

FANTASIES OF FAME:
ARE WRITING SEMINARS
AND CONFERENCES
WORTH YOUR TIME AND MONEY?

DAVID MCGRATH

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as I dreaming, or did novelist Ann Beattie whisper in my ear that she had not done her homework?

It was Day Two of the Key West Writers Workshop led by instructor and author Harry Mathews (*The Conversions, Cigarettes*). Seated around a rectangular table in the historic Village Hall in downtown Key West, Fla., 11 aspiring novelists and poets who had plunked down \$300 for eight hours of dictums and philosophy from the enigmatic Mathews listened in awed silence.

Some of the awe was because of Mathews—a bespectacled, bald, serious writing professor (Columbia and Bennington) who had a habit resting both elbows on the table and leaning forward, peering intently at each participant as if defying them to doubt his proclamations. And then there was yesterday’s surprise discovery that one of the 11 “students” was the acclaimed novelist and short story writer Ann Beattie (*Picturing Will; My Life, Staring Dara Falcon*). Seated at the table’s end opposite Mathews, the striking, smiling, silken-haired literary phenom seemed as dazed by Mathews as the rest of us.

But the major kick for the amateurs, or why we had traveled thousands of miles for a weekend workshop, had more to do with where we were on this sunny 70-degree morning. Would-be writers, hanging with the pros in the tropical lair of word-gods like Hemingway, Elizabeth Bishop, Tennessee Williams and now Beattie, we were living out a literary fantasy. Really.

In this age of extreme adventure vacations, you could, for the right price, indulge any lifelong fantasy for a week or a day. Ante up for baseball fantasy camp and shag grounders hit by Cub great Billy Williams in Mesa, Ariz. Sign on for the crew of a tall sailing ship, and climb to the crow’s nest 40 feet above the Caribbean. Register for the Navajo cultural exchange, and sleep in an authentic hogan, 100 yards down the hill from an authentic outhouse.

And to provide a similar fix for the countless number of aspiring writers in the United States and England, conferences, conventions, writers’ “groups,” writers’ colonies and writing workshops have bloomed. An Internet search turns up hundreds of such offerings each season. Some are affiliated

with schools and universities; others are private, for-profit monthly services. Registration fees vary—from \$35 for a single Adventure Travelwriting session to \$1,200 for a week at the prestigious Stonecoast Conference in Maine, including credits—and depend on the length of experience, and, of course, the name value (read “celebrity”) of the pros who will be in attendance.

Add the expense of flights, car rentals and bed and breakfasts (literary types eschew hotel chains), and it’s easy to see how an entire industry is making money off those who think and type and, most importantly, dream. The market pool is limitless; you don’t have to be blessed with athletic talent, beauty or wealth to seriously entertain an ambition to write. All you need is the conviction, secret or public, that you have a story to tell.

For a total of about \$1,500 (including tuition, lodging, too much Key West Sunset lager and not enough key lime pie), I participated in this year’s Key West Writers’ Workshop (KWWW). Sponsored by Florida Keys Community College, the program schedules weekend writers’ gatherings, each proctored by a reputable artist. This year’s instructors included novelist Robert Stone, poets Robert Creeley, Sharon Olds and Carolyn Forché, and poet/novelist/essayist Harry Mathews, whose workshop I was lucky enough to secure a seat in (writing samples were required). The KWWW Web site urges those interested to apply early, as the workshops fill fast because of the additional lure of the brilliant Florida Keys sunsets in the middle of February, when the rest of the country is freezer burned and stir crazy.

KWWW Director Irving Weinman has this whole beguiling fantasy thing down pat. At the end of your mundane week, after emerging from some arctic city to land under sunshine in Key West, you follow his careful directions to the Friday night orientation session. Pass by the palatial home of Ernest Hemingway and his old watering hole, Sloppy Joes, as you walk in short sleeves to the Westwinds Inn for the sunset gathering. Proceed to the torch-lighted courtyard, where, seated under palm trees, you’re served white wine and literary anecdotes by Mathews and Weinman, novelists who hobnob with John Ashbery and Raymond Roussel. You keep silent, sipping and smiling and nodding. The evening ensues and you shake hands and say, “Till tomorrow,” as if you always speak that way. You walk in the dark toward Mallory Square, slightly abuzz from the wine, the smell of flowers in mid-winter, the music tingling from the water front, and, most powerfully, from the question inside that you dare not even whisper: *Am I one of them?*

Harry Mathews turned out to be the ideal tease for this dream. At 73, he stood erect in a black t-shirt and white deck pants, soberly assaying anyone who dared approach him in the courtyard. I say dare because Harry disclosed to us tuition payers that he is repelled by people who flatter him, quoting another writer who compares the act of complimenting his novels to a stranger remarking how beautiful his ex wife is. Wanting to meet a writer because you like his work is like wanting to meet a goose because you like its droppings, Mathews said.

The tanned, chain-smoking Mathews fixes his listeners with a steady gaze and carries over his legendary literary economy into his social interaction, discouraging meaningless small talk. He will abide someone else’s remarks or questions but prefers to pivot to a monologue on Key West’s atmosphere (a feel of the continental), on France (where he lives half the year), or on fishing for prized permit in the flats.

On the first day of the “workshop,” (a misnomer for what is essentially a series of lectures punctuated by student sessions of free writing, which Mathews does not read), he set out the rules for

the weekend like the boss man in *Cool Hand Luke*: “You will not be late. You must go to all four sessions. Do not interrupt with questions. Say nothing if you disagree (or take it up with me outside of class). Do not take notes, as note taking is actually a form of not paying attention,” he said.

I looked around the table, expecting to see a welling up of protest, or maybe grudging resignation. Instead, what I saw was glee, a welcoming of rules and discipline, as if this answered their craving for order, for punishment, for initiation into the writer's life.

And then Harry Mathews asked for a show of hands: “How many of you got into writing as awkward adolescents, spurned by your peers, homely social outcasts who sought in reading and in writing a refuge from the world?”

Every hand went up. (Even Ann Beattie’s, though I cannot swear since note taking was disallowed.) I don’t know if I was embarrassed by the admission or embarrassed that I and these 10 others, and the ten hundred others who show up at these seminars each month in all 50 states, had gravitated to this life not out of talent or avocation, but because of a social behavioral disorder.

Though Mathews is internationally known, and his work is critically acclaimed for its freshness, intelligence and departure from literary convention, his work is not widely read. As with Faulkner or Joyce, his prose is not reader friendly. A musicologist who graduated from Harvard, Mathews does not find conventional writing challenging, so he experiments with and invents forms that lead to unique modes of expression, giving him a kind of literary liberty.

One of these experiments involved writing without using the letter *e*. He said he had taped a thumbtack to the *e* key on his typewriter to compel him to use alternative words and, concomitantly, phrases and clauses that he would not otherwise use.

The results of his inventiveness are challenging novels that are more imaginative than realistic. Even his most conventional novel, *Cigarettes*, which explores the tentacled body relationships among a battery of male and female characters, is based on a structure that can befuddle casual readers. (His controversial book *Singular Pleasures* contains 61 one-page descriptions of methods of masturbation.) So one of things he must do is teach. And Ann Beattie, who was taking the class because she is, of course, interested in Mathews’ thought processes (her missing homework notwithstanding), also indicated that she was auditing the workshop in preparation for her own teaching, which she and her sculptor husband must do to supplement their artists’ income.

One would think that the revelation of Beattie’s finances would be a sobering dose of reality for the workshop neophytes. Apparently, not even the life of a successful literary artist is worry-free. But it was never about wealth, as Mathews’ first lesson on motivation testified to.

The problem with some writers, said Mathews, is that they don’t know why they are writing. If they think it’s for self-expression, or for escape, or to get published and reviewed and win prizes, their writing will fail them. The writer’s real mission, he says, is to search for his own story with which to fill the blank page. It may take years of pain, volumes of work, reams of paper; even at life’s end, he may not have entirely fulfilled that mission. But the journey is key.

As far as fantasy camps go—and for the illusion of immersion in the Key West artists’ cachet—Mathews was contrarily well suited. As an intellectual figurehead, he kept the dream safely remote. Granted, we did learn important attitudes about, and approaches to, writing. And while it’s hard to expect any improvement in writing skills after a two- or three-day workshop, the value of networking at these venues can’t be underestimated (novelist Lynn Crawford began a collaboration with Mathews

as a result of an earlier workshop, which led to her inclusion in his latest anthology, *The Oulipo Compendium*).

But because Mathews joined us for cigarette breaks on Duvall Street and for lunch at a harbor side oyster bar during our one weekend in paradise, we flew home sated, tanned and star-dusted, though not necessarily any better at writing.

David McGrath's weekly columns on politics and culture appear in dozens of newspapers across the country, including the *Birmingham News*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Duluth News Tribune*. He is editor of *The Thing About Hope Is...*, a literature anthology, author of the novel *Siege at Ojibwa*, and has recently completed a second novel, *The Vocation*. He lives with his wife Marianne on Dauphin Island, Alabama, and can be contacted at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.