Faculty Development Grant Report  
Yael Samuel/LAS/Fall 2015

Thanks to my Fall 2015 Otis Faculty Development Grant, I attended the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) Conference May 14-21, 2016, held at the Academic Village in Seaside, Florida. With the forthcoming publication of my short story “The Border Road” in Jewish Fiction.net, I looked forward to the opportunity to participate in this conference, designed for creative writers to hone their craft and network.

http://seasidewritersconference.weebly.com/

It was an action packed week filled with writing seminars in the morning, workshops in the afternoon, and faculty lectures and readings in the evening, starting with Elizabeth Stuckey-French reading her darkly humorous and audacious story, “Interview with a Moron,” and following up the next morning with a seminar titled “It’s All About Audacity: Finding the Courage to Write,” with Stuckey-French offering advice on what it means to be audacious. “Dare to use the most beautiful, biographical, painful things you are afraid to touch.” She touched them all with poignant examples from her own life, paving the way for a productive and honest exploration of what it means to tell the stories we are most afraid to tell, and why, quoting Jonathan Franzen, “It is absolutely necessary to say the things that are absolutely unsayable.”

We had our first workshop immediately after, and I was fortunate to have Matt Bondurant (The Night Swimmer, The Wettest County in the World, and The Third Translation) as my workshop faculty leader, and conference fellow Rachel Weaver (The Point of Direction) among the seven in our group of writers critiqued per session. I was first to be critiqued, and as with all critiques, was expected to remain silent during the process. I took copious notes on my laptop as the group discussed my twenty-page story “The Fortune Cookie Communion” as if I weren’t in the room. I felt like one of the amanuenses in Cynthia Ozick’s “Dictation: A Quartet,” writing about someone else’s work rather than my own, and it helped to have that distance as I read their comments, pieced together a picture of my audience, discovered what these readers found compelling and questionable, and sifted through the suggestions they had for revising my work. I was intrigued by the language these fellow writers used to describe this story, which centers on an estranged childhood friend, Anne Marie, who contacts our unnamed narrator via Facebook, comes back into her life “in rather reduced circumstances,” wants money, and “tramples on some of the narrator’s fond childhood memories” in the asking. “Anne Marie is unpredictable, unrepentantly vain and controlling, and that feels real,” Bondurant said. It is “good that she is smashing things as she goes and the narrator is following in her wake.” Bondurant called this a “Nick Caraway situation and a great strategy, because it fools the reader that it is about Anne Marie, but it is actually about the narrator, and there is an epiphany.”

Because the journey back in time consists of multiple plot lines, Bondurant asked if these weren’t the elements of a novel. Should “Fortune Cookie Communion” be expanded into a novel? It was up to me to decide.

Nothing like a seminar on “How it Works: The Literary Landscape From Query to Book” with literary agent Duvall Osteen to make me reimagine this as a book, something I had considered prior to the workshop. Stuckey-French had said you can’t be too attached to what you have written, and that sometimes you have to put something away and write something else. I asked Bondurant if I should have selected an excerpt from my novel in progress, *The Idiot’s Lament*, rather than one of my short stories to workshop. He said what we learn looking at one literary mode informs the other, which reminded me of the Henry James quote I used to preface my Masters Thesis: “A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.” It is also in the sum of the parts of a writer’s work where we see the whole, and critiquing Rachel Weaver’s work further elucidated the point James made in *The Art of Fiction*. Weaver selected a scene that takes place about a third of the way into her novel in progress about a single-mother on a fishing boat navigating motherhood and the sea to workshop. When she read that evening from *Point of Direction*, I could see her novel in progress, the no nonsense characters and the nautical world they inhabit, fully formed.

Bondurant’s comments about each of the works in progress - A social worker is summoned to give testimony on a suspected murder that happened thirty years ago; a mother struggles to come to terms with her son’s autism; a new generation of Nigerians is leaving the old behind, but sends money home so their parents can survive – applied across the board, and were echoed in all the literary seminars:

In his seminar “Poetry That Demands in Surprising Dimensions” Seth Brady Tucker (*The Mormon Boy* and *We Deserve the Gods We Asked For*) said, “poetry should inform fiction and vice versa,” emphasizing the importance of narrative and emotional distance in both genres. He cautioned against naval gazing and pushing too close on the reader. “Kill your darlings: the things you care the most about are the things that need to be cut.”

Rebecca Makkai (*Music for Wartime*, *The Hundred-Year House*, and *The Borrower*) is one of those writers, as Henry James would say, “On whom nothing is lost.” Each story in *Music For Wartime* ends with a gut punch. In her seminar “Closing Time: Chronological Shifts at the Story’s End,” Makkai said that writing is largely judged on how things end, and the story is a vehicle to get to the end. “You don’t want to tie up everything very neatly,” she said.

Harold Bloom said that “we are a collage effect of all the writers we have read,” and Bondurant said, “Writing is a process of emulation.” He started with Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Cheever, and then wrote in a combination of all three. In his
seminar “Notable Pinnacles: Strategies for Writing Scenes of Intense Physical Interaction,” Bondurant focused on violent scenes. They don’t have to be “grisly or horrible” he said, and you don’t have to put everything in. But there should be “moments that will never leave the reader.” One such moment is the protagonist in Bondurant’s *The Night Swimmer* swimming into a battered and bloated corpse.

Bondurant’s Literary Agent Alex Glass led a topical seminar on “The Nonfiction Landscape: Publishing Your Memoir, Essay Collection, or Nonfiction Book,” delineating the distinction between publishing fiction and non-fiction, explaining how it works for credentialed and non-credentialed authors, and the role social media platforms play in publishing non-fiction today. In regards to the much debated subject of Vanity publishing, Glass said it is best to exhaust all your resources before self-publishing, and if you do, to take short excerpts and publish them as digital shorts. If they are successful, publishers will find you.

Headliner Andre Dubis III (*Dirty Love*, *Townie*, *The Garden of Last Days*, *House of Sand and Fog*, *Bluesman*, and *The Cage Keeper and Other Stories*) is as gifted a speaker as he is a writer, as evident in his seminar “Do Not Think, Dream: How Can We Dream Fully and Honestly with Mere Words?” He took us through an exercise in which he had us describe five people by their smells, the light in which they appear, and the sounds they make, showing us how we start to get a picture from the sensory and from here to a story. “There is a beating heart, and things start to move,” he said. But then he cautioned: “Don’t think about the reader. Writing always tends to go better not when we have something to say, but when we set off with something to find. Just tell the truth.”

A minor detail but one that was not lost on any of us at the conference, was that *The Truman Show* was filmed at Seaside. We kicked off our sandals at the iconic Coleman Pavilion, the pyramid shaped tower that looms portentously in the film set, dug our toes in the sugar sand, and settled into our circle of sling back beach chairs for our daily gatherings to read and reflect. Before us lay the great expanse of swift blue water, Truman’s biggest fear, and the obstacle he has to overcome when he sets off to find the truth after discovering his life is a lie. Looking out at the horizon one last time before leaving Seaside, I imagined Truman sailing off to the painted blue sky, hesitating before the camouflaged door as Christof, his creator in this reality television show, the only life Truman has known, cautions him against walking out that door. As I gathered my sandals, all the critiques and conversations of the week washed over me. I looked behind me at the Gulf of Mexico, and forward to a productive summer polishing my writing.