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Training A New Generation of Christian Writers

It is encouraging to note the number of Christian colleges that are accepting the challenge of training tomorrow's writers **BY ADAM MILLER**

In the Church

Training a New Generation of Christian Writers

Adam Miller, Issue Number 25, October 2009

One wonders what Eudora Welty might think if she could gaze out her window across the street at Belhaven College in Jackson, Miss.--her discerning eyes wearing a worn path across the lawn. And what about William Faulkner from Oxford, Miss., recalling his Nobel speech from sixty years ago this year: "The young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."

These two towering storytellers from Mississippi pounded out their literary existences from the same soil as ink-stained apprentices reading and writing at Belhaven, A Christian liberal arts institution affiliated with the Presbyterian church since its inception in 1883. Belhaven students join good company in the Deep South, but they also want to cut a new path with their art. Director Randall Smith is helping carry the torch of academic rigor and literary acuity fueled by a Reformed Christian worldview.

"We are not the architects of meaning," says Smith, distinguishing a Christian worldview from its humanistic counterpart. Indeed, the idea that art is an end in itself and that the artist's work creates personal identity on the page has driven many toward an unhappy genius. "Instead," says Smith, "we acknowledge a divine, grand meaning-maker who has already imbued creation and human experience with mystery and meaning."

His words ringing with the voices before him—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Flannery O'Connor to name a few—Smith speaks of writers as explorers of the human condition and of the complexity of creation. Each of the writers he cites and recites subdued a piece of literary earth—an idea he explains as our duty revealed in Genesis.

The question is what does this subduing look like for writers working today and the institutions that guide them? How should they pursue their craft of writing poems, stories, essays, and plays?

Where did all the Christians go?

Every year, a city in the United States is besieged by thousands who attend the International Christian Retailers Show, where Christian publishing houses and manufacturers of goods display their latest works, from fiction to Christian candy. Murder mysteries and romances are mixed with

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apocalyptic thrillers and are scooped up by Christian bookstore owners trying to stay alive. But, when you walk into any given Christian bookstore, you're not likely to find an abundance of books that examine the human condition in any non-exalting way.

While plenty is written about John Doe running through sketchy eschatology in an end times thriller, where's the good story of a man dealing with the agony of an estranged son or a collection of essays that chronicles an undertaker's dealings with death (think Thomas Lynch)?

"Christians specialized," says Smith. "We started writing just for ourselves, for an ingrown, Baptist-married-to-a-Presbyterian, politically conservative, home-schooling, God-bless-America audience. We adopted genres and literary styles as packaging for a message—we already knew what we wanted to say and dressed it up with culturally clichéd wrapping paper."

In the words of Fredrick Buechner, the Christian market lost its "vein openers."

"Vein-opening writers are putting not just themselves into their books, but themselves at their nakedest and most vulnerable," says Buechner.

We see vulnerability in Madeleine L'Engle, Donald Miller, Bret Lott, and Luci Shaw. In these and a handful of others who identify themselves as writers working from a Judeo-Christian perspective, there is a willingness to deal in the particulars of reality: Miller and his first experience with pornography in *Blue Like Jazz*, Lott in the love scenes found in *Jewel*, and Buechner's *Son of Laughter* as he shows the humanity of the patriarchs. Their stutterings, passions, lusts and faults--those ingredients that make them human--are painted in significant ways to make them breathe on the page.

"We forgot that writing is an act of discovery and exploration," says Smith. "Storytelling

helps us get This is the idea Smith and professors at Belhaven, Covenant College, and elsewhere are attempting to instill in their students.

ourselves. "Any kind of art points to the greater truth of life," says Sarah Huffines, associate professor of English

When at Covenant College. "Storytelling helps us get outside of ourselves. When Nathan confronted David

Nathan about Bathsheba and Uria he did it by telling a story. Poetry forces us to slow down see things anew

confronted A story or any kind of art can get you outside of your situation and reveal things.

David "Literature exposes us to so many lives and experiences and emotions that we get to live a little bit of about a bigger life," she adds. "It increases our capacity to love and to understand."

Bathsheba

and Uria he

did it by

telling a

story."

Recovering a sense of calling

While we can't discount the many followers of Christ walking the halls of graduate and undergraduate writing programs at secular universities, it's encouraging to note the number of Christian colleges that are accepting the challenge of training tomorrow's writers. Seattle Pacific University's low-residency

has an easy

imbued

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Randall

Smith,

Belhaven

College

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Sarah and regular MFA programs, for example, provide interaction with top Christian writers in the country
Huffines, including Thomas Lynch, Bret Lott, and Luci Shaw.
Covenant
College What's makes Belhaven unique is that it's one of only 25 undergraduate institutions in the United States offering a bachelor of fine arts degree in creative writing, and the only Christian institution providing this tract of study. As is typical of BFA degrees in other areas (visual arts, dance, theater, and music) the BFA in creative writing requires more credits in the major than a BA for graduation, primarily in craft courses.

In higher education in general, the concepts of calling and mission have grown peripheral to the more practical tasks of training in a field and getting a good job--even for students in the arts. In the church, writers and artists are hardly mentioned, let alone encouraged in their pursuits. This decline of support from the academy and the Church makes the task of Belhaven, Covenant, and others all the more important as the literary world grows less and less accustomed to thoughtful Christians.

"I hope to borrow from Flannery O'Connor, that my students in their writing will be more attuned to 'the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil,'" says Smith. "[I hope they] will offer the full range of human experience digested from a Christian worldview perspective."

"Think of the range subjects of the Psalms: praising the God of creation, calling down judgment on the wicked, questioning God's sovereignty and goodness, lamenting the shortness of our days and the wickedness of our ways, affirming faith, hope, and love in the face of overwhelming circumstances. That's what I want my students to do."

Adam Miller studied creative writing at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Ga.

Comments

All Fields Are Required:

First Name: Bill

Last Name: Furioso

Location: Rochester New York

Comment: "We are not the architects of meaning," says Smith, distinguishing a Christian worldview from its humanistic counterpart. Indeed, the idea that art is an end in itself and that the artist's work creates personal identity on the page has driven many toward an unhappy genius. "Instead," says Smith, "we acknowledge a divine, grand meaning-maker who has already imbued creation and human experience with mystery and meaning."

Yes! Very well put. The Christian worldview brings art beyond the smallness of self expression to a reflection of the Divine in the midst of the fallen. This is not only good art - this is the "abundant life" Jesus has made available to humanity. I find art - indeed life itself - unsatisfyingly "thin" when it lacks this dimension of spirit and truth. This perspective combined with insight, sensitivity and mastery of language makes for great art.

2009-10-28 01:05 [Permalink Reply](#)

All Fields Are Required:

First Name: Marty

Last Name: Davis

Location: Atlanta

Comment: My Belhaven roommate and I used to look out our window in the opposite direction - toward the light in what we believed must be Eudora Welty's bedroom where we were sure she must be writing late into the night. I can't say that our eyes were discerning, As Adam Miller wrote of Ms Welty, but our imaginations were fired. Alas, if only I could return to that campus now and study under Randall Smith.

2009-10-28 12:11 [Permalink](#) [Reply](#)

All Fields Are Required:

First Name: Carol

Last Name: King

Location: North Carolina

Comment: As a graduate of Belhaven, I wish with Marty Davis that I could be there now to study under Randall Smith. When I attended, only one creative-writing course was offered, which I took; I longed for more. With the new emphasis on world view on the campus, and this new degree, Belhaven has become a strong voice in the world of literature.

2009-10-29 20:55 [Permalink](#) [Reply](#)

All Fields Are Required:

First Name: Deanna

Last Name: Vanderver

Location: Jackson, MS

Comment: Having Dr. Smith as a teacher has been a great experience. He truly enjoys creative writing and knows what he teaches. He has a passion for poetry that has re-sparked my own. I'm so glad that I came to Belhaven for Creative Writing. All the teachers here are fantastic. They really care about their students. We can visit them in their office and just talk about anything, like our future, philosophy, history, anything.

2009-10-30 12:42 [Permalink](#) [Reply](#)

All Fields Are Required:

First Name: Steve

Last Name: Peacock

Location: Point Pleasant, NJ

Comment: Rather than comment further on this fantastic article, please take note of this: I received a link to this piece on the very morning that my dear wife blessed me with a "Spend the entire day writing" gift. At the very moment I sat down to write -- a point at which I am pondering what exactly to do with a God-given ability to write fairly well -- my pastor sends this article to me. I am blown away at the timing. Thank you Lord.

2009-10-31 11:00 [Permalink](#) [Reply](#)

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