/came stillborn/on the spring.

After *Into Celebration* there was a long silence, an important change as she moved from the country to the city. McCracken feels that living in an urban environment has helped her writing. She looks "outside into the environment for language or image" and feels "forced back inside" herself. "The city is complex and hostile," she explains. "It's harder to know than nature. This environment encourages greater self-examination for me." Her new poems seem more thematic and complex as a result of this setting. As McCracken says, "I feel I now have something valid to write about. I have a more positive view of my work."

Two Untitled Poems By Kathleen McCracken

Now you are sleeping

*in the air
around the drifting shell
that is your dream*

*I hover
black wings balancing
the blown orb
of moon—*

*my body
is a bouquet
of water iris
falling
to earth*

*in the fields
of grain
you gather
the scattered mirage,
assemble the indigo pieces
of skin and feather*

*you want to be a magician
but these parts
have a separate magic*

Now you are sleeping

*the city is a song
humming around you*

it is morning

*I go softly
without pronouncing your name*

Because it is summer

*and a crescent
moon
cleaves to the pegged
womb of sky*

I am etherized

*in fields
lie tracing the smooth
white scar*

that lights your thigh

RECORD & MOVIE COLLECTABLES CONVENTION

Sun. Nov. 9th — 12-7 p.m.
HOLIDAY INN — DOWNTOWN
89 CHESTNUT STREET, TORONTO

Rare records, movie posters, buttons and more!
Over 85 Dealers

\$3.00 includes unique movies
For info: 698-8757

posters st. germain

from \$10 — excellent selection of
European & North American
art exhibition posters

from \$200 — a collection of limited
edition Picasso ceramics

1775 Avenue Road
above Lawrence at St. Germain

Mon - Sat. 10-6, Thurs til 9
783-8738

ISLAND HOP

To Trinidad over Christmas/
New Years for three weeks with
Andy (961-6911 days) and Jack
(923-5876 nights) in Jack's
twin-engined, 6-seater, Piper
Aztec aeroplane.