

A Noble Tradition: Creative Writing at UNCG

by William K. Finley

Allen Tate, Peter Taylor, Randall Jarrell, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Katherine Anne Porter, Carolyn Gordon, Robert Penn Warren, Elizabeth Bowen, Richard Eberhardt, W. D. Snodgrass, Reynolds Price, Fred Chappell, Donald Hall, Kay Boyle, R. V. Cassill, Andrew Lytle, Robert Frost, Eudora Welty, William Styron — the names read like a *Who's Who* of twentieth-century American literature. This distinguished group has one thing in common: since the late 1930s they have participated at various times and to varying degrees in the esteemed Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. With this glittering array of talent as support, the university's Creative Writing Program has long been rated one of the best in the country.

Although the Creative Writing Program was not organized fully until 1965, the teaching of creative writing at the university goes back much further. Under various designations, classes in rhetoric and composition have been taught at the North Carolina State Normal and Industrial School (as the university was first called) since its opening in 1892. The English curriculum in the very first *Annual Catalogue* includes an untitled "Course IV" which enforced "practice in writing." "Writing," however, did not necessarily mean creative writing, a course of instruction generally foreign to American universities of that time. The English Department's stated purpose for its writing classes was to assure "the acquisition of the ability to use the lan-

guage with simplicity and force by means of composition in its simpler forms, e.g., letters, reproduction exercises and essays." Institutional interest in encouraging creative writing would not come until later.

By 1918, however, two-semester courses were offered in both short-story writing and versification ("a course designed for that limited number who wish help in the simpler forms of verse making"). In 1920, "The Writing and Editing of News" replaced "Versification" in the English curriculum, while "The Short Story" was reduced to a single semester. In 1923 "Play Writing" joined "The Writing of News," but courses in writing short stories and poems were curtailed (although "Poetics" included "practice in writing simple pieces of verse"). Obviously, for most students, creative writing as an academic discipline was not compelling. For the 1924-1925 academic year, "English Composition" included "practice in the short story," while the courses in news writing and playwriting continued. In this year was added "The Writing of Verse," "limited to fifteen students who have a real desire to express themselves in verse." The reinstitution of such courses reflected a national trend among American colleges to develop classes in creative writing.

In 1927 a course simply called "Creative Writing" first appeared, with a focus on "practice in the short story, the essay, and other literary forms." This was the first course at what was now called North Carolina Woman's College to encompass training in more than one lit-

erary genre. This hybrid course joined the existing course in "Play Writing" and "The Writing of Verse" to form the creative writing component of the English curriculum. All courses in creative writing were electives; none were required to major in English.

In January 1938 the first of many illustrious writers joined the English faculty at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. Allen Tate came from Vanderbilt as full professor to teach the art of poetry writing. He had already written six well-received books of poetry, a volume of literary essays, and two biographies and was completing his first novel. Coming to Woman's College at what he called a "fabulous salary," Tate brought with him his wife, the novelist Caroline Gordon, herself the author of four books. He did not inherit the general "Creative Writing" courses, but he taught both "The Writing of Verse" and "The Writing of Literary Criticism," while Gordon taught a new course, "The Writing of Fiction." With the arrival of these two distinguished authors, it may be said that creative writing became established as a fully-recognized component of English studies at the Woman's College, although there was as yet no opportunity for a concentration in writing.

For 1939-1940 Tate added a course in "Special Projects in the Writing of Criticism and Verse," a class designed "for students desiring to master a critical style or to study intensively the techniques of verse." Gordon taught a complementary "Special Projects in the Writing of Fiction." "The Writing of

News" continued to be taught, as did the general "Creative Writing" classes. After the 1939-1940 academic year, Tate and Gordon left Woman's College for Princeton, where Tate had been named Poet in Residence; and the advanced specialized writing classes in poetry and fiction temporarily ended.

In 1940-1941 "Play Writing" resumed, and in 1943 the Creative Writing courses were renamed "Writing Workshops," covering the writing of fiction, drama, and poetry. The first to teach these classes under the new designation was Hiram Haydn, fresh from a Ph.D. program at Columbia and some years away from achieving his reputation as a foremost editor and author. He remained at Woman's College only two years, leaving to become editor of *American Scholar*. Today, these broad classes still are carried in the English curriculum under the same title and course number.

In 1944 there first appeared at the Woman's College what was to be an important supplement to the creative writing program. The Arts Forum, initiated by English professors Marc Friedlaender and Winfield Rogers, invited to campus distinguished representatives from many fields of arts and humanities, including well-known authors to read and lecture and to discuss and analyze student writing. Over the years such esteemed writers as Robert Lowell, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Frost, Saul Bellow, Elizabeth Bowen, and Seamus Heaney visited Woman's College to give both readings and advice to student writers. These visitations, though generally brief, not only enhanced the instruction given to students in creative writing, but brought recognition and prestige to the college. Today, visits from renowned writers continue to enrich the educational experience in creative writing at UNCG.

In the Fall of 1946 a second major talent joined the English Department at Woman's College to teach creative writing. Although he did not bring with him the distinguished publication record of Allen Tate, Peter Taylor had already published fiction in national magazines and showed great promise as an author. Drawn to the world of teaching after spending four years in the military in World War II and a brief stint as a reader with the publishing firm of



Richard Wilbur, Peter Taylor, Jean Stafford at 1949 Arts Forum, UNCG.

Henry Holt, Taylor had studied poetry under Tate at Southwestern University and under John Crowe Ransom at both Vanderbilt and Kenyon College, where he roomed with the poet Robert Lowell. But Taylor's strength was fiction, not poetry. At Woman's College he revived the specialized fiction-writing courses that years before had been taught by Caroline Gordon. In time, Taylor would win a Pulitzer Prize and many other distinguished awards for his fiction and would become one of the most respected names in American literature.

The following year Taylor was joined by Randall Jarrell, a classmate and close friend from Vanderbilt. Likewise a World War II veteran, Jarrell had been a literary editor at *The Nation* and had published two volumes of poetry. Jarrell would go on to win the National Book Award for poetry and fiction and achieve great acclaim as one of America's finest

poets. Taylor and Jarrell shared the Writing Workshop courses, Taylor teaching the fiction component and Jarrell the poetry. Unlike many authors who accepted teaching positions merely to pay the bills while they concentrated on their writing, Taylor and Jarrell shared a genuine love of teaching and discussing the art of good writing. Their interest in students and their enthusiasm for teaching ushered in a golden age of creative writing instruction at Woman's College.

When Taylor took a leave of absence in 1948-1949, his place in the Writing Workshop was taken by Lettie Rogers, a graduate of Woman's College and a former member of the Sociology Department who had published her first novel to much acclaim in 1946. Rogers would write three more novels and be a teacher and mentor to several future writers, including Doris Betts. Her untimely death in 1957 at age 39 deprived the literary world of what might have become a major talent.

In 1949 the merit of the creative writing component of the English program was recognized by its prominent inclusion in the newly formed Creative Arts Program at the Woman's College (strongly endorsed and aided by Woman's College Chancellor, Walter Clinton Jackson) and a new graduate degree, the Master of Fine Arts, with majors in painting and graphic arts, dance, music composition, or writing. New courses in advanced fiction, poetry, and playwriting ("reserved for those writers who have been encouraged to continue creative work") and graduate seminars in writing were established; and a required thesis for the MFA degree in Writing called for original work in the genres of novel, short stories, poetry, or drama.

Joining the English Department in 1950 was Robie Macauley, a young writer of short stories who showed much promise. The English Department now boasted four distinguished writers in its

creative writing program: Taylor, Jarrell, Rogers, and Macauley. Jarrell taught the poetry sections, Taylor and Rogers handled fiction, and the versatile Macauley taught both poetry and fiction. By this time the writing program within the English program had been greatly expanded. In addition to courses in poetry, fiction, playwriting, and journalism,

[Peter Taylor's and Randall Jarrell's interest in students and their enthusiasm for teaching ushered in a golden age of creative writing instruction at Woman's College.]

the department since 1947 offered a course in "Writing for Radio" and extended this course in 1950 to "Writing for Radio and Television," undoubtedly one of the earliest courses in the country to respond to the new popularity of television.

By 1954 Randall Jarrell was all alone in the Writing Workshop. Peter Taylor and Robie Macauley had both left for other positions, and Lettie Rogers taught only classes in Advanced Composition. For the next ten years Jarrell essentially was the creative writing program at Woman's College, helped out only by the occasional visiting professor. One of the most admired and beloved instructors on campus, he remained the dominant figure in the creative writing program for 18 years. His death in October 1965 left a tremendous void in the Creative Writing Program. Eulogized by colleagues, distinguished writers, and especially by his students, Randall Jarrell left an unmatched legacy of brilliant talent, teaching ability, and genuine concern for students, a legacy reflected in UNCG's Randall Jarrell Fellowship in Writing.

Fortunately, the English faculty had competent replacements. Peter Taylor rejoined the program from 1963 to 1967 for his third and final stint. In 1964 Fred Chappell joined the English faculty from Duke; and Robert Watson, who had been a member of the department since 1953, teaching mainly literature classes, moved into the creative writing component. Currently North Carolina's Poet Laureate, Chappell would eventually publish more than 20 volumes of poetry and fiction and win many prestigious awards, among them the coveted Bollingen Prize for Poetry and the T. S. Eliot Award. Watson's poetry also would receive many awards, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 1966 for his second volume of poems. The post-Jarrell era in creative writing at Woman's College began with reassurance that the quality that Jarrell reflected would continue. Occasionally, visiting professors of

the stature of Allen Tate, Gibbons Ruark, and Alan Shapiro would enhance the program with their presence. Today the Creative Writing Program is in the capable hands of Chappell, Lee Zacharias, H. T. Kirby-Smith, Michael Parker, Stuart Dischell, and Jim Clark, who serves as director.

These prominent writers and teachers represent one-half of the success story of UNCG's Creative Writing Program; talented and dedicated students constitute the other half. Since the university's beginning in 1892, there has been strong interest in writing among students. In the very first year, two student literary societies were formed: the Adelpian and the Cornelian. A third

tained only a few short poems or stories to reflect the creative urge.

Beginning with the October 1910 issue, however, a new impulse characterized the magazine. Now more than twice the length of previous issues, this issue contained five stories and five poems from students, as well as essays and short commentaries on a variety of subjects. This new focus set the tone for subsequent issues. Thus a prestigious new creative voice was born on campus. By the time *The State Normal Magazine* changed its name to *Corradi* (an amalgam of "Cornelian," "Adelpian," and "Dikean") in 1919, the content was almost entirely poetry or fiction. Beginning in 1946, a special Arts Forum issue of *Corradi* wel-

comed student writing from other universities. Works chosen for this special issue were discussed and analyzed by the Writers Committee during the annual Arts Forum conference. The quality of this publication is indicated by the number of contributors who later achieved literary prominence. Among those who contributed over the years were Flannery O'Connor, James Dickey, Guy Davenport, Donald Hall, Wendell Berry, Borden Deal, Anthony Hecht, Heather Ross Miller, and Sylvia Wilkinson.

Students enrolled in both the undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs have published their works in leading magazines and have won numerous lit-

erary awards as well as prestigious Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and American Academy of Poets fellowships. More than a few have written books of poetry, fiction, or non-fiction to national acclaim. Among the more prominent authors who have studied creative writing



Front Row: Elizabeth Hardwick, Carol Johnson (UNCG faculty).
Back Row: Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, Fred Chappell at the Arts Festival, UNCG, 1964.

society — the Dikean — appeared in 1918 and a fourth — Aletheian — in 1922. Active and prestigious, these literary groups encouraged creative expression and provided an outlet for student literary endeavors. The first literary magazine at the university dates from March 1897. Called initially *The State Normal Magazine*, the quarterly publication was edited by members of the Adelpian and Cornelian societies and consisted almost entirely of student work. The early issues focused more on campus news and scholarly critiques than on fiction or poetry, and generally con-

Few programs in the nation can boast a history that includes so many awards won by faculty and students.

at UNCG are Margaret L. Coit, Eleanor Ross Taylor, Robert Morgan, William Pitt Root, Heather Ross Miller, Kelly Cherry, Tim Sandlin, Sylvia Wilkinson, and Doris Betts.

In 1965 the MFA Creative Writing Program at UNCG was formalized and accelerated. A new emphasis distinguished this program from other MFA offerings at the university, and the staff sought the most accomplished student writers from across the nation. At this time only two official creative writing programs existed in the country — at Stanford and the University of Iowa. Students were now accepted as a “class” into the two-year graduate program and became a tightly-knit group who discussed writing and analyzed one another’s work in formal classes or informal gatherings on or off campus.

The next year saw the founding of an important new campus publication. While *Corradi* remained the chief outlet for undergraduate writing, the newly focused MFA Creative Writing Program needed a different publication for graduate work. *The Greensboro Review* was founded by faculty member Robert Watson and several graduate students as a vehicle for graduate writing. Watson, Peter Taylor, and Fred Chappell sat on the first editorial board. Originally intended solely for UNCG students in the Creative Writing Program, the magazine soon expanded to include, first, graduate students from other universities, and then writers in general — students, faculty, or freelancers. Among the prominent contributors since the magazine’s beginning have been Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Bly, May Swenson, Walter Lowenfels, William Peden, Guy Owen, Dabney Stuart, James Applewhite, and Sallie Bingham. The best indication of *The Greensboro Review*’s quality came when the Winter 1987-1988 issue had four stories selected for inclusion in distinguished short story anthologies. Still going strong, *The Greensboro Review* recognizes and encourages good writing, especially by newcomers, by presenting annual awards for best submissions of previously unpublished fiction and poetry. Over the years, publications in the magazine have won numerous prestigious awards.

Since the first creative writing courses were offered at the State Normal

and Industrial School over 80 years ago, the writing component at UNCG has grown to great renown. Few programs in the nation can boast a history that includes so many awards won by faculty and students. The quality of the program was proclaimed in 1994 when George Garrett, Hoynes Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia, in an article for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook 1994* titled “Who Runs American Literature?” ranked



Back Row: Wallace Stevens, Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate. Front Row: Marianne Moore, Muriel Rukeyser at the Arts Form, UNCG in 1955.

UNCG’s MFA Creative Writing Program fourth in the nation, ahead of such well-known programs as those at the University of Iowa and Johns Hopkins.

The development of the Creative Writing Program at UNCG is documented by the breadth of research materials in the Special Collections & University Archives Department of Jackson Library. In 1997 a new focus and emphasis were created in gathering a number of separate collections of creative writing under a general heading to form the Creative Writing Collection.

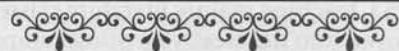
Among the relevant books are publications of staff and students in the Creative Writing Program. Shelves in the university archives are complete runs of both *Corradi* and *The Greensboro Review*. Copies of all university catalogues and bulletins from 1892 help document the evolution of creative writing courses. Special files devoted to Creative Writing, the Arts Forum, *The Greensboro Review*, and many individual faculty and students add valuable information on the history of the program.

It is in the area of manuscripts, however, that the Creative Writing Collec-

tion is unique. Writers whose manuscripts are represented in Jackson Library include Margaret Coit, Jean Farley, Edythe Latham, Robie Macauley, Heather Ross Miller, Michael Parker, Lettie Rogers, Jessie Rosenberg Schell, Joan Cox Spears, Eleanor Ross Taylor, Peter Taylor, Robert Watson, Sylvia Wilkinson, and Emily Herring Wilson. Related collections include *The Greensboro Review*, the Black Mountain Poets, and the papers of Olive Dargan and Lois Lenski.

While the Peter Taylor Collection contains much useful research material on a major literary figure, the most significant research collection in the Creative Writing Collection is undoubtedly the Randall Jarrell Collection. Not only does this important collection contain manuscript and typescript copies of many of Jarrell’s poems and essays, but it also includes class and lecture notes, photographs, memoranda, news clippings, annotated books, and other material which help document both Jarrell’s career and the development of the Creative Writing Program at UNCG. The collection is one of the most heavily used in Special Collections and has proved invaluable to scholars preparing books and articles on Jarrell’s life and works.

Woman’s College Chancellor Walter Clinton Jackson’s hope in the 1940s that the MFA program in Creative Writing would become one of the best in the country has been realized. Tate, Taylor, Jarrell, Watson, and other luminaries in the program are gone, but a distinguished staff and high-caliber students remain to lead UNCG’s Creative Writing Program into the next century.



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Contributing Members:

David S. Ferriero,
Duke University

Dr. Benjamin F. Speller, Jr.,
North Carolina Central University

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