

Letter from America Spring 2009

This year's Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference was in balmy downtown Chicago. When I signed on to participate in a panel entitled "Qualifying for University Employment in Creative Writing," I felt some trepidation. What could I possibly say that people hadn't heard before? Was there anything to say besides publish, publish, publish?

We were a panel of five -- three Britons and two Americans. As we discussed our collective strategy via email and, later, in person at the conference, I became aware that my own experience teaching on both sides of the Atlantic helped me understand some of the gaps between the two systems but didn't help me explain those gaps. We would be speaking to an American audience, most of whom would want advice about seeking employment within the US. Could we offer the advice they wanted? Sometimes, I would say to my British colleague, "Oh, they won't understand that." Or in response to a term like "exam boards," I would say, "We don't have that." But my comprehension of both systems was somehow making me tongue tied, unable to explain what we did have. For example, my colleague planned to discuss the challenges that part-time faculty both face and pose within creative writing departments. It wasn't until I was looking at the typed text of her presentation the day before the panel that I could explain why some of her comments wouldn't translate. The majority of part-time and temporary faculty in the US who have a creative writing background don't actually teach creative writing. Most of them teach composition, which is a tough slog because the students have to take it and the class sizes are large and the pay is low. I could not, for the life of me, understand why I hadn't been able to articulate this to my colleague earlier. When I am in the company of both American and British colleagues, I'm so aware of all the ways they don't understand each other. The weird thing is that they often aren't. There are many terms we share and many assumptions behind what the terms mean. For example, the term "B.A." in the US represents four years of full-time classes, less than half of which would be in the student's major. There are scores of other things like this. And so I watch the conversations, knowing that the two parties aren't communicating with each other in the ways that they think they are.

Yet, on the day of the presentation, we did, I believe, find the common ground we sought. Most of the audience were post-graduate students, who would soon be seeking full-time teaching jobs. In the US, this is a more common track for post-graduates than it is the UK, perhaps because most of them have had teaching assistantships during their years of study. One of my colleagues on the panel did an analysis of recent job advertisements in the UK. Though there were some terms and concepts in the ads that weren't applicable to the US system, the overall idea was extremely relevant. Increasingly, employers want candidates who can do and be all things to all people. The audience was laughing at the absurdity of some of the job criteria. In the US, we've seen the same trend: "We seek a poet who has a secondary specialty in playwriting. Must be able to teach Asian and Afro-Caribbean literature. The ability to oversee the publication of a literary journal and the implementation of a program in English as a Second Language is desirable." Who *are* these job candidates?

We gave the audience the best, most specific advice we could. I appreciated an anecdote one colleague told about a job candidate who, when asked about his weaknesses, gave example after

example of the way that he struggles to maintain authority in the classroom. Everyone laughed, but then later, someone raised her hand and said, "What *should* we say if we're asked that question?" My colleague explained that it doesn't matter what the weakness is, so long as you explain how you've worked to remedy the problem and the ways you've improved. The audience scribbled notes furiously. I could feel the energy, the eagerness, the desire in the room. At the end, there was a rush of people toward those of us at the front, each of those audience members burning to ask more, discover more.

The job market is tough under ordinary circumstances. Last year, David Fenza, the director of AWP, said during the directors' meeting that twenty percent of the people (in the US) who wanted full-time permanent jobs teaching creative writing actually had them. This year, these numbers would obviously look worse. My own institution has implemented a hiring freeze, and I have heard about hiring freezes at many other institutions, as well. After a quick look at the AWP Job List, my impression is of fewer permanent, full-time jobs on offer than there might have been at this time last year. Even if one can make a case that he or she is an Asian, Afro-Caribbean, bi-lingual, play-composing poet, it may no longer be enough. And sadly, this phenomenon requires no cross-pond translation.

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