The AWP Conference in Boston: Where Writers Swim Like Fish and Also Sit in Chairs

My first day at the AWP Conference in Boston, I stood for several minutes at the bottom of the escalator, paralyzed by the sight of so many writers swarming upstream like fish to uncertain habitats. The first night of arrival my friend and I asked a couple of AWP strangers and they suggested Legal Fish. That’s what I called the restaurant chain every day we were there. Its real name is Legal Seafood. Not sure why Legal is in the name. That could be a reason from some very interesting research in the future, if I want to continue on this Creative Nonfiction (CNF) phase of my writing.

I could almost see the thought bubbles accompanying them:

"Is the physical book dead?" I couldn’t give a flying fish that mean, once in the air and once under water but also there’s that great double “f” construction. At my age, I’ll probably be dead by the time this extinction happens, but I will say now, that it’ll never happen. Books are too fabulous.

"Will I meet the editor of that literary magazine who's had my short story for fifteen months?" Up until now, except for the occasional flash fiction, I don’t send out short stories, and that may be a reason for the fifteen months it takes for a response. An editor can get through a prose poem or five one page poems in about five minutes, even with a second reading of flash fiction as part of the deal. I love it when someone in a workshop responds with, “How did she get to that last sentence, that surprise turn?” Flash fiction is a little manipulative; it causes readers to read it a second time to find out how the writer did it. "Should I just go ahead and self publish?" No. Never. There are plenty of journals and editors of journals who are very hungry for new voices (I hate that expression). If you’re a poet of course, you have to think from the get-go in terms of a book. It’s got to cohere, to be themed, to feel whole, to be somehow satisfying and to address a few questions if not to answer them.

"Will that cute guy with the five o'clock shadow -- no, the other guy, no, not him, the OTHER one -- notice me if I stand ahead of him in the registration line?" Not an issue with me; but there were lots of cute guys. And if they are writers, they’ve got to be intelligent, right?

"What do you mean, I paid all that money to stay at the Sheraton and I still have to pay for WiFi and coffee? Even Motel 6 gives you free WiFi and coffee!" A real issue… I
stayed at the Westin Copley Place, 4, yes, 4****s, and went out through the lobby and across to Starbucks to use their WiFi—for free. And real, not in the way it is used when a writer states, “But it’s a real story.” I learned that there is evidently a call for truth in CNF, but it might be the truth of the writer’s pov. I learned what CNF stands for, by the way.

And so forth. One nice savings was that for 3 nights I put out my “DON’T CLEAN THIS ROOM” sign that gave me $15.00 towards a final breakfast in the Hartford Restaurant in the Westin Hotel that doubles as “BAR 10” at night. The hotel calls them Green Choice Coupons. Who are they kidding? What it really means is that they hire one less woman who could use the job. At least she probably doesn’t know that I contributed to her unemployment.

Over 11,000 writers, editors, and publishers turned out this year for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' Conference, making it one of the biggest literary hootenannies for anyone with a passion for putting words on the page. There are over 500 sessions devoted to topics of interest to both writers and teachers of writing, ranging from esoteric discussions of character development to the thorny business of publishing your first novel. It took two of us an hour to figure out what panels were worth attending on a specific day. There were two documents to go back and forth between (see below). It was first thing on Thursday that we realized what was at issue when we didn’t plan ahead and get to a panel early. There were 100 people outside the small room for the panel – Modern Fairy Tales & Retellings. I ended up down the hall in Looking for Real-Life Humberts: The Unreliable Narrator in Creative Nonfiction. It turned out to be an excellent choice. I noted these things in my ever-present notebook:

1) We write to understand. Writing grows out of a not knowing.
2) A narrator is a persona, serves the narration.
3) Write against the one, true line, against what feels most certain.
4) If there’s absolute certainty, then call it fiction.
5) There is a tacit agreement with the reader in humor writing.
6) Acknowledge that the author is unreliable, not to be trusted.

There's also a massive book fair with so many small publishers and literary magazines represented that someone dropping in from Pluto might think all we do here on Planet Earth is read. I did take some time on my flight home to read what I ended up purchasing. Most journals and magazines were 50% off, a real incentive, but I didn’t set aside time for a real visit to the Book Bair.
until Friday. Quite unexpectedly on Thursday afternoon, running between panels, I saw Yvette Sobky in the hallway. It hadn’t occurred to me that Otis would have a table at AWP. She, of course said, meet us at Table M5. So I did, late that afternoon. She and Sarah and Rachel were there with all the Seismicity Books and a nice bag of snacks courtesy of Yvette. Somehow, lunch was not on the chart.

Amaranth Borsuk who worked in Otis Laboratory Press while she was in the USC writing program had her wonderful Between Page and Screen at the next table, M6. She created her limited edition version of hologram poems in the Otis Lab Press.

I don’t know whether to be terrified or exhilarated to be here. Maybe both. I second that. I am terrified, because there are so many writers, and so many hungry looking faces. YOUNG faces. How can I possibly compete with so much talent? Why would anyone notice my writing, when there are so many other things to read? I am also not sure why my writing gets read. All I know is that I sent out my full MFA manuscript and a portion of it to two contests before I had finished the MFA program at Otis and they were both selected; the full manuscript at New Issues by Brenda Hillman and the short version at Diagram/New Michigan Press by Ander Monson. Since then, Ander at Diagram has included me in a deck of cards anthology and published my chapbook, of which anything consists, in 2011. I had the pleasure to meet the young woman who was the first reader of that last manuscript at the Diagram table. And I am exhilarated, because I have rarely been in a place where so many people are gathered to talk about the craft of writing. Here, everyone acts as if words still matter, despite the fact that our information and entertainment are delivered instantly and in a myriad of different ways. I am at a loss for words here. And that loss of words is a way of working at the craft of writing. At the Book Fair, in addition to visiting with Otis friends and colleagues, Siglio Press, Les Figues Press with whom I won their first NOS contest [http://lesfigues.blogspot.com/2010/05/her-not-blessed-by-barbara-maloutas.html], Diagram, I saw Janet Holmes at Ahsahta Press who published my second full collection, the whole Marie. I was pleased to be able to give her one of my “NO LEG S” artist book constructed by erasing words and letters from the DUINO ELEGIES. Rainer Marie Rilke, whose words and letters I blackened, lived in a chateau above my husband’s family home in Valais, Switzerland, while he composed

Can you see M6? It’s right down the aisle from Les Figues Press in the yellow area.
some of those elegies. Shearsman Press published Holmes manuscript, *The ms of m y kin [THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON]*. There is no anxiety of influence here.

When the panelists presented well-written papers like Sarah Bynum and her panel did on Friday, *Origins of Contemporary Fabulist Fiction*, the panelists resonated with each other in unexpected ways. Who would put together turtles, Raymond Carver and The Fairy Way of Writing? The answer is the laconic writers of fabulist fiction.

![Image](image.jpg)

*That's me sitting under the fireplace mantel, eating it up.*

By writing, we are making our voices heard -- as well as the voices of so many people, old and young, educated or not, from the future or past or present. Writing isn't just an art form. It really is a craft, one that can be learned, taught, and shared. It is a business, yes, but first and foremost, writing is about putting your heart, mind, and soul out there for anyone to see.

A little melodramatic, but essentially true.

Let’s not forget support of other writers… I attended two readings, one in the lobby of the Westin featuring *Kore Press* poets, and one on the last night with thousands of other fish, sitting in Hynes Center’s Auditorium C, on chairs. Yes, fish on chairs, gulping in poetry in that “good writing” aerated atmosphere. Lucie Brocke-Broido hyphenates her two last names and was also influenced to think and write with Emily Dickinson in mind. Anne Carson’s new work was mesmerizing and puzzling. I look forward to holding her new book in my hands.

![Image](image2.jpg)

So maybe I can get on that escalator, feeling wonderful to be, just for a short time, swimming in a school of fish just like me.

This was written by Holly Robinson and me, Barbara Maloutas.