

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

TINKER MOUNTAIN WRITERS' WORKSHOP

Hollins' summer workshop for writers has just finished its second successful year.

BY SARAH ACHENBACH '88

A woman cradles a .45 caliber pistol for the first time, the weight of its handle heavy in her sweaty palm. An opened box of Remington bullets sits nearby. As she tries to quiet her nerves, her index finger slowly squeezes off a shot. The air fills with the smoky, sulphurous smell of cordite, and a slow smile stretches across her face.

Photos by Jillian Walker '08



It's just another day at the Tinker Mountain Writers' Workshop (TMWW), Hollins' annual writers' conference. While the venue for the class—the Potts Mountain Firing Range in Virginia's Jefferson National Forest—may be unusual, it's the perfect place to prove a point to both novice and seasoned writers: when writing, it's important to sweat the details. "So many people write about guns incorrectly in their stories," explains TMWW codirector Pinckney Benedict, who teaches a fiction workshop at the conference, which he cofounded with novelist Fred Leebron. "There are many things that we write about on a day-to-day basis without much awareness of their actual physicality and the level of detail that's possible. My hope was to show [participants] something they've

Roanoke County Sheriff's Deputy Kermit Moore shows Molly Atwell '00 how to aim and shoot a handgun at a nearby firing range. The practice was part of Pinckney Benedict's class, "GUNS, GUNS, GUNS: Everything You've Always Wanted to Know for Writing About Firearms But Were Afraid to Ask."

probably been glossing over in their writing and to show them how complicated and interesting they are."

To help writers understand the details and differences in firearms and how to use them in their writing, Benedict hosted a trip to the firing range and offered a craft seminar titled "GUNS, GUNS, GUNS: Everything You've Always Wanted to Know for Writing About Firearms But Were Afraid to Ask"—complete with an arsenal of unloaded firearms and commentary by writer and Roanoke County Sheriff's Deputy Kermit Moore. In addition to being a gun enthusiast, Benedict is

an award-winning novelist, short-story writer, essayist, screenwriter, and opera lyricist—and the son of Ann Arthur Benedict '56. He recently taught English and creative writing at Hollins, and this fall begins a teaching position at Southern Illinois University. He will continue to codirect the TMWW.

Attention to detail and individual attention by instructors are quickly becoming hallmarks of the Hollins conference, now in its second year. This past June, thirty-nine writers joined five faculty instructors for a week of seminars, daily writing workshops in fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction,

readings, and outings. “The Roanoke Valley is a special place, with its own rich literary history, and Hollins is the perennial hotbed of literary talent,” says Leebron, who is professor of English at Gettysburg College and director of the M.F.A. program at Queens University at Charlotte. “[Hollins] is the natural locale for both tapping the region’s literary interest and talent and for providing a resource to that talent. As an adult-based, open-enrollment program, we were looking to provide a friendly,

but structured like a smaller one. A lot of the bigger conferences are built around ‘Mt. Rushmore-types’ of literary folks. We don’t build around a star system here. When I talk to potential TMWW faculty, I want them to be accessible.”

That’s exactly what drew Jacob Williams to the TMWW for a second year. “I was very impressed [in 2005] at how accessible the faculty was,” notes Williams, a short-story writer and M.F.A. student at Queens University at Charlotte. “It was like hanging out

writing program students, like Williams, and graduates and published writers, but it also attracts people who are newer to the craft. When Benedict thinks of the perfect audience for the conference, one word comes to mind: enthusiasts. “We have folks who have their M.F.A.s and those who are just starting out as writers. Some are retired and some are just out of undergraduate school, but all are extremely enthusiastic about the art of writing. Here nobody is measuring you against someone else.”

At eighteen, TMWW newcomer Charlotte Asmuth was the youngest 2006 TMWW participant and the youngest by thirty years in her five-person poetry workshop led by Hollins faculty member and poet Thorpe Moeckel. This fall, Asmuth returns as a member of the Hollins Class of 2010 with plans to study creative writing with a minor in music. “I love writing, and I thought [the TMWW] was a great way to get to know the campus. I probably know it better than any other freshman. I already feel like Hollins is a second home, and I want to go back next year for the workshop.”

Nervous initially about being the youngest participant and curious about how the workshop scenario would be, Asmuth’s anxieties quickly dissipated during orientation the first night. “I got right into it and mixed with everyone,” she says. “We had exchanged our poems over the Internet before the conference, but I had never gotten to give and get criticism in a workshop before. Most had done workshops before, some had M.F.A.s, and some had published. But everyone said that they hadn’t done workshops as young as me so I was on the right track.”

As the week went on, Asmuth felt more comfortable giving and getting feedback in the daily, three-hour workshops. “The best part of the conference was learning how to hold my own in a room full of adults,” she says, laughing at her answer when asked what the hardest part was. “When you’re being critiqued, the rule is to stay quiet and not explain what you meant. It was so hard not to say anything, but I never had so much concentrated effort on my poetry before.”

For TMWW second-year instructor Daniel Mueller M.A. ’89, the workshop environment carries over into the rest of



This summer’s TMWW faculty included (left to right) Daniel Mueller, Thorpe Moeckel, James McKean, workshop codirector Pinckney Benedict, and Ashley Warlick. Not shown is codirector Fred Leebron.

serious, and convivial atmosphere, and I think we have been very successful in doing so.”

Since the first conference last year, enrollment has climbed 30 percent. “We are thrilled with the participants, the faculty, the support from Hollins, and the facility,” Leebron notes. Future plans include growing the poetry division and offering workshops in writing for stage and screen and new forms such as “genre fiction”—but not growing too far beyond its current number of students. “Our program is small by design and intimate,” says Benedict. “This is the most blended conference I have ever seen. We’re the length of a [larger] conference

with friends talking about writing. It was a very positive environment.” Williams was also taken with the quality of the workshops and his fellow attendees. Hollins is his only experience with a writers’ conference, though he belonged to a writers’ group for a year in his hometown of Owings Mills, Maryland. “Most of the people in that group only wrote as a hobby. The writers here are much more talented and very enthusiastic about sharing, reading, and workshoping. This is a really great place to find out whether or not you want to do serious writing without a super-serious environment.”

The TMWW draws its share of

the conference. “We created a dialogue the first day that continued through the rest of the week,” explains Mueller, who taught a workshop titled “Casting a Long Shadow: Dimensionality in Short and Long Fiction” and presented a craft seminar on the exotic and familiar in fiction. “Every piece that we workshop is in the process of being realized. The point of a workshop is to help writers become writers implicitly. We talk about a diverse array of techniques, and everyone acquires a greater level of skills. Writers take away techniques and strategies that are conscious rather than unconscious.” The dialogue he created with the 2005 TMWW participants continued throughout the year via e-mail, something he expects to repeat with this past summer’s attendees.

The conference offers Mueller an interesting change of scenery from his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he teaches fiction at the University of New Mexico. As a 1989 graduate of Hollins’ then-M.A. program in creative writing, Mueller enjoyed a homecoming during the week of the conference. “Each thing was new, but it was in the context of all these memories that came flooding back,” he recalls. “My year at Hollins was bar none the most important year in my development as a writer. My writing improved exponentially.” Currently at work on a novel, his collection of stories, *How Animals Mate*, received the Sewanee Fiction Prize, and *Esquire Magazine* selected it as one of five best collections of short fiction of 1999. Mueller also teaches in the M.F.A. program at Queens University at Charlotte with Leebron and fellow TMWW instructors Jim McKean and Ashley Warlick.

The week was a homecoming as well for Peg Roney Gary ’45, who at age eighty-three was the oldest participant. Gary had attended Hollins for two years before transferring to Yale Art School, which along with nursing was the only Yale course of study available to women at the time. She visited Hollins in the late 1960s when her daughter, Valle Simms Ashley ’69, was a student, but hadn’t been back since until she and friend Martha George signed up for the conference. “Martha and I have both been widowed lately, and we thought it would be a very nice way to spend the

week,” explains Gary. “We stayed in the dorm and rushed around from place to place—all the things that college kids do. I was proud of us actually.”

She was proud of what she accomplished in Daniel Mueller’s fiction class as well. “It is very hard to go in with one chapter,” she says of the modern-day novel she is writing about a girl whose family emigrated from Greece to the U.S. in the 1930s. “I’ve concentrated on writing letters and had a poem published once, but hadn’t tried writing

wasn’t intimidating. Whether you’ve been writing for a few months or all your life, you’ll come away with a great experience.”

That’s exactly what Leebron and Benedict hoped for when they founded the conference. “We want to give writers a week where they can say each morning, ‘I’m not crazy or at least not alone in my craziness,’” Benedict says. “This conference is a world where what they do is perfectly legitimate. We’re just trying to make folks who love writing a little better.”



The group gathered for a picnic and open-mic session in the Forest of Arden the night before the final day of the workshop.

fiction until recently,” she says. “It’s so hard to grapple with all the parts of the story. I felt what Dan had to say about my stuff was good. Consequently I came home and did some reworking on it.” A suggestion they developed together was changing the voice from third to first person. “Writing is so hard because it’s so isolating,” explains Gary, who owns a decorating firm in Atlanta and has enjoyed a career as a painter. “It’s interesting to get together with people who are doing what you’re doing.”

That sense of community is at the heart of the Tinker Mountain Writers’ Workshop. “It definitely helped me grow as a writer,” admits Williams. “There was a broad range of writing experience so it

Sarah Achenbach lives and writes in Baltimore.

► For more information on the Tinker Mountain Writers’ Workshop, contact Christine Powell, director of special programs, at (540) 362-6225 or cpowell@hollins.edu. Or visit the Hollins Web site, www.hollins.edu. Tuition for the 2006 conference was \$700 for the week, with an additional \$200 for the on-campus meal plan and \$200 for on-campus housing in Tinker dormitory.