

Letter from America Spring 2008

Because I'm from the US and went to graduate school there, the AWP conference has been a prominent feature on the yearly calendar for a long time. In fact, I first met Paul Munden, the director of NAWE, at the AWP conference in Palm Springs, California in 2001, about six months before I moved to England. After I got to England, I grew to understand that the US creative writing "scene" was relatively unknown to our British counterparts. People didn't understand that my MFA was a different degree from an MA, for example. Most people had also never heard of AWP or its annual conference. I kept telling creative writing colleagues, "You've got to go to AWP! You just can't understand the scale of it until you go." So I am delighted that so many British colleagues attended the conference in New York this year, and I enjoyed reading their accounts of the experience. I'm sure you will, too.

I have long believed that there is a lot of potential in transatlantic collaborations, precisely because the creative writing cultures in each country are quite different. In the UK, writers don't tend to work full-time at universities in the same way that writers in the US do. Many writers in the UK work part-time, and I think this is because the UK has national health. In the US, part-time workers do not automatically qualify for healthcare. Based on my own experience of working in both countries, working full-time in British institutions is a little more grueling than working full-time in US institutions. The hours were longer and the summer breaks were shorter. Perhaps the idea exists that full-time UK lecturers are not as advanced in their writing careers as part-time lecturers – they are the workhorses. Many UK writers take advantage of arts council grants and other public funding, sources of money that don't exist in the same abundance in the US. The "Enabling e-Learning" project at York St. John's that Ben Moore and Simon Sweeney discuss, for example, would be very unlikely to be funded externally (by NAWE in this case) were it to take place in the US. Perhaps partly as a result of this lack of external funding and partly because we're all working full-time, we in the US tend to do fewer of these interdisciplinary, adventurous types of projects. Anne Caldwell discovered the exception, perhaps, with the US "Writers in Schools" programmes she discusses in her reflection.

Regardless, universities are where US writers live. In "An Innocent at AWP," Hilary Jenkins writes a wonderful account of coming to the conference for the first time. One small part of it caught my attention. In the piece, it says that US universities receive an average of 25 applicants for each creative writing position advertised. This figure seems quite low to me. At Eastern Kentucky University, we had 90 applicants for one teaching position, and over 100 for another. I hear similar tales from colleagues all over the country. I'm sure Hilary reported exactly what was said, but it seems worth pointing out that the competition for US university creative writing jobs is even more fierce than that figure might indicate.

And another difference is that US creative writing in universities has been around for a really long time (75 years or so); it has always been and largely continues to be housed within English Departments. On the other hand, in the UK, there is a tendency for creative writing to exist independently of English literature departments – not exclusively, of course, but far, far more often than in the US. At the Director's meeting at AWP, David Fenza gave a lot of data about recent national trends in English Departments and among English majors. Afterward, I heard

some British colleagues grumbling about David Fenza's assumption that creative writing is housed within English Departments. It was at that moment that my own "bi-cultural" awareness kicked in. David Fenza's assumption wouldn't be offensive in the least to US writers because what he said was a reflection of the reality. In fact, most US writers that I know feel strongly that good readers make good writers – and thus creative writing majors should be English majors in some form or fashion. One theory I have about the difference in perspective on this issue is that the British educational system (at least at HE level) favors the separation of subjects and the intensive study of one discipline. In the US, students study a "core curriculum" throughout four years at university. It includes all subjects – maths, science, sociology, you name it. They do have a major, of course, but they only focus on it for about half the time they are at the institution (possibly less than half). So I think Americans are, in general, happier with the idea of studying multiple things.

The publishing markets in the US are a little different, too. There are a lot more literary magazines. Perhaps this is simply a reflection of the size of the country, though. I'm not sure. Whatever the reason, the AWP bookfair reaps the benefits. It is huge beyond all description. This year, it was on three floors. I found myself having to move against the wall so that I could ponder the map. Having been to AWP for many years, I know that T-shirts are always on offer at the bookfair – and everyone tries to outdo each other with the weirdness or boldness of their T-shirts. This year, Eastern Kentucky University was a major sponsor of the conference. As one of the perks of sponsorship, we were given a bookfair table where we could exhibit information about our new low-residency MFA program. Because I'm a veteran conference attendee and I know how huge the bookfair is, I thought, *We've got to slow people down so that they stand at our table for a moment and notice the program.* Toward that end, we came up with our green "Get Lucky in Kentucky" T-shirts. It did work. A lot of people stopped to talk to us because of the T-shirts. So, I laughed when I read Hilary's reflection, and the mention of seeing them. You really couldn't miss them!

This year's AWP was a strange one for me because of the sponsorship. Normally, I fly in, I meet my friends, I go to some panels, see some sights, linger in the bookfair for hours. It's almost a vacation. This year, however, I traveled for 14 hours overnight on a charter bus with 30 students and several faculty. We had the military operation of setting up the bookfair, with our heavy boxes of leaflets, our boxes of T-shirts, and the mannequins on which to display the T-shirts. We had to organize our students into two hour shifts at the table, and also generally look after them, as many had never been to a city larger than Cincinnati. It was an effort just to check them all into the Sheraton, and to check them out again at the end. As the point of contact for ECU, I was invited to participate in several exclusive dinners with the featured readers at the conference. This was also the first year I have ever given a presentation at the conference, and the first year I've held a reception there. So all of this is to say, that, even though I enjoyed myself immensely, I was incredibly STRESSED and busy. I hardly got to see any sessions. Even worse, I hardly got to spend any time with my friends from England.

Well, at least I get to read Maggie Butt's, David Belbin's, and Georgina Locke's contributions here. Through their wonderful accounts, I am able to envision some of what I missed. I love how disparate the topics of the sessions are, as this is a reflection of the diversity of the conference itself. Maggie's sensitive response to a panel about the nuances of notebook keeping seems like a

perfect counterbalance to Georgina's discussion of a panel about the Virginia Tech tragedy. I doubly wished I'd been to that one because it made me think about articles that Lucy Collins and I have written for this issue.

A person could reincarnate numerous times as a conference attendee and have a completely different experience each time. I hope that reading these reflections will embolden more British writers to attend the conference next year in Chicago!

Kathy Flann