

Letter from America

Autumn 2006

After five years in the UK, I sold my house, had around fifteen leaving do's, and piled into a hire car with four suitcases and my yellow Labrador – we were off to Heathrow. I had accepted a position as the coordinator of a new low-residency Master of Fine Arts Program back in the US -- Eastern Kentucky University, to be exact.

For anyone who isn't familiar with it, an MFA is a degree that's unique to the US and Canada. Although it isn't exactly the equivalent of a PhD, it is considered a "terminal" degree – which does not mean it will kill you (except perhaps in a starving artist kind of way). Instead, it means that the degree makes a person an expert in his or her artistic field. There are MFA's in visual art, cinematography, theatre, dance, and so forth.

A low-residency MFA is an increasingly popular option at universities across the US. A low-residency program provides students the opportunity to enter an intensive course of study with minimal disruption. During two residencies on campus each year, students spend 7-10 days in workshops, lectures, and seminars with a distinguished faculty of writers – there are different visiting writers each time. The rest of the program takes place via online courses which students can complete within the context of their everyday lives (wherever those lives take place). I suppose it's not so different from the Open University model in the UK. The residencies take on a rather festival-like atmosphere, with tons of reading and events, but also a lot of merry-making. For many students, the residencies may be the only vacations they get in a given year and they want to make the most of it.

The first low-residency programs in the US were launched at small, private institutions, such as Goddard College and Warren Wilson College – beautiful little campuses tucked away in mountainous settings. Perfect writing retreats. These are still the most well-established and prestigious low-residency programs. Because the colleges are private, the tuition is very high – twenty something thousand dollars per year. Now, a handful of public, state institutions have started low-residency MFA's, which will make the experience far more affordable.

When I arrived at Eastern Kentucky University, I really was not sure how much planning had already been done for the new program. As it turned out, things were still at very early stages. Three months into the job, I've had meetings with just about every big wig on campus, have redrafted the catalogue descriptions of the program, tried to establish the tuition fees (without success so far), and have begun work on the website and the brochures. A budget has not yet been attached to the program – and it's hard to plan when you don't know how much you've got to spend! While I admit that within the realm of my own personal finances, ignorance of the facts has not slowed me down -- even I would find that strategy too reckless in this case.

As I write about all of the above, I realize that it might sound very boring and minute. However, I really love it. While I wait for the slow turning of the bureaucratic wheels of the institution to deliver me a budget, I spend my time dreaming about what I want this

program to be. I meet with the other creative writing faculty and say, “Hey, what if we had, not just visiting writers, but also visiting editors and agents?” Or I say, “Hey, what if we started our own literary journal? And what if students could do a lot of the editing, even when they’re not on campus?” It’s like being a kid again. It’s the next best thing to writing itself.

For me, it’s a novelty to have colleagues. In the UK, I was within an English Department of five people, and I was the only Creative Writing specialist. At Eastern Kentucky University, the English Department has around sixty people (the university enrolls 16,000 students, which makes it a mid-sized institution). Although I was initially very excited about taking a position in a large department, I have found that I miss the intimacy of a smaller one. When there are only five, you have to work together -- on all sorts of things. There’s the very real sense that the five of you *are* the English Department. Without cooperation and participation from each of you, the whole operation is sunk. You work together like a tiny marching band. Now, even after three months, there are colleagues I have not yet laid eyes on, let alone spoken to.

Occasionally I come across one of the other new people, who were hired at the same time as I was. We pause in the dark, maze-like hallway of our building, eyes flitting over our shoulders, as if more senior colleagues might catch us whispering here (how would we know since we don’t know what they all look like?).

“How are you doing?” one will say, standing close.

“Oh my gosh,” the other will say.

Then we both smile – it is a smile of recognition, a smile that says *What is this place?* This reaction is not a reflection on the individuals in the department, who are all very nice, but rather on the scope of what we don’t yet understand – policies, procedures, timescales, politics, relationships. The department sometimes feels like a large grumpy animal that is in no way the sum of its parts.

Creative Writing, however, is a very small subset of the department. There are five of us, and we meet every Monday afternoon to talk about the new program. Well, actually, I talk about the new program, presenting the latest developments and asking for feedback. This is one of the things that I like best about the new job – having colleagues with similar backgrounds to my own. We can finish each other’s sentences the way old married couples do.

“What if we--”

“Offer creative non-fiction?”

“Exactly.”

I suppose the other thing I like about these colleagues is that they talk to me as if I'm a writer, which makes me feel more like a writer, which in turn makes me feel more excited about going home and turning on the computer. In the US, arts councils don't exist. Neither does healthcare for part-time workers. Therefore, it is the norm that creative writers seek full-time positions in universities, unlike in the UK where writers might work half-time in a university and also pick up some freelance work. In the UK, I often felt like the really serious writers wouldn't have chosen to work as I did – full-time. I felt as though others saw me as a teacher or a course leader rather than as a writer, and I think sometimes I started to feel like it was true, like the “professional” aspects of me had subsumed the creative ones (as in that symbol of the dragon eating its own tail).

Things had become quite difficult at my institution in the UK before I left (which is *why* I left). There were terrible problems with recruitment to traditional, non-vocational BA (Hons) subjects, and there were frequent threats of course closure. People quit and were never replaced, thus increasing the workload for all of us who remained. I'm never sure if my experience was typical or not.

It's also difficult to compare my experiences in the UK and the US because the types of institutions are so completely different. I never worked within a large department in the UK. Sometimes I wonder if departments this size even exist there? The reason this department is so big is that there are general education requirements in US universities. That is, all students must take a certain amount of English, a certain amount of maths, a certain amount of science, etc. Much of the mission of the English Department is to fulfill these general education requirements. In addition to the sixty full-time faculty, there are some ninety-five temporary lecturers – all of this to ensure that 16,000 Kentuckians read a little Joyce and Hemingway. Not a bad aim. But what a production...

At any rate, there are many things I miss about the UK, such as its size. In the US, I will never have the same opportunities to meet colleagues from other universities because they are much too far away (even the ones within Kentucky). Also, I won't have much chance of getting involved in AWP (which is like NAWA) because the organization has something like 20,000 members and the headquarters are a nine-hour drive from here. I miss the practice of second marking. Even though it creates more work, I always found it fun to share with colleagues the work my students had done and to chat about it. And these are just a few examples.

So here you have an introduction to my “Letter from America” series. You know something about where I am and how I came to be here. In future issues, look for letters about teaching practices and also about life in Kentucky (like, for example, the fact that men all have mustaches.... Why? Do they serve as beacons when all of that Kentucky fog rolls in from the mountains?) Stay tuned...

Kathy Flann

