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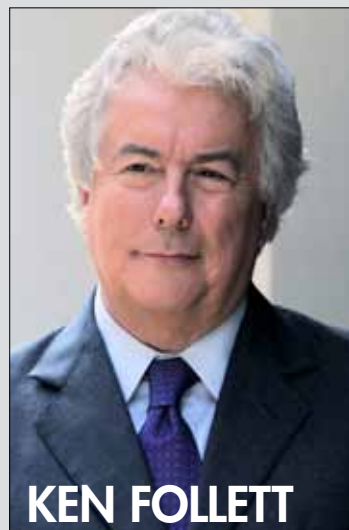
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the **Writer**

January 2012

Imagine • Write • Publish

www.WriterMag.com



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\$6.95
0 71896 46787 1 01
Vol. 125 • Issue 1



MFA's

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

By Melissa Hart

OUR WRITER
TAKES A LOOK AT
FOUR PROGRAMS
AROUND THE U.S.
THAT OFFER A
VARIETY OF
APPROACHES

Fifteen years ago, when I earned my MFA degree in creative writing, graduate students could focus on poetry, fiction or nonfiction in a handful of programs across the country. Now, hundreds of universities and colleges offer the coveted master of fine arts degree in genres as diverse as the travel narrative, screenplay and graphic novel.

I recently spoke with the directors of four programs to discover their MFAs' particular strengths, their illustrious faculty members, and the specific qualities—location, financial aid, opportunities for teaching and editing—that help potential students determine which school represents their perfect fit.

VERMONT COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS Post-graduate support

Many MFA students thrive on semesters packed with stimulating workshops, visiting writers, and constant critiques from advisers. But post-graduation, they freeze, unsure of what to do next.

To smooth the transition from student to professional, faculty at the Vermont College of Fine Arts offer a post-graduate writers conference, as well as a post-degree semester of study for alumni. "It's a great opportunity for them, whether they want to come back and explore a different

genre or a more specific project, or work with new faculty," says program director Louise Crowley.

The 30-year-old program operates on a low-residency model. Students attend 10-day residencies twice a year, either at the college, in Montpelier, Vt., or in Slovenia in the summer or Puerto Rico in winter.

Students may opt to work on its literary journal, *Hunger Mountain*. Those interested in literary translation may apply for a special concentration, studying an extra semester with a professional writer/translator. As well, some apply for a semester of

dual-genre or cross-discipline focus.

"We have a number of faculty who are well-published in more than one genre," Crowley says. "We embrace all kinds of writing, and students have a diverse group of faculty members."

Memoirist and poet Sue William Silverman teaches here, as do fiction/nonfiction writer Connie May Fowler and American Book Award recipient Rigoberto González.

The Vermont College of Fine Arts offers both an MFA degree in writing, and an MFA in writing for children and young

WHIDBEY WRITERS WORKSHOP

Literary citizenship

Faculty members who teach in the Whidbey Writers Workshop MFA Program feel so strongly about ensuring students' success that they offer a 27-hour course for graduates on the profession of writing.

"When I got my MFA years ago," says program director Wayne Ude, "it was kind of, 'So long and good luck.' Our program brings in agents, editors and social-media experts. By the time graduating students finish, they have their 30-second pitch, their five-minute pitch, and an idea of where to send their query letter. They walk out of that final residency and they're ready to send their book out."

The program, on Whidbey Island near Seattle, is the first in the country to be offered by an organization of writers, as opposed to a university. Students have up to six years to complete a degree with a concentration in fiction, poetry, nonfiction, or writing for children/young adults. Biannual 10-day residencies bring together students, alumni and faculty. The latter include author and essayist Ana Maria Spagna, Nebula award-winning fiction writer Bruce Holland Rogers, and children's book author Bonnie Becker.

Literary citizenship—"the ways in which writers support one another"—informs the Whidbey Writers MFA program, Ude says. "It's somebody who edits a magazine, who joins the board of a writers organization, who offers local workshops for other writers. The students jumped on it and recognized its value before I did. It's becoming a model for us."

Length: Two to six years. **Residency months:** January and August. **Cost:** About \$25,000. **Financial aid:** Scholarships; Department of Education Title IV Direct Loan. **Contact:** Wayne Ude, program director. 360-331-0307. ude@nila.edu. **Website:** writeonwhidbey.org/mfa.

adults. Each August, students with a graduate degree in writing from any program may attend the Postgraduate Writers' Conference, which includes workshops, instructor consultations, readings, and forums on issues relevant to professional writers.

Length: Two years; optional additional semester. **Residency months:** December/January and June/July. **Cost:** About \$36,000. **Financial aid:** Scholarships; Federal Stafford Loan and Federal Direct Grad PLUS. **Contact:** Louise Crowley, program director. 866-934-8232. louise.crowley@vermontcollege.edu. **Website:** vermontcollege.edu.

CHATHAM UNIVERSITY

A travel and environmental focus

Chatham University professors incorporate global citizenship in their full- and low-residency MFA programs. Students may concentrate on travel writing or on nature/environmental writing, working with faculty that includes poet Peter Oresick, screenwriter and fiction writer Marc Nieson, and children's/young-adult author Katherine Ayres.

"We're incredibly blessed because the priorities of our administration are the environment and internationalism," says program director Sheryl St. Germain. "We're all about travel—we focus on a country every year."

Recently, that country was Vietnam. Writers with related works came to Chatham to read and teach, and the university offered Vietnamese courses and a film festival. "And then we did this trip to Vietnam," St. Germain says.

In the past, trips have included two weeks in England, Turkey and Israel. They also include a field seminar in Pittsburgh, where Chatham is based. They are a requirement for full-residency students, and optional for low-residency participants.

Writers may move in between the two programs. "If someone gets married in their second year and moves to Oregon, they can move seamlessly into low residency," St. Germain explains. "International students who can't get here the first year can do low residency until they arrive."

Chatham MFA students can also do independent field seminars, designing their own trips. "The idea is that they learn to journal meaningfully about their travels and generate poems, stories and essays." Some get in the school's literary journal, *The Fourth River*.

St. Germain points out that because Chatham is a small, private university, staff respond quickly to market demands. For example, she says, "There's been interest in food studies, so we offer a food-writing course. We have a sustainability program; our students get involved with organic gardening."

Length: Two to six years. Full- and low-residency. **Residency month:** August. Field seminars differ. **Cost:** About \$30,000. **Financial aid:** Fellowships; Federal Stafford Loan. **Contact:** Sheryl St. Germain, program director. 412-365-1190. sstgermain@chatham.edu. **Website:** chatham.edu/mfa.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Teaching opportunities

"It's cheap to live in Alabama," says Robin Behn, MFA program director at the University of Alabama. "You can come out [of the program] without debt, and it's a fascinating and interesting local culture. You can enjoy the food of the region, the folk art and blues music and heritage."

MFA students fund tuition through fellowships and teaching stipends, which Behn says creates a feeling of camaraderie and equality. They teach composition, creative writing and literature. They also teach in high schools and local prisons. "We're thinking about writers in the world, and the work we're called to do."

The program offers instruction in fiction, poetry and nonfiction, but writers may work in several genres, including prose poetry and short-short fiction taught by Kellie Wells. Hybrid classes range from poet Joel Brouwer's examination of how writers use history in their work to Behn's workshop in which writers collaborate with other students in the arts.

"Each of the faculty has an open-

minded idea about what genre is," she explains. "Once you're in our program, you can take any class with any professor. If you've always wondered what acting is like or you want to explore book arts, you can count a course in another field toward your degree." Students can also take a paid position on *Black Warrior Review*.

UA's MFA students come from all over the world, Behn notes. "It's a place where people with anthropological interests like to come and have fun with lots of people from other places. You're part of a big, vibrant community in a nice facility. It just takes a little bit of adventurous spirit to explore this in the Deep South."

Length: Three to four years. Full residency. **Cost:** Incidental. **Financial aid:** Graduate assistantships and fellowships. **Contact:** Robin Behn, program director. 205-348-5065. rbehn@bama.ua.edu. **Website:** english.ua.edu/08_cw.

Melissa Hart

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