

▶ AN INTERVIEW WITH VISITING FICTION WRITER, MARTHA SOUTHGATE 1

▶ AN LIU TEACHING ASSISTANT'S UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON PATHWAYS TO FREEDOM, AN UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING COMMUNITY 2

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Word's Worth

NEWSLETTER OF THE
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An Interview with Martha Southgate

Martha Southgate is the author of four novels and last spring visited Long Island University's Creative Writing program to teach a fiction writing course. I recently conducted an interview with Martha Southgate about some of her experiences as a writer and her observations about young writers.

This semester we've discussed the writing process extensively in workshop and how writers tell stories. What is your writing process?

I always feel a little uncertain about exactly what people mean about my "writing process" when I'm asked this question. So I'll answer two ways. In terms of how I actually get the writing done, my practice is a little up and down. I make it my business to do my very best to get my hands on the work at least five days a week (I only write on the weekends when I'm at an artist's colony, where time stretches on forever).



Lately I've been setting a goal for myself of 500 words a day, which is what Graham Greene did. He was focused, stopping in the middle of a sentence when he reached 500 words. I'm not that precise--but I'm finding it helpful to have a definite stop and start point. Because I'm in the very earliest stages of writing a new book, it's helpful to not spend that much time with it. I'm still uncertain about which way I'm going with it. When I'm writing in the dark, meaning it's very unclear how a book is going to turn out, it's easier to spend less time writing and more time thinking. As I get farther into a book, I try to spend three to five hours a day with it. I do not achieve this every day, but I try. I used to work at a shared writing space in Manhattan called The Writer's Room but for the last year or so, I've been working at home, which is going fairly well.

(Continued on page 3)

John Jay Campus Writing Center Makes It's Mark

Afterschool, on a humid March afternoon, a handful of students from the John Jay Campus Writing Center in Park Slope, met in a first floor classroom to read and discuss Shirley Jackson's classic short story "The Lottery." Students were quick to point out parallels between Jackson's tale and the recent box-office hit, "The Hunger Games." At the center of both stories is an inhumane ritual and a public eager to participate in it. "Why would a group of people go along with something they believed was wrong?" and "Does the individual have a responsibility to take a stand against injustice?" were just a few of the questions raised. After which students got down to the business of writing their own short stories and poems. *(Continued on page 2)*

The John Jay Campus Writing Center, a partnership between the LIU Brooklyn campus and the John Jay Campus in Park Slope Brooklyn, is the brainchild of Deborah Mutnick, English professor at LIU Brooklyn.

According to Professor Mutnick, “The John Jay Writing Center provides academic support to local high school students, a training ground for LIU graduate and undergrad students, and an opportunity for LIU Brooklyn to serve the surrounding community.”

The John Jay High School Campus houses four small secondary schools--the Secondary School of Law, the Secondary School for Journalism, Park Slope Collegiate and Millennium Brooklyn High School. During the Spring 2012 Writing Center pilot, students from all schools were invited to drop into the Writing Center for academic help and creative writing workshops led by students from LIU’s MFA program.

“The assignments that were given were like portals toward bigger discussions about parental relationships, academic

frustrations, social anxiety, and just being a young person in the hyper-connected modern world,” said Willie Perdomo, a workshop facilitator and 2012 graduate of LIU’s MFA program.

“The range of poems was astounding, but the compassion that each student brought to workshop was even more impressive. By that I mean that the workshop was a place where the coolest kid in the school could work with the kid who was ‘special needs’ and that’s when you really heard the voices come out.” In addition to the creative expression and peer-bonding, students created a class anthology called “ink.” to share their writing with a larger audience.

Sarah Anne Wallen, an interdisciplinary writer and current LIU MFA candidate, led students through the bookmaking process. “As writers, we often depend on outside forces to decide whether or not our poems or stories are ‘publishable.’ In learning the bookmaking process we, as writers, decide our work is worthwhile, we achieve a great sense of self-empowerment—we are no longer dependent on the business of books to

validate our hard artistic work through their power to create objects; we become the object-makers, and can choose to inhabit this role at any time,” Wallen said.

Students had a say in all aspects of the book design process, from layout to cover art to naming their imprint—“Park Greene Press”—a nod to Park Slope and Fort Greene, two of the Brooklyn neighborhoods they call home.

Wallen points out that beyond craft, the process of compromise and collective decision making helped students see themselves as leaders with an aesthetic point of view and a unique vision of the world.

The success of the JJHS Writing Center would not have been possible without the support of Marilyn Boutwell, LIU professor, advisor and coordinator of Graduate Studies in English, Nিকেিশা Grey, MA candidate at LIU Brooklyn’s School of Education, and the students and staff of the John Jay Campus. Funding for this project was generously provided by Gale Haynes, Provost of LIU Brooklyn.
-Felice Bell

Perspectives on Pathways to Freedom

Reflecting on the Pathways project is a challenge for me. Reflection requires distance, and I don’t feel like I have that much from the project right now. So much of it was oriented around putting myself in front of a cohort of students, regardless of circumstances, and forming a connection with them that extended outside of the classroom, a connection I’m reminded of every time I pass a student walking down the hall or across campus. I suppose that’s a reflection in and of itself: Pathways was first and foremost about being available for students.

Of course, the bigger picture of the class was much more complicated than that, and not all of its elements were quite so halcyonic. Sometimes it was also an exploration of the impact of fatigue on students. By the second semester nearly all of my students were complaining, not just about the pace of the class (which was, by design, more intense than usual) but that the subject matter had become tiresome and alienating. Even my strongest students complained that both the topic and many of the approaches to the subject were monotonous and alienating, that materials all hit the same note, and that this “one note” had permeated their previous encounters with the subject in educational settings.

Thankfully this fatigue was assuaged to some extent by community oriented aspects of the project, which literally forced students out of their familiar paradigms and into a new means of interacting with race, history, and academia in general.

Even students who seemed to regularly have trouble with readings and coursework became animated when they discussed their research at the Brooklyn Historical Society or the oral history interviews with key civil rights figures active during the 1960’s for they conducted BHS archives.

But this was, in and of itself, a challenge: this requirement to engage with external sources put additional strain on students, forcing them to juggle the scheduling issues inherent in these tasks with the demands of their daily lives and a regular college course load. Still, it endeavored to expose students to the idea that composition and speech could influence the world outside of the classroom, a noble goal and an element of composition all too often ignored. And the bulk of the students I worked with stepped up to the call when they were pushed into engaging with primary sources, something rare for college freshmen to engage with.

Even if the focus sometimes drifted from their own writing to the research they conducted, it was heartening to watch students engage with unfamiliar material with such aplomb.

Within this intense classroom environment there were also some fascinating social developments. I saw my students forming close bonds, solidifying into smaller groups of friends who studied together, arrived for meetings together and coordinated and cooperated across classes.

From what I’ve seen, this has held up following the class’ completion: I’ll often see my students around LIU’s campus, still in their old study groups. This was a crux of Pathways project: it wasn’t about reinventing an approach to text or composition as much as it was about promoting a sense of community within LIU and illustrating the connections students share not only with one another but with the world outside of the university. Even if students didn’t internalize this lesson, even if students perceived the project as “just a class,” I can look at the groupings from Pathways and I see a measure of success.
(continued on page 3)

Martha Southgate (cont'd)

Your latest book, *The Taste of Salt*, came out last fall. Please tell us if writing that book was easy or difficult for you. What would you say the book is about?

While addiction is part of the story of the Henderson family in *The Taste of Salt*, I see it more as the story of a woman coming to terms with herself and her family and realizing that she is a part of where she comes from and that she can't put it all away from her forever. It's also about her learning to embrace certain parts of herself and of her family that she has pushed away for a long time. Writing the book was most challenging in figuring out how to create Josie's narrative voice, which goes in and out of various family members' consciousnesses. Trying to do that in a way that was plausible was my biggest challenge.

What is your current project?

I don't want to say too much about my current project (afraid to jinx it/talk it away) but I will say that it is set in the world of ballet, which is a longstanding passion of mine. It's a little funny to be returning to it, given that my first novel, *Another Way to Dance*, was also set in the world of ballet. But they are very different stories.

What are some of the weaknesses that you've noticed in the work of young writers? What are some of the strengths?

The two biggest that I've noticed, over and over, are ones that you've heard me talk about over and over.

One is the avoidance of direct conflict or of what novelist Charles Baxter calls "sparkplug characters." These are people who get the party started, as it were. When I say conflict, I don't mean a fight.

Rather, I mean that if characters don't have opposing desires or feelings of some sort, the story will not move forward in any interesting way. Baxter's essay "Creating a Scene" in his book *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot* is very articulate on this point. That essay really helped me see that problem more clearly.

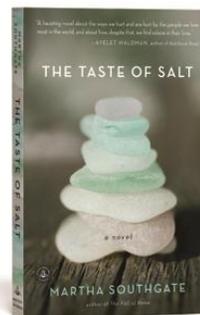
The other is the tendency toward what novelist Alice Mattison calls "elliptical" writing, that is, not simply telling crucial information in an effort to create a kind of mysterious mood. It results in stories that often feel unfinished and are perhaps even confusing.

She wrote a terrific essay about this that is available on the AWP website--but unfortunately, only to AWP members. But if you know one, have him or her get you a copy. And buy *The Art of Subtext*, along with Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction* (you can get previous editions inexpensively on Amazon). Great books to have on your shelf as you start out.

What tips do you have for writers who are at the beginning of their careers?

Focus on writing, not publication. Make sure that your craft is as solid and clear as you can make it. If three to five people have given you the same criticism on a work, they're probably right and you need to figure out how to correct that issue. Read good books!

-Jon Jenkins



Student & Alumni News

Stephanie Grey ('10 MFA in Creative Writing) just published a new chapbook, *I Thought You Said It Was Sound/How Does That Sound* on Portable Press at Yo Yo Labs in June 2012

Willie Perdomo ('12 MFA in Creative Writing) just had two poems accepted by *MANDORLA*, a literary journal published by Illinois State University.

Micah Savaglio ('12 MFA in Creative Writing), **Gulay Isik** ('11 MFA in Creative Writing), editors at Overpass Books, present their latest publication, *ways of dying naked in mexico city*, by **Giuseppe Infante** ('12 MFA Creative Writing). This book was released late last summer and is Infante's first collection of poems. It can be purchased at www.overpassbooks.com.

Overpass Books, is also launching an online publication this winter called *Underneath the Bleachers*. Guidelines for submission can be found at www.overpassbooks.com.

Yani (Janina) Perez ('11 MFA in Creative Writing) had two poems published by *Jelly Fish Whispers* and *Napalm and Novocain*.

Perspectives/Pathways (cont'd)

As for me...I'd never taught before, never really put myself in front of a classroom. Pathways was a real eye opener for me, and a great chance to get my feet wet working with students. Getting a feel for the challenges of running a classroom and making a syllabus into an actual course was invaluable. While it was sometimes frustrating to be in a position of perceived authority with little or no actual capacity to impact events in the class, it wasn't a terminal experience: it was for me, much like the students, a stepping stone, an introduction to a larger world.

And the experience of connecting with students, frustrations and all, prepared me for teaching at LIU in ways I'd never have expected. Most of them related to dealing with scheduling frustrations and incredibly limited resources.

-Michael Grove

Letter from the Editor

I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this edition of Word's Worth. To send a story ideas, news or announcements, or to find out how you can write for Word's Worth, contact Marilyn Boutwell, Advisor and Coordinator of Graduate Studies in English, at Marilyn.boutwell@liu.edu

You can also contact Marilyn for information about the various graduate programs offered in the English Department at Long Island University.

-Patia Braithwaite

Vous êtes mon cœur

I am bleary-eyed and dulled by exhaustion. When I was a child, the nights I could not sleep were spent listening to phantom sounds recalled by my memory muscles – voices of the dead, my breath's ragged exhales, the soft symphonic hum of bugs congregating outside the window. The sad song of sycamore trees always lured me out of bed. I crept into my grandfather's bedroom and listened to his heartbeat.

Jake Maktov



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