

INSIDE THE KOOTENAY SCHOOL OF WRITING

Calvin Wharton

It's a Friday afternoon in Vancouver. In a classroom above the Saigon restaurant on West Broadway, a group of men and women sit around a table and discuss a proposal from someone who wants to teach a course in writing. One of them points out that students could find the same course at three or four other schools in the city. They decide against the proposal and move on to other business.

The meeting is the regular weekly gathering of the members of the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver – there is also a branch in Nelson, B.C.. The KSW is an independent, non-profit society offering workshops and courses in writing, editing and publishing, as well as sponsoring a public reading program and a series of talks. In the year that it has been in operation, KSW has attracted about 400 students.

"The numbers game can be a bit misleading," says instructor Tom Wayman. "Sometimes the same student will attend more than one workshop or lecture. But we had 85 students signed up in Winter term for courses lasting longer than three sessions. You might say that's the core of our student body.

"The students we get are special," adds Wayman. "Their first commitment is to writing, so the writing takes precedence over other concerns such as grades. Otherwise, they'd look for more conventional writing programs."

Although the KSW is in its third year now, it does have a slightly older background. The David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, which opened in 1979, was "an educational facility dedicated to personal, quality instruction in Fine Arts and Education" according to a promotional poster.

In May 1984 B.C.'s Social Credit government closed the centre, which had included a thriving writing program. The closure brought loud protest from the institution as well as from the community and David Thompson University Centre supporters across Canada.

Despite the centre's demise, the writing program refused to disappear. Program coordinator Colin Browne and Fred Wah, the founder of the writing school, had already been thinking about how to keep the program going.

"We devised a school that was more like a referral agency than a building with classes in it," says Browne. "Our idea at the time was to take on a select number of students with proven ability and give them the best education others could provide."

Browne and Wah met with students, graduates and former instructors of the program. The initial core group included, in Vancouver, Tom Wayman, Gary Whitehead, Jeff Derksen, Alicia Priest, and Calvin Wharton. In Nelson the members included: Irene Mock, Paulette Jiles, Caroline Woodward, and John Newlove.

They named the new school the Kootenay School of Writing in recognition of its origin, and began the search for office and classroom space. The KSW in Nelson moved into a room in the old David Thompson University Centre student society building, but in Vancouver the [end of page 8] school had to explore a bit further to find a suitable location.

"Tom and I began looking for a place in late June," Browne says, "and found 1045 West Broadway *after* two or three weeks of snooping around. We knew it was right from the beginning. We moved in on July 15 1984 and the rest is history."

In its first brochure, the KSW is described as "a form of parallel gallery and a centre of scholarship open to the needs of its own constituency and alert to the possibilities of all disciplines that involve language."

The brochure explains this is a response to the failure of most public institutions to serve their artistic communities and a recognition that the theory, practice and teaching of writing is best left to working writers.

"We've lost our universities," Browne explains. "They've become tools of industrial policy, which is bent to corporate will, and that's how it's going to be – we ought to recognize it and do something about it."

Jeff Derksen, an instructor at KSW's Vancouver centre, sits at a classroom table. Behind him the wall is lined with books and literary magazines and a huge painting by a former KSW writing student. "I see the KSW as a place where things can happen quickly," he says. "We serve both the community and ourselves because we can do what we feel needs to be done. The school is an attitude rather than an institution – an energetic attitude. It's there to serve the possibilities of writing."

The school's philosophy encourages a wide range of offerings. The KSW calendar has included courses in poetry, fiction, journalism, scriptwriting, typography, work writing, publishing, 'comedy as literature', as well as single-session workshops in such areas as journal-writing, researching oral history, and 'literary groceries' – a look at the meat and potatoes aspects of writing. KSW also offers manuscript evaluation and a series of talks on poetics. In addition, during the summer, in Nelson the KSW in conjunction with the Kootenay Lake Arts Celebration has held workshops with such diverse writers as Margaret Hollingsworth, George Bowering, and Toronto dub-poet, Clifton Joseph.

The KSW also hosted an event called the New Poetics Colloquium. The four-day symposium on developments in current poetics featured writers in both English and French from across Canada and the US, including Charles Bernstein, Nicole Brossard, Barbara Einzig, Daphne Marlatt, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer and Ron Silliman. They gave readings and participated in dialogues concerning their theory and practice of writing, performance and publishing. The school also sponsored a special version of the Pulp Press three day novel writing contest for Vancouver's centennial year. [end of page 9, *cont. on page 29*]

A feeling of enthusiasm and purpose informs the operation of the KSW and is what draws people to the school. "I have a sense of working with people I like," Wayman says, "to create something worthwhile from literally bare walls. It's a kind of excitement I've never experienced before."

Instructor Gary Whitehead adds: "I like the notion we have that when we get good ideas we can follow through with them. There's no bureaucracy and no red tape. A few years ago I taught in the public school system and it didn't work out," he says. "I find it easier to work within a structure I've had a part in creating."

The KSW also has a strong notion of a school as a true centre of learning, much like the universities and colleges of medieval Europe.

"I feel that it's time for us to establish our own small universities," Browne says. "Not pop universities, but centres of scholarship in which to keep the flame burning as we enter and pass through the current and coming dark age."

Central to the working concepts of the KSW is what Wayman calls the "many musics" idea. Just as there are many kinds of music and anyone might appreciate more than one of them, the school does not promote any particular approach. "KSW is not a school in the sense of endorsing a certain kind of writing," he explains.

"The KSW has no one line," Derksen agrees. "We're interested in all possibilities. We have people from all along the spectrum of writing and the school works because of this interest."

Instructors from outside the core membership are chosen for their enthusiasm and concern for writing as well as their abilities. Anyone who wishes to teach through the KSW submits a

proposal and the members make their selection based largely on whether the instructor is bringing something new to the school, something not done exactly the same way anywhere else in the city. The potential teacher must also be working in the area in which she or he wishes to teach.

For example, among past offerings were a workshop dealing with writers and the law, and the first half of a 20-week publishing procedures program taught in sections by Denise Bukowski, Steve Osborne, Bob Amussen and Calvin Wharton, a course designed for people with little or no experience in publishing to instruct the students in all aspects of the industry.

"Our record so far has been pretty good," says Browne, "due to enthusiasm and faith in the KSW. It's important to continue with very high standards. We can't become a kind of night school catering to weekenders."

Representatives from the KSW students are also involved in many school matters, including decision-making. Two students, Nancy Shaw and Maureen Colclough, volunteer one day each week to work in the KSW office. "I started working here because I believe in the philosophy behind the school," says Colclough, "and I saw how hard the others were working to create a school. They were willing to take a risk in starting their own school at a time when the provincial government was de-emphasising educational programs such as writing."

Colclough also coordinates the school's student organisation, the KSW Writer's Club. The club has about 40 members whose ages range from about 23 to 65, she explains. The group meets monthly and offers support for beginning writers, manuscript exchange and a forum for people who read their work. As well, it publishes a monthly newsletter which provides information about the KSW and about writing markets.

"Some people have found the writer's club is the best thing for providing motivation, discipline and self-confidence," Colclough said.

Despite all the positive attributes of the KSW, there are a few drawbacks to operating the school. "The least favourable element of our operation is how much work is involved for how little money," Wayman explains. "Besides the pedagogical work, we're handling the administrative, janitorial, grounds-keeping and every other aspect of running a high-calibre educational institution for, sometimes, less than token payment. The only thing that offsets this is the sense that we're keeping alive innovative education in a province where ordinary education is barely surviving."

Derksen adds: "The KSW can often be a full-time job on a volunteer basis. We all have a strong sense of allegiance to the school, but also have to spend a lot of time working at other things to make a living."

However, some of the financial pressure may be less severe, since the KSW received a Canada Council Explorations grant to operate a literary information service in Vancouver. "The grant allows us to take over some of the operations of the former Literary Storefront," says Wayman. "But we still have a pressing need for money to pay people who are working regularly for KSW something close to a living wage. Student fees cover rent, phone and similar matters, but there's a limit to how long people can work two or three days each week for the school for nothing."

Despite the financial pinch, the KSW has a number of specific aims for the future-development of existing course programs, as well as planning to provide new and innovative workshops in all areas of writing, such as a series for Native Indian writers, in collaboration with the B.C. Native Communications Society.

The overall attitude at the school is one of optimism. "The KSW is becoming a vital gathering point for writers," says Whitehead. "Other people's expectations of the school are growing. Students coming from as far away as Toronto and Edmonton are planning to take courses."

Throughout all the growth and enthusiasm the people at the KSW try to remain aware of their basic philosophy. "So many risks end up compromised – so many good plans become mush," says Browne. "I don't want the KSW to become mush. I want this school never to forget that the most important thing is the writing, that nothing even comes close."

Calvin Wharton, an instructor and one of the founding members of the Kootenay School of Writing, also works as an editor at Pulp Press and as a freelance writer. [end of page 29]

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