

# THE CANADIAN WRITER & THE IOWA EXPERIENCE

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TWO-FOLD: to try to piece together from interviews and correspondence I have had with a number of Canadian authors — twenty-seven to be exact — a sort of general history, a chronological overview of their involvement in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and to try to assess the significance of that involvement not only to the writers themselves but to Canadian literature in general. I intend hedging a bit by including some writers who became Canadians only after leaving Iowa.<sup>1</sup>

Could so many writers have studied at the same institution in the United States without its having left some mark? What attitudes about teaching creative writing or the commitment to the writer's life and craft did they form? Given the method of Workshop investigation, the fragile egos of most young writers, and the fact that the Workshop is in another country, not all of them profited from the experience of studying at Iowa. Speaking of her experiences there in the late 1950's, for instance, Carol Johnson, who teaches at the University of Victoria, noted, "Writers on the whole seem notorious for their unhappiness. Legends of particularly unhappy types prevailed [though not necessarily Canadians]. Since writers are apparently predisposed to neurosis, it would be safe to assume that most of them would be unhappy anywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Those who were satisfied found the programme valuable, the atmosphere conducive to work — though perhaps neither so attractive nor congenial as the main character finds Iowa in W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (1982). Hands buried deep in the rich soil, he "knew [he] loved Iowa as much as a man could love a piece of earth."<sup>3</sup>

The State University of Iowa or S.U.I. (later the University of Iowa) in this town which Kinsella's character describes as a place of "shady streets, very old white frame houses, porch swings, lilacs, one-pump gas stations and good neighbors"<sup>4</sup> first permitted "substitution of a poem, play, or other work of art for the more usual type of (Ph.D.) dissertation" in autumn 1931. Eight years later the University *Catalogue* used the term "Writers' Workshop" for courses in imagina-

tive writing taught through "Group conferences and individual conferences."<sup>5</sup> Despite its detractors and the increasing number of such programmes in Canada and the United States, the Iowa Workshop over the years has remained the most prestigious of its kind. Such American authors as Gail Godwin, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Bly, Donald Justice, John Irving, W. D. Snodgrass, James Tate, and William Stafford are graduates. Both Hortense Calisher and Walter Van Tilburg Clark have taught there; among others Vance Bourjaily, Andrew Lytle, Kurt Vonnegut, John Cheever, Wallace Stegner, Nelson Algren, Stanley Elkin, R. V. Cassill, and Richard Hugo. Workshop alumni the last several decades have won virtually every major American literary prize including the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.

Equally impressive is the list of Canadians who have studied there (and with whom I shall concern myself), among them W. P. Kinsella, Dave Godfrey, W. D. Valgardson, and Robert Kroetsch; or of Workshop alumni from other countries who would eventually settle in Canada, Christopher Wiseman, Bharati Mukherjee, and Kent Thompson to name a few. Some of the country's most respected writers and teachers, I think it is fair to say that they have influenced the course of Canadian letters. Just how many, I wonder, from a kind of Iowa perspective or Iowa frame of mind? How far does the Iowa influence go?

THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN INVOLVEMENT there begins in 1948. Seven years after the State University granted its first Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing,<sup>6</sup> Paul Engle, the Workshop's director — and himself an alumnus and poet of some renown — invited Robert Harlow to enroll. Harlow, in turn, persuaded two other graduates of the University of British Columbia, James Jackson and Paul Wright, to come with him from Vancouver, the three joining sixty-seven other students, many of them veterans, meeting once a week to read and criticize manuscripts in quonset huts along the Iowa River. (The Workshop has since moved to its present home in the English-Philosophy Building on this campus of 24,000 students.) As it was then and remains today, the responsibility to produce was entirely one's own; ". . . not," according to Harlow, "the best way to encourage writing. Young writers . . . need attention, sometimes undivided attention, and a lot of applause. Three or four instructors and the odd visitor for a weekend party were not enough. People with less than 100% dedication often failed."

One he recalls spent "five years on five stories, beautifully polished, and nothing more." Another had "an imagination no one, in my experience, has equalled . . . [but] died the romantic writer's death without, so far as I know, completing a manuscript. There were dozens of others as unproductive. Young men and women

with romantic notions and not the skill or the drive or the independence of mind to take the kind of workshop Paul was running there at the time." Some succeeded: R. V. Cassill, "probably as good a writer as the place gave help to"; Oakley Hall, whose first novel was published and second — 1,300 pages long — completed during his two years there; Robie MacCauley; and W. D. Snodgrass, who in 1960 won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry with *Heart's Needle*.

While at Iowa, Harlow both wrote and revised a novel, which proved instructive. "In a prodigious burst of energy [completing] the first draft . . . in twenty-nine days, I then rewrote it four times — all 400 plus pages of it." When his instructors liked it, Paul Engle sent the manuscript to Random House, which returned it with regrets that recently another, similar book had been published. The structure of the rejected novel, part of which he would reconstitute and use in *Scann* (1972), was the structure of Huxley's *Antic Hay*, and one which Harlow found useful in his two published novels, so the "book wasn't wasted."

I learned a lot at Iowa. The good energy I had was released there, and I was able to teach myself what I then needed to know about being a writer. One has to teach oneself in the end . . . that is where the old saw about not being able to teach writing comes from. However, one can manufacture a climate in which young writers can teach themselves . . . a mentor can share his experience with a young writer and thus prevent him from having to re-invent the whole world simply to find out the technical basis for the novella he's working on at the moment, or the reason why point-of-view in another story of his is the most important thing about it.

The potential of such a system has made him a student of how to conduct a workshop — of how to "manufacture the climate" — so that its participants can better guide themselves, by no means an easy task for a teacher. If Harlow himself did not learn a great deal from his Iowa teachers, he had the support of one in particular, Ray B. West, Jr.:

He was not only a good human being, but . . . a serious critic and a kindly mentor . . . I will always remember him as a man who encouraged me and liked my writing, even if sometimes he didn't much appreciate the content. He was a technician — believed a lot in technique, I think — and that was something I needed to know. There is too much talk about content . . . I remember vividly listening to Robert Penn Warren . . . appreciate a story of George Robertson, a little beauty called "The Rains That Fall on Gentle Oregon" about his bus trip down to Iowa from Vancouver to join us [Robertson, a Canadian, arrived during Harlow's third year at Iowa], and it was the first time I'd ever heard a real writer say with an understanding of the craft, the technique, what was right with a piece of writing. A real writer *likes* writing. The writing instructor is a flaw-finder. Warren was drunk, or half-drunk, as usual but he talked technique, not content, and he knew how to love and for those few minutes the trip to Iowa was worthwhile.

Harlow's other instructors "talked content." Hansford "Mike" Martin he recalls as a "content man." "And Paul, marvellous buffoon that he was, had two stan-

dard questions about any story, 'How old is this protagonist?' and, 'Don't you think we need to know more about this character?'"

Mostly as a result of Engle's constant, tireless promoting — "marvellous buffalo" or not — the Writers' Workshop, "Large in the American tradition, and . . . ramshackled, as much of American know-how often is," says Harlow, "was becoming increasingly noticeable." During the time he, Jackson, Wright, and Robertson were there, September 1948 to June 1951, several national magazines made pilgrimages to Iowa City, *Life* magazine twice. In the years to come, others arrived — *Esquire*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Time*, *Mademoiselle*, *Newsweek* — publishing articles with such titles as "Eggheads in the Tall Corn," "Poets on the Farms," "The Trail of the Hawk-Eye, Literature Where the Tall Corn Grows," and "The Muses Meet in Squaresville."<sup>7</sup> Their amusement at a school in the middle of the corn belt turning out writers is itself amusing, for by that time, the city and the university already had a relatively long and solid literary tradition, partly a result of the writers' clubs that had flourished at the university and partly a result of the spirit of regionalism that arose early in the century and which found voice in *The Midland* magazine.

Nor is it any wonder the media finally investigated this place when in the three years of Harlow's stay such luminaries as Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, John Crowe Ransom, James T. Farrell, and Warren taught in or visited the Workshop and the English Department twenty-four miles from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, thirty from Muscatine, sixty from Davenport-Rock Island, and ninety from such points as Waterloo and Dubuque.

What else is there to say [Harlow wrote to me] but God bless Paul. He was a literary Babbitt but, as he was rushing along toward the ultimate in hype and glory, he did create, somehow, that incredible industry known as the Creative Writing Programme. There has to be that moment of superabundance, of plethora, that ensures survival and growth, and he provided it, inefficient and ineffective as it was in many ways. I'm glad I was there near the beginning, and I'm happy I was able to learn from it all.<sup>8</sup>

ONE OF THOSE WHO ACCOMPANIED Harlow, James Jackson, who before his retirement was Assistant Dean and Registrar of the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and a Professor of English at Carleton in Ottawa, came because he knew he "didn't want to teach high school," had "a couple of years more veteran's educational allowance" and "liked to write, being aware at the same time that writing held no future in Canada." Though like Harlow the Workshop's tutorial influence was not great on him, he managed to complete a novel which narrowly missed being serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, was accepted by McClelland & Stewart in Toronto and Michael Joseph in Eng-

land under the condition that he produce a more marketable second novel, and finally published by Baxter in Toronto "as their first attempt to enter the trade market."

Another Canadian at Iowa then was David Dooley, a Ph.D. candidate whose article on Jackson's novel appeared in *Canadian Literature* some years later:

Paul and David and Liz [Jackson's wife] and I saw a great deal of each other and were certainly conscious of the national bond. We were very conscious of being different. Liz and I used to crouch over the radio at night to hear, very faintly, the CBC evening news from Winnipeg. Clandestine stuff. I remember Bob and Paul and I staggering . . . home one night . . . singing the *Marseillaise* at the tops of our voices, but it wasn't really informed by any consciousness of the "French fact." I think it was . . . important to have other Canadians there. It helped delineate and keep us aware of the cultural differences, and it was friendly.

As a Canadian, James Jackson remembers being well-treated by Engle who, it appeared, "wanted a foreign component in the workshop" and offered him a teaching assistantship when in fact his "undergraduate record didn't merit it."

In addition to the teaching assistantship, something else helped Jackson in his years at Iowa: coming into contact with major literary figures. Once in the Old Capitol building on campus, he remembers seeing

a small ruffled man with the face of a guilty cherub finding his way uncertainly to the lectern, gazing around apologetically so that his audience shuffled and coughed resignedly at the predictable prelude to yet another ritual evening of incompetent reading, then suddenly erupting majestically like a full choir; Dylan Thomas on what I guess was his first American tour, an experience of the real thing which I don't think can be replaced by VTR . . . and which reinforced the teaching so importantly . . . Robert Frost's appearance touched on other themes I've mentioned [in an earlier letter Jackson told me how "in 1948 the Canadian academies were focussed exclusively on English literature"<sup>9</sup>] because here was a name we'd thought of from our Canadian university background as being too trendy . . . to deserve recognition, and by God — and I can still remember the shock — he was white-haired and doddering.<sup>10</sup>

To Jackson, a veteran of military service which had taken him to India, Ceylon, Nassau, and all across Canada where he saw "quite a bit of the 'mid-west' thing in Calgary, Saskatoon and McLeod," Iowa City's "socio-academic environment" still came as something of a shock.

It left us . . . thoroughly conscious of being from the back woods. . . . The . . . enduring impression was of living in a kind of forced intimacy with a group of people (the workshop group and ancillary male and female groupies) who were obsessed with exhibiting their psychic wounds as a matter of normal day to day discourse. We weren't used to confessions of incest, or to seeing people writhing on the floor of our living room in the pain of having left the church of their parents. We had read Freud, but here he was routinely dramatized . . . at that time the Canadian middle-class western bourgeoisie were naive to an extraordinary degree,

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and what Liz and I were experiencing was I think an immersion in what was then a subculture but which later . . . became the milieu. . . . Quite apart from the intellectual component, Iowa at that time provided for some Canadians a social maturation that wasn't to be found at home.

In this respect, Jackson found that the community in which it is located may be as important as the writing school itself in helping the writer discover his "personal and cultural identity and uniqueness"; something else he learned at Iowa, the "exploration of technique at a respectable intellectual level"; further still, that "the Canadian writer would be best served in a Canadian setting" where he would not have to transfer (or attempt to transfer) to his country's literature and culture what he had learned of the traditions and "impulse" of another's. The American student in the American university — close as he is to the setting of and to the force which drives his nation's literature and perhaps his own writing — is spared the necessity of this transfer. ". . . the Canadian was still left with a job of transposition, of carrying over what he or she had learned to the Canadian context of experience and literature, in the latter aspect of which we are still trying to get the basic bibliographies together . . . the study of creative writing in a properly furnished Canadian setting would save the writer that job of transposition."<sup>11</sup>

Paul Wright, a colleague of Harlow and Jackson and currently Executive Producer of TV Current Affairs for CBC in Toronto, also came to Iowa in 1948. Because his Workshop experience was significantly different from theirs, I should like to include most of his letter — a fairly brief one:

I went to Iowa partly because I had had some notions of writing and partly because it was there and I had some DVA (veterans') credits left. I left at the end of a year, without completing the degree, by mutual agreement with Paul Engle. . . . During the year I did very little writing and that had something to do with a strong antipathy to the locale and its climate and to Americans in the mass (as opposed to singly, when many of them became friends). It had to do, too, with my inability to resolve my own attitudes to writing fiction. . . .

The curious thing is that despite the generally unfavourable atmosphere of my memorial, the place had a strong influence. This was in the area of writing analysis which at that time was the basis of the teaching method.

Engle, Wright noted, would conduct sessions during which "the elements of a piece of work would be isolated" and discussed before the class.

Often a new sequence would be suggested or a different point of view. I was unused to thinking of writing in such a cold way and the experience was useful. . . . And yet then and now I have the feeling that such an approach had about it something of a steamroller, smoothing but also flattening idiosyncrasies which might have proven interesting.

Engle I admired though I didn't like him. He was, as I saw him, a burned-out or failed poet, who struggled manfully and did well with something which he must

have regarded as secondary, I mean the school. The rest of the instructors I thought more or less negligible . . . Iowa I found insular and heavy; Iowa City provincial and claustrophobic; SUI a less interesting place than UBC had been; fiction writers less attractive than the journalists with whom I was associated before and after. I was glad to leave.<sup>12</sup>

On the recommendation of Earle Birney, George Robertson, another Canadian (Robertson is now a documentary producer for the CBC) left Vancouver two years after Harlow, Jackson, and Wright, wrote a story which was “a great success” in the Workshop about his encounter with “a former Rose Queen at Pasadena” — the story Harlow refers to, “The Rains That Fall on Gentle Oregon” — then failed to produce another as good the rest of the semester. “I like to think . . . I had been warped by the highly self-conscious approach to writing that the school engendered in its students, but that may be unfair.” Impatient to “get out into the real world” — the university having become “a very inward sort of place” — and bothered by the political conservatism of most Iowans, he left after one year rather than complete the extra year’s requirement. “I was learning nothing about writing,” though Engle and other Workshop teachers looked after him, he recalls. “What Iowa revealed to me was that I was probably not a writer *at any cost*.”

As a Canadian, Robertson felt the “foreignness” of his teachers,

something I didn’t want to admit at the time. They made writing seem less a joy than I thought it should be. . . . In Canada, we fledgling writers had the happy amateur’s approach to writing. At Iowa, it was a serious business, and writing obviously revealed not only the darker reaches of one’s soul but of the whole culture that had created the writers.

When Robertson arrived Robert Harlow had already been there for some time.

. . . he and his wife were very good to me . . . undoubtedly made me feel much more at home than I would otherwise have been . . . we implicitly recognized that Canada was the country to which we would return, and that Iowa was a challenging and useful experience.

It was Harlow who heard Robert Penn Warren “appreciating” Robertson’s “The Rains That Fall . . .” And Robertson remembers Warren, a Kentuckian, saying “That’s a mighty fine story you wrote, son.” It would appear in *Tomorrow* magazine along with work by Christopher Isherwood, by no means an inauspicious beginning, but, as Robertson said, “thirty years ago.”

Would I recommend Iowa to other Canadians? Possibly not. . . . It may be an even better school now than it was then. But my ideas about writing have probably changed. To a would-be writer, I would say: write. And read. And remain independent of influences. By all means, absorb influences when you are young, but grow through them. A place like Iowa is probably good for social indoctrination into the company of writers and would-be writers. But perhaps a few weeks or a

few months are sufficient for that. . . . On the other hand, I am glad I was there. I was twenty-one, and that is a good age to leave home, meet new friends, be subjected to a new kind of discipline, and begin to see a direction ahead. In short, to begin to learn what you want to do in life. Iowa was the end of my growing up.<sup>13</sup>

**B**Y THE EARLY 1950's, THE Workshop's reputation was expanding. In his history of that institution, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth* (1980), Stephen Wilbers notes that in February 1952 *Poetry* magazine "devoted half of a special issue to poetry" of Workshop writers. In 1953, six novels by Workshop students were published, among them Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. And in 1956-57, when Robert Kroetsch, Dave Godfrey, and Kent Thompson were there and a year which Marguerite Young, a Workshop instructor, described as "the most successful . . . to date for fiction writers," stories by Tom Williams, John Gardner, and others appeared in such magazines as *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Botteghe Oscure* and poetry by Knute Skinner, Philip Levine, Henri Coulette, and others in the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *Accent*, and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> The decade of the fifties also saw the beginning of separate workshops for poetry and fiction "to accommodate the expanding enrollment of the postwar period," and in 1957 Engle began "Form and Theory of Fiction" classes in an attempt to increase the literary background of his students.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Kroetsch recalls how poets and fiction writers were divided in another way. "Maybe my . . . central connection with the workshop was the softball games. The fiction writers against the poets. We fiction writers tended to beat them. Some of the poets, already then, were making reputations — Everwine, Levine, Mezey." Two things had led to Kroetsch's discovery of the University of Iowa: research he had done on Raymond Knister, who had been in Iowa in the 1920's with *The Midland*, and his (Kroetsch's) work for the United States Air Force in Goose Bay, Labrador in the early 1950's, where he advised "airmen about what to do when they got out" of the military and where he came to know "a lot about American universities."

I was what — 29 years old — when I drove into town with my wife . . . I suspect that I was more at home in Iowa than she, because I'd grown up on a farm in Alberta. I dearly liked the summer heat of Iowa, the smell of pig--- wafting across the little university town, the variety of the bars, the big old houses (and I chanced to live in a few), the corn fields . . . the trips down to the Mississippi to knock around along the river, in those river towns. I liked the few weekends I spent in Chicago. . . .

I had published before I went to Iowa and Engle sent me a telegram saying I was accepted and offering me a teaching assistantship. Just like that (it was

already July, I lived sort of by the moment those days) I was in the workshop. We drove into town more or less broke . . . all of a sudden we were living in an old Iowa house that was crammed with books. Lived in by this incredible man [a retired Iowa professor] who could no longer read.

His first year as a graduate assistant Kroetsch made nine hundred dollars, while his wife worked as a nurse. Eventually he would earn a Ph.D., leaving in 1961 for a teaching position at SUNY-Binghamton. "I was innocent enough those days to set out to read English literature from *Beowulf* to Faulkner. I was in no great hurry. I liked Midwestern beer. I discovered that I liked teaching. And I wanted to write a novel. . . ."

During his Workshop years, 1956-58, he studied with George P. Elliott and Harvey Swados of whom he wrote: "Both . . . influenced me immensely not so much by the way they wrote as by the models they provided: both were totally committed to the craft and art of fiction. I think that what I learned first of all at Iowa was a sense of the high seriousness of fiction writing." The friends Kroetsch made were mostly "scholarly, not creative. We drank at Irene's," Mort Ross, a scholar now teaching at the University of Alberta and one of the few people Kroetsch met who was actually from Iowa, being "the prime mover in our group." David Godfrey was there at the time as well, though Kroetsch and Godfrey rarely met; "I know that on the Iowa campus he was thought of as a promising and gifted writer." For those five years, Kroetsch wrote, "I feel nothing but gratitude. Somehow I've never gone back . . . I hear the place has changed. I keep meeting the friends from there. I read their books. Time and place came together in just the right measure for me, there in Iowa City. I was lucky."<sup>16</sup>

Several Workshop alumni — citizens of other countries — would reside in Canada some time after their studies were completed at Iowa: Kent Thompson, who was at Iowa from 1957-58; Carol Johnson, 1958; Christopher Wiseman, 1959-62; Bharati Mukherjee, 1961-63. Perhaps most supportive of the Iowa Workshop method and its influence on Canadian literature was Thompson, who had come there from Hanover College in Indiana and who some years later would take Canadian citizenship.

The workshop was very important to me, and I think it's very important to Canada . . . look at the people now teaching creative writing or in charge of creative writing programs . . . who have gone to Iowa: Godfrey, Valgardson, Harlow, Wiebe. . . . We all share a common attitude about literature and about the teaching of creative writing . . . the student's soul is his own; all we care about is good writing of whatever kind the student wishes to do. We believe in craft above all. So we are not likely to get on hobby-horses about what ought to be written.<sup>17</sup>

Carol Johnson, who studied at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, and at Marquette University before coming to Iowa and who was a friend

of Flannery O'Connor, remembers Engle's being good "at getting money for his writers from the pig and corn producers of Iowa" and how she appreciated "the freedom purchased in those courses involving no supervision" though she decided to leave after one year, emigrating to Canada in 1968.<sup>18</sup>

Christopher Wiseman came to Iowa in 1959 from Cambridge, England, where David Daiches put him on the plane, and to Canada in 1969. "It was my first time in Iowa — in North America for that matter." Accepting Paul Engle's offer of a teaching assistantship in the English Department, Wiseman in his three years recalls seeing a "knife fight between two poets about who was the 'best poet in Iowa City,'" remembers the Iowa landscape, "especially that lovely light in the evenings," and remembers Donald Justice from whom, Wiseman said, "I learned more about poetry in three years than from anyone else I've ever known." About the value of the Writers' Workshop:

I have started Creative Writing here [the University of Calgary] using methods and techniques I learned from him. My poetry developed and matured in Iowa and I started serious publishing during, and straight after, my time there. I would strongly recommend [the Workshop], as I remember it, to any young writer. I know of nowhere better for coming into contact with so many talented writers and teachers.

Philip Roth, Vance Bourjaily, George P. Elliott, Hortense Calisher, and others were there, and Wiseman recalls among the students at the time Mark Strand, Michael Harper, Vern Rutsala, and Marvin Bell going "on to make a name for themselves."<sup>19</sup>

Interested in writing and having heard of the Iowa Writing Programme from members of UCLA Project India one night in Calcutta, Bharati Mukherjee sent a letter of inquiry to Paul Engle, but addressed it "Ames, Iowa" — actually the home of Iowa State University 150 miles distant. The letter forwarded, Engle replied, and she, like Wiseman a few years earlier, was on her way to the United States for the first time. "It was good to talk about writing. People were interested in inaccessible worlds such as India." She would later enjoy the distinction of teaching at Iowa — to her "the leading workshop on the continent" — where questions of whether she is an American, Indian, or Canadian writer were unimportant. "Nationalism insists," she believes, "on excluding anyone who is not dealing with nationalistic materials." With that she has had experience, being denied acceptance into the Writers' Union of Canada when it was first forming because "her name," as she said, "was too difficult to spell."<sup>20</sup>

With the Canadian artist Alan Weinstein as best man, she married Clark Blaise in Iowa City in 1963, Blaise having begun the Workshop in January 1962, when he realized — "living [as he was] in Boston . . . working at a Harvard Square bookstore, and taking the writing course with Bernard Malamud at Harvard" — that he "couldn't hold a job and still write." A friend of his from

his undergraduate college in North Carolina also suggested he go to Iowa. In the Writers' Workshop, Blaise studied with Philip Roth, José Donoso, and others. He began to publish stories in *Shenandoah*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and *Prism international* and remembers it "as a time of intense activity around the post office," mailing out stories the minute he finished them. "I also remember the activity down at the periodical room of the library, reading everything the moment it arrived, then going to Kenny's Bar to discuss it." (In 1966, Bharati Mukherjee would receive an Honourable Mention in Martha Foley's *The Best American Short Stories* for "Debate on a Rainy Afternoon," which appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, and in 1967, Clark Blaise would win the President's Medal of the Canadian Authors' Association for the best short story published in Canada, "The Mayor," which appeared in *Tamarack Review*.)

Blaise, who had lived in such diverse places as Boston, Chicago, and Winnipeg, found Iowa "neither beautiful nor bleak, but a good place to work," a good place to further, one might say, a "North American education." He wrote one explicitly "Iowa" story, entitled "Early to Marry," which was never published:

The *experience* of Iowa, however, was crucial to my writing: the intensity of the reading, the devotion to the work of one's friends, the pains one takes to meet all possible objections (long before you'd turn it in to your "teacher." The true teachers were the friends you respected — in fact, the only friends you could have were those whose work you respected. This has persisted).

It was most helpful — essential — that I went to Iowa. By knowing that my work was good at Harvard, and good at Iowa, I knew, in that long apprenticeship, that I would "succeed . . ."

Having grown up mainly in the deep South, his early stories were often set in that locale:

[the Workshop] was a time in which I was changing from being an exclusively "Southern" writer into incorporating material from my family, and Canada. The first workshop story I did was the most vehemently "Canadian" one I've ever written, from the point-of-view of my senile grandfather, remembering the prairie blizzards of the 1900's. . . . Dave Godfrey and I were quite close as Canadians . . . [he] ran interference for me in that class.

My relationship to Canada evolved fully after Iowa, though I was showing stronger and stronger kinship during my years there (my mother moved back to Winnipeg in '63, and I started spending my summers in Quebec City from '62. I would always advise Canadians to study anywhere else; the same with Americans. I've taught Americans in Canada as well). My Canadian material wasn't as well received as my Southern material, because of the inevitable culture-gap; but the same problem applied to Southern writers who were trapped in dominantly urban Jewish sections [of Workshop classes] — and vice versa. I think it's inevitable that people of the same regional background will cluster; Lowell Uda of Hawaiian-Japanese origin had problems being understood; so did Frank Chin (Chinese-San Francisco), and Doug Hall (Utah Mormon) . . . 1962-63 was a long

time ago in the evolution of the various sub-and-ethno- and counter-cultures. We can all write from intensely narrow backgrounds now without feeling defensive or expository (witness Valgardson, Godfrey, etc.).

Clark Blaise would teach in the Iowa Workshop during the 1981-82 school year, returning in the fall term of 1982 to his position at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, while his wife replaced him on the Iowa Workshop's faculty. The "great sexual imbalance in the Workshop" which he noticed in the early sixties — "Bharati was there, but a forbidding presence, Joy Williams . . . intensely shy, Bette Howland and Linda Kailish; Ann Mendel, and that's about it" — has changed since then. Something else has changed too, what Blaise calls "the big successes" having come — Charles Gaines, Tom McHale, John Irving (*The World According to Garp*), Nicholas Meyer (*The Seven Per Cent Solution*), and others. "I'm just glad I missed the big commercialization. We still treasured the literary quarterlies and Honourable Mentions in Martha Foley."<sup>21</sup>

In autumn 1964, Blaise and his wife took teaching positions in Milwaukee, then returned to Iowa, leaving again in July 1966, this time for Montreal. Dave Godfrey, the author Margaret Laurence once described as "undoubtedly the most talented young prose writer in Anglophone Canada and one of the most interesting anywhere"<sup>22</sup> and the man who "ran interference" for Blaise, continued at Iowa. (Godfrey took his B.A. there in 1960, his M.F.A. in 1963 and his Ph.D. in 1966.) But his memories of the place are not particularly good ones. "Iowa does not interest me [he wrote to me]. I learned a good deal there about other writers from other countries, much of which I had to relearn and sift in Africa and France and Canada afterwards."<sup>23</sup>

**D**URING THE PERIOD 1964-66, the effectiveness of the Iowa Writers' Workshop as an educational institution would be seriously questioned. In his history of the Workshop, Wilbers writes, "the dispute was called 'The Battle between the Hut and the Hill' in reference to the English Department's location in the more imposing buildings up on the Pentacrest."<sup>24</sup> Part of the dispute involved promotion of Robert Williams to the rank of associate professor when in the opinion of some R. V. Cassill was better qualified, and part involved Iowa's continued financial support of the *Western Review* magazine, which Ray West had brought with him when he returned to the university — support which Engle sought to terminate, using the money to attract more promising writers to the Workshop.

Once the controversy died down, Engle and Donald Justice had resigned (Engle remaining in the university though not as director of the Writers' Work-

shop, Justice returning in 1971), Cassill had left for Brown University and Williams for California State University at Hayward. Eugene Garber then took over as the Workshop's temporary director.

... as in the past [Wilbers writes] the conflict created factions among faculty members and strained relations between the Workshop and the English Department... the upheaval's effects on the Workshop included a general decline in morale and a pervasive feeling that the program was without direction.

Other, longer-lasting effects would occur in the way the programme was financed and administered. Outside donations, for which Engle fought so tirelessly during his years as director, today "have all but disappeared, with the notable exception of a gift from the James A. Michener Fund in 1980." (The gift of \$500,000 provides annual grants to young American prose writers and is intended to help them in publishing their work.) The Workshop is now financed with money from the English Department and the Graduate College.

The basic relationship between the Writers' Workshop and the rest of the Department of English has not changed appreciably. As before, the Workshop is a program within the English Department, which means the faculty of the English Department continues to pass on promotions in the Workshop.

New teaching appointments, furthermore, must be "approved officially by the chairman of the English Department but in practice... are handled by the permanent faculty of the Workshop."

In spite of periods of conflict between individuals on the Workshop staff and some members of the department, during most of the Workshop's history cordiality has prevailed. Most members of the English Department have been happy to have young writers in their classes. They realize that the Workshop has been responsible for bringing some of their best students to Iowa. To be sure, a minority has disapproved of the whole idea of combining imaginative writing with traditional graduate study in preparation for a Ph.D., but the department as a whole has supported and continues to support the Workshop as an activity and as an institution.<sup>25</sup>

Rudy Wiebe was hardly there long enough, the summer and part of the fall of 1964, to have been affected by the academic infighting that took place between 1964-66, and W. D. Valgardson, who arrived in September 1967, "wasn't aware of any enmity."<sup>26</sup> But change had occurred. George Starbuck as the Workshop's third director — and not Engle — for example, passed on Valgardson's admission manuscript.

About the Workshop itself? The place, says Wiebe, "did absolutely nothing for my writing," whereas on Valgardson it "made a tremendous impression" — Wiebe staying two weeks, Valgardson four semesters and completing the degree. What Wiebe learned was that "F. M. Salter of the University of Alberta at Edmonton had given me more in one course, one year, than I could expect in

such a massive place [as Iowa]. (Salter had four students, one of whom did not write much) . . . writing schools are of no benefit unless they are small and personal . . . individual attention . . . is everything after a certain level of competence is gained." Valgardson, on the other hand, found it "tremendously helpful" studying there. "For the first time in my life I had a chance to meet other writers and to find out that my obsessions were not mine alone . . . working on an MFA gave me two years to concentrate on my writing. . . . On the whole, I found the . . . technical comments of the instructors . . . helpful."

Both men dealt with Vance Bourjaily, Wiebe after two weeks discussing matters with him, then leaving for northern Ontario to research *First and Vital Candle* (1966), which was to have been his Ph.D. thesis.

I never finished that doctoral program; there was no point in it. I agreed with Bourjaily: why stay for weekly seminars that discussed stupid prose (generally speaking) when I could be researching, writing stuff of real importance to me. I was not impressed with either students, or teachers generally, or the program. So I didn't stay. . . . Iowa could have helped me . . . but it didn't. Perhaps I was already too far down the writing trail to be helped there; whatever it was, I'm convinced that Canadians don't have to go there to get the kind of instruction they need. They can get it, now for certain, in Canada; without the massive American business that goes on there.<sup>27</sup>

Valgardson viewed the Workshop and Bourjaily, who was one of the instructors present at his first Workshop class, in a different light. "He, Bourjaily, chose to discuss a story I had turned in. In five minutes, he showed me how to identify where the story really began. Until then I'd been leaving in too much material. That lesson alone was worth the trip south." During his first year, Valgardson wrote an article for a feature writing class and sold it to *TV Guide*; during the second year, "Bloodflowers," which would eventually win The President's Medal and publication in *The Best American Short Stories 1971*.

What I *didn't* find helpful were the . . . theoretical statements made by some of the students. Most of them didn't know enough to say anything intelligent or helpful. The visits by writers who came to read or who just dropped into classes were, I felt, exciting.

I'd recommend the workshop to Canadians. I advised Bill Kinsella to attend and I have two other students who will graduate next year and the year after. If it sounds like the faculty in the workshop is still as good as it was when I was there, I'll recommend that these students go there for MFA's.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most outspoken critics of the Iowa Workshop would eventually turn out to be Kinsella, Valgardson's student. Despite his antipathy to the Workshop, Kinsella pays homage to Iowa and Iowa City in *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* (Oberon, 1980) and *Shoeless Joe*, winner of the 1982 Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. "I have fallen in love with Iowa City. The

air, the architecture of houses. In Calgary there are virtually none. White houses with front porch swings, houses square as biscuit boxes, attract me. I would like to spend a good part of my life here.”

In the Workshop, he studied with Bourjaily and with the playwright and novelist Robert Anderson (*Tea and Sympathy*), and other writers, but he found a Freelance Writing Workshop sponsored by the Journalism Department of more help than Writers’ Workshop classes:

I was incredibly disappointed with the quality of students in the Writers’ Workshop. Both as critics and as writers. I thought at first that my disappointment with the place might have been because I had just come from such an outstanding undergraduate school as the University of Victoria. I expected to work with students who had a great interest in writing and with teachers who demanded a great deal. . . . Unfortunately, I found a situation where a majority of students had little or no writing talent and where instructors demanded absolutely nothing.

“With no help from the workshop staff,” he wrote a novel and collection of stories.

My first experience was with a catatonic instructor and pontificating moron of a student who talked one-half of each class to hear the reverberations of his own nasal voice. So inarticulate was the instructor that she had *us* critique each story, critiques which she then read back. We got nothing from her. Things got so bad that she sang songs to us once. I think perhaps she had been a vocalist and she sang all the old standards. . . . She wasn’t totally untalented.

The final insult occurred when he gave her an 8,000-word story, which she held the entire semester, returning it unmarked and with the comment, “I liked your story. It had so many ideas in it.”

At that point, I threw up my hands and wondered why have I come 2,000 miles for a course less demanding than a high school English class? . . . No instructor . . . was willing to give serious criticism, only add a comma or two here and there. The students didn’t work at a graduate level.

Kinsella has “terribly ambivalent” feelings about whether to recommend the Workshop. He would if he thought a student mature enough to work on his own. “It is a nice place to get an MFA degree without doing much work. What cheapens the degree . . . is that some people do not turn in so much as one story a semester. There are no such requirements. All in all, Iowa could be so wonderful if somebody cared.”<sup>29</sup>

In a more recent testament to his love for Iowa, Kinsella wrote to me:

I was hired directly from Iowa to teach fiction writing at the University of Calgary. I will leave next June ('83) after five years. I was given my papers to apply for tenure but sent them back, which I assume is a first in the history of Canadian academia. I plan to return to Iowa City — I married an Iowa City woman — and write full time for a few years.<sup>30</sup>

Though there for part of the same time, W. P. Kinsella and Hugh Cook, another Canadian, never met, Kinsella taking his degree in May 1978, Cook a year later. Hugh Cook did study with Bharati Mukherjee, however, whom he found to be "rigorous in her demands that a writer's prose style be efficient and provocative. . . . She always made me question my characters; were they fully rounded, motivated enough?"

As a high school teacher in London, Ontario, Cook had published poetry in *Canadian Forum*, *Quarry*, and the *University of Windsor Review*. But upon moving to Sioux Center, Iowa, to teach, he stopped writing until one day discovering the work of another Iowa graduate. Flannery O'Connor "opened up whole new avenues. She awoke something in me, showed me possibilities that I could transform to my own country." He then enrolled in the Writers' Workshop because of its reputation. At Dordt College, where he had been teaching, and at the University of Iowa, Cook spent more than a decade (he now teaches at Redeemer College in Hamilton, Ontario). During the years in Iowa, he still found himself dealing with Canadian landscapes and people. "I haven't felt that need with Iowa. . . . It hasn't evoked something in me, though it may."

Concerning his feelings about the Workshop form of instruction: "workshops *can* work," he said. "A sympathetic yet opinionated audience teaches you to use what you can and to toss the rest aside." Would he direct a student to Iowa?

At Dordt College [in Sioux Center], twenty-five per cent of the students are from Canada — mostly British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario — a sort of Canadian subculture. I have sent a student to Rudy Wiebe. I would send a student to UBC or to Victoria as well as to Iowa, depending upon that student's personal situation. Would the work he was doing be better served in Canada?

Cook, along with Kent Thompson and others, agrees that "what is important is the student not the writing programme."<sup>31</sup>

THREE CANADIANS MORE RECENTLY involved with the Writers' Workshop are Douglas Glover, whose article on the Workshop, "Catcher in the Corn," appears in *Books in Canada* (September 1982), Mark Jarman, who at the University of Victoria studied with Valgardson and Matt Cohen, and Rick Hillis, who studied at the University of Saskatchewan after growing up in Moose Jaw. At Iowa Glover, who has sold his novel *Precious* to Seal Books and whose collection of stories *The Mad River* (1981) was published by Black Moss Press, "learned a good deal about writing," especially from Robert Day, "a cowboy from Kansas" and author of *The Last Cattle Drive*. But Glover's stay in Iowa was not without disappointment. As he told me in a telephone interview: "In January 1981, John Leggett [the Workshop's fourth director, appointed in

1971] said I was at the top of the list for a James A. Michener Fund grant. At graduation in May and after months of anticipation, he told me I was no longer eligible. I was not an American citizen."<sup>32</sup> Whereas Valgardson could not get "a bucket of water if [he'd] been on fire"<sup>33</sup> from the Canadian government but qualified as a foreign student for tuition aid from the University of Iowa, Glover could not get the Michener grant *because* he was a foreign student.

Mark Jarman applied when he "was ignored for the most part by Canadian schools." He learned of Iowa's offer of a teaching assistantship while in Ireland, where he had been touring on money saved from a winter of driving trucks.

... it's been a great experience, good contacts, markets, friends. I've found out about a lot of good writers and books that I wouldn't have otherwise, wide spheres of influence. Good range of teachers too, Southern madmen to Ivy League denizens, very diverse. I like American bars too. Competition is important also; when people around are selling to *Playboy* and *Esquire* or just writing hard and well, it makes me aim higher and try a bit harder. It's healthy. I finish up this spring ('83) and wouldn't mind staying on but likely will return to Canada.<sup>34</sup>

Rick Hillis — most recent representative in the long line that goes back thirty-five years — is enrolled at the time of this writing. Being accepted at Iowa boosted his confidence in his ability to write. "Like Bill [Kinsella], I have doubts as to whether the workshop fulfils its potential, but on the other hand it is clear to me I have written my best work here. It's a nice place to come for two years and pretend you're Chekhov, and it beats the hell out of working construction which was what I was doing before." Saskatchewan was a good place to write too, he says. "There is no doubt the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and Saskatchewan Arts Board have been central to my development as a writer. Arts Colonies, workshops in rural communities, etc. have given me a big boost. These organizations, services, whatever you want to call them really back the arts. I have had a few minor publications which I am embarrassed to mention when I think of what other Canadians in the workshop have done."<sup>35</sup>

It is reasonable to assume, finally, that other Canadians will follow Hillis to Iowa, that its mystique is still great enough to draw students from the north. Regardless of the number of writing schools in Canada and the United States, Iowa, I think, still holds that allure: the paradox of a writing school on the American prairies, a place with a reputation. Jackson and Wright came in 1948 to help build that reputation, Robertson in '50, Wiseman in '59 from England, Blaise in '62, Kinsella in 1976 from Edmonton, Cook from Windsor (by way of Sioux Center), Glover from Brantford, Ontario, Jarman from Victoria, Hillis from Regina and Moose Jaw. One comes to this place "immortalized by Meredith Wilson in *The Music Man*," this place of "shady streets and white frame houses," as Kinsella describes it, to study and write where Flannery O'Connor wrote, and

Donald Justice and John Irving, and where Dave Godfrey and Robert Harlow studied and wrote, and W. D. Valgardson and Robert Kroetsch and Rudy Wiebe.

Some of them, in tribute to the place, modelled university programmes after the Iowa method. Others were influenced by particular teachers or colleagues. Others still by the town itself, or the state. Some Canadians came away with the lesson in craft, the lesson in "technique, not content," which Harlow speaks of. Some, on the other hand, were dissatisfied. It is tenuous business ascribing literary influences. But for many the place wrought magic.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> My correspondence with these authors is in the library archives of the University of British Columbia.
- <sup>2</sup> Carol Johnson, letter to the author, April 25, 1979. Iowa alumni, who are either Canadians or associated with the country but not mentioned in this essay, include: Robert Casto (Iowa 1966), whose M.F.A. thesis was entitled *The Tin Flute and Other Poems*; David Margoshes (Iowa 1969), who lives in Bragg Creek, Alberta, and one-third of whose work comprises *Third Impressions* (Oberon 1982); Valerie Kent (Iowa 1972), whose M.F.A. thesis was *Shoplifting Broccoli*; Sandra Storm (Iowa 1974), who lives in Brandon, Manitoba; H. Earl Harrison, who at the time of our correspondence was teaching in Winnipeg; Deborah Eibel and Christopher Levensen. Another Iowa alumnus, Mark Strand, was born on Prince Edward Island.
- <sup>3</sup> W. P. Kinsella, *Shoeless Joe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Kinsella, p. 172.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence & Growth* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 1980), p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Wilbers, p. 51. During the 1930's and 1940's, Wilbers writes, recipients of what was then the creative M.A. numbered Wallace Stegner, whose *Remembering Laughter* (1937) won the Little Brown Novelette Prize; Paul Engle, who won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award for *Worn Earth* (1932); Margaret Alexander, *For My People* (1940), a collection of verse submitted as her M.A. thesis; and others. "In a four-year period (1947-51)," notes Wilbers, "seven books written by students in the Workshop were issued by leading American publishers, and this is to say nothing of the numerous poems, stories, and essays that were appearing regularly in magazines."
- <sup>7</sup> Wilbers, pp. 141-44.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Harlow, letter to the author, May 25, 1979.
- <sup>9</sup> James Jackson, letter to the author, September 19, 1979. Upon his retirement in April 1982, Professor Jackson moved to Vancouver.
- <sup>10</sup> James Jackson, letter to the author, January 12, 1980. D. J. Dooley's article on Jackson's *To the Edge of Morning* appeared in *Canadian Literature* 36 (Spring 1968), pp. 34-39.
- <sup>11</sup> James Jackson, letter to the author, September 19, 1979.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Wright, letter to the author, June 13, 1979.
- <sup>13</sup> George Robertson, letter to the author, January 7, 1980.
- <sup>14</sup> Wilbers, p. 94.

- <sup>15</sup> Wilbers, p. 97.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Kroetsch, letter to the author, May 27, 1979.
- <sup>17</sup> Kent Thompson, letter to the author, May 8, 1979. Of his time in Iowa, Thompson wrote: "The workshop was then full of veterans. That meant we had a large number of older people among us — which was a very good thing, because they had some experience against which to measure things, and even some who had already published novels . . . (The pride of the place was Tom Williams). And one of the things which resulted from having all those veterans was an informal rule: no foreign words were to be used in stories. All those guys who had served in Germany were incapable of saying "street." Every thoroughfare was "strasse." So the ban went on: no littering of stories with foreign words just because one happened to know them. There had to be a damned good reason for using a foreign word. . . . But there, you see, was the basic premise of the workshop: one had to understand the craft. . . . I had come through a literature program at a pretty good little college (and I'd spent a year at a British redbrick university in the bargain), but I still had the idea that literature was sugar-coated philosophy. When I arrived at Iowa I *couldn't read*. I mean, I couldn't read as a writer reads — word for word, with attention to everything which contributes to the effect. All I could do was read for ideas. Again I was astonished. It was lovely."
- <sup>18</sup> Carol Johnson, letter to the author, April 25, 1979.
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher Wiseman, letter to the author, May 9, 1979.
- <sup>20</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, interview with the author, Iowa City, April 15, 1979.
- <sup>21</sup> Clark Blaise, letter to the author, May 10, 1979.
- <sup>22</sup> Margaret Laurence, "Dave Godfrey," in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 255.
- <sup>23</sup> Dave Godfrey, letter to the author, November 3, 1982.
- <sup>24</sup> Wilbers, p. 112.
- <sup>25</sup> Wilbers, pp. 119-20.
- <sup>26</sup> W. D. Valgardson, telephone conversation with the author, August 30, 1982.
- <sup>27</sup> Rudy Wiebe, letter to the author, June 1, 1979.
- <sup>28</sup> W. D. Valgardson, letter to the author, April 24, 1979. Valgardson's letter reads in part: "I had never heard of the workshop at Iowa. I had been living up at Snow Lake, Manitoba which is way and hell and gone up north. While I was there I'd sent out a couple of stories and had them accepted. Then, suffering from scurvy and a bad case of being bushed, I moved to an island in the Whiteshell Forest Reserve. There, in Pinawa, the town for the workers of the Pinawa nuclear facility, I taught high school. I kept writing and did a lot of journalism and poetry. One day I was ordering books for the library, and I came across a blurb about author Paul Engle who was the head of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. After a great deal of agonizing, I sent a batch of poetry to him. I never really expected to hear from him. I wasn't at all certain that he or the University of Iowa existed. In seven or eight weeks, I got a reply from George Starbuck saying that he had made arrangements for me to come to Iowa to take the MFA program, and, as well, he'd gotten me a half-time teaching position. I quit my job the same day."
- <sup>29</sup> W. P. Kinsella, interview with the author, Iowa City, April 19, 1979.
- <sup>30</sup> W. P. Kinsella, letter to the author, March 28, 1982.
- <sup>31</sup> Hugh Cook, interview with the author, Iowa City, May 5, 1982.

- <sup>32</sup> Douglas Glover, telephone conversation with the author, September 14, 1982.  
<sup>33</sup> W. D. Valgardson, letter to the author, April 24, 1979.  
<sup>34</sup> Mark Jarman, letter to the author, September 9, 1982.  
<sup>35</sup> Rick Hillis, letter to the author, July 10, 1983.

## A CRACK IN THE CEILING—

*R. F. G. Harding*

that crack there over  
there just a crack in the ceiling  
over shadows of broken moulding  
and peeling plaster, to a cobweb  
in the corniced corner  
a spider  
on a single thread, trapezing  
no should I  
or shouldn't I  
with the drop beneath

a cry  
Over wrinkled sheets  
through shadows  
out of sight  
into the cornered darkness  
my back pressing  
hard against the solid  
wall outside the wandering  
circle of an eye

with the snap of a Light  
getting up  
that familiar  
in the mirror, the face  
put out for the world  
and seeing a hair  
insidious in the lamplight.  
Shall I be a witch?