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"Take a Seat" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://www.cmichelleolson.com/Home.html>

About this image: *"Feeling the solitude of a quiet day, it was apparent the new season of autumn had arrived with leaves coloring the ground with warm orange and golden brown. Mother Earth was dressed to impress. My feelings were ones of reluctance toward accepting*

*change in my life, but with some reflection, I realized the best thing anyone can do is to accept new transformations for a better future." —CMO*

## *Interview with Thomas C. Foster*

*Imagine if you will, an epic cathedral with stone walls, marble floors, stained-glass windows and vaulted ceilings. This cathedral is actually a library for the worship of literature and it spans so far and wide that one might walk a straight line for a year and not meet its end. It is compromised of every story and verse you've ever read or ever will read, as well as those you'll never consciously know that have something within them that would resonate with you. These texts come from around the world and go back to the beginning of transcribed storytelling. This is your domain, its architecture a reflection of your mind's connection to and internalization of these words. Your library will share universal symbols and archetypes with those of others, but no two will be exactly alike in their interpretations.*

*There may be staircases that move at will and scenes of stories in the stained-glass windows that act themselves out, continually changing the light coming through them. Although characters, both heroes and villains, will roam these halls at your behest to be asked pressing questions, the type of character you will see most nudging its way out from walls and floors is place. You may have to go some of the way by raft down a river, take in a view from a Capulet's balcony, aim your direction by the flash of a green light off some distant dock and step through a wardrobe to a snowy wood. Caution is prudent in towers with spinning wheels, ethereal gardens with fruit trees and catacombs where the rare books are said to be kept along with casks of Amontillado... There may be moorland sprung up from the marble, valleys of wheat and ash. Signs of firms such as that of Scrooge and Marley can jut out from amongst the shelves. Roads will diverge with one to be chosen. Journey well and consult your inner compass...*

*We are given the keys to the kingdom by a master of inference, a consummate guide in the world of literature who seeks to impart the wisdom he's gained from his forays into the heart of the written word, and awaken within us our gifts for navigation so we may forge our own paths. Author Thomas C. Foster encourages exploration in reading that inspires*

*the building of brave new worlds in readers' minds, accessible and personalized with the infusion of their beliefs and experiences.*

*We discuss drinking from a pool of rich literary heritage to extract deep meanings, identify patterns and ask the pertinent questions; awareness of a writer's dual identity as reader and creator; the creative collaboration between writers and their audiences; the role of a reader—their responsibilities to both the text and their experience of it; getting the most out of technological advances, trends and opportunities while acknowledging the endurance of literary tradition; life journeys; active engagement with one's craft and the illusive muse; public and private writing; experience and observation; perpetual learning; and future projects.*

Thomas C. Foster is the NYT best-selling author of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, *Twenty-five Books That Shaped America*, *How to Read Novels Like a Professor*, *Form and Society in Modern Literature*, *Seamus Heaney*, and *Understanding John Fowles*. Foster taught as a member of the University of Michigan-Flint faculty for over twenty-five years, recently retiring with the designation of professor emeritus of English. He is a leading scholar of twentieth-century English, Irish, and American literature; contemporary Irish poetry; modernism and postmodernism; literary analysis for general readers; and critical theory. He received his BA from Dartmouth College and both his MA and PhD from Michigan State University.

Interview with Thomas C. Foster by Nicole M. Bouchard for *The Write Place at the Write Time*

1) In the preface to *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, you acknowledge the discovery of unexpected audiences with whom your book resonated. Having read this tome of literary exploration as well as your other works, I'd venture to say that there is another audience for them, as yet unnamed—writers. They see engaging demonstrations and illustrations of a multitude of rules and tools utilized by the greats, so that they may make with them or break with them. Although the books are primarily the readers' advocates, there is an inspired richness in the discussion of craft, iconic works, influences and the collaborative nature of the reader-writer relationship (conveying the interactive agreements, subjective interpretations, the visceral, instinctive feelings of the active reader) that writers benefit from internalizing. What are your thoughts on the responsiveness of this demographic—does this come as a surprise or seem a natural predilection for word lovers?

*I think that when we discussed the book initially and I put together the potential audiences, writers and creative writing classes were on there somewhere, around third or fourth but definitely after adult general readers (number one) and high school English classes (two). And in truth, I do hear from writers occasionally who have found it helpful. And down in Alabama there is a radio interview host who insists that both Literature and the follow-up, How to Read Novels Like a Professor, would be really good books for creative writers. So he proved prophetic, to some degree. I can't claim any originality for this insight, but writers are readers first. You really need to know what others have done, how they've done it, what sorts of patterns have developed over a few millennia of storytelling and poetry recitation.*

*One of the great things the Internet age has given us is instant access to the Paris Review interviews, which I have always found very illuminating. Plus, there are interviews all over the place with all sorts of writers, and what we find are these really interesting family trees. Robert Frost, for instance, has probably had a more profound effect in England and Ireland—and even Russia—than in his homeland. Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, and Joseph Brodsky all speak eloquently about what they learned from Frost, whereas in his homeland he may have been too much of a presence in that same generation for young poets to bear that yoke. But now I'm sure there are younger American poets who have learned from Heaney and Hughes.*

*What writers have to do pretty early-on is accomplish those things that I advocate readers learn to do: understand the connections among works, notice meaningful patterns, ask questions (that thing we call “interrogating the work” these days) that lead to deeper understanding, really take ownership of the literary works we read. If my books can help expedite that process for aspiring writers, so much the better. That's really what literature classes are about: short-circuiting the laborious process of becoming better readers. I have always maintained that my goal as a teacher and as a writer is to make myself obsolete. That is, if a student goes through a few classes*

***with me (and by extension, through our English major), at the end of that journey, she shouldn't need me (or us) any longer. In truth, quite a few of them didn't need me well before that, which is okay, as long as I didn't bore them. Same thing with the books: I hope that they act as springboards, places from which readers can launch themselves beyond where I take them.***

2) In an autumn/winter 2014 interview with author Ann Packer, we discussed her 2004 *Washington Post* essay "Out in the World" where she wrote of how the readers taught her a lesson in "ownership" by how subjectively they viewed the ending of her first novel according to their own lives and views—"as useful a thing to remember as any I know." She elaborated that as a reader, she prefers "fiction that leaves doors open and strings untied: fiction that is open to interpretation and therefore requires a reader for meaning to be made. Now that I think about it, this very much parallels my taste in people, or at least my taste in conversations: I don't enjoy listening to someone hold forth, I like an exchange of ideas. With my books, I like to think of each reader having a unique experience—and from there I can almost believe that the book itself differs according to who is reading it."

Writers are often instructed to write for themselves and to not think of the readers so as to alleviate the pressure of external expectation. Readers strive to figure out what the writer meant which can be both rewarding and disorienting. Yet if the writer strikes a balance and, in process, writes for themselves albeit with room for interpretation and thinks not *of* but *as* a reader as well as a writer, and the reader then endeavors to extricate meaning from the text, its inspirations and infuse their own experiences, do you feel this mutual awareness deepens the reader's emotional investment and the final product of the story itself? Does this equal relationship work better now in a contemporary forum than say in the Victorian era where readers wanted less interpretive wiggle room and more definitive, tied ends for their invested time?

***That injunction, which I have indeed heard, has always seemed misguided, although I think that in actuality it is merely misstated. Let's take the notion of writing for oneself. At the extreme end, I was briefly in graduate school with someone who insisted that his writing—which was crabbed and full of jargon and obscurity (think Derrida on a bad day)—was all***

*about his thinking and that it was the reader's obligation to tease out his meanings. Readers who couldn't understand him simply weren't smart enough. His professors, needless to say, disagreed, which was why our association was brief.*

*What really lies behind that instruction to write for oneself, or so it seems to me, is precisely what you point to, that the writer should be the first reader of his or her work. That's another way of saying that the writer needs to be the readers' advocate. In a sense, your writing needs to contain the voice of the heckler. You need to ask yourself, "Is this going to work?" "Why not?" "Will readers understand this reference or is it too obscure/precious/aggressive/whatever?" I'm speaking here, I suppose, primarily of nonfiction, but I think it also applies to creative works. Playwrights, of course, are quickly disabused of the notion that their audience doesn't matter, which is why so much rewriting takes place somewhere between New Haven or Boston and Broadway. They get to hear every night which lines get the laugh or the gasp or the sigh and which ones get the groans. Or silence.*

*Let's see if we can tie Ann Packer and the Victorians together, with maybe another wrinkle. I love her insight about readers' ownership of her novels. As the writer, you can only take care of what you mean to say when you write an ending, for instance. What you can never anticipate are precisely those individual, subjective connections that each reader will make with that ending. Now, assuming that we're not talking about actively "misreading"—although that term makes me nervous, since all reading is in some sense misreading, another old insight I can't claim for myself—the facts, such as they are, the events and dialogue in the novel, should be pretty much the same for everyone. But not everyone will experience those facts the same way because of what they bring to that ending.*

*The Victorians totally got this idea, probably a lot better than we did. Because British novels of the era—and some American ones, although not as many—were first serialized in periodicals, there was a lot of room for interaction between a writer and the reading public. Thackeray and Dickens and Eliot all got mail from readers asking them to marry off this widower*

*to that young woman or to please include more antics by a particularly amusing character or to reconsider killing off the young heroine (that would be Dickens, of course). And sometimes they listened. Now their essayists, Macaulay and Cardinal Newman and Ruskin, to pick but three, seem generally to be writing as if from a sort of godlike authority, but novelists often were in tune with what their audiences wanted. It's not quite true that Dickens changed the ending of Great Expectations because of reader demand, but he did write a new one because his friend Edward Bulwer-Lytton argued on their behalf.*

*And the wrinkle? For many years, mostly as a gift to myself, I taught John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman, about which students were split. It is, as your readers may be aware, a postmodern novel masquerading as a Victorian novel. With two endings, no less. Some students loved that, loved all the games with narrative possibility, while others were driven to distraction by those same things. Just when the novel would get going, they complained, he would stop the momentum to pull some trick out of his hat. He points out that while he may be writing as if he were a Victorian writer, he cannot be one, living as he does in the age of Jorge Luis Borges (who also toyed with narrative form) and Roland Barthes. And he is drafting the novel in 1967, the year Barthes now-classic "Death of the Author" first appeared.*

*I taught that essay, which is about how the capitalized Author can no longer exist as he once did as a sort of Divine Authority in his work, quite a few times to incoming master's students, and it was astonishing how vehemently many, possibly most of them, wanted to defend Authorship from this barbarian attack. On a practical level, however, most of them knew that he was right, that the Age of the Author has been replaced by the Age of the Reader, by which Barthes means that readers are important co-creators of meaning in a literary work. It's really a demotion rather than a death, the Author being replaced by simply the writer, while the formerly passive reader is elevated to the role of an active participant. The students mostly survived this shock to the system and even learned to build on it later on.*

***Seriously, though, you might think that readers would appreciate being celebrated, being given so much respect, but in both the novel and the essay, students were unsettled by the responsibilities that came with all that respect.***

### 3) On Matters of Interpretation

The chapter “Conspiracy Theory” in *How to Read Novels Like a Professor* details the glories and perils of perceived meaning. In its positive aspect, it reflects the passionate, synergistic reader-writer relationship in the question above, made possible with the practice of what was inscribed upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi—*Meden Agan*, meaning, 'Nothing in excess.' To “give” to what we read, exploring meaning to “get the most out of the novels” and to “get the most out of ourselves” but also to be cognizant of a story’s goals and the questions the writer intends to ask—as in the example of “Sonny’s Blues” in the cautionary “Don’t Read with Your Eyes” chapter of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. Yet how to achieve and maintain this temperance can be a tricky endeavor for the ardent reader.

Novelist Amy Tan in her non-fiction book of insightful musings entitled *The Opposite of Fate*, discusses in the chapter “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects” extents of consideration with word and image choices, drawing from personal life, her not plotting where literary devices will appear, questions regarding “the responsibility of the writer” for later interpretations, and an instance of having read a master’s thesis that utilized examples from *The Joy Luck Club* which “proved completely brilliant and precisely logical” though inaccurate in its analysis. On the flip side, there are examples of authors who find what certain readers derive from their works to be accurate though they themselves were initially unaware of what was emphasized on a subconscious level.

So how do we exercise moderation and see what we need to, but not get so involved in our sleuthing or preoccupation with our own interpretations that we miss out on the story? How do we still read “. . .deep and suck out all the marrow of life” with that Thoreau fervor?

***I’ve always figured that if you push the needle on the curve, sometimes you wind up in the ditch, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t use the accelerator. There probably aren’t that many of us who’ve spent a lifetime analyzing literature who haven’t run off the road occasionally. Mostly, we have had our speed***

***checked by professors early-on, by colleagues, and by students throughout our careers. Nothing like having to back up an outrageous claim in class to cause you to make sure of your facts. Readers are always going to take chances with their analyses, and that's mostly good. What holds us in check is a pair of precepts. They sound the same but they're not. The first is, Read the Words on the Page; the second, Read All the Words on the Page. In other words, our first duty is to the text: we need to see what it says and not what we might wish it to say. And the second is to accuracy: we can't skip words or be sloppy. Of course, we all miss things from time to time, and in memory the text can get a little garbled, but we owe it to the writer to do our best.***

#### 4) Revolutions, Roles, and Responsibilities

The late, great E. L. Doctorow in *Reporting the Universe*, shared a notion that even in modern times, we return to an ancient core in our minds that is inherently "structured for storytelling". Author and editor, Terri Windling, in an interview from our 2010 winter issue, agreed with this notion, suggesting that life is a series of stories (personal history, world history, media, advertising, sacred texts, literature we grew up with...), saying that "stories not only reflect the way we see the world, they also help to shape the way we see the world—which was something understood by older societies in which the storyteller's role was a magical and sacred one."

I believe that this human predisposition towards stories and storytelling makes the majority of us agree that literature and its creators will always have a place. Yet technological advances in an increasingly digital society have us at the forefront of "a brave new world," bringing new opportunities as well as new concerns. Brick and mortar bookstores and libraries have taken some mortal hits. In the Envoi to *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, you state that a good portion of what you like the most in your reading you "found by accident as I poked around bookshelves." It's about choice—still being able to go for the hand-held book and the temples that house them while having digital options in addition.

Every age has its breaks with tradition, "battle cries" and revolutions. In *How to Read Novels Like a Professor*, you share the secret of literature being "a fashion industry." I've come across opinions that the novel will cease to exist as we know it, replaced instead by stitched together multi-

media compilations closer to videogame formats and it brings to mind your point about a Frankenstein of sorts that can emerge at the forefront of discovery.

The question is, what roles do you think storytellers will/should/could take to make the most out of these advances and opportunities while maintaining and preserving the integrity of literary tradition with all its accoutrements (saving bookshelves everywhere)? In your opinion, what responsibilities do storytellers have to the trappings of their own time as well as their literary heritage? To readers of preceding, current and future generations?

***Where is Nabokov when you need him? I think he would know what to do with the new technologies. Your question, as ever, opens up several avenues of discussion, but I'll try to be brief this time. Let me say first of all that I have been using an e-reader at least some of the time for several years. I wasn't a first adopter, but I was fairly early. Even so, I still prefer a physical book because it (a) feels the way a book is supposed to feel, has appeal to several senses—the smell, the sound of pages turning, the touch and heft—and (b) it doesn't also contain distractions from the task at hand the way my iPad does. To be fair, reading on an early Nook was safer than the iPad because all it could do is present text. But it has the big drawback of taking up space, whereas an e-book needs no shelf space, of which there is no more in my house.***

***One of the problems with digital books and even more so with digital bookstores is how heavily curated they are. Every advertisement for books from Barnes and Noble or Amazon or iBooks seems aimed at some lowest-common-denominator audience to which I don't belong. I mean, my various platforms have titles by, among many others, Joyce and Proust and Beckett and R. K. Narayan, so why am I encouraged to buy the latest romance or spy-thriller? I mean, Amanda Coplin is sort of a tonic against romances, and she's on there, too. No matter. Worse, those obscure titles or unknown authors that I often find because their names also start with "J" or "P" will never present themselves in these digital lists.***

***But back to your main question. I can't say what writers "should" do in this changing literary biome. I do think that traditional print-structured narratives offer attractions that readers will always want: beginning-middle-end structure, physical layouts that are familiar and even comforting, rhythms of reading that we find comforting. That said, they don't make use full use of the digital environment. Narratives envisioned for that environment can fly right out of the "home" print screen since they're not tethered to the page. That brings exciting possibilities but also challenges: by and large, readers are willing to work but don't want to become lost in the labyrinth of some never-ending story. They want the consolations, if we can use that old-fashioned word, of traditional forms. But it's intriguing to think of what real masters of the printed page, Nabokov or Italo Calvino or E. E. Cummings, might have done with digital texts. The minds that could invent Pale Fire or If on a Winter's Night a Traveler or Buffalo Bill's would surely find the modern e-reader a delightful challenge.***

***I don't think that the traditional novel will disappear, but it may in future share imaginative space with forms that have yet to establish themselves. It may even subsume them so that the result looks like neither a video game or Jude the Obscure but like something new. Literature is a fashion industry, but fashions fade and alter. Our postmodern fictional gamers, John Fowles or John Barth or Robert Coover are no longer the flavor of the moment, but in part that's because writers have internalized their games and incorporated such of their practices as fit the current moment. What was that I said about brevity?***

5) From Mother Nature to human nature, our autumn issue explores external and internal environments, the fundamental elements of earthy landscapes and labyrinthine realms of the psyche. In keeping with the general theme, this question is actually more of an invitation to use geography, season and weather to depict, through a brief poem or snippet of flash fiction, where you feel you are right now as a rounded character in the story of your life. You'd written that "[l]iterary geography is typically about humans inhabiting spaces, and at the same time the spaces

inhabiting humans.” What spaces do you inhabit and what spaces now inhabit you? In our last issue, we had a creative writing prompt inspired by a photograph from one of our artists who takes a self-portrait every year on her birthday. We asked our writers to create a self-portrait in words portraying where and who they felt they were at this point, this year, this time in their life.

Snow can come down in June—there are no rules to this, just felt experience. If our lives are non-linear maps, but rather circles and intersecting paths, where would place yourself in symbolic, emotional terms? In this instance, we’re being put to work too, as we get the fine opportunity to infer what we can from a master of inference.

***Strange that you should ask. I was reminded of the highly linear nature of existence a week or so ago when a college friend, a brilliant editor and far better writer than I could ever be, reached the end of all his roads, the end we all attain eventually. It probably helps to know that my favorite quatrain is the beginning of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, “That time of year thou may’st in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs that shake against the cold, / Bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.”***

### **TRAVELS**

***(for Keith)***

***You brought wider experiences to our shared adventure than I, your Congo and England and Canada and Scotland crossing paths with my exploration of darkest cornfields and forbidding haymows, the most improbable of meetings in distant New Hampshire. You had already travelled the forested ways of English poetry and sought to lead me through lists of names and catalogs of styles and forms with boundless enthusiasm and patience for one who stumbled along behind. Restless, you ranged ahead yet circled back, looking for new territories, showing how one might soar away on wings of fancy, if ever one could catch up, which one never quite did. Your image was Donne’s compass, circling out from some fixed base wider, wider, ever wider, yet always returning; mine Yeats’s great-rooted blossomer, stolid, home-seeking.***

***We later traced out paths of exploration into the world. You, they said, never met a place you didn't like, reeling off miles to all points of a different compass before winging home to write about them. I climbed a tree of knowledge shaped like so many shelves, dug into terra incognita to plant a few seeds that might sprout wisdom. Somehow the circuits of our travels never intersected; we existed like rumors of one another. I wondered if, like me, you sometimes thought of those nights we spent studying like madmen for the exam of our lives, the exam that would shape and direct the course of our journeys. Did it matter at all that Marvell was not Wordsworth, Pope not Tennyson? It did to us in that moment, else why did I struggle so for answers, or you pepper me with questions? And now? When my branches shake against the cold? When you have planted the compass foot firmly in unknowable soil? Stretch out, circle back, our tangents meeting once more. Quiz me again.***

6) You've written of the "one story" as well as a mythic original defined by all those that followed it and the universal symbols and archetypes Carl Jung defined that stemmed from and reappeared in varied cultures and religions. Jung felt that "the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious . . . It is the mind of our unknown ancestors, their way of thinking and feeling, their way of experiencing life and the world, gods and men . . . Just as the human body is a museum, so to speak, of its phylogenetic history, so too is the psyche."

People say that life has no manual, but what if there is one—and it is in every book ever written that shows us not how we live life, but how we face and feel it. And what are we to make of guides beyond literature that aid in its creation?

It has been written that Jung's experiences in practice as well as his mythological research led him to a "knowing" of the existence of the divine, his own conscious conclusion versus a blind faith. In questioning sources of inspiration, writers in general have discussed the waters being fed by the one story concept, myth, literary influences, their time, geography, politics, cultural history, personal histories and a number, regardless of their religious beliefs, subscribe to the idea of divine inspiration. Author Elizabeth Gilbert gave a talk about how this concept of drawing from something higher, in essence, takes the burden off the writer rather than thinking their creations were solely of their minds. In the

Acknowledgments of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, you thank the figure of the muse, expressing gratitude for its graces despite the mysterious nature of the source of such inspiration.

What are your thoughts on the idea of higher sources of inspiration, serendipity and words meant to be written/read? Do you tend to think that writers primarily do what they do on purpose, pre-planned and executed or do you think that time to time they tap into something beyond themselves?

***On one level, I'm afraid that my views on inspiration are entirely prosaic. Would that they were more romantic, the waters of Helicon and the Aeolian harp and so on, but it seems to me that inspiration generally strikes when the butt is planted in the chair. Not literally. The writer or artist can be walking around the block or making dinner or doing any of a hundred mundane activities that everyone engages in, but unless that writer or artist is actively engaged in the work of creating, the breath of the muse probably won't waft her way. My attitude is probably shaped in part as a reaction against students who insist that they're "waiting for inspiration." Usually, it never comes because they're always waiting. Now, having said that, I firmly believe that inspiration is mysterious, capricious, and precious. For me, there's a tactile element to the experience. Something magical happens when my fingers actually touch the keyboard. Sometimes. At others, zilch. But I often don't know what I'm going to write until my fingers are in the "home" position, and what comes out can be surprising, not so much "I said that?" as "Why did I say that?"***

***Can I say that everybody's right? We're not blank slates awaiting the touch of the divine chalk. Nor are we purely self-contained machinery of creation. Rather, we are a mix of everything we have heard or read or seen, along with a good deal of what our sources have heard or read or seen, all mixed into some strange brew, and what that process of fermentation produces is as much mystical as practical. John Fowles awoke early one morning to see the image of a woman from a hundred years earlier, who was nothing he had been seeking to conjure. The result, he tells us, was The French Lieutenant's Woman. At the same time, he took that image and worked, planned, outlined, and constructed a masterwork. He had his vision, to***

***be sure, but he also worked like a dog to make that vision into something artistic.***

***There are several very diverting fictions involving the struggle with the muse. Fowles has his writer-surrogate wrestle with his muse in several scenes and in multiple guises in Mantissa, a minor but engaging novel. And Helen Oyeyemi's Mr. Fox revolves around a muse's complaint about her writer's treatment of his women characters (Bluebeard-like, he keeps killing them off). The subject of inspiration and the figure of the muse is endlessly fascinating because we understand so little about that process.***

7) With your having also been an instructor of creative writing, these question sub-topics touch upon purpose and experience.

I. If a tree falls in the woods with no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? If a writer writes a piece that no one outside of them reads, does it make a difference?

There's a quote by F. Scott Fitzgerald on the sentiment of writing purely for the passion of writing that I love: "No one felt like this before—says the young writer—but I felt like this; I have a pride akin to a soldier going into battle; without knowing whether there will be anybody there to distribute medals or even record it..."

Many writers discuss how they write to learn about themselves, interpret the world around them and heal through their work. Writing is such an intimate process and some who come to choose this form of expression, don't intend to release their works or certain works to the world at large—or they may choose to do so much later as I've seen with some dynamic writers I've met. In your classes, how would you go about creating an environment of "safety" for the words to flow? What did you feel as an instructor was most important about purpose in creating? If a piece has individual meaning for the writer, regardless of an audience, do you believe it holds a general artistic significance?

***What I tried to encourage was a sense of audience, that you could write till the cows come home on your own and you might never find a reader. In normal life, the words, "I just wrote a story," are a good way to see people move away fast. In the***

***classroom, however, I can guarantee you a readership, even if it's only the other five or eight or ten of us present. Even if it's only two, that's two more than you had before. Not only that, you have people who are willing to comment (if only by professorial fiat) and who share an interest and a need. I would usually give a reading prompt for the first couple of rounds—comment on one thing you like, then on one thing that would improve; or find an image that works or something that could be built into a strong image—so that we set a standard for positive discussion.***

***Curiously, I found less need for being protective as my career went on (although I still used them); it seemed that students had been socialized in composition and intro to creative writing classes, which were prerequisites for the fiction writing class, into fairly accomplished workshoppers. Clearly, this approach is for work that is agreed upon as “public” writing. Journals are places for purely private work, and I even told students that if they had something they didn't want even me to read, they could mark it as such and I would merely count pages of those entries. Usually, however, if they entrusted it to paper, they were okay with my reading it.***

II. Our aforementioned friend Carl Jung spoke of the importance of experience in this way:

“Anyone who wants to know the human psyche will learn next to nothing from experimental psychology. He would be better advised to abandon exact science, put away his scholar's gown, bid farewell to his study, and wander with human heart throughout the world. There in the horrors of prisons, lunatic asylums and hospitals, in drab suburban pubs, in brothels and gambling-halls, in the salons of the elegant, the Stock Exchanges, socialist meetings, churches, revivalist gatherings and ascetic sects, through love and hate, through the experience of passion in every form in his own body, he would reap richer stores of knowledge than textbooks a foot thick could give him, and he will know how to doctor the sick with a real knowledge of the human soul.”

Writers can take us anywhere, doctor our ills; both of which necessitate “a real knowledge of the human soul.” In a high school English class, I once heard a story of Hawthorne shutting himself away to write in a room for

seven years. At the end of that period, he was said to have discarded all those writings he'd produced, feeling that interaction with the outside world was essential to good, honest writing. You've written of what returning adult student readers can bring to the texts they read with more self-reliance and less inhibition from real world exposure. Beyond the growth taking place within the classroom, what aspects of outside reading by choice and experience did you emphasize most?

*For a number of reasons, it isn't practical to tell everyone, "Go away for twenty years and have a career, or fail to have one. Come back to school when the clock strikes 2035." You will certainly get an education that way, but life may well intervene before you can get back to college or to writing your novel or whatever the goal is. I suppose the gap year is one way around that, but as someone who could hardly afford education in the most favorable of circumstances, that year has always struck me as a luxury item: the wealthy sail to Tahiti and those of us fresh from the streets or cornfields wind up flipping burgers or swamping out bars. One needn't be so extreme, however, to have "experience." We encounter life every day, all around us. But to adapt Sherlock Holmes's statement, the problem is that we see but we do not observe. If we pay attention, we can get all the experience we need to read or, for that matter, to write literature simply from moving through the world.*

*In truth, the classroom merely provides a template for education to continue. The students who took, say, a novels class from me read maybe seven books. That's a tiny fraction of all the twentieth-century fiction from which to draw lessons on reading or life. A poetry course would attend to a similarly tiny percentage of the available work. Even if you multiply that by the ten or twelve courses students take in the course of a major (and by no means were they all majors), figure something like seventy books or their equivalents. Seventy. To understand all of English and American and in some cases world literature. Not terribly likely. And some of those courses may well be creative or professional writing, which will lower the total still further. That's why I have never subscribed to the "coverage" model of the study of literature.*

***Rather, I have believed in what for want of a better term I call the skills model: we try to provide students with the techniques and background and analytical strategies, broadly constituted, to be able to continue educating themselves if they so desire. Or, if this is it for their reading lives, not to leave them totally bereft of benefits. The added value is that those analytical and communication skills, unlike sheer literary knowledge, are transferable to other areas of endeavor. Don't get me wrong; it's great to be able to trot out the apposite quote from Milton or Emerson, but it's not exactly a talent that will get you hired—except in bookstores and some very literary saloons. What happened with those returning students—Lord, what a term!—was that they had often done all that post-baccalaureate reading before they got to the baccalaureate part of the program. What that template that my colleagues and I offered them accomplished was merely to give them the keys to the car they had already been assembling for so long. We provided them some short-cuts in what can be a long, slow process of mastery.***

8) Tell us what new projects and endeavors are on the horizon—those begun and those seedlings of inspiration you hope to cultivate in the coming years.

***You mean I can't just be a lily of the field? I considered that very briefly when I retired from teaching last year, but I can't stop at this point. I'm always searching for something new. I've always maintained that a writer should be able to wake up in the morning and come with eight book ideas—books he would like to write, not that anyone else would necessarily want to read, by the time he finished his Cheerios. I still test myself on it periodically, and it's getting harder to do.***

***That said, I have some dough rising and some bread in the oven. I've just finished revising a book on treating film as a branch of literature called Reading the Silver Screen. Not so much a film-school technical manual as a sort of decoding the special language of the movies to get maximum pleasure and insight out of our viewing experience. After that, I'm contracted for an e-book on reading poetry—no title yet—so I'm going to have to***

***put my money where my mouth is about e-books making use of the qualities they offer that print can't match.***

***After that, I have no idea. I'd like to try a novel again. I have one drafted but never found the right way to get out of the mess I'd created. Who knows? I'd be interested in a novel based on February House, that train-wreck of an experiment in communal living that brought together Auden and Carson McCullers and Benjamin Britten and Gypsy Rose Lee, among others, but a lot's been done on that already. My heart sank when I saw that a musical had been made about it. Always late to the party. But maybe tomorrow I'll wake up and figure out something new before I wash my cereal bowl. You never can tell.***

\*Here we would like to thank featured past and present subjects for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss life, literature and art with them.

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