An Interview with Vance Bourjaily

Steve Wilbers

WILBERS: How do you think a writer benefits from attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop?

BOURJAILY: Well, Iowa works for different people in different ways, but more than anything else it provides an ambiance, an atmosphere. It's a place where a bunch of writers of various ages live together in the same town, drink in the same bar, and have a certain Byzantine business to do together. In this atmosphere, finding yourself a member of a group of peers -- possibly for the first time in your life because you were always the kid who could write but there wasn't anybody else around quite

like you in your high school of college -- two things happen.

For one thing, you learn a certain humility about what you have taken to be your unique talent. You find out that they're an awful lot of people around who are just as talented. Talent is a cheap commodity. At the same time, you're reassured that there are people around who seem to make sense and function normally, who don't think that the idea of writing a great novel or great poem is preposterous goal. In fact, that a couple of hundred people think that it's a marvelous thing to do and they're all there and they're all talking about it and they're all trying to do it.

From that standpoint, a writing program is not all that unlike the literary capital of a country that has a literary capital. After all, in England, particularly in I guess the eighteenth century, if you were a young writer, you went to London, you got into the coffee houses, you tried to sit at a table near enough to Dr. Johnson's to hear what he was saying, and you got little writing jobs -- but it all happened in London. It was centered in London. In France, the same sort of thing all centered on the café life of Paris and in the twenties obviously American writers learned that and took

advantage of it. They made their own Paris within Paris.

That sort of localizing of a literary place went on in this country in Greenwich Village at one time, in the twenties and thirties. It kind of disappeared in the Depression. After the Second World War, it became very fragmented. New York has not since then really been a literary capital -- it's been a publishing capital. It's where the business of literature is carried on. But it's not a comfortable working atmosphere where writers know each other and see each other from time to time and have a few drinks together, swap girlfriends and boyfriends (laughing), all that kind of stuff. I've seen this sort of thing for American writers both start and end in Mexico City. There were a group of us in Mexico City in the early fifties. Obviously, there was a time when it all took place in San Francisco. I've seen it sporadically in New York, but not in a really concentrated and continuing way. I've never seen it any place as strongly as I have in Iowa City.

WILBERS: Has the University of Iowa itself contributed to this atmosphere?

BOURJAILY: Well, in a way I suppose. As a result of Paul Engle's work and perhaps as a result too of

there having been a strong tradition of productive people both in music and theater, Iowa is good about supporting artistic endeavor. The extraordinary thing about this university is that in supporting research is makes no distinction between scientific or scholarly and imaginative work. They feel that a painter or a composer or a writer who achieves publication or display or performance is achieving a record of publication as beneficial to the university as scholarly publication and scientific publication. The university itself, as part of its educational pride in the quality of its faculty, is willing to concede that creative work is just as valid as any other kind and therefore takes no exception to the idea of supporting loads of free time in which to write books, just as a guy doing diabetes research in the hospital is given lots of free time in which he is not teaching or treating patients. He's working on his research.

WILBERS: How has the Workshop changed since you came here to teach in 1957?

BOURJAILY: Well, it was a more innocent time then. It was smaller. The workshop itself was located in the temporary buildings over by the union, which is now the union parking lot and I think we all had considerable affection for those old tin

buildings. In 1957, there were still a number of older students around, the Korean War veterans, and it was in general a much younger faculty. We were all pretty close to the students in age. It made for an easy-going kind of student-teacher relationship. Tom Williams, whose book won the National Book Award last year, was a student here then. Tom was a guy who had published a novel before coming here and he was virtually my age -- a couple years younger. Tom and I became very close friends and still are. We used to go duck hunting on the Iowa River together, morning after morning. Fishing in the spring. Our trout fishing group would go up to northeast Iowa when spring came and would generally include Kim Merker, and a guy named Pete Everwine, a poet of some distinction now. In addition to hunting and fishing and the usual partying, there was a regular Friday night poker game that generally met at my house, which was again Merker, Everwine, Tom Williams, Justice. Bill Murray used to play with us -- he was a graduate student then. We all used to really look forward to our weekly poker game.

A much more significant difference was that in 1957 there were not a lot of jobs around teaching creative writing. The students at that time were

single-mindedly interested in developing themselves as writers, seeing if they could become writers, seeing what they could learn about writing. We never thought about teaching. We never thought about teaching jobs as something that the M.F.A. certified a student as qualified to undertake. It was an exception when a student wanted to go into university teaching. The M.F.A. was a studio degree. And while it might turn out that a few people would have to teach or would like teaching well enough to want to teach, this whole idea that somehow you do two years at Iowa, get an M.F.A., and go out and get a teaching job had really not taken any root in the students' minds, nor had it in mine.

When I was an undergraduate, it never occurred to me that I might become a college teacher. I knew I wasn't qualified. I never went to graduate school. It just wasn't one of the things I was going to do with my life. The thing I was going to do with my life, obviously, was to write books and to make enough money that way to support myself and my family. The books came along all right, but the earnings didn't.

Still, when I first came out here, I had no idea of staying more than a year and, then when I

decided to stay the second year, that was going to be it. It certainly was not part of my vision of what I'd be doing when I left after the second year at Iowa that I'd ever be back teaching again. I had done that and it was fun and it was interesting. And that was pretty much the attitude of the students. The kids then didn't think of themselves as preparing to be teachers -- they thought of themselves as preparing to be writers, quite single-mindedly. The idea that teaching and writing didn't often go very well together was a prevalent one. I think I had that idea myself, though I was gradually learning that there simply aren't any jobs away from the academic world which provide you the kind of free time that you find here.

WILBERS: The question always arises whether or not creative writing can be taught. Nelson Algren, who once taught in the Iowa program, has attacked the whole concept. More specifically, he has written that "the Writers' Workshop provides sanctuary from those very pressures in which creativity is forged. If you want to create something of your own, stay away." How would you respond to that?

BOURJAILY; Well, I think it's a terrible over-simplification. In the sense in which that phrase is used, there isn't anything that can be taught.

You can't teach mathematics. That is to say, you cannot create a gift for originating mathematical concepts in a mind in which that gift does not innately exist. In the same way, you cannot teach somebody to be a great painter or a great musician or a great biologist. What Nelson's lines ignore is that excellence is unteachable in whatever field. You can't teach somebody who doesn't have it physically to be a great football player. But you can put him in a football program and give him the right kind of competition and watch what he does and have experienced people in that particular kind of athletic endeavor correct the way he holds a football when he passes it or suggest that he turn it slightly more to the side when he punts it. These are things which, indeed, the gifted athlete might by trial and error find out for himself in time. But what coaching in a situation like that does is to save some of that time.

I think that all we can pretend to do in a program like this is to say that for certain gifted people, who are temperamentally suited to the life in Iowa City to begin with, a certain amount of time can be saved by coming to this workshop for a couple of years. I often think, in the case of my own career, that a great time for me to have

come to a program like this would have been after I had written my second novel -- a bad novel that has never been published. It was the point at which I became self-conscious about craft and I really had to learn something about writing and needed unimpeded time and the company of my peers. And my time instead was impeded with all sorts of jobs, including newspaper work, and the company of the other elevator operators and window trimmers and waiters and messenger boys and newspaper men.

Now, in my mind the learning that goes on here has very little to do with the structure of classes and courses and the resulting degree. We have a structure of classes and courses and a resulting degree because we must because we are part of a university. The first thing I would do if I were somehow empowered to have my own writing program would be to throw out all of that structure, because that has so little to do with the learning that goes on here. On the other hand, I wouldn't say that the workshop sessions themselves are totally irrelevant. And I do think that the literature courses are quite necessary for some, because students these days are not terribly well read and you just push them through a bunch of books they ought to be reading anyway.

WILBERS: If the workshops and the literature courses

are not the primary means of teaching and learning here, what is?

BOURJAILY: First, I think I should make a distinction between teaching and learning. I can't teach anybody to be a writer, but somebody might come here and learn to be a writer. Now, the learning that goes on, goes on for many reasons. It goes on because of the exchanges that students have with their peers and colleagues. For some, learning may be accomplished by being in a student-teacher relationship with an older, established writer -- if they happen to respect that older, established writer and he or she is able to articulate for that particular student certain things that make sense.

Generally speaking, when you're working with somebody on a manuscript, you're not telling them things they didn't already sense intuitively, but you're helping them get those things into words or get those things into concepts they can make use of. Almost always when I'm conferring with a good student and I make a negative point about a manuscript, it turns out to be something that he or she already knew, but kind of hoped it wasn't that bad. You just confirm what they already suspected.

At that level, it's very much the same kind of work that editors once did for publishing companies.

Editors don't function that way anymore. Editors no longer really edit manuscripts. They sell, promote, produce, they write jacket copy, they're terribly busy and they don't work much with writers. They don't work with writers as Max Perkins worked with Fitzgerald and Wolfe. There's a void, because at a certain time in your life as a writer, it's good to have somebody whom you respect, who can go over your stuff and talk with you about it, criticizing or generalizing or just patting you on the back. But there's a void in American publishing in the absence of that kind of editor. And I think that the writing programs -- not just this one but writing programs in general -- fill that void for the developing writer.

WILBERS: How would you go about assessing the relative success or failure of a program like the Iowa Workshop?

BOURJAILY: You know, I think if we produce a Flannery O'Connor in the fifties and a Tom Williams in the sixties and that if one person comes out of here in the seventies who's that good, I think the program is worthwhile. You don't expect a conservatory to make everybody who goes through it a concert star or a university football program to send out every man on the squad to be a super star

in the pros -- it just doesn't happen that way. There are programs -- take the example of the conservatory -- which expose people to a lot of music and a lot of music training and produce lots of competent musicians, lots of high school music teachers, lots of people who give piano lessons at home, some who stop taking music very seriously -- maybe a few performers, maybe a great star every decade, and a bunch of people who find it a good enough educational discipline for their minds and go on and do something else.

Same way with a football program. They produce a bunch of high school coaches, a few good enough to go into the pros, who become small-time names in the pros, but a lot of guys who are just going to leave athletics and play a little week-end tennis and touch football. That was a good part of their lives and they're done with it. But to put the burden on a writing program of turning out ten prominent writers every year and a Nobel Prize every decade is just silly. You don't make that requirement of any kind of teaching program.