

Letter from America Spring 2014

When I landed what's known as a "tenure-track" job teaching creative writing at Goucher College in 2008, it had been the culmination of long and arduous quest. There were so many fiction writers clamoring for university teaching positions that several hundred people would sometimes apply for an opening.

Writers in the US are drawn to academia for a variety of reasons. Partly, the teaching, while intense, is pleasant – we talk about cool books and ideas with (mostly) enthusiastic people, and we get to wear anachronistic fabrics, including corduroy, linen, seersucker, and possibly even taffeta.

In addition, the job allows a certain flexibility. A writer can, theoretically, carve out a few hours of daily writing time by completing course prep in the evenings or early mornings. In reality, though, for most faculty, this magical writing time is elusive. Mornings, evenings, and weekends find us hunched over student drafts, scribbling copious comments. Somewhere, in some other department, someone is completing course prep with a scan-tron machine. A scan-tron machine! Still, at least writers can look forward to the breaks that take place in the winter and summer, right? Maybe. Hopefully.

But if those breaks get subsumed by class preparation and meetings and student recruitment and by recuperation from the semester, writers with full-time jobs can focus on the fact that they have health insurance – a consideration that writers in countries that have national health care don't have to weigh. When I lived and taught and wrote in England, I met many writers who chose to teach half-time, something that most US writers are not able to do, even if they can afford it – unless they're married to people with health-care coverage. We are nothing if not a romantic people.

In 2008, the year I got my job, 98 tenure-track creative writing positions were advertised nationally. Last year, there were 130. Sure, that may sound like the sweet music of fiscal recovery. But the number of people chasing those jobs also grows each year. In 1975, there were 15 MFA programs and five PhD programs in creative writing. By 2012, the year the world was supposed to end, there were 214 MFA programs and 40 PhD programs. Maybe the Mayans were a little bit right. If each of those graduate programs produces fifteen or so fresh-faced, writerly job seekers each year, then 130 positions starts to look less like growth and more like *The Lord of the Flies*. I have given thanks daily not to be on the express train to Piggy-ville anymore.

I had grabbed the tenure-track brass ring. And now I found myself, not sipping pina coladas on the quad, not hosting a black turtleneck appreciation group, not even existing in space. Rather, I existed in time. I was "on the tenure clock." These were the probationary years during which I would have to prove myself as a dynamo, a phenom, a throwing-star-wielding ninja in the areas of teaching, publication, and university service. My particular department decided to evaluate me chiefly on excellent teaching and on writing and publishing a novel. Up to that point, I had written and published only short stories.

According to the National Education Association (NEA), about 20% of tenure-track faculty don't get tenure. People who "don't get tenure" lose their jobs. It's a polite way of saying that

they're fired. My department colleagues were kind and supportive – they offered advice and editorial feedback and introduced me to people in the profession. Still, a deal was a deal.

I imagined the situation like a cartoon sketch of a time bomb. Maybe I was the unwitting pudgy guy sitting on a chair over the bomb, and maybe the university was the goofy bandit under the table, the one wearing a black and white striped shirt. Wasn't the KABOOM sure to come any moment? Five years is a long time to live with that kind of suspense.

I spent two and a half years writing the novel. At the end of that time, I secured an agent. Then I spent another two and half years receiving forwarded publisher rejections from said agent. I became twitchy about opening my inbox. My agent would preface the rejections with supportive little notes that said, "This editor doesn't usually get things quite so wrong. I can't understand it!" Although I thought the book was good and still do, it's hard for me to say if I would have written that story in that particular way if I hadn't been thinking the whole time about selling it.

Deep doubts and health problems developed. The latter involved digestive issues that I hope I never decide to discuss in a public forum like this one. There was also a bout of mysterious tingling of the extremities. I visited physicians and specialists probably twenty times and even had a short stay in the hospital. Doctors ordered CT scans and blood tests, never finding anything wrong. It was a good thing I had that health insurance.

Finally, in the midst of preparing my 700-page binder of tenure-related documents, I got a contract for the novel from an independent press. My health problems took a dramatic turn for the better the weekend after I submitted the binder (complete with publishing agreement) – despite the fact that submitting the thing was just the beginning of the binder's voyage. It would travel to my department for a vote, to the Promotion & Tenure Committee for a vote, to the provost for approval, to the president for approval, and the college board for a vote. My body didn't care about all those details. It just wanted that damned binder out of the house. Go figure.

Tenure is, I believe, though I don't know for sure, an American institution. A 2008 *Time Magazine* article called "A Brief History of Tenure," reports that in 1887, "nearly 10,000 teachers from across the country met in Chicago for the first-ever conference of the National Educator's Association, now one of the country's most powerful teachers' unions. The topic of "teacher's tenure" led the agenda.New Jersey became the first state to pass tenure legislation when, in 1910, it granted fair-dismissal rights to college professors. During the suffrage movement of the 1920s — when female teachers could be fired for getting married or getting pregnant or (gasp) wearing pants — such rights were extended to elementary and high school teachers as well." (Read more at: <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1859505,00.html#ixzz2sU8ix0AX>)

People tend to think that tenure guarantees a "job for life," but that isn't quite accurate. According to the website for today's NEA, "Tenure is simply a right to due process; it means that a college or university cannot fire a tenured professor without presenting evidence that the professor is incompetent or behaves unprofessionally or that an academic department needs to be closed or the school is in serious financial difficulty."

Over in England, this was, based on my observations, the deal we got anyway. Tenure wasn't a thing. It didn't factor into the university equation. Basically, it seemed that a person there

had “tenure” (based on the above definition) just by virtue of having the qualifications that led to being hired in the first place.

Here in the US, tenure is always under siege, especially from the right wing. A Google search of tenure will produce, on any given day, a raft of editorials about how it should be abolished and how it protects “bad teachers” and fosters laziness.

Given that my own tenure experience resulted in my own tiny version of hell and given that mine was much better than some people’s, one might imagine that I’d be penning a blistering editorial myself about how ill-conceived the institution is. But that’s not where I’ve ended up.

It’s not a perfect system. But I figure, without tenure, we’d all be living like we’re “on the tenure clock” for the rest of our lives. It could mean being terrified to offer a dissenting view in a public forum, or to say no to a request to take on more and more duties that have nothing to do with teaching. People might be afraid to do ground-breaking research – because what if they failed? Might writers feel pressure to produce work that is either more literary or more commercial than what they would create on their own? And then ultimately, having lost touch with their own processes, could they really mentor students?

Thankfully, we have tenured faculty to do all of these things and to speak up when non-tenured faculty might not feel comfortable doing so, though tenured faculty are a dwindling number overall of university communities – the US Department of Education says they accounted for 31% of US faculty in 2005, as compared to 56% in 1975. Even with the burgeoning of Obamacare, we’re probably not going to become Britain anytime soon, with healthcare that’s not attached to our jobs or with jobs we can’t easily lose. Given that, I’ll take tenure. Heck, I’d fight for it. Even if it kills me.

Final approval of my tenure still has to go through a few more channels. “Buy the case of champagne,” the provost told me, “but don’t uncork the bottles yet.”

Kathy Flann