

2ND & CHURCH



LEFT Bronze statue of the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald by the artist Michael Price. Created in 1996 and located in St. Paul, Minnesota's Rice Park. Throughout Fitzgerald's career, he mentored fellow writers, and The Writer's Loft was created with this generosity of spirit in mind. (Photo by Gayle Edlin)

Lofty Writers & Poets Engage Middle Tennessee

How MTSU's Writer's Loft is mentoring new writers by Amanda Moon

What do a Vanderbilt pediatrician, a stay-at-home mom, a grandfather, and a NASA astronaut have in common?

All are alumni of The Writer's Loft at Middle Tennessee State University.

Twice a year, students and mentors gather for a weekend of workshops, discussions, and planning, then scatter back to their normal lives and back to their writings.

The Writer's Loft is now in its tenth year and offers students one-on-one mentorship as they work toward this non-residency certificate in creative writing. The program is self-directed through the partnership between the mentor and student with the pair determining the student's reading list and writing goals based on their overall objectives. Some students come to the program looking to begin a creative outlet, others have used the program to pen memoirs, poetry collections, and novels, and still more to launch their freelance writing careers.

In the summer of 2010, I found myself with a successful (if unfulfilling) corporate career, a fabulous family, and an uncontrollable need to write. I began looking for creative writing courses and thought about pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Writing degree, but with no formal writing experience I didn't feel comfortable with the financial commitment required to even apply to such a program, much less to cover the actual cost of the degree. The Writer's Loft's focus on mentorship and working with all levels of writers, along with the modest tuition, appealed to me, and I applied.

Each of the fall and spring semesters at the Loft kicks off with an intensive on-site orientation weekend. Although referred to as an "orientation," the weekend is as much for returning students and alumni as it is for new students. Each weekend is different: taught in a workshop style by the Loft's mentors and other creative professionals, topics vary from general lessons in creativity to writing exercises and discussions of current publishing trends. My first orientation weekend began with Whitney Ferre,

Roy Burkhead, then a full-time writer and editor at MTSU. At the time, he was also a fiction genre student in Spalding University's Master of Fine Arts in Writing program, he had a new baby, and he was looking to create a program for aspiring creative writers, something that was a step above a simple creative writing course.

Terry Price, current Loft mentor and director emeritus, was a student in the inaugural class.

"The Loft is a good way to find out if you have the discipline and the passion [required]

The Loft is a good way to find out if you have the discipline and the passion [required] before you commit your time and finances to a degreed program.

author of *The Artist Within: A Guide to Becoming Creatively Fit*, leading us in a group painting exercise, followed by a discussion about how to best tap into our inner creativity and combat blocks. Over the rest of the weekend, the other attendees and I (including a host of alumni who popped in and out as their schedules permitted) completed several writing exercises, worked with our mentors, and discussed various writing issues.

I was in heaven.

The Loft began in 2003 as the brainchild of

before you commit your time and finances to a degreed program," Price said. "Some people are affirmed in their directions, and we've had many students go on to earn their MFAs.

"We've also had people take a semester at the Loft and find out that [the writing life is] different or harder than they thought; in both cases, the Loft has served a valuable purpose."

"I've mentored three students in poetry," said poet Bill Brown. "One, Sandy Coomer has since

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23

The Writer's Loft

A decade-old community at MTSU by Charlotte Rains Dixon

I live in Portland, Oregon, but my writing community resides in Nashville.

Oh, I know a few writers in Portland, and I meet with them regularly. But I know *tons* of writers in Nashville, too many to count. And I see as many of them as possible when I come to town in January and September. I leave my trips to Music City refreshed, inspired, and energized... which is why a community is so vital to the solitary creatures named *writers*.

But that's getting ahead of the story. The first question you're probably asking is this: why is my main writing community in Nashville rather than Portland?

The answer is simple: The Writer's Loft.

I owe my wonderful writing community to this non-residency certificate in creative writing program, started by Roy Burkhead in 2003 and now run by Rabbi Rami Shapiro and headquartered at Middle Tennessee State University's English Department. (Read more about the Writer's Loft in Amanda Moon's article, elsewhere in this issue.)

Roy hired me to be the program's first mentor, and I continue to mentor for the Loft, which is why I arrive in Nashville every January and September. And through the Loft, I've met both students and mentors who have gone on to become close friends. Dozens of writers have gone through the three-semester program by now, and it's a certified success.

But back in August of 2003, when I first landed in Nashville (or more precisely, Murfreesboro), if you'd told me I'd be making the journey east from Portland regularly a decade later, I'd have said you were nuts...because not much about that first experience screamed success.

There was no budget for hotels or gas mileage, so Roy hosted the out of town mentors at his home. Drinking wine and eating ham with his family and with fellow mentor Linda Busby Parker that first night, I had my initial taste of a southern thunderstorm, complete with a tornado warning, which scared the bejeezus out of me. Later that night, Linda somehow managed to claim the private room which left another mentor and myself sharing the pull-out sofa surrounded by the toys of Roy's young son, Seth. We

lay there and talked and laughed into the night. Bleary-eyed, we arrived at the auditorium where the orientation was to take place, and the seats outnumbered participants by about ten to one.

And yet, from those inauspicious beginnings, the program grew and thrived.

It's been under the direction of a number of people since Roy left MTSU (including myself and my co-director Terry Price for a couple of years). Students have gone through their three semesters and continued to rave about the program. Some have taken one semester to gain help with a book, and others have completed the three semesters necessary for graduation and continued to sign up, unwilling to sever their connections with their mentors. Our alumni include an astronaut (Rhea Seddon), an award-winning author (Phil Searce), and numerous writers who have published articles, poems, and books, as well as to be accepted into competitive programs like the Sewanee Writers' Conference and to have their prose included in national and foreign anthologies.

One of the reasons the Loft is so successful is because it has always emphasized community. I know of at least one writer's group that grew from the program which has continued to meet for years, and the Loft has spawned many lifetime friendships among writers. Often when I arrive in town, a big group of us who've met through the Loft gather for dinner or drinks. We talk shop, commiserate with each other about lack of progress on WIPs (works in progress) or gaining acceptances, and cheer each other's successes.

So let's talk a bit more about community.

One thing I've noticed is that writers are excellent at supporting one another. The director of Spalding University's MFA in Writing program, Sena Jeter Naslund, gives a welcoming lecture to new and returning students each semester. At every one of those I attended, I heard her emphasize the same thing: "Your competition is not in this room, it is in the library." And that has been my experience with writers. Sure, we may become jealous when one

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26



TOP Photo by Elizabeth Weeks



... Lofty Writers & Poets continued from page 21

published a chapbook with Finishing Line Press, another, Tiana Knight was awarded a full assistantship in the MFA program at Southern Illinois University, based on an interview and the manuscript she created during The Writer's Loft experience. It is an important part of our literary community."

The Loft requires the student to create a writing habit. Each student submits to his or her mentor three packets consisting of up to 25 pages of writing and an essay on the semester's reading.

For example, the mentor during my first semester was novelist Linda Busby Parker, and we focused that semester solely on getting words on the page. I used the structure and confidence I gained to complete an entire novel manuscript throughout my subsequent semesters.

My mentors provided me with several craft books that helped me through the drafting process that I continue to refer to throughout my re-writing process.

The other goal of The Writer's Loft, to create a community of writers within Middle Tennessee, has been successful, resulting in several writing groups, a thriving Facebook community, and connections to various publications.

"I am indebted to Terry Price and Charlotte Rains Dixon," said Phil Searce, author of *Finish Forty and Home: The Untold World War II Story of B-24s in the Pacific*. "This book would still be an idea if not for the structure and support of The Writer's Loft.

"My writer friends, other students of the Loft, and the mentors who contribute their time and talent to the program nurture creativity, cultivate writing, and demystify the process."

Several program alumni have published their works, both independently and traditionally. Director Rami Shapiro is particularly interested in seeing student work available in print and digitally.

"The Writer's Loft is really about completing publishable manuscripts; we are looking for students who want to sharpen their writing as they produce marketable material," Shapiro said. "I think the changes we will see over the next few years will be shaped by developments in digital publishing. Good writing will still be good writing, and bad writing will still be bad writing.

"We will work with students to make their writing as good as it can be, but what will change is the way we think about publishing our work"

The Writer's Loft may be found online at: mtsu.edu/theloft

... The Writer's Loft continued from page 22

among us gets a publishing deal and we're still languishing, but that jealousy is also combined with hearty congratulations.

Writers are the most interesting group of people to meet for social occasions. This may fly in the face of the conventional view of writers as introverts who are miserable socially, but I've found the opposite to be true. Because writers are at heart curious souls and generally passionate ones as well, conversations tend to be full of interesting turns and detours. And of course, there's all that chance to talk shop as well.

How do you find a community of writers?

There's lots of ways. Join a program like the Loft, or take a writing class at a community college. Check into local Meet-up groups. Go to a writing conference or retreat and chat up people. Attend an event like Nashville's Literary Libations, which meets at 5:30 p.m. the fourth Thursday of each month in the Prime 108 bar in the Union Station Hotel. Join a critique group. You can find support online, as well—check out writing blogs and forums and join in on the discussions.

If you're used to being a shy writer at home, the thought of stepping away from the computer can be daunting. The rewards are more than worth it, trust me.

... The Technical Truth of Creative Writing continued from page 25

the writers I know are drawn to the process with a dedication that approaches obsession. The stories we want to tell live in our minds, but bringing them to the page with the intricacy of honest truth can be about as easy as petting a ghost cat. And that complexity might be the root reason underneath all the tangled branches we cite for not finishing our works.

To tell the truth of our stories, we have to inhabit them, with all their oddities and flaws and denials; we have to accept the implausibilities of our stories and present predilections in a genuine way, regardless of what we—or our readers—would like to believe. To tell the truth of our stories, we first have to reach out to them ... and sometimes, through them.

