

Kratz Center *for* Creative Writing

A T G O U C H E R C O L L E G E

A GIFT WITH WORDS

The following is an interview originally published in *The Goucher Quarterly* (January 2000) between the novelist and Goucher professor **Madison Smartt Bell** and **Rick Bader** in which Professor Bell talks about the college's new Kratz Center for Creative Writing:

Goucher has built a strong reputation as one of the premier liberal arts colleges for developing creative writers. It was the undergraduate training ground for such noted writers as poet and MacArthur Fellowship recipient Eleanor Wilner '59; Janet Shaw '59, author of the Kirsten series of the popular American Girl books; writer Anne Lamott, who attended Goucher in the early 1970s, and acclaimed novelist Darcey Steinke '85. More recently, literary wunderkind Jenn Crowell '99, whose first novel, *Necessary Madness*, was published when she was a Goucher sophomore, and 1999 graduate John McManus, who has a contract with Picador for the publication of a volume of short stories, have joined the ranks of those who've honed their craft at Goucher and gone on to publish.

The college now has an exceptional opportunity to build on these successes, as gifts totaling over \$1 million from Eleanor Kratz Denoon '36 have led to the creation the Kratz Center for Creative Writing, an academic program that will bring in nationally recognized authors for lectures, readings, and semester-long residencies. The Center's inaugural event was a one-day visit in September by David Guterson, author of the award-winning novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars*. In the spring, Steinke will be a writer-in-residence, teaching an advanced writing course and directing student tutorials. Quarterly contributor Rick Bader spoke with Kratz Center director Madison Smartt Bell to learn what impact the Center will have on Goucher's ability to develop young writers.

Goucher has a strong tradition of preparing writers. How does the Kratz Center add to that?

I tell students, "You have read short stories in your lives. Go write one." Then I see what they do. There is no one method. John McManus worked with me here, then he went to England [on an exchange program to the University of Exeter] for a year. When he came back he was hot – he was writing a story a week. I don't know how he did it – he figured it out for himself. That's

what you've got to do – figure it out yourself. What I don't want to get is people coming here thinking they can be passively molded into becoming professional writers.

The Center got off the ground with David Guterson's residency in September. Did that accomplish what you'd hoped it would?

We wanted to get someone for the opening public event who would attract a lot of people and who would attract a lot of attention. I think Guterson worked pretty well for that. I was a little uneasy at first, because I had not met David Guterson in person before the event. Normally I know the writers I bring here, at least slightly, but it was actually [Goucher executive director of communication] Debra Rubino's idea to invite Guterson. She had heard him on the radio and thought he seemed like a nice guy who would be good with students. His merits as a writer were known to both of us. Sometimes people who seem to be really nice in their public persona are not. However, it turned out that Guterson is really nice. And he filled Kraushaar Auditorium. He gets credit for turning in a good performance, our donors get credit for making his visit possible, and Debra Rubino gets a lot of credit for making the whole thing work. It's been a great morale raiser.

Many aspiring young writers today assume they will hone their talents in a college writing program. Is this the best way to become a writer?

A very large part of our visibility in the academic world is because of a person, Jenn Crowell, who published a novel as a sophomore, at the age of 18. This is not normal. I never wanted us to become a studio school for manufacturing precociously published young writers. Most people at age 18 are not capable of writing a publishable book. Twenty-one is pretty young too. That's why I have tended not to encourage people to go directly from here into graduate school, but to take time off, do something else for a year or two. The Jenn Crowell thing was very unusual. I informed everyone here that it would never happen again, and then it happened again, with John McManus. If people start thinking this sort of thing will be routine, they'll be in for disappointment.

During Guterson's discussion with our writing students, I tried to emphasize the point that he did not start publishing until he was over 30. He spent a lot of time in the trenches. Not only is that a more probable way to get your career started, but it's arguably better. What we have here is an undergraduate program that is as good as any I know of. But I may have to work against the mentality of many students of becoming too careerist. I don't want to get the point where people say, "make me a wunderkind."

What do you look for in a young writer?

I tell students, "You have read short stories in your lives. Go write one." Then I see what they do. There is no one method. John McManus worked with me here, then he went to England [on an exchange program to the University of Exeter] for a year. When he came back he was hot – he was writing a story a week. I don't know how he did it – he figured it out for himself. That's

what you've got to do – figure it out yourself. What I don't want to get is people coming here thinking they can be passively molded into becoming professional writers.

The success of the "stars" in a writing program is fairly easy to see. What about the others – those who don't wind up becoming great writers? What does the Kratz Center offer them?

In your top MFA programs, maybe five to ten percent of the graduates will turn professional, in the sense that they will get as far as publishing a first book. So what happens with all these other people? They obviously do something else with their lives. Were they wasting their time? I don't think so. They become readers and appreciators of contemporary literature. They have a more developed sensibility. It's a refinement of the original intentions of a liberal arts education. At the undergraduate level it's the same but more so. We have a concentration in creative writing in the English department, and I don't want it to become a major. The concentration is complementary to work they do for the liberal arts degree. They gain an understanding of texts from the point of view of practitioners. And that is a liberal arts goal.

At the same time that the Kratz Center was in development, Elizabeth Spires suggested that the English Department might offer courses in other sorts of professional writing: children's literature, book reviewing, biography and so forth. This year the Goodwin family [Douglas and Hilda Fivel Goodwin '43] has made a gift to support those courses. We don't mean to make Goucher a trade school for writers, but the courses underwritten by the Goodwin gift will give students a look at other career paths open to people with an interest in writing.

Great writers aren't automatically great teachers of writers. What qualities do you look for in someone who comes here in residence?

I look for people who are known quantities as teachers. There's a whole cluster of people like that in Washington and New York, and there are also some people right here in Baltimore. We're well placed geographically. We have the good luck to be in the Eastern Seaboard commuter run, where we can bring people in for one day a week at reasonable cost. The Kratz Center writer-in-residence will be a visiting position that will change. The famous Iowa Writers' Workshop has several slots for visitors in the faculty, and Princeton, where I went as an undergraduate, gets many of its writing teachers on a rotating basis from New York. What we can have with the Kratz Center is a miniature version of that system, suitable for the size of Goucher.

Our first teaching visitor will be alumna Darcey Steinke, an excellent young novelist with a rapidly growing reputation. Better still, I have team-taught with her and know how good she is. She's young and has some common interests with our students, I think – for example, she covers all sorts of esoteric subjects for Spin – so I think that students will connect with her easily, and profitably. Darcey was one of my top two students the first year I taught at Goucher, so it seems especially appropriate that she should be first person the Kratz Center brings to teach.

Ten or twenty years from now, if the Kratz Center has been wildly successful, what will have happened?

It's too early to say. If you walk out on the streets of Baltimore right now and talk about the program to ten people, nine won't know what you're talking about. But the one who will know will say, "They brought David Guterson and there was a big lecture with lots of people and they were on Mark Steiner" [a radio call-in show]. And that's good. We will certainly continue to have events of that kind, attractive to the surrounding community.

But for me the thing that's really significant is this – I've been here ten years and I've added one new course in that time. This year, with the help of the Kratz Center, I've been able to create a new course in the top tier and a new course at the introductory level. That adds an entire year to our sequence of classroom courses. Since both of these courses will be staffed by visiting writers, we have at one stroke added a tremendous amount of variety to the experience of our writing students. I am convinced that will be a very good thing in the long run.