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ABSTRACT

The teaching of writing and formation of the literary canon are influenced by two myths. First, writers must assume they will be neglected, misunderstood, and unappreciated in their lifetimes, and second, the writer will prevail if the work is good. Both ideas are examples of underlying religious metaphor in writing instruction and publication. The contexts of circumstance and coincidence, however, are often left out of literary success or rejection stories. Consequently, students come to the classroom steeped in idealistic myths of what a writer's life should be, reflecting a common misconception that writing is a calling rather than a discipline. Writing teachers are best equipped to correct disparaging misconceptions, introduce critical skepticism to the classroom, and question the mystification of canon formation. (EF)

Canon Formation and the Creative Writing Classroom.

by Ladette Randolph

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"Canon Formation and the Creative Writing Classroom"

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Several years ago I heard an influential teacher give a talk to creative writing students. I remember only two statements he made that day. First, he told the students they should never give up on their writing no matter what, and went on to cite as his example Kafka who "never published anything in his lifetime." Secondly, he said with conviction "if you write a good book it *will* be published in this country." He may have repeated this assurance. I know he emphasized the word "will."

There are probably many reasons why these two comments have bothered me for so long, but the most obvious reason is what seems like an inherent contradiction between them. As the first statement suggests, writers must assume they will be neglected, misunderstood, and unappreciated (meaning, not published or unfavorably reviewed) in their lifetimes by the philistines around them, while the second statement suggests, the writer will prevail if his or her work is good. It's a promise, good work = certain publication. I am struck by the religious overtones of these two remarks. The first is the story of sustaining a vision at the expense of an obvious and easy life. In other words, the story of martyrdom, and like the biblical martyr the writer will be recognized for his or her goodness in an afterlife—or posthumously. The second statement mimics the Calvinist doctrine that the "elect," or the "good" will be "saved," or, in this case, published. Of course, as in the Calvinist doctrine, with its assumption that the "elect" will be recognized because of their material success, the latter statement promises that the "good" will

be recognized because it is published. In light of this, when I take a closer look the two statements don't seem as contradictory as they first did, for both seem to share a belief in an ultimate truth, a universal principle-- "god"-- which recognizes and rewards the "good." The difference between them, like the difference between the two religious doctrines, is that the first assumes the reward will come in another life while the second assumes the reward will be reflected as well in the here and now.

Even though the two statements aren't as contradictory as they first seemed, they do contain certain falsehoods and exaggerations. Unlike the lecturer that day would have us believe, Kafka was not an unknown writer on the fringes of society. He was well connected, well known, highly regarded by influential men. And we all know very well that aesthetic goodness has little to do with publication. In fact, books we consider bad for various reasons are published every day in this country. The "good" work does languish. We know this now more than ever because of the recovery projects recent scholarship has brought to our attention. Beautiful things have been lost to us for generations. Those that are found don't reassure us that we've somehow now made the record straight. It only makes us more aware of how whimsical and arbitrary the canon is, and how much wonderful art may be lost and beyond recovery.

I have to admit that I love these myths of ultimate reward. As a writer and as a teacher I have had a huge investment in believing them and passing them along in some form or another as encouragement to my students. Which of us hasn't told our students to keep writing no matter what, always with that lingering air of a promise unspoken? Which of us hasn't discouraged them from thinking only about publishing but rather to focus on mastering craft, so that someday when it's "their turn" they'll be poised and ready? Which of us hasn't told students that discipline and perseverance are more significant than being published prematurely and at any

cost, the assumption being that they will be published someday and they'll be glad it's their best work? Likewise, haven't we assured a student that their fine work *will* be published, that we're certain they will in time find the publisher/editor who loves their work as much as we do? And in what form or another have we told ourselves these same stories to keep ourselves from discouragement?

The use of religious metaphor at the beginning of this talk is not accidental. Like all who possess religious convictions, writers keep themselves and each other writing (keeping faith with the creative work) often by incorporating deeply held myths and assumptions into both the private practice of their art and the public exhortation of the novices in their care. There is nothing evil about this practice, surely, but like all unexamined belief, it can pose unintentional problems for our students. The pervasiveness of the myth of the misunderstood artist must be in part due to how these stories have been told over time. The *bildungsroman* as the favorite trope of artistic biography leads us to believe in the inevitability of recognition by and preservation in the literary canon. Everything the chosen one has done throughout his/her life is part of a higher destiny, and all choices inevitably lead to ultimate acceptance. What I often overlook in these tales are the primary connections, the influential contacts, the prominence of a given community in which the writer matures. Also overlooked, and I continue to do this despite myself, are the accidents, the manipulations, the intrigue behind a writer's inclusion in the canon. I don't like to hear those stories that in some way crush my idealism. I want to see those instances where I discover a writer's ploys for self promotion and manipulation as the exception rather than the rule. And perhaps this is why as a teacher I leave out of my classroom the stories of writerly infidels, those early saved by publication and acclaim who later, if they're lucky, merely escape into obscurity, but who are more often scorned and mocked by later readers. Perhaps, too, it is

why I don't talk to my students about the heretics who succeed in making their livings as genre writers—mere "hacks" who nonetheless appear to be successful at living the writer's life. At the risk of annoying my audience, I'll continue with my religious metaphor and say as Garrison Keillor might of his Lutheran protagonists in *Lake Woebegone*, such writers seem to be having too much fun to be among the truly and miserably saved.

And the belief that good prevails? Can there be any more pervasive myth in our culture's lexicon of belief? Despite our awareness of the subjectivity of canonical choices across time, we are still swept away by a magnanimous wish to believe that there really is someone, or something, with taste and integrity, with an objective sense of fair play who is making these decisions rather than to believe that they are sometimes random, always time-sensitive discrete decisions made by overworked individuals. I speak now as someone who has worked for several years in both literary and scholarly publishing. There is nothing particularly malicious in the decision making, but neither is it necessarily noble or pure. And even if we do happen to be published in the literary magazines or the scholarly journals, these venues are by their nature disposable. Statistically, editors know that only a small percentage of the work they choose will last in any significant way. And even books that are published, as we well know if we try to find books that have gone out of print, fall into oblivion, as Dana Gioia says, "Literary culture rightly assumes that all books are destined to join the incalculable holdings of what Nabokov called the 'Lethean Library' unless posterity provides a compelling reason for remembrance."

As teachers of writing we know that our students come to our classrooms steeped in the myths of what a writer's life should be. Their false notions are no accident. Hans Ostrom writes about being taken aback when during a job interview he was once asked, "But can writing really be taught?" The perennial, if unspoken, criticism of writing teachers. Ostrom observed that of

no other art form is this question asked. No one asks for instance whether or not you can be taught to play the piano, or to dance, or to play the violin, or to draw, or act. It's assumed these are skills that must be taught. Although there are professional practitioners of these arts, the vast majority of both students and teachers are happy to remain amateurs. Anyone who has an avocation understands the joy of simply partaking, the inherent value found in playing music, or dancing, or drawing. The practice of creative writing, however, seems to be ponderously informed by the myths of how writers really write, myths we well know have been perpetuated by writers themselves for generations. Our students are aware of these myths and they bring to our classrooms a terrible expectation. Because of these myths about the writing life, students often see writing as a calling rather than a discipline with all of the struggles and delight found in learning any new skill. Because they have not yet learned to think critically about the creative process, it is easy to interpret their imaginative products as divine dispensations. And after all, haven't we heard writers historically speak of their writing process as inspired, even referring to that foggy something called the muse, making the creative writing teacher's job one of negotiating with a student who believes the story or poem they've just written as miraculous. How can one improve upon or analyze a miracle? All of this is not meant to negate that there is something magical that happens in a creative state. We know there is a difference between the technically sound creative work and the work that achieves some element of the sublime. We see it in our own work. It is arguably for the brief glimpses of that magical aspect that sometimes occurs in the creative process that we continue to write.

That said, we who know best the ways that writing as a practice transcends any amount of publication and professional accomplishment and the ways our editing of initial ideas is unending, are best equipped both to correct our colleagues who disparage our efforts, and to

bring a dose of skepticism into our classrooms. We are also equipped to question the ways canon formation has been similarly mystified and to resist reinscribing it with our students. We have the opportunity not only to shape how young writers view writing as an activity but how they view the work of other writers. Our classrooms are the places where the canon can be questioned and expanded and where students can begin to apply that same critical acumen to their own work.

A few of our students will continue to write no matter what. And a few of those will publish. Some of our students will become savvy readers of books that fall outside of the established canon. Maybe one or two of them will become eloquent apologists for a long lost work, trusting themselves to stand alone in their critical fix—the true prophet rather than the religious follower.

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