

**The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop:  
Forty-Three Stories, Recollections, and Essays on Iowa's Place in  
Twentieth-Century Literature/A Community of Writers: Paul Engle  
and the Iowa Writers' Workshop/The Eleventh Draft: Craft and...**

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California not only included many similar displays and amusements but also offered exhibits unique to their state. Nelson thus succeeds in depicting "the American state fair," but his broad view of the subject seldom focuses on the uniqueness of particular state fairs.

*The American State Fair* is amply researched, engagingly written, and perceptive. Anyone who has ever strolled around a state fair-ground in late summer will find the book an enjoyable and informative tour of the history of these annual exhibitions. This book, like a well-run fair, aims simultaneously to educate and to please—a tricky balance to maintain, as any fair secretary could attest, but Derek Nelson succeeds admirably.

*The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop: Forty-Three Stories, Recollections, and Essays on Iowa's Place in Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Tom Grimes. New York: Hyperion, 1999. xii, 766 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

*A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, edited by Robert Dana. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. xvii, 294 pp. Illustrations. \$17.95 paper.

*The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, edited by Frank Conroy. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. xiii, 235 pp. \$23.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RONALD WEBER, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

"Iowa changed the course of American literature in the twentieth century," writes Tom Grimes at the end of *The Workshop*, his impressive anthology of stories and recollections by students who attended the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop over the course of seven decades (754). It's an unguarded remark in an otherwise balanced account of the Workshop that accompanies the volume. Hemingway, just possibly, altered the direction of American literature, but surely the Workshop did not. What can be said with some certainty is that it changed the way young people went about trying to become writers, another thing entirely.

Would-be writers used to think the route to the literary life was through newspaper offices—or through 57th Street in Chicago, Greenwich Village in New York, or the Left Bank in Paris. Since the 1940s they have, almost exclusively, assumed it was through university writing programs. And it is here that Iowa led the way, offering degree credit for creative work and developing M.F.A. and Ph.D. programs in writ-

ing that established the model for what Grimes, a novelist and director of the writing program at Southwest Texas State University, says are 300 writing programs now in existence, many led by Iowa graduates.

This is no small accomplishment. Iowa has reason to be proud of the preeminence of the Workshop—and the Workshop cause to celebrate itself, as it does in the three books discussed here. Of course success has bred detractors. Some decry the cookie-cutter sameness of writing programs that produce fiction and poetry long on technique and short on substance. Others draw back from the intense, insular, writing-as-religion nature of the Iowa City experience. “In many ways,” writes James Hynes in *The Workshop*, “being at the Writers’ Workshop was like being in high school again. It was a cliquish, judgmental place, where your reputation could be decided in a moment” (720).

But what appears to be criticism is a backhand compliment. In the Workshop, Hynes adds, “you weren’t judged on your hair or clothes . . . but on the contents of your bookshelf” (720). He tells of witnessing a fistfight at a party over, of all writers, Theodore Dreiser—“probably the first time anybody had thrown a punch over *Sister Carrie* since Dreiser himself was in his prime” (720). Over and over in the recollections Iowa City is approvingly sketched as a place where, as Tom Barbash puts it, writing “matters more than anything else. . . . I felt like I was at the very center of things, and I felt protected from the elements, from having a job or looking for a job, from pleasing a boss, from any responsibility other than finishing the next story. What a great gift” (726).

While the bulk of *The Workshop* is given over to a collection of stories by fiction writers who attended the Iowa program (among them, Flannery O’Connor, Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, and Jane Smiley), the poet Robert Dana’s *A Community of Writers* offers a collection of essays about the Workshop experience, including essays by Workshop instructors. While Iowa wasn’t the first university to have professional writers on its faculty (the novelist Robert Herrick joined the University of Chicago faculty in 1893), it quickly embraced the new form of literary patronage. As a result, a parade of well-known writers spent teaching time at Iowa, including John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and Hortense Calisher. The visiting writers joined a more or less permanent staff that included Donald Justice, Ray B. West Jr., Vance Bourjaily, R. V. Cassill, and Marvin Bell. The impresario of the assembly was the poet Paul Engle, and much of Dana’s book is taken up with recollections of Engle’s manner and accomplishments.

Although Engle is acknowledged as the one who put the Writers’ Workshop on the literary map, John C. Gerber, a former chair of the Department of English, locates the origins of Iowa’s prominence in

writing in a "Verse-making Class" the poet George Cram Cook offered at the university in 1896. This was followed by an advanced composition course offered by Clarke Fisher Ansley. Ansley, in turn, had considerable influence on John T. Frederick, who in 1915 began publishing in Iowa City *The Midland: A Magazine of the Middle West*, which until it ceased publication in 1933 was a major influence in the rise of American literary regionalism. Meanwhile, the appearance of the semi-autonomous Writers' Workshop at Iowa was furthered by the work of figures such as Edwin Ford Piper, Frank Luther Mott, and especially Norman Foerster and Wilbur L. Schramm. In 1939 the designation "Writers' Workshop" appeared for course offerings, and in 1943 Engle succeeded Schramm as the Workshop director. "It was Engle," Gerber concludes, "with his indefatigable drive, entrepreneurial skill, and boyish enthusiasm, who brought the workshop its fame and international attention" (227). (A more detailed account of the Workshop's history is available in Stephen Wilber's *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, and Growth* [1980].)

Although Engle was an Iowa-born graduate of Coe College and the University of Iowa, the Workshop under his direction pursued a course of international modernism rather than the midwestern regionalism of Frederick or the painter Grant Wood. Curtis Harnack, both a student and instructor in the Workshop and a native Iowan, wrote memorably about the state, but for the most part the Workshop, while set in Iowa, was not about it. Engle scouted the country and eventually the world to bring to Iowa talented writers and teachers—and to raise money for fellowships and salaries. His stated aims for the Workshop remained modest. Steven D. Salinger recalls Engle telling him that all a writing workshop could do was "establish an environment where creative writing was the central activity, where young writers could mix both with their peers and with established professionals. The best thing we can hope for . . . is to save a young writer some time, to bring him along a bit faster than he might progress alone" (271).

The Engle that emerges from *A Community of Writers* is a generous and tireless literary promoter. "No writer in all of history," Kurt Vonnegut says of him, "did as much to help other writers as Paul Engle" (115). But what the poet W. D. Snodgrass calls Engle's "missionary zeal" for the needs of others exacted a price: according to Snodgrass, a sharp decline in the quality of Engle's poetry from its auspicious start when he won the Yale Younger Poets Prize (123). Snodgrass is blunt: "It had once been expected he'd become a fine, perhaps a great poet; this had not occurred" (122). The overall mood of the recollections, nonetheless, is thick with warmth—for Engle, for such Workshop in-

structors as Berryman, West, and Justice, for the Workshop experience, and for Iowa City. "That was a golden time, wasn't it?" Dana recalls Robert Lowell saying when, twenty years after shared Workshop days, he chanced to meet his former poetry instructor in London (158).

Dana's book gives most of its attention to the Workshop in its early days, particularly the 1950s and '60s when the program was housed in honorably shabby temporary barracks along the Iowa River. The 23 essays in *The Eleventh Draft*, written by former students and teachers in the Workshop and edited by Frank Conroy, the current director, have a broader base. Many of the writers are familiar with the Workshop in more recent times, and their concern is less with the Workshop itself than the writing life. In one of the best pieces, "What I Learned at the Iowa Writers' Workshop," Ethan Canin notes that little of what he learned there was learned from teachers and classes; in fact, Canin says he wrote nothing his first year-and-a-half in Iowa City. What he did learn came in the final half-year from the furious labor needed to produce stories for his M.F.A. thesis: the hard truth that writing is "this most difficult life" (28). That seemingly obvious but not immediately apparent insight is echoed in Conroy's brief introductory remarks when he sums up what he has learned in twelve years as Workshop director, namely, that "writing is a test of character as well as a test of talent, and talent is more common than character" (xiii). Therein is another hard truth.

*The Way It Was: The University of Iowa, 1964-1989*, by D. C. Spriestersbach. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999. xv, 264 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, index. \$27.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY AMY SUE BIX, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

In the decades after World War II, America's Cold War defense needs combined with an active scientific, medical, and social agenda to transform the nation's universities. The opportunity to tap an unprecedented flood of federal funding changed the University of Iowa, as it did others, from an institution financed primarily by tuition and state appropriations, into one driven by a continuous quest for outside grants. Increasingly, a university's status would be defined not in terms of undergraduate teaching, but by a focus on research, graduate training, and success in competing for funds.

One man instrumental in helping the University of Iowa negotiate this transition was Duane Spriestersbach, who served from 1965 to 1989 as dean of the Graduate College and vice-president for educational

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