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Novelist discusses writing with students

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Oakland University students recently learned about creative writing, modern literature, and ethnicity and place in fiction from novelist Brenda Flanagan.

Flanagan, a novelist and professor of English at Davidson College in Davidson, N.C., visited OU March 18 and 19 to speak to students.

"She provides a role model for our students," said Brian Connery, associate professor of English and department chair. "We have a lot of students here who would like to pursue writing, and when we bring someone in who is a published writer, it gives the students a sense that it's really possible."

Flanagan is a three-time winner of the Avery Hopwood and Julie Hopwood Award for creative writing and has published numerous essays and fiction in literary journals such as "Caliban," "Indiana Review" and "Witness."

"I enjoy writing and hope some day to publish life essays about people," said Jill Steinkraus, a junior English major who is taking English 112, Literature of Ethnic America, which is one of the classes Flanagan visited. "I enjoyed Flanagan's talks on the way culture affects people, but I was most fascinated by the way she talks about place and knowing where someone is from. You always hear America described as a 'melting pot.' But Americans really have so little understanding of cultures outside the U.S. Bringing Flanagan here gives us more access to them."

Hundreds of OU students in five English classes read Flanagan's 1996 novel, "You Alone are Dancing," prior to her visit. The novel, set on a fictional Caribbean island similar to Flanagan's native Trinidad, depicts life in a bustling village threatened by corporate imperialism.

"Her presence and the way she makes you aware of her native culture really caught my attention," said Connie Mansour, a freshman taking English 112. "Reading her book really brought her ethnicity to light. And when she came to my class, she talked about her background and answered our questions."

"I can relate to how Flanagan carries her ethnicity with her because both of my parents are from Iraq. I've been Americanized quite a bit, but I can still relate to the differences in nationalities that Flanagan writes about in her fiction."

Flanagan's visit allowed the students who had read her book to ask questions and to get more out of the learning experience by listening to what the author had to say about her work.

"Authors are granted more authority to talk about their work than professors because they can answer students' questions with a lower degree of speculation," Connery said.

In her second day at OU, Flanagan delivered a lecture, entitled "Ethnicity, Place and Fiction," to an audience of more than 100 students, faculty and staff in the Oakland Center Gold Rooms. In the lecture, she spoke of the difficulties of incorporating ethnicity and place in literature.

"Ethnicity has been talked about in a popular way after Alex Haley wrote 'Roots,'" Flanagan said. "That book encouraged Americans to seek out their cultural heritage. In my own fiction, I try to bring something of my world to Americans. To me, it's important that young African-Americans know that we are connected."

"One of the ways we inscribe ethnicity in literature is through language. But how do you register place? Often the images are compromised because of the audience for which we are writing. And this makes it very difficult."

The **English Department** asked Flanagan to visit OU not only because she is a good writer, but a good teacher as well.

"We selected Flanagan not only for the quality of her work but also because of her great teaching," Connery said. "Flanagan's a good writer who exemplifies the delight in language that we try to convey in all of our classes. The work she does is complex, current and of interest to both readers and critics. And she herself is a good teacher. Many authors are good writers but not so

good with students. But Flanagan has been great with the students.

“We’ll be bringing her back in May for the Far Field Retreat for Writers as a guest faculty member.”

The **English Department** hopes to attract other writers to visit campus as soon as next fall.

“We’d like to bring in as many authors as possible to speak and work with the students,” Connery said. “We want to establish good long-term relationships with writers and teachers so they stop by when they’re in the area. With the success of this visit, we can make a good case to do it again.”

Flanagan’s OU visit was sponsored by the **English Department** with support from the **College of Arts and Sciences** and the Judd Endowment. Visit the English Department’s **Events and Announcements** Web page for information on upcoming department events, including the **Far Field Retreat for Writers**.

SUMMARY

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