

Letter from America Spring 2007

Recently, I had accepted a paper proposal for a conference. The presentation is to be entitled, “This Won’t Hurt.... Much OR How to Launch a Creative Writing Program in 10 Easy Steps.” It is, of course, obvious that I was being tongue in cheek. It is, of course, plain that launching a creative writing program is anything but easy or painless. Ha ha, how delighted I was with myself.

Now, though, I feel like some kind of irony karma has come back to bite me in the you-know-what. When I submitted the proposal, I had not yet begun to experience the full agony of launching a low-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. Who knows? Maybe I *still* haven’t experienced all of the octaves of despair. That’s a scary thought. But see? That’s what happens when you’re flippant.

In my last “Letter from America” (Issue Number 40, Winter 2006), I explained what a low-residency MFA program is. I also explained some of the structural differences between HE in the US and the UK. Ah, I told you, what a lovely time I’m having dreaming up this program! It’s just ideas, ideas, ideas.

Well, the autumn was very much that way. I spent those months investigating which work had already been done on the program, and moving forward with those aspects that still needed to be addressed. Everything was going swimmingly. I had been granted funding for leaflets. The tech folks were working on the website. My graduate assistant and I had researched the costs of catering, housing, and so forth. We had studied the fees at other programs across the country. Our little committee of Creative Writing faculty had had spirited discussions about ways to make our program stand out in the crowd.

However, the whole operation ground to a screeching halt. Why? Well, it’s a word I do not like to say in the polite company of civilized artists like ourselves. It is a word that strikes fear into the hearts of writers, regardless of nation or creed. If you have a nervous disposition or constitutional frailty, I really must urge you to look away now. The word – and that word is FUNDING – can undo even the heartiest among us. I can tell you this: I, for one, feel undone.

When I was hired, my mandate was to launch the program in the summer of 2007. Everything was ready. All the program needed was someone to take the reins – recruit students, enlist visiting writers, take care of the logistics involved in hosting a first residency. It is my firm belief that no one misled me intentionally. Due to retirements and resignations, there was simply a communal lack of knowledge about where things actually stood.

The detective work I undertook throughout the autumn finally led me to one hulking scaly monster of a realization: the program had (thus far) been granted no operating budget. One can expect a low residency program at a place like ours to cost in the neighborhood of \$100,000 per year. After a few years of existence, the program would

become self-sustaining and even profitable. However, at the beginning, it needs an infusion of funds in order to get off the ground.

I spent several months before Christmas meeting with people from throughout the university and filling out mountains of forms. However, I still have had no word about if and/or when the funds will be forthcoming. Having done everything I know to do, I have spent the last two months in a holding pattern. So here I sit in eastern Kentucky. Doing a lot of proverbial thumb twiddling. I don't know if it's because I'm at a large institution (16,000 students) or if it's because I'm in the South, but Things..... Move.....Slow.

I've moved over 4000 miles, given up friends, and sold a house to become an "MFA Coordinator" for an MFA that may or may not exist by 2008. Heck, let's be honest, I sometimes fear it may *never* exist. When I walk with my dog through the bizarre little town where I now live – which is comprised almost solely of liquor stores, Baptist churches, and a lap-dancing club -- I do sometimes feel the firm hand of regret on the back of my neck.

So come to the Great Writing conference in Wales this June! If nothing else, it will be fascinating to see how I am able to make all of the above seem *hilarious*. You know. In a wry, wink wink kind of way.

Kathy Flann