Pat Stiles: 2006-07 Faculty Development Grant Report

Report:

Words & Music
A Literary Conference in New Orleans

The Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society (http://www.wordsandmusic.org/) in New Orleans is a non-profit literary arts organization and the creator of Words & Music, a unique sort of writers’ conference, which is the center of a multi-discipline arts festival each fall. As a finalist in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition (http://www.wordsandmusic.org/competition.html), my tuition was waived and I was invited to attend their writers’ conference this past November. The Otis Faculty Development Grant gave me the opportunity to travel to New Orleans, to participate in the conference, and to receive my award.

While in residence for four days I was able to attend literary workshops, master classes, readings and a series of discussions encompassing a great variety of social and political issues, literature and literary history, the visual arts and film, as well as contemporary trends in the arts and society. There were a significant number of recent Pulitzer Prize winners in attendance, among them, Robert Olen Butler, Oscar Hijuelos, Michael Dirda and National Book Award winner, Julia Glass.

Many of them were initially finalists or winners of the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition, and have continued to support the conference by returning to participate in recent years.

Because it was a relatively small conference I had the opportunity to spend time talking with writers whose work I’d read and to share ideas and writing with other writers who were new to me.
Because the theme of the conference was The Impact of Spain and Latin America on U.S. Life and Literature, the participating faculty included many internationally known Latin American and Spanish writers. There was a panel discussion on the Cuban American experience, Cuban literature and the impact of Fidel Castro on literary creativity that I found quite powerful. It was also fascinating to hear Latin American authors examine the influence of the great Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, and the work of Nobel Prize winner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

I attended a number of panel discussions led by distinguished writers, critics and editors and found these discussions to be engaging and spontaneous, often twisting and turning in interesting ways. A panel discussion on writing Pulitzer Prize prose surprised me by turning into a lively discussion on teaching, which all of the Pulitzer Prize panelists had done at one time or another. They each had wildly different opinions on the subject, and primarily on the impact, both positive and negative, that the activity of teaching had on their lives and their writing. It was particularly revealing to me as a faculty to hear Robert Olen Butler discuss his reasons for continuing to teach long after there was any financial need. Another panel discussion on the literature of disaster, featured a number of authors and prize winning journalists who covered Hurricane Katrina. Since the conference was in New Orleans, still reeling from the destruction of Katrina, the conversation quickly became a discussion of the politics surrounding the hurricane and its aftermath. I had the opportunity one afternoon to drive to other parts of New Orleans and see the devastation for myself. I now have an ongoing literary correspondence with Ellis Anderson, a Southern writer and activist I met at the conference. She wrote The Language of Loss, the story of her town, Bay St. Lewis, Mississippi, which was devastated by Katrina.

The conference also offered me advance critiques of my work and meetings with literary editors and agents. Their specific insights were particularly helpful to me as a writer, and a benefit to me professionally. But I think what I found most fascinating about the conference was meeting women writers from the South. Although I’ve always loved the great Southern writers and grew up reading their work, living in New York and Los Angeles never gave me the opportunity to get to know writers from that part of the country. It’s clearly a different world. Since attending the conference I now have an email correspondence with two Southern writers that I find especially valuable.

Overall, attending this conference was greatly beneficial to me as an artist and as a teacher. As we move forward as an academic institution, particularly in the design programs, it is important for us as educators to broaden our experience and to further interdisciplinary study.

--Pat Stiles
Fashion Design