

THE *BAG*

OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER

FAQ'S on MFA's and Other Educational Matters



In hard economic times, some people decide that since they're unemployed anyway, they might as well go back to school to finish that degree or get the next one on the ladder. Others can't imagine spending money on tuition and books. I have a friend who is a newspaper reporter (at least, as of this writing) and he's getting his MFA at night.

Some writers wonder if getting an advanced degree—an MA or an MFA—would help them with their craft. A lot of writers also teach. Others would like to teach, but don't know how to get started.

I'd like to start this discussion by talking about MFA's—Master of Fine Arts degrees—from two positions: going to school to obtain an MFA: and getting a teaching position with an MFA program. I teach for the low-residency Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing Program offered through the University of Southern Maine, but I don't have an MFA myself.

About six years ago, I started teaching creative writing at the University of California San Diego in the Extension department.

Anyone could take my Extension classes, including UCSD students who needed credits in literature. I suddenly found myself writing lots of letters of recommendation to graduate MFA programs.

At Extension, when my students would tell me that they hadn't gotten into the creative writing grad programs they'd applied to, I would remind them that Ernest Hemingway didn't have an MFA and leave it at that. I remembered my own very brief flirtation with getting an advanced degree in creative writing. I eventually decided not to pursue it because I figured that a writer writes. A writer does not keep going to school. So I opted out, and about a year and a half later, sold my first novel. I held onto horror stories about fellow writers who were mocked by their professors for writing romance novels; or who felt that academia sucked all their originality out of them.

Then, about three years ago, an editor of mine quit her job to become a freelance writer. She also became a student in a low-residency MFA program (not Stonecoast), so that she could also teach. I read her blog and was intrigued to discover how nervous she was about her deadlines; and joyful when working with her mentor; and what a sense of camaraderie she felt. She was invigorated by her academic program, and her career has flourished.

Around the same time, I was researching an agent for a friend. I found a forum where some writers were discussing the agent, and they were well disposed toward her in part because she possessed an MFA. They felt that she would understand how to put a book together, and would be good at giving them substantive editorial feedback. I was beginning to see that MFA's were in the literary air, and I wondered if I had been wrong to blithely assure my Extension students that MFA's were a waste of time and money.

Meanwhile, a SFWA friend of mine who has written oodles of published material began teaching at a private arts college here in Southern California. Although it was clearly arduous work, he

seemed to enjoy it immensely, and I decided to apply for a teaching position, too. I asked him for contact information.

Before I had put my resume together, he emailed me to tell me that he had been fired. The college had a new administration, and they were worried about accreditation. They needed professors with advanced degrees—and my friend only had a B.A. I had always believed that in academia, one needed advanced degrees to teach, but like my friend, I had assumed that life experience would count, too, especially in a unique setting such as his private college. In his case, he had tons of life experience. But it didn't save his job.

About two years ago, through a chance meeting at Dark Delicacies bookstore in Los Angeles, I made friends with a television writer who was back to school to get her MFA. She told me about her program, which was Stonecoast, and put me in touch with the director. I joined the faculty, and I teach there now. I am astonished at the opportunities put forward for our students. I don't want to sound like an advertisement for my own institution, but I had no idea that what we do is what getting an MFA was all about.

A low-residency graduate program usually entails going to your home campus twice a year for “residencies” of between ten days and two weeks. We also have a campus in Ireland. Some programs hold residencies only in summers. Others provide ways for you to skip residencies. At our residency, we have two five-day writing workshops; seminars; panels; readings; lunch meetings; community meetings; open mics, and fun ways to blow off steam such as our talent show or the graduation party. (Since new students matriculate each semester, other students graduate. We hold graduation each residency.)

Once we leave the residency, students complete course work online or through the mail; in our case, we pair up a student with a mentor in her/his “genre”—Creative Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, Popular Fiction, or an approved crossover of two genres. We attract a wide range of students, from recent college graduates to those who are considering a second career, and the occasional published author (in some cases well-published) who wants an MFA so they can teach. We also get English teachers who need terminal degrees to satisfy requirements in their school districts.

An MFA is a terminal degree. There is, at present, no PhDFA, so once you get an MFA, you're “done.” An MA is not a terminal degree, because you can go on to get a PhD. So for an English or literature teacher who needs a terminal degree, an MFA is the way to go, provided your institution accepts it. And because there is no PhDFA, a person with a PhD is not necessarily ranked “higher” when applying for an academic position than an MFA. While both, of course, are ranked higher than someone with a BA.



Some students love low-residency programs. It's easier to work and go to school with this flexible format. In fact, another editor of mine is currently a student at Stonecoast.

However, other students find that distance learning is too distancing for them. I was emailing tonight with a student who feels that she might do better in a traditional “bricks and mortar” school that she has to attend every day.

If any of this is resonating with thoughts you have had about getting your MFA, check out TK. It's a new website TK. You can look at all the programs and see what we have to offer.

What about teaching in an MFA program, or in some other paid capacity? You would do well to inspect that above-mentioned website and check the credentials of the faculty of various programs—some faculty are all PhD's. Other programs are heavy with MFA's. But in all cases, the faculty must be published, and current with what's going on in publishing.

Two summers ago, when Clarion came to UCSD (a move my alma mater and I are justly proud of), I joined the Clarion Foundation Board and met the faculty members of the UCSD Lit Dept. Soon after, I was offered a lectureship to teach a class on “Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Irrealism.” Like USM, UCSD can also factor in some life experience when making hiring decisions. And a recent article in the California Association of Teachers newsletter stated that part-time lecturers make up the majority of the teaching faculty in institutions of higher learning in California.

What do we faculty do? At Stonecoast's MFA program, we mentor students one-on-one for a semester at a time. We read and critique their papers, theses, and, in my case, original fiction and revision of same. We also teach seminars, serve on committees, read admissions packets, and perform other academic tasks, so it's good to be able to demonstrate some familiarity with creating syllabi; suggesting reading lists; performing student assessments; working with other faculty members, and the like.

At UCSD, I lecture, show movies, grade papers, give tests, hold office hours, and answer emails. I attend occasional Lit Dept events.

What about teaching experience? In addition to Stonecoast and the Lit Dept., I have taught at UCSD Extension; the Maui Writers Conference and Retreat; through San Diego Unified School District's Adult Education Department; and led work-

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shops at regional and genre-specific conferences, and in a paid capacity for several years at a writers' bookstore. I've also held a substitute teacher teaching credential. So I have some teaching experience to go along with a body of published work.

What should you do if you have no teaching experience? A possible avenue is to create your own classes and seminars. Writers can rent spaces to hold conferences and retreats. I held an all-day seminar in my home. Another writer I know organizes seminars and finds interested writing groups to host them. The group provides the venue, refreshments, etc., and pays her travel expenses. If they don't get enough participants to cover expenses and make a profit, the event is cancelled. To save additional expense, the writer usually stays in the home of one of the organizers. The group gets back their outlay, and the writer donates back a percentage of her share of the revenue to the group or to a charity of their choice.

You can join the AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) and go to their website <http://www.awpwriter.org/>, where you can look at their job listings (for members only.) There are also articles at AWP on how to land academic jobs. You can also volunteer to teach writing in prisons, juvenile detention facilities, and for groups that have no funding—perhaps a memoir workshop at an assisted-living facility or a creative writing group in a homeless shelter. All these teaching gigs will add up on your resume. I'm going to teach a two-hour workshop at a public library at the end of March.

Like Extension, some community college districts or "Universities without Walls" accept proposals for classes. For example, there is a course proposal form for the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District at <http://www.cuyamaca.edu/preview/pdf/Course%20Proposal.pdf>.

Another useful link is Writers' Conferences & Centers <http://writersconf.org/>. I know a freelance writer who sends resumes to these events, asking to be put onto the faculty. Sometimes he's offered only room and board, but other times, he's paid. And he's making contacts and building his teaching resume in the interim.

Is it hard to combine teaching and writing? Sometimes. A writer who teaches lamented to me, "I want my writing life back!" Some semesters are easier than others. Some students are, too. There are times when I've had papers to read while I've been on a writing deadline. But I often look forward to reading those papers when I've gotten my quota of writing done for the day. And as with freelancing, I can do a lot of my work from home—or in a coffee house, or at the dog park. And it's hard to beat the flush of satisfaction I get when a student makes good. In fact, my coauthor Debbie Viguié and I are currently on the *New York Times* bestseller list—and she was once a student of mine.

I've read out of my field(s) as a result of staying up with my students. I have had to learn how to try to pull the best out of a writer without discouraging him or her (and gained greater respect for the professional editors among us.) I've learned about teaching, and I know I'll never stop needing to learn.

Is it hard to combine getting your MFA and writing? I think for working writers, it's pretty easy. We're already writing and we can already make deadlines. A writer friend just joined the faculty of an MFA program near me and pointed out that I could submit my contracted work as my homework and voila, get my MFA. It was tempting, but right now, I'm at max capacity working, teaching, and being a parent.

Is getting an MFA worth the outlay of time and expense? I look to the swelling ranks of editors, published writer friends, and journalists who are in MFA programs, studying everything from creative nonfiction to poetry. My life is certainly the richer—literally and figuratively—for being involved in an MFA program. Maybe it will be for you as well.

Until next time...don't forget to write!

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