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Book Review

You Say You Want a Well-paid Revolution: On Chad Harbach's *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*

Chad Harbach. Brooklyn: n+1., 2014. ISBN 978-0865478138.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009) is in many ways the critical equivalent of a Bildungsroman for American creative writing pedagogy: a narrator's tender and sober account of someone else's coming-of-age. Following self-consciously in its wake is Chad Harbach's (2014) recent anthology *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, a kind of polyvocal *Künstlerroman*. A culture comes of age when it produces artists; both books acknowledge American literature's late 20th century shift from the self-tutored ethos of rock-and-roll to the official accreditation usually found in classical music programmes. With exponentially rising enrolment in writing programmes constantly producing new writers, students and professors, American literature (if not Western education) is, McGurl argues, past the point of asking 'To MFA or not to MFA?' Filled with veterans from both sides of the writer-professor's desk, *MFA vs NYC* has an ensemble cast alternately praising and bemoaning these popular and often expensive programmes that, depending on your perspective, make writers or simply make their own market.

As founding editor of *n+1* magazine then the author of the deservedly well-received novel *The Art of Fielding*, Harbach works as both editor and novelist to follow his own eponymous essay 'MFA vs NYC' with an impressive collection important to anyone interested in not just American creative writing pedagogy in particular but also more generally what the [American] Associated Writing Programmes rightly calls 'the largest system of literary patronage the world has ever seen' [i.e., American university writing programmes] ('A Brief History' 2011). Harbach and his chosen team catch a fundamental challenge with this 'program era' (10). He observes, 'In the university, the fiction writer nevertheless manages not to think of himself as of the university' (10), while Keith Gessen, a fellow editor at *n+1*, suggests, 'Practically no writer exists now who does not intersect at some point with the university system – this is unquestionably the chief sociological fact of modern American literature' (176). Harbach's head count finds '79 degree-granting programs in creative writing in 1975; today there are 1,269!' (12). This exponentially rising interest and/or societal shift makes the whistle-blowing of *MFA vs NYC* extremely relevant, while nearly all of the contributors (including heavyweights like David Foster Wallace and George Saunders) make it important and revelatory.

MFA vs NYC is much more than a pro/con debate about creative writing as an academic subject and/or social institution; it is in fact a superb consideration of both writing and writing pedagogy. With the chilling, posthumous gravitas of his suicide, a reprinted essay by David Foster Wallace lucidly worries about the creative writing 'disease': 'in terms of rigor, demand, intellectual and emotional requirement, a lot of Creative Writing Programs are an unfunny joke. Few require of applicants any significant preparation in history, literature, criticism, composition, foreign languages, art or philosophy' (79). Similarly, Harbach laments that 'MFA programs themselves are so lax and laissez-faire as to have a shockingly small impact on students' work – especially shocking if you're the student and paying \$80,000 for the privilege' (11). Crucially, though, both Wallace and Harbach have MFAs (and Wallace was a writing professor). Wallace's experience as a seasoned fiction professor affords him the very acuity of his own programme appraisal. Like cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett or Richard Feynman, Wallace laments how institutional exigencies (mostly temporal) prefer work that is polished but unmemorable to intriguingly flawed work: 'Workshops like corpses. They have to. Because any class, even one in "creativity," is going to place supreme value on not making mistakes' (78). All true, but it's unlikely Wallace would be read if he hadn't sharpened his own prose, expanded his personal canon and impressed his writer-teachers (who have editor colleagues and friends) in workshop after workshop.

As with many binaries, the foundational one in this title is quickly and even self-consciously revealed as false. Essays that could just as easily have been entitled *Education vs Experience*, of course, really comprise a book about education *and* experience. Refreshingly, nearly half of the essays overtly address the economics of a creative writing education: creative writing educations are the rare hot commodity in the humanities, and several of these battle-tested writers offer field notes on pursuing or not pursuing the certain costs and uncertain rewards of a formal writing education. Like many a poet working three jobs, Alexander Chee thought himself too marginalised and iconoclastic for a graduate writing programme but found his entry-level journalism jobs in NYC were in fact the wrong kind of experience: 'Anything you did that was not your writing was not your writing, and New York provided a lot of opportunities to write, but also a lot of opportunities not to write' (92). Several essays here affectionately dramatise how education can both digest and augment experience (whilst being an experience itself).

The diversity of talent, experience and passion in *MFA vs. NYC* also make it a compelling prompt book on writing. These seasoned writers follow Emily Dickinson by telling the truth but telling it slant. Those who do lament the homogeneity of programme fiction create an unintended chorus for vibrancy in fiction. The admirably forthright Diana Wagman admits to not enjoying teaching but needing it for the money while simultaneously observing standard workshop fare that 'is so earnest, so temperature-controlled and perfectly modulated, that it never stops being words on a page' (234). The multiply expert Foster Wallace's lament for what 'cannot quickly be identified or discussed between bells' includes 'interestingness' and 'depth of vision' (77). Eric Bennett taxonomises and laments an 'Iowa fiction' that 'got you *feeling* – it

got you seeing and tasting and touching and smelling and hearing. It was like going to an arboretum with a child. You want exactly that from life, and also more' (57). Not content to merely parse programme uniformity, Bennett himself counsels writers:

to have read enough to feel the oceanic movement of events and ideas in history; to have experienced enough to escape the confines of a personal provincialism; to have distanced yourself enough from your hang-ups and pettiness to create words reflecting the emotional complexity of minds beyond your own; to have worked with language long enough to be able to wield it beautifully. (71)

According to his half-impressed former students, the volatile Gordon Lish argues 'a writer maximized her authority by choosing a subject she knew intimately and that made her feel helpless' (Blumenkranz, 216). Elif Batuman does some welcome whistle-blowing about the sanctimony pervading North American creative writing pedagogy: 'there is a genuine problem when young people are taught to believe that they can be writers only in the presence of real or invented sociopolitical grievances' (246). Because these various writers provide a spectrum of thought on both writing and teaching fiction, and because almost all are professional writers, *MFA vs NYC* offers more incisive writing advice per chapter than almost all how-to books by single authors.

A graduate education's allure of financial security provides one common denominator to many of these essays, while fear of conformity provides another. In his aptly entitled 'The Pyramid Scheme', the self-reflective Eric Bennett laments the levelling of his dreams in the famed Iowa programme: 'The Workshop was like a muffin tin you poured the batter of your dreams into. You entered with something undefined and tantalisingly protean and left with muffins' (55). Industrialisation isn't an irrelevant image for Bennett given his archival muckraking and surprising exposé of how significantly anti-Communism CIA funding expanded American writing programmes (especially Iowa, cf. his contribution to Graeme Harper's *A Companion to Creative Writing*). However, Bennett and the others here who share similar worries about programmes preferring competent lifelessness to dazzling brilliance miss the forest for the trees. I've taught creative writing for a dozen years at four different Canadian universities in all shapes and sizes (from graduate thesis supervision to programme coordination to all-access courses without a portfolio requirement). Those that worry that a few writing courses taken around the age of 20 are forever going to blunt writing for the rest of their lives under-rate both their own creativity and the creative adaptability required of vibrant writing and lifelong writing careers. Who is captivated by a musician who can only sing or play in one way year after year? George Saunders – a writer so successful he does not, at least financially, need to teach – stands nearly alone here in saying:

You are not going to be doing this workshop crap forever. You are doing it to get a little baptism by fire, purge yourself of certain habits (of sloth,

of under-revision, of the sin of thinking you've made a thing clear when you haven't) and then you are going to run away from the whole approach like your pants are on fire, and not look back, but return to that sacred land where your writing is private. (35)

Several essays similarly observe and half-indict the fact that the exigencies of term prefer the semester-friendly short story over the semester-impossible novel (until, at least, a graduate thesis). Too many of these imagination professionals too regularly fail to recognise the possibility (if not the desirability) of extrapolation. Just because a computer science student has time to design apps but not operating systems during term doesn't mean that the lessons she learns writing app after app won't help her when she finally has time to write an operating system. Those who lament a literary awards mania for plotless novels (see Julian Barnes's Booker-winning *The Sense of an Ending* then, if you can, see it again) should delight in the university-friendly genre of the short story, where a few fellow practitioners can sit around a room and notice, say, whether or not conflict and desire fuel a problem, a contest and a resolution. The titular NYC is a metonym for publishing, but that invoked world doesn't quite get enough attention here. Almost no consideration is paid to how writing workshops and degrees can also make editors, not just writers (and writing profs).

The vibrancy of this illuminating collection of essays is further illustrated, however negatively, by its surprise inclusion of two villains. Essay anthologies with wicked scoundrels are rare, but Carla Blumenkranz's frank portrait of the highly influential American writing editor and teacher Gordon Lish definitely provides one scoundrel. Crucially, though, this portrait of the mad and bad Lish is itself an interesting illustration of how quickly North American creative writing pedagogy has evolved. With state support for universities dwindling, universities (especially private ones like those that host many of the popular MFA writing programmes) tell themselves they need superstar faculty who can attract applicants, aspirants and envy. Lish's editorial work for *Esquire* then Knopf certainly made him just such a draw for Yale, NYU and Columbia. According to Blumenkranz and those comrades-in-arms she quotes, Lish had students read their fiction aloud in workshop but would cut them off, dismissively, when he felt a story waned. His pearls of instructorly wisdom apparently included the bracing 'Seduce the whole fucking world for all time', and Blumenkranz provides enough testimony to clarify that readers were never Lish's sole focus for seduction (211). Perhaps because so many of the essayists here are primarily fiction writers and/or writer-teachers, the essays, too, are super-charged by the emotional honesty of great fiction. Blumenkranz can never bring herself to fully condemn the womanising, sexually confrontational Lish. With the courage of a dirt-slinging novelist, the half-wooed Blumenkranz confesses, 'to really write for someone you have to want to do more for him than turn in ten pages by the end of the day Friday' (214). The era of celebrity editors is waning if not gone; contemporary students are not, like Blumenkranz's classmates, going to hear a workshop peer read a submission one day then learn that the instructor awarded her a publishing contract the

next day. Blumenkranz trusts her fiction writer's nose for blood when distilling the fuel of much writerly ambition: 'What's particular about a writing workshop is that another kind of desire is omnipresent: the desire to become known, viable, famous, great. In other words, to publish' (215). Her passion, however, is as blinding as it is intense. Blumenkranz and others here fail to notice that students in disciplines as diverse as math, architecture and music are similarly driven (see Blair Tindall's confessional *Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs, and Classical Music* for tales of prostitute-like young classical musicians). Crucial context could also be added: most of Lish's now intolerable teaching acts were committed decades ago. Only inference and cross-reference with Diana Wagman and Keith Gessen's anguished laments on the contemporary adjunct faculty's constant pressures to receive good teaching evaluations clarify that the very professionalisation of North American writing pedagogy that occasions this book means that students are no longer going to be phoned by a Lish who tells you, as he offers you a book contract, that he's naked – and erect – in a bathtub (208). Lish is an extinct animal, and the zoo placards in *MFA vs NYC* should clarify that. Aside from self-portraiture by writing teachers, the anthology's most in-depth portrait of a single teacher would benefit from a contextualising footnote.

Blind passion may have contributed to the anthology's other obvious villain, though sadly this passion has nothing to do with literature. Like all other contributors, Emily Gould has writing and publishing experience (though her debut novel was still forthcoming when *MFA vs NYC* went to print). However, the glare of her own maudlin spotlight can't help but emphasise the fact that she's also the romantic partner of Harbach's fellow *n+1* editor Keith Gessen. Harbach and Gessen are the only writers here with two essays each (though deservedly). Gessen's two essays are both entitled 'Money', though they were composed eight years apart.¹ His probing, incisive essays are profound and genuine. To his hypothetical students (i.e., not the ones in front of him with frayed egos and deep pockets or deep debt) Gessen wants to ask 'What do you know that no one else knows?' (193). That is quite simply one of the best writing questions I've ever heard. His turn to a teaching that sounds generous, reasoned and effective followed and partially overlapped very serious free-lance journalism, a trade, he worries, threatened 'not [by] penury but vanity' (178). Gessen's freely disclosed experience with not just the art of the novel but the also art of the deal easily contributes to the fear that his romantic partner Emily Gould was included as part of a package deal.

Where others lament writing education is compromised by cost, commerce, facile tutelage or false expectations, Emily Gould laments being Emily Gould. Sustainedly, volubly and enragingly, Gould demands a bigger piece of a world she finds highly imperfect. Only in hindsight, and only partially, does she acknowledge how thoroughly she authored the poverty she feels was somehow externally inflicted: 'You think you'll tackle the habits first – "I'll stop buying bottled water and fancy cups of coffee" – but actually the habits are the last to go' (126). She feels that *Girls* creator and star Lena Dunham isn't 'the only person living the life I'd once felt entitled to' (133). Entitlement, not writing, is Gould's theme. Like Dunham's character Hannah Horvath, Gould

confuses confession and redemption, detailing how much money and goodwill she drained from her supportive partner [Gessen] before 'greeting him by being a huge territorial bitch' at the writing cabin he had rented them. Gould's essay is the only weak link in the otherwise lively and genuine anthology and taints the otherwise superb collection with unflattering nepotism.

Few essays on pedagogy (in any subject) make one laugh, think and shake the head in awe, but those in *MFA vs NYC* do. This vibrant, timely and stimulating anthology is a treat for anyone interested in writing, learning or the arts.

Note

1. Readers of Michael Schmidt's (2014) *The Novel: A Biography* will recognise that authorial penury is the most vibrant through line in this 1200-page, four-century portrait of novels and novelists.

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