

Letter from America Spring 2011

The annual Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference was held Feb 2 – 5 in Washington, DC. Several from the British contingent have provided *Writing in Education* with their reflections on the experience. It occurs to me that each of them, even if just peripherally, refers to the emotions that the event can elicit. Graeme's surfing analogy speaks to an adrenaline rush, an almost physical experience. Steve acknowledges the melancholy that stays with him after an affecting reading. Helena mentions the pleasure (maybe almost relief?) of communing with others. And Linda says: "I have come away feeling reignited as a writer."

I've been going to the AWP conferences for a long time. In ten years or so, attendance has grown from roughly 1000 people to 8000 people. Or should I say from 1000 writers to 8000 writers. Eight thousand is larger than the entire populations of some towns where I've lived. In normal life, it would seem exceptional to be under one roof with, say, five writers. But at AWP, one spots Amy Hempel buying coffee and the Bausch twins at the bar. And those are only a few of the folks I can recognize by their appearances. I am all-too-aware that every person in the dozens of crowded bars and restaurants is a writer, whether I know the faces or not.

Often, in the days leading up to the conference, I experience existential dread. Where am I as a writer? How will I cope with the inevitable question: *What have you published?* Which really means: *Have I heard of you?* Is all of this going to make me feel as though I am *not* where I wish I were with my work?

When I enter the book fair – the size of several football pitches – it is a veritable city. Hundreds of people mill amongst tables sponsored by various literary magazines, presses, universities, and literary organizations. The fluorescent lights, the colors, the people zipping past or stopping short in front of me... this is where I can see in person many of the editors who have rejected my work!

The pubescent angst evaporates, though, when I enter the 45th Anniversary Reading for UNC-Greensboro, my alma mater, where I did my MFA. There I find former classmates and former tutors. We are old friends. Simple. Easy. The tutors read from their recent work, and I exist only in that moment, swept up in the stories – I realize how lucky I was to have been taught by such talented writers. It's nice to remember how I got into this racket – via the love of fiction, a love that many of these people helped me nurture further, through their own beautiful work and by helping me learn to craft stories myself.

For the next several days, I have experiences like this, running into people I knew from graduate school or past jobs – we have born witness to one another's passions and drives and struggles during earlier times. Though our paths have diverged in a literal way, we are on the same journey. We still are. There's something joyous about spending time with people who understand – in ways that family and other friends do not – just what this journey entails.

And this is why, I suppose, I always feel a bit deflated when I come back home to my normal life and my teaching. I do like teaching. It's the best way I know to make a living while still writing. Lord knows you can't make a living writing fiction. But going to the conference reminds me all over again that I wish I could.

Kathy Flann