

Letter from America Summer 2014

Once, when I was in Denver for a writing conference, I met a friend for a drink, a friend who worked at a Department of Defense outpost in Colorado. I'd forgotten what a striking figure Stuart was – six feet five inches with broad shoulders, lean and muscled. He wore an expensive suit with a crisp white shirt the likes of which one never saw on a university campus, and he resembled the comic book hero, Thor, except that his hair was short-cropped like a Secret Service Agent's instead of long and perpetually blowing like there was a fan hidden someplace.

As the two of us worked our way through the hotel bar, Stuart parting the crowd in front of me, one of my gay friends grabbed my arm. "Jesus," the friend shout-whispered in my ear. "Where did he come from?"

Right. Exactly.

Stuart and I got settled at a table and ordered our drinks from the waitress, struggling to be heard over the throngs discussing their books and their agents and their angst. He surveyed the scene, the purple velvet décor and the fancy pod-like booths, where groups huddled. Maybe he was surprised by the scale of the event, to find himself under the same roof with so many wordsmiths. It was a strange thing, even for the people in attendance, who spent so much time alone at computers.

"Writers..." he said and then stopped himself, making eye contact like he wanted to apologize for a thought he hadn't spoken.

"What?" I said. "Writers what?"

"Well," he said, and he studied the ceiling for a second before the desire to speak seemed to renew itself. He leaned forward on his elbows. He cupped hand to his mouth. "Well, they're not the best looking bunch – are they?"

While Stuart was certainly a noteworthy specimen in this room, it hadn't occurred to me that the inverse could also be true. Writers seemed more image-conscious now than they'd ever been, presumably because of the need to promote themselves on social media and blogs. I knew more than a few, male and female, who were using prescription strength Retin-A skin cream to fight back crow's feet that hadn't even been noticeable in the first place. On their tiny writer incomes, they purchased designer eyeglass frames and messenger bags and scarves.

Was Stuart right? I studied the conference-goers, trying to imagine I'd never been to one of these things before. Compared to the population at large, maybe there were still, on balance, more long scraggly ponytails, ill-advised Indiana Jones hats, threadbare Hawaiian shirts, bum bags, and unkempt beards. There was certainly a lot of bad posture. "Now that you mention it," I told him. "The gym is empty every morning. I thought maybe people were just partying too much."

He shook his head. “That would never happen at one of our conferences,” he said. “No matter how much tequila.”

In a way, Stuart might as well have been from Thor’s realm of Asgard. In the defense industry, it presumably mattered if a person were fit, if one had a strong handshake, unwavering eye contact, and the ability to put others at ease or maybe to scare the crap out of them, depending on the circumstance. In short, presentation was important. Beyond important.

But writers, historically, have been under no such pressure. They’re people who spend hours alone, who need to be able to shut out everything and everyone so that they can live in the worlds inside their heads. It’s perhaps why they want to work at universities – traditional safe havens for smart, eccentric people who may leave home in socks that don’t match.

At their best, writers can create text that gives readers poignant, thrilling, sexy, devastating experiences that might in some small and permanent way transform those readers’ internal landscapes. But at a book signing or a reading, fans might encounter a George RR Martin type of figure – someone in an ill-fitting leather waistcoat, a Greek fisherman hat, and a beard that threatens to devour his whole face. It’s an interesting disconnect, one that has not, of course, slowed *Game of Thrones*. And I love that.

Writers have been one of the few groups about which people have abided by the axiom, Don’t judge a book by its cover. It’s amazing because we judge everything by the cover – especially books. The fruit industry artificially colors our berries to accommodate our visual palettes. “Attractive” people, researchers say, get hired for jobs at higher rates and thus make more money over their lifetimes. Maybe they then spend it on full-priced furniture – after all, nobody wants a scratched-up armoire, even if perfectly functional. But with writers it has always been different. Everyone can quote “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” No one cares, though, even in an age when they can google his image, that Robert Browning has a wild comb-over and a Colonel Sanders vibe that could evoke the smell of chicken. Or at least, I hope not.

It’s the unusual person who has the introspection and imagination and love of solitude and discipline to be a good writer. It’s rare for that same person also to have the charisma and theatricality and social skills and sock-awareness to be a good public ambassador of his or her work. Readings seem like an especially ill-suited forum for writers.

Even for a professional actor, a reading from a novel or collection of poems would be hard to deliver. The words aren’t designed for performance. They’re designed for private delivery in people’s heads. So it was always a bonus, of sorts, if a writer one admired turned out to be an entertainer. Sherman Alexie comes to mind. So does Kurt Vonnegut. Everyone can probably name a few.

Mainly, though, writers are introverts. And so it’s incredible, isn’t it, that they get up there at those podiums, and they do it? Sure, sometimes they mumble and sometimes they fall into a flat monotone. But they do it. And every now and then, their voices soar through a room or a bookstore, and the words refresh the audience like the oxygen it needs to stay alive – because the words are ultimately what it’s about. The words reveal that person’s beauty and also our own. Can I plant my feet and hold my breath and wish for writers not to become too slick and glamorous?

Maybe all those hats and beards and bags and those shirts with camouflaging foliage give writers the buffers they need to leave their writing rooms. Maybe what I should have pointed out to Stuart is that Thor is the exception amongst super heroes. He doesn't wear a disguise. But most of them do. Consider Clark Kent, Diana Prince, Peter Parker. Their glasses and hats and overcoats allow them to walk among us, to hide the electric white within, the light that might blind us if we saw it too clearly.

Kathy Flann

Assistant Professor, English (Creative Writing)

Goucher College, Baltimore