"Living Writers" Show Students How Literary Art Is Made

By Frederick Busch

James Laughlin, publisher of New Directions Books, is a conduit to some of the great literary modernists and himself a fascinating poet. He studied writing with Ezra Pound, chauffeured Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein through Europe, and left there at Pound's direction for the United States to publish the work of Pound's friend, a New Jersey pediatrician named William Carlos Williams -- who became the first author published by New Directions.

Thus, on an afternoon in 1982, J.L. -- or J., as he is also called by his authors and colleagues -- was among the first visitors to help launch a new class I was offering at Colgate University, "Living Writers." Undoing the brass hasps on two battered pigskin book valises, such as one might have seen carried by passengers on the Queen Mary, he removed first editions of the fiction and poetry of William Carlos Williams. He held literary history -- I remember thinking that the volumes virtually glowed -- before a class of undergraduates and discussed with them some of Williams's work.

Later, he sat before them and discussed with them the fiction they had read in an issue of his New Directions Annual, a literary journal published by the press. He was the editor in chief, he told them, and they were his editorial board. They should imagine that the stories had not yet been selected. How, he asked, should they decide whether to publish the story "Alphabet of Revelations," by Walter Abish? He took them through the steps taken by him and his editors. What occurred was not only a discussion of an interesting contemporary author, but an exercise in practical criticism.

The students who wanted to publish the story because they were intrigued by its strange language -- it felt at once quotidian and resonant -- and because they enjoyed the way the story challenged their traditional ideas of form had to defend their choice against their classmates' complaints about its opacity. The students discussed diction and structure as if a life were at stake. In a sense, it was. For the story might not appear, might die, if it didn't reach its audience.

The exercise felt real to the students, I think, and the values that were attacked and defended under the direction of an actual editor, with real powers of yea and nay, had a sense of urgency. I believe that some of those students felt the pulse of serious publishing and understood something of what happens to literary work once it leaves the writer's desk.

That is what I aim for in "Living Writers," which grew out of my experience as acting director of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. While at Iowa, I was asked to lecture on my work in a wonderful class, "In Print-In Person," in which undergraduates studied the writing of authors who happened to be teaching that year in the workshop. I
modified the concept of that class by controlling the list of guest writers, rather than letting whoever happened to be on campus determine the content of what students read and whom they met. During each week of Colgate's course, students meet with a different author, whom I have selected to help them grapple with the mission of the course: to find out how serious writing is achieved by these artists.

Working writers know about the construction of language in ways that their historically or critically oriented brothers and sisters in teaching do not. That truth is the premise of my course. I will never forget Alfred Kazin, in an especially packed classroom, patiently, but unhappily, answering students' questions about his great memoir, *Starting Out in the Thirties*. He suddenly stopped in the middle of his sentence and shook his head. He sought a page in his copy of the book.

"Here!" he cried out, "Where I write, '... even a little boy could feel that it was a love affair to live so near her ...' -- you should be asking me how I created this woman on the page." He went on to talk about what he had sought in his evocation of the memorable Sophie, "whose need burned in her, giving her a sultry and splendid fire." I and my colleagues could talk about her from the outside, but only Alfred Kazin could speak from the inside of his experience -- an attempt to possess, with words, a woman denied him, by time and proprieties, in the flesh.

I first offered "Living Writers" every other year, because of the expense of the course to the college. More recently, though, I have offered it every year, because the provost and dean of our faculty, Jane L. Pinchin, has insisted that the enriched curriculum and students' enhanced learning are worth the costs. Versions of the course have been offered, since its birth here, at Syracuse University, the University of Michigan, Muhlenberg College, and La Salle University.

Once the students and I have discussed a book during the first class session of the week -- this semester, our first book was Reginald McKnight's short-story collection *The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas* -- they go off to the library to create four questions, about how the author works or what the author was driving at in a particular passage, for example. Two questions are based on library research into not only reviews of the authors' work, but also published interviews with the authors, essays they have written, and earlier published versions of their stories. The other two questions are the fruits of the students' thinking about the text at hand.

At the next class session, two days later, the writer of the work appears, and the class proceeds to interview the author, using the questions they've created. It is the students and the guest who speak; I rarely intervene.

When Reginald McKnight visited, students asked him about a published interview in which he had referred to a long hiatus in his writing. He gave them a remarkable sense of the pain involved in writing fiction and having it published. Then one student, finding a concern with consumption (or denial) of food in many of the stories, asked McKnight if
that were a crucial matter. His answer was surprising. He asked his questioner to show
him the lines in the stories, since, he told the class, he rarely reread his own work.

When I grade the students’ questions, I look for ingenuity in the reading and hard work in
the research. I tend to ignore the author’s responses to the questions, since not all students
may have had an opportunity to speak.

After visiting the class, the guest author gives a reading of new work, to which visitors
from the local community and from surrounding campuses and cities are invited. The
occasion is festive, and afterward, when the author has finished signing dozens of copies
of his or her books -- sold on the spot by our university bookstore -- a number of faculty
members in various disciplines dine with the author.

And then another week and a new book roll around. The wheels of the course turn, and
the students are entering in a journal -- which I will grade at the term's end -- their
perceptions of the craft of serious writing. It is not a course about being an onlooker, and
it is not only for English majors. Excellent history majors, biology majors, sociology,
anthropology, economics, and fine-arts majors take the course, and many distinguish
themselves.

Last semester, students met and studied not only Reginald McKnight, but also Franklin
Burroughs, Clark Blaise, Ethan Canin, Alice McDermott, John McGahern, Chang-rae
Lee, Lorrie Moore, Michael Parker, Bharati Mukherjee, and Melanie Rae Thon. I invite
writers I admire, some of them friends. If the writers are new to me -- recommended, or
people to whose work I've been attracted -- I read all of their books before inviting them.
In years past, Colgate students have met such writers as Lee K. Abbott, Richard Bausch,
David Bradley, Andre Dubus, Pam Durban, Paula Fox, Alfred Kazin, Melissa Malouf,
Paule Marshall, James Alan McPherson, Grace Paley, and Reynolds Price. My students
and I are lucky in that there are so many fine writers I haven't yet invited: We'll never run
out of material.

When students can ask authors, in the flesh, provocative questions that often stimulate
fascinating responses, art becomes more for them than just a preserve where professors
and artists conduct squabbles about terminology or bull sessions about the paths of their
careers. The students begin to learn something about the processes through which literary
art is made.

"I noticed that you changed the ending of the story 'Batorsag and Szerelem' when you
included it in the collection The Palace Thief," a student said to Ethan Canin."Can you
tell us why you removed certain physical details that were present in the magazine
version?"

In his response, students heard a writer wrestling aloud with a process that he more
customarily engages on a less conscious, and more private, basis. They came as close to
witnessing how writing decisions are made as readers can get.
Mr. Canin, after considering aloud his revisions, asked the student,"Which ending did you like more?" The student essayed an answer, then stopped."Hold it," he said,"I'm supposed to ask you the questions."

One semester, we met an author who all but wept about how his characters eluded his control."They did what they wanted to!" he grieved before the class, not unmindful of their wide-eyed attention. A week later, the students asked E. Annie Proulx, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, whether her characters ever evaded her control. She stared at the class. She said very coldly and clearly,"My characters exist as instruments of my will. They are there to express what I wish them to."

Her wonderful froideur was a lesson about the control that is a basis of art, all fashionable claims about the frailty of the"author function" notwithstanding. In general, students learn during the semester that writers seek total control but rarely can say that they have it; characters do get away from most writers; and many authors are reluctant to consider their manuscripts concluded, because they suspect that they are not totally in control of their work.

One year, Cynthia Ozick began to talk about her methods of working, but subject matter called to her, and her language became focused on Europe's treatment of the Jews. She concluded by speaking passionately about the Holocaust, after which, trembling before the class, she whispered,"And that is how I dot my i's and cross my t's!" Her lesson about moral content as a context for, and a determinant of, style was as vivid as any of us, students or professor, had ever witnessed.

Such moments would not be as useful for students if they were imported through anecdote alone. They are the stock in which "Living Writers" cooks. And so, like the bonne femme in her kitchen, I keep adding to the stock. I plan the course all year, pester ing friends and invading the tranquility of strangers, asking people in a very isolated profession to join a conversation -- among 60 or more very intelligent young strangers -- about the work they most frequently conduct alone.

I have just sent an invitation off to a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and have just rung off after speaking to the editor of a quarterly, who will ask my students -- as James Laughlin asked my students 15 years ago -- why a certain work of literary art should be printed in his magazine. Yesterday, I telephoned New Mexico to ask a wonderful short-story writer to join us next fall. This morning I wrote to the novelist James Welch in Montana, begging him to make the long journey to upstate New York. The stock simmers.

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