

Letter from America Autumn 2011

In September, the American magazine *Poets & Writers* released its annual list of MFA program rankings. This particular list is even more controversial than the college rankings put out by *US News & World Report*, which rely on statistical data and surveys of academics. The *P&W* list is compiled by one man, a poet/blogger named Seth Abramson, who has made a name for himself as the authority on MFA programs. He is a moderator at the Creative Writing MFA blog, a hub for prospective applicants, where he repeatedly posts the question “Where are you planning to apply?” The rankings this year were derived from the responses of 640 prospective applicants.

In their *Frequently Asked Questions* about the rankings, *Poets & Writers* asserts that “Applicants have a vested interest in researching and comparing as many programs as possible and have no special interest in favoring one program over another, aside from their own preferences. . . . MFA students and faculty at particular programs – while experts on where they attend and teach – are less likely to have compared their programs with others as recently as applicants have.”

Soon after the release of this year’s rankings, almost 200 creative writing professors (“lecturers” in British parlance), many of them from institutions ranked favorably on the list, signed an open letter to *Poets & Writers*, criticizing the methodology. “To put it plainly,” the letter says in part, “the *Poets & Writers* rankings are bad: they are methodologically specious in the extreme and quite misleading. A biased opinion poll – based on a tiny, self-selecting survey of potential program applicants – provides poor information. *Poets & Writers* itself includes on its website a disclaimer suggesting the limitations of these rankings, recommending that potential applicants look beyond them. Regrettably, the information appears on a separate page. What’s worse, if a program decides against encouraging a bad process by choosing not to provide information, *P&W*’s process insists on including that program as though the information was negative, a procedure we think is unethical, as well as statistically misleading. The *P&W* rankings, in their language and approach, labor to create the impression that the application process between applicants and programs is adversarial. It is not, as any proper, sensible survey of MFA students and alumni would indicate.”

Perhaps it isn’t surprising that this response from a small army of creative writing faculty has ignited the blogosphere. *The New Yorker* site ran a piece entitled “Should MFA Programs Be Ranked?” The article quotes Leslie Epstein, director of the writing program at Boston University. “It’s analogous to asking people who are standing outside a restaurant studying the menu how they liked the food. Why wouldn’t you ask people who’ve actually eaten there for an informed opinion?” The article goes on to assert that writing programs aren’t really rankable. “What if your favorite writer/teacher teaches at a program at the bottom of the list? What qualifies as a successful graduate: a creative writing teacher, a best-selling novelist, or someone who has honed his or her writing in an extraordinary way but fails to work professionally?”

The *Best American Poetry* blog ran a piece entitled “Shame on you, *Poets & Writers Magazine*.” It chastised the magazine from yet another point of view. “*P&W* is wrong to assert that a scientific ranking of MFA programs is not possible. A ranking is possible, though to construct it properly would require time, money, and commitment, resources that might be better spent

elsewhere. The underlying data, if collected by a reputable research firm, under the auspices of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs and with the cooperation of its members, could establish a ranking that would give MFA/PhD applicants valuable information to guide their decisions about graduate programs.... The MFA programs should *immediately* pull their advertisements from *P&W*. Why continue to support a publication that is so lacking in journalistic integrity?"

Samuel Amadon, a poet, posted "Letter to an MFA Applicant" on *Coldfront*, an online poetry magazine. "You're not getting an MFA to get funded by an MFA program, nor to have a good teaching load, nor to move somewhere with an ideal cost of living. You're getting an MFA to have your writing taken seriously by serious writers who you respect. There's no way of knowing ahead of time if someone is going to be a great teacher and especially not if they're going to be a great teacher for you. But I swear that anyone who tries to tell you that teachers are not the most important part of an MFA program has been spending too much time on the internet. Don't buy it. Put the rankings down."

As someone who doesn't teach in an MFA program, I have borne witness to the *P&W* rankings frenzy with a certain detachment. However, I will say that it is hard for me to imagine my own creative writing undergraduates as the final arbiters of MFA program quality. They understand little about why they're drawn to one program over another. Here in the US, sometimes longevity equates with desirability. The Iowa program is a venerable one, to be sure, but does that mean it's the best fit for every student? When I suggest to them that they ought to read the books of the professors who teach in the programs they're considering, their eyes widen.

"Well," I say, "don't you want to be taught by someone whose work you admire?"

"Oh," they say. "I never thought of that."

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