

Letter from America Autumn 2007

Having lived, written, and taught in Britain for five years, I read [insert name]'s article "Over Here: Being an American Writer and Educator in the UK" with special interest. Many of her experiences echo my own. I think perhaps my own experience might have been even more fragmented than hers because I received a BA, an MA, and an MFA within the American system, and then moved to Britain to teach Creative Writing. I think the fact that I had never been a student within British academia, as [insert name] was, probably caused me to be more perplexed by the cultural differences. I was teaching and marking within a system in which I myself had never been taught or assessed.

Even more than the focus on aims and outcomes, I was taken aback by the insecurity and suspicion that surrounded the teaching of Creative Writing within academia. The belief seemed to be that one either did or did not have writing talent – the classroom could have no bearing on this one indisputable fact. When I was out and about, and someone asked me what I did for a living, I would hear, "Creative Writing? Can that be taught?"

I always laughed and said, "I sure hope so. Or else I'll be out of a job!" It was funny. I'd been teaching in the US for many years before I'd moved to Britain, and I'd never been asked that question. Indeed, now that I am back in the US, I don't hear it anymore. The difference fascinates me, and I do reflect often on why it exists.

I suppose what I found even more curious was that these insecurities seemed especially rife within the universities themselves. My colleagues felt the need to justify the subject's legitimacy to the management on a regular basis. Perhaps sometimes the justification was necessary – many managers didn't understand what the subject was. But I often felt that if we all approached managers and HEFCE and everyone else as if *we* had no doubts, we would have been in a stronger position. I had always chalked this up to the newness of the subject. In the US, where the subject has been established for longer, I still encounter managers who don't understand what it is that we do, or how our methods and "research" differ from traditional academic subjects. However, because the subject has been around for a long time and people know *of* it, I feel less like I am in a position to justify the existence of my subject. I may have to make a case for the existence and viability of my particular course, but not the subject itself.

I suppose the reason that the "talent" idea makes me so uncomfortable is that talent isn't like hair color – it's not something that everyone can see. "Look! He's got talent!" And perhaps if we secretly believe that writing *can't* be taught, that all we can do is rely on talent and explain to students the importance of perseverance, then we *would* feel insecure about our discipline. However, my experience in Britain did not lead me to believe that my colleagues actually felt this way. In Britain, as in the US, I had colleagues who understood that talent is a red herring. All of us knew that through the careful teaching of craft via exercises, reading, workshops, and so forth, we could reach students who had seemed unreachable. Conversely, we knew that some students who at first had seemed full of innovative ideas might be too immature or too lacking in critical skills to

bring those ideas to fruition. Plus, much of teaching is timing. Am I saying the right thing to the right person at the right time? There's no way for me to know this in advance, so I have to treat all of my students as if they have "talent." I never felt as though my British colleagues felt differently about this issue than I did. So, in my mind, the insecurity and suspicion that surrounded the subject really derived from the lack of an established position within academia and from being involved in a subject that conducted its business in unorthodox ways.

Now that I'm back in the US, I'm encountering a new version of the insecurity and suspicion. My position at Eastern Kentucky University is that of "MFA Coordinator." The program I am charged with launching is actually a "low-residency" MFA, which is a relatively new model within the US. It's very like the Open University system in Britain. Students do much of the course via distance learning. But they meet in person for ten days twice a year in order to attend readings, workshops, and lectures. There are many variations on the model within different universities, but they all combine distance learning with short intense meeting periods.

At the moment, AWP (which is like NAWA) is drafting benchmarks for low-residency programs. These benchmarks have never existed before, and it's proving to be quite controversial. Many of the directors feel as though AWP is trying to squeeze low-residency programs into a box shaped like the traditional MFA programs, or at least into a box that makes all of the programs very similar. When AWP says in its official documents elsewhere that Creative Writing in the US is suffering from "cash cow syndrome," many of the low-residency directors feel as though they are the personal targets of the criticism. Within the low-residency directors' email group, I often sense fear, paranoia, and anger. Given the experience I recently had living in Britain, though, I feel fairly sanguine about it. Perhaps change is always viewed with suspicion. Perhaps this period, during which the establishment and the upstarts circle one another and give the stink-eye, is actually just a necessary part of growth and acceptance. Perhaps the best strategy is to be confident in what we know we do well. *We're here, we know what we're doing, and you'll get used to us in time.*

Kathy Flann