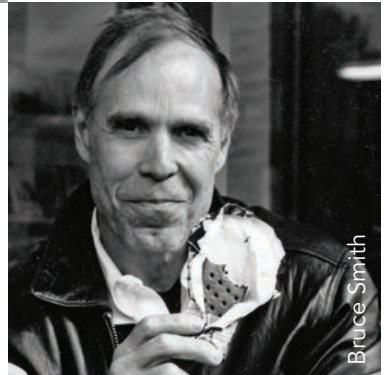




George Saunders



Dana Spiotta



Bruce Smith



Mary Karr

Encouraging WORDS

The Creative Writing Program
marks 50 years of care and
commitment to developing writers

BY ROB ENSLIN

RAYMOND CARVER BELIEVED THE secret of good writing isn't talent—there's plenty of that around, he felt—but rather one's ability to put his stamp on everything he does. "A writer who has some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking: That writer may be around for a time," he said. This ethos was alive and well in the early '80s, when Carver taught creative writing in Syracuse University's College of Arts and Sciences. Although Carver passed away in 1988, his writing endures today and his commitment to capturing the world "according to one's specifications" has inspired authors and poets alike.

It's no secret the college's M.F.A. program in creative writing is one of the nation's best. Nary a year goes by in which someone doesn't bring home a major award. Take, for instance, Professor George Saunders G'88, who picked up the prestigious PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in short fiction in March. Two weeks later, he was named to *Time* magazine's annual list of the world's most influential people. That Saunders's latest book, *Tenth of December* (Random House), spent 15 weeks on *The New York Times'* best-seller list—a rare feat for any work of short fiction—puts his accomplishments in proper perspective (see Q&A, page 40).

Ever since Margaret Hambrecht G'65 was the first student to enroll in the Creative Writing Program, it has been launching the careers of authors, poets, scholars, and teachers. Each spring, hundreds of applicants from around the world—approx-



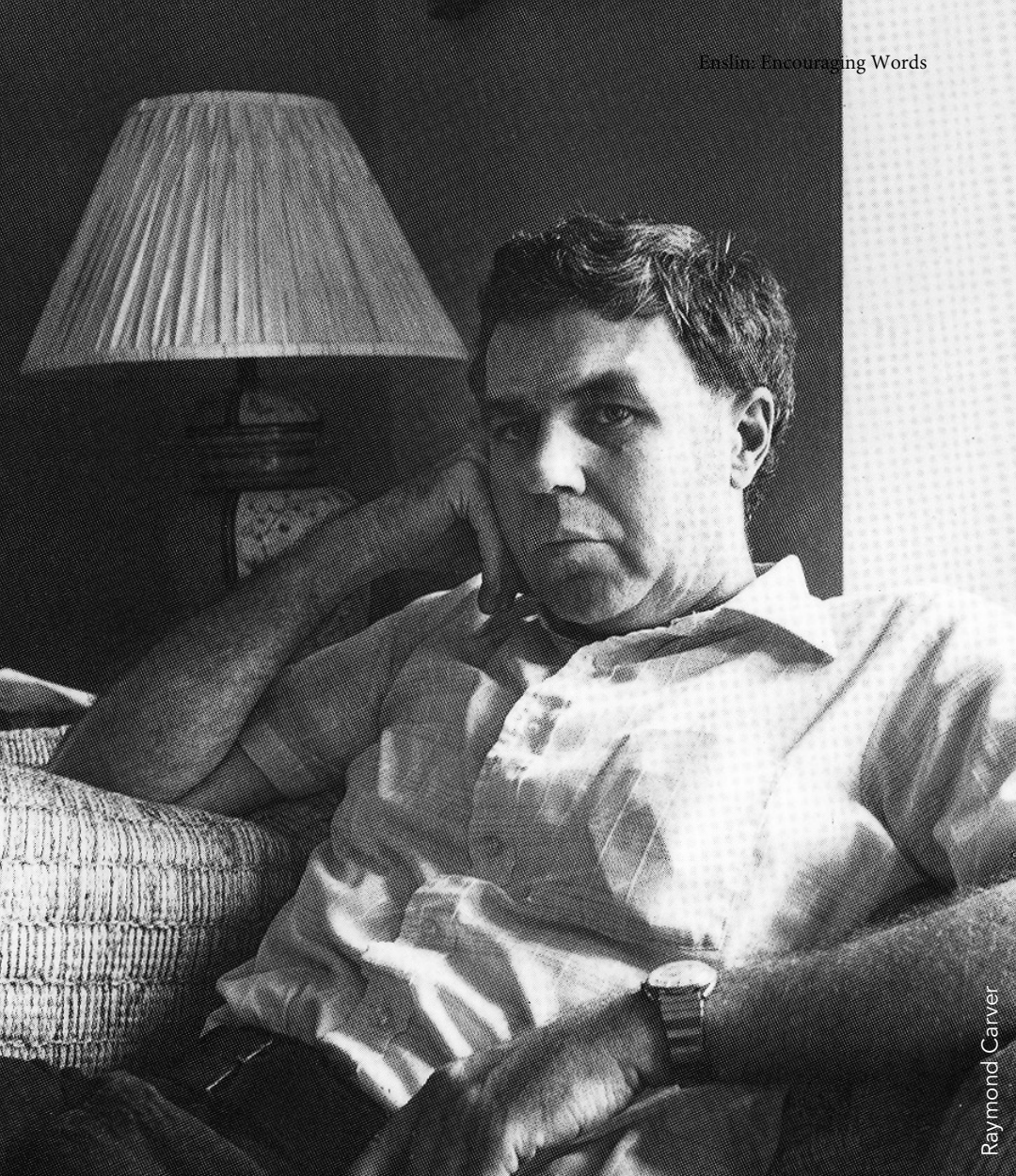
Arthur Flowers



Christopher Kennedy



Michael Burkard



Raymond Carver

Acclaimed short story writer and poet Raymond Carver shared his insights and expertise with SU creative writing students in the '80s. A reading series is named in his honor, bringing poets and writers to campus.

mately 500 fiction writers and 150 poets—vie for a mere dozen openings. The program owes much of its allure to blue-chip faculty. Saunders, Mary Karr, Dana Spiotta, and Bruce Smith are just some of the professors one is apt to study with on a full-time basis. Previous faculty members include Tobias Wolff, Mary Gaitskill, Douglas Unger, Tess Gallagher, and Junot Díaz, as well as the dearly departed crew of Carver, Philip Booth, Donald Justice, Hayden Carruth, and W.D. Snodgrass.

If proof of a successful M.F.A. program is turning out one notable writer per decade (a metric often used with the Writers' Workshop at The University of Iowa), SU's is well ahead of the curve. The list of alumni is a veritable who's who of literati—just consider this small sampling: M.T. Anderson G'98; Stephen

Dunn G'70; Phil LaMarche G'03; Jay McInerney G'86; Tom Perrotta G'88; and Cheryl Strayed G'02, whose 2012 memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Knopf), has kept her in the national spotlight.

Creative writing director Christopher Kennedy G'88 says the program has a knack for being in the right place at the right time. "I mean, we get Raymond Carver *before* he becomes Raymond Carver. Toby Wolff *before* he's Toby Wolff. George Saunders *before* he's George Saunders. And Dana Spiotta—she's everywhere you look," he says. "Syracuse hires people who want to teach and are good at managing their time between teaching and writing."

Throw in a full scholarship and an annual stipend for each student, Kennedy adds, and you have one of the country's most competitive M.F.A. programs—actually, the fifth best program, according to *Poets & Writers* magazine. Not having to worry about money understandably keeps the experience pure for students, allowing them to focus solely on their development, faculty say. A measure of this commitment was on display in March, when Professor Arthur Flowers invited 15 alumni back to campus to talk about life after SU. One of them was LaMarche, a SUNY Canton professor who has attributed the success of his breakout novel, *American Youth* (Random House, 2008), to his M.F.A. training. "I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like without those three years [at SU]," he told the rapt audience. "I have profound gratitude for the program and for the people who gave me the confidence to write a book."

As often goes with writers, not everything was agreeable. The anxiety in the room was almost palpable whenever someone brought up the subject of literary rejection. After one alumna



50 YEARS



Brooks Haxton

English professor Brooks Haxton '81, an award-winning poet, carries on the Creative Writing Program's tradition of helping students develop their talents. In the '80s, Tobias Wolff (below), now a professor at Stanford, joined Raymond Carver in building the program into one of the most respected in the country.

complained about trying to jump-start a professional writing career, Kennedy asked, if given the opportunity, would she do the program all over again? "Of course," she said. "No question about it."

WORK IN PROGRESS

One could say creative writing at SU unofficially began in 1891 at the Delta Upsilon house, where Stephen Crane turned out fiction in his upstairs bedroom. He wasn't much of a student, but his desire to tackle gritty subjects, such as war, suicide, and prostitution, made him a convincing author. Crane's coming-out party was the 1895 novella, *The Red Badge of Courage*, which did wonders for his career and the city's reputation. Years later, other notable writers, including Lillian Hellman, Toni Morrison, and David Foster Wallace, found their way to the Salt City.

Central New York has always held a certain appeal to writers. Whether it's the long, harsh winters, abundance of cheap housing, or proximity to New York City (the publishing capital of the world), something about the place seems to breed moody introspection and inspire wordsmithing. By the time the Creative Writing Program roared out of the gate in 1963, Syracuse already had a growing list of nationally recognized top-flight writers, including art critic Clement Greenberg '30, short story writer Shirley Jackson '40, and columnist William Safire '51, H'78 (who was in the public relations field then), as well as novelists John A. Williams '50, H'95 and Joyce Carol Oates '60, H'00. Other notable alumni writers, such as Alice Sebold '84, Steve Sheinkin '90, and Koren Zailckas '02, benefited as undergraduates from the guidance of creative writing faculty.

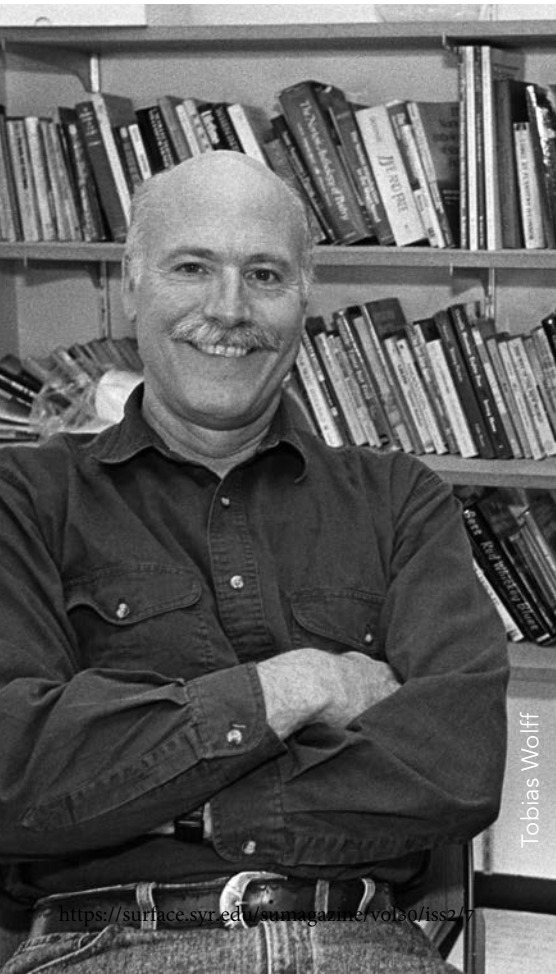
Creative writing also has an undeniable mystique to it. One would be hard-pressed, for example, to talk about the program without mentioning Delmore Schwartz, who famously mentored rock 'n' roll legend

Lou Reed '64. "I will always love Syracuse for giving me the opportunity to study with him," says the gravel-voiced rocker. "Delmore inspired me to write, and to this day, I draw inspiration from his stories, poems, and essays."

As the program gained traction, so did its students. Novelists Mary Gordon '73 and Jay McInerney succeeded by dint of hard work and helped usher the program into a kind of golden age. At the center of it all were professors Carver and Wolff, destined to become two of the best fiction writers of their generation.

Prior to arriving at SU, Carver made a noise with his short story collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (McGraw-Hill, 1976). Other volumes followed, many of which drew on his experiences as the child of a small-town sawmill operator. He eventually amassed a cult following, as well as his share of imitators, before succumbing to lung cancer in 1988 at age 50. "Anybody who knew Ray knew what a serious artist he was," says Mary Karr, the Peck Professor of Literature in the College of Arts and Sciences. "He had enormous enthusiasm for other people's work. I remember Ray reading my poems and stories when I was in my twenties. He was very encouraging."

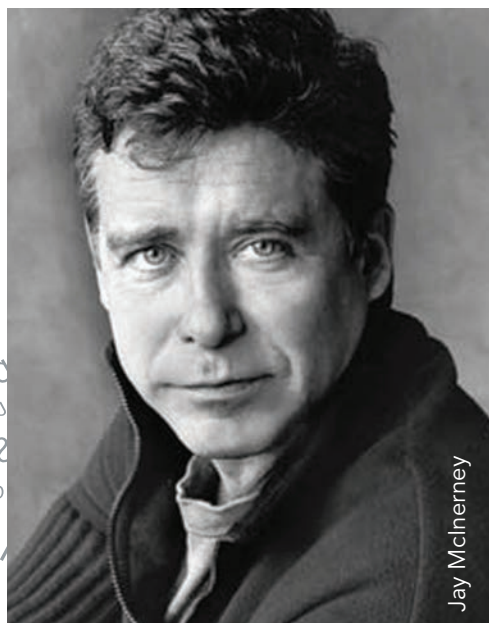
Perhaps no one benefited more from Carver's tutelage than McInerney, who shot to fame as a student with *Bright Lights, Big City* (Vintage, 1984). The renowned novelist and wine columnist has credited Carver—and Wolff—for teaching him a "hell of a lot about writing, about the basic craft...that has to be mastered before you can do original work," he says. "Their [writing] styles were completely different. Ray treated his work like a living thing, and was not bound to it. He'd nurse it along. Toby was more methodical, and viewed writing like a watch, which could be taken apart and reconstructed. He was also very objective with his teaching."



Tobias Wolff



English professor Arthur Flowers, known for his griot-style of storytelling, discusses writing with a class.



Like Carver, Wolff had Pacific Northwest roots. But it was a stint in Vietnam that inspired him to channel his wartime experiences into writing, as evidenced by the novel *The Barracks Thief* (Ecco, 1984) and the memoir *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (Vintage, 1995). He has also produced the short story collection *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (Ecco, 1981) and the memoir *This Boy's Life* (The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), which was made into a film with Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert DeNiro.

With success, though, came the public's need to label and categorize. Carver had the dubious honor of being called a "blue-collar minimalist," and along with Wolff, was lumped into the "dirty realism" camp. "I don't even know what 'minimalist' means," Wolff says. "I guess it was more of a journalistic term than anything—a term of convenience, much like the 'blue-collar' label.... Ray's stories took place in a world that he knew. They were stories of social observation, without being preachy."

Novelist Tom Perrotta recalls Wolff reading from *This Boy's Life*. "The book was still in progress at the time, and the excerpt was amazing—funny and mortifying and deeply moving," he says. "It was one of those moments when you realize you are in the presence of something special."

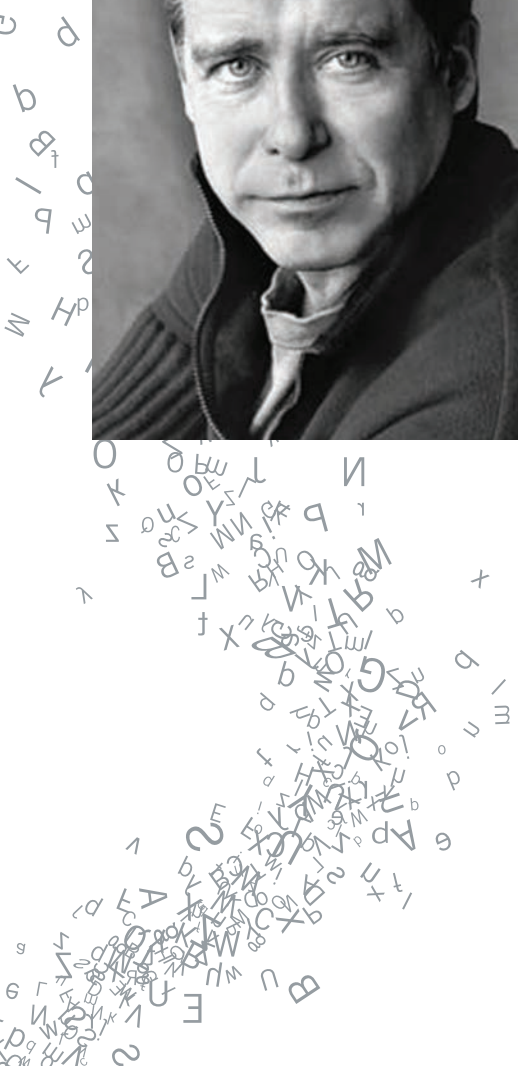
HERE TO BE WRITERS

It's been a good year for the Creative Writing Program, which has marked its

50th anniversary with myriad events around the country. It's also an interesting time in the field, itself. The aforementioned alumni event, for instance, was organized mostly in response to the spike in M.F.A. programs—there are more than 500 in the United States, alone—and a dwindling number of opportunities for creative writers.

SU professors insist they're not in the publishing business. They say their goal is to foster creativity and strong writing skills. This means students write a lot. Additional learning opportunities come in the form of the Raymond Carver Reading Series. Presented as part of the popular undergraduate course Living Writers, the Carver series brings 12 to 14 writers and poets to campus each year. Series director Sarah Harwell G'05 says the course is a good opportunity for M.F.A. students to acquire classroom experience as teaching assistants, while undergraduates learn firsthand about the creative process. "We read an author's book before he or she comes to campus, take a test on it, write a response to the book, and then have an in-depth discussion about it," says Harwell, who is also associate director of the Creative Writing Program. "Everything culminates with a public reading by the author."

Karr has been especially helpful in raising awareness of and support for the Carver series. "Most highly ranked M.F.A. programs have a standard amount of money to bring in visiting writers—





Mary Karr, the Peck Professor of Literature, is a best-selling memoirist and poet who shares her enthusiasm for writing with students.



Stephen Dunn



Cheryl Strayed

usually four or five times of what we have," says the best-selling memoirist. "We are like a chemistry program without Bunsen burners and labs." Karr hopes her proselytizing will benefit other areas of the program. Philanthropy certainly played a role in a recent visit by award-winning novelist Christine Schutt. In addition to being a Carver reader, she spent the spring semester as a visiting professor, and was a thesis reader for two M.F.A. students. Schutt also participated in the program's graduation ceremonies—an emotionally charged weekend of student readings and faculty appraisals. "The affection of the faculty for students is entirely genuine," says Schutt, adding that SU's was the first M.F.A. graduation ceremony in which she had ever participated. ("I didn't even attend my own graduation from Columbia University's creative writing program," she notes.) Schutt cites other attributes about SU as well—the strong work ethic, the familial atmosphere, the "great mingling" of poets and writers. "The difference between Syracuse's program and others is the way the faculty gets behind its own," she says.

If the program has a tie that binds, it's the idea that writing is for everybody—an egalitarian impulse probably triggered by Carver's working-class background. Strayed remembers when Professor Brooks Haxton G'81 stood up at new student orientation and informed everyone they were there to be writers. "Until then, no one had ever told me that my

job was to be a full-time writer," Strayed says. "Although I was already on my way [as a writer], SU allowed me to devote all of my time and attention to my craft." She promptly went on to complete most of her first novel, *Torch* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), at SU.

Whether it's Haxton's penchant for classical languages, Flowers's griot-flavored storytelling, or Professor Michael Burkard's open-form verse, the program seems to cover writing's waterfront. "Thank the Muses we have no common aesthetic or teaching style," says Professor Bruce Smith, whose latest poetry book, *Devotions* (University of Chicago, 2011), won the William Carlos Williams Award and was a National Book Award finalist. "Or maybe there is one: care and scrupulous attention and commitment to developing writers."

Says Deborah Treisman, fiction editor of *The New Yorker*: "I don't think Syracuse professors and alumni have much in common, aesthetically. If they did, it would be a failure of the program.... The purpose of an M.F.A. program is to allow each writer to develop his or her own voice, rather than to impose an aesthetic."

Perhaps Carver was on to something when he said the writer gets the final word, insofar as the word is ever final. "That's all we have, finally, the words," he said prophetically before his death, "and they had better be the right ones." «



George Saunders G'88

SERVING A 'STIFF TONIC' OF SATIRE

THIS YEAR HAS BEEN A MEMORABLE ONE FOR English professor George Saunders G'88. On the heels of winning the prestigious PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in short fiction, he was named to *Time* magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. (Professor Mary Karr, in her *Time* 100 tribute to her colleague, described Saunders's writing as a "stiff tonic for the vapid agony of contemporary living.") Meanwhile, he has been crisscrossing the country in support of his latest short story collection, *Tenth of December*, which *The New York Times Magazine* called the "best book you'll read this year."

Syracuse University Magazine contributing writer Rob Enslin recently caught up with the celebrated humorist to ask him a few questions:

You've been busy promoting *Tenth of December*. What do you like about being on the road?

I like it a lot. I've met so many nice people and dedicated readers. Having those interactions expands your idea of what you're doing right in your work and thereby expands your ambition. The only bad part is, when you're on the road, you're not writing.

In *Tenth of December*, you ask: "Is life fun or scary? Are people good or bad?" What do you think?

My answer is "yes." Life is fun and scary. People seem capable of both good and evil. I think the trick, both in life and in writing, is to be okay with that truth—that life contains everything, depending on the person and the circumstance. No need to draw conclusions, really.

You often talk about having an “inner nun” for an editor—an obvious throwback to your Catholic schooling. When did you meet her?

About first grade, as I remember it. She was a dark mass, hovering over me, disapproving of my penmanship. At that time, she was an “outer nun.” Then she gradually became internalized. And for the best, I think. Those nuns were rigorous and merciless. There’s a certain part of me that always feels a little remiss, slothful, and inadequate. I try to compensate with hard work.

What’s most important: plot, characterization, or dialogue?

I don’t believe in any one of those things. We use those terms to describe a whole, and I’m really interested only in that whole. The writer is just trying to move the big ship forward, by any means necessary. To me, thinking of fiction as being composed of these different craft-inflected parts doesn’t help me much when I’m writing. It’s kind of like if we asked, “In a relationship, what’s most important: affection, consideration, or thoughtfulness?” What motivates all those things is, you know, love.

Likewise with writing: If the big ship is moving (i.e., if the story is compelling), then a symptom is that we might be able to say something witty about the plot. But in the phase of where we’re actually making stuff up, I try to keep those concepts out of my head.

How do you know when a story isn’t working?

When reading it makes me feel sick and full of dread.

Of all the honors and awards you’ve received, which one is most meaningful?

I think the 2006 Cy Young Award, for best pitcher in the major leagues. Now, did I deserve it? That’s arguable. But still, it was very meaningful. What it meant was a person can win the Cy Young Award, even if he’s not a professional baseball player. And I think that’s a wonderful thing. Very democratic.

How do you deal with criticism?

In the best case, I let it wash over me and hope something true and useful sticks. In the worst case, I go into a terrible sulk and retire to a back bedroom with my Cy Young Award and pout until I feel better.

I enjoy your journalism, particularly large-scale pieces you’ve done for Esquire and GQ magazines. Plans for any others?

Not at the moment. I’m starting another fiction project and am pretty into that.

ingly. What we do try to teach them is how to fully inhabit their talent—to find and do that thing that only they can do.

Is there an overall ethos?

I’d say acceptance. We accept our students just as they are and try to work with them just as they are—this and mutual enthusiasm. Everyone wants to be here, and I think people feel happy about being part of the M.F.A. community and contributing something positive to it. It’s very familial. The friendships that start here continue into the future.

It’s often said that time is a writer’s most precious commodity. Would you agree?

Well, I would say gold is actually a writer’s most precious commodity. Because with gold—you know, you can sell it and buy time. Or you can just keep the gold. Melt it down and make it into something cool, like a golden Kindle. Or a Cy Young Award.

Can humor and satire be taught?

Not taught, but coached. And the way you coach, I think, is through line edits—helping the writer see where she’s doing her best. Trimming out the slow bits or the unfunny or condescending bits—helping the writer get a sense of her ideal tone, if you will.

With the recent proliferation of M.F.A. programs, how can aspiring writers make the cut?

Many can’t. That’s the way it is and has always been. It’s a hard job, and there’s an “X” factor that can’t be taught. Sadly, not everyone has it.

I think it’s important to debunk two myths that seem to be gaining traction, namely: 1) To be a writer, you have to have an M.F.A.; and 2) If you get an M.F.A., you will be a published writer. Both of these are demonstrably false. The best way to view the M.F.A., in my opinion, is as a really nice thing, if you can get it. It’s a way to possibly speed one’s progress. ‹‹

“Well, I would say gold is actually a writer’s most precious commodity. Because with gold—you know, you can sell it and buy time. Or you can just keep the gold.”

You’re both a graduate and faculty member of the M.F.A. program in creative writing. What’s special about it?

First, every student is fully funded. Nobody has to incur massive student loan debt—which makes for a very pure artistic environment. Also, our faculty love teaching and take it very seriously. It’s a critical part of what each of us does. Third, we attract the best students in the country—566, last year, for six spots in fiction. Fourth, it’s a genuinely warm atmosphere. I think our students feel seen and heard and valued.

Does the program actually “teach” writing?

Our students are so good that we don’t need to teach them writing. They already know how to write, and they write mov-