



Tuesday, May 25, 2004

Creative writers hone their craft during retreat

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

For four days each spring, groups of creative individuals put their busy schedules on hold to devote their time to working on what they enjoy most – writing. Poets, novelists, fiction and nonfiction writers from across the region gathered at Oakland University May 20-23 to attend the fourth consecutive **Far Field Retreat for Writers**. After spending time writing and helping other like-minded writers in highly interactive workshops, many of this year's participants left with more confidence and new ideas for their craft.

"For the most part, I've been writing in isolation but have been looking for some encouragement, which is why I came to the Far Field Retreat last year," said retreat participant John Jamieson of Muskegon, who graduated from OU in 1976 with a BA in English. "There's a great practicality to holding a writer's retreat. I've learned the importance of working with others. I like the encouragement and critiques I receive from the other writers. Now I'm investigating forming a writers group near home."

This year's group of 35 writers had the opportunity to study the craft of fiction, poetry or creative nonfiction with noted faculty who also are prominent writers on the local and national levels. Jamieson chose a fiction writing workshop led by Alan Cheuse, professor of English and creative writing at George Mason University, book commentator for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," and author of several novels, short story collections and a memoir. Cheuse began his workshop by analyzing the structure of the Greek tragedy "Oedipus the King" by Sophocles.

"This play represents the greatest plot in Western culture," Cheuse said. "The pattern or three major beats to the play are purpose, passion and perception. It's a method of demonstrating how to organize material in your own work. It's not a little kit for putting things together, but a paradigm you can use and apply to other forms of fiction such as short stories, novels and sketches."

Cheuse also examined Sophocles' use of time, telling his writing students to "begin your first-person narrative in the heart of the matter, no matter how important it may seem." The participants also analyzed two short stories by Anton Chekov and discussed how Sophocles' techniques can apply to more modern writing. Cheuse then asked the group to write a one-scene sketch working with Sophocles' paradigm. The writers met with Cheuse the following day to discuss their pieces.

"Alan also read our work and gave us his feedback. That's worth the price of admission alone," Jamieson said. "At last year's retreat, (poet and essayist) Thomas Lynch had us write our own obituary, which was an interesting exercise. The workshops are also beneficial because you learn how other people read your work. The writers who participate all have different backgrounds, and they all have a common desire to help each other with their writing. Everyone's very friendly, conversational, and there's no competition."

Other retreat faculty included OU Assistant Professors of English Gladys Cardiff and Annie Gilson; Dennis Hinrichsen, poet and instructor at Lansing Community College; Mary Ann Samyn, conference director, OU alumna and assistant professor of English at West Virginia University; and Sue William Silverman, award-winning novelist and associate editor of the literary journal "Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction." In addition, noted crime novelist Elmore Leonard made a special guest appearance, in which he read from his work and participated in a question-and-answer session.

The Far Field Retreat for Writers is sponsored by Oakland University's **English Department**, the Distinguished Programs Fund of OU's **College of Arts and Sciences**, the **Writers Voice Project of the Detroit YMCA**, and the **Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs**. For more information, visit the **Far Field Retreat for Writers** Web site or e-mail farfield@oakland.edu.

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Created by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Tuesday, May 25, 2004
Modified by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Tuesday, May 25, 2004
Article Start Date: Tuesday, May 25, 2004