

WORKSHOP AND AESTHETICS



“EVERYBODY WAS REALLY SUPPORTIVE, again. I really feel like everybody was there to help one another grow as writers. Nobody, like, coddled each other, but — I really feel like our workshops hit the right balance between being encouraging and being constructively critical. And I think we have a nice variety of work being done, different styles, different influences. You know, we get some more experimental stuff, and just people using language in really different ways. People have different ideas of what a short story is. We have people working on novels. So, yeah, there are certain baselines I think that people are always going to look for — is it clear, you know, is it engaging — but in terms of the actual work that we’re doing, I feel like there’s a pretty good variety.” - KATE

“THE THING THAT’S REALLY GREAT HERE is that there’s a lot of aesthetic diversity, at least among the poets. And that challenges me a lot. The students are sort of an insular community that’s really geared towards helping each other out and pushing each other along. This program’s not really very prescriptive at all. There’s not really an ‘Ole Miss type,’ and that for me is a very good thing. We’re all doing totally different things, but we all read each other’s drafts and come up with ways to help each other out. And sometimes what we’ll be saying is, like, ‘What you’re doing here isn’t my thing,’ but you learn something by figuring out how to meet someone on their own terms. [Gives several examples of colleagues’ work.] Almost every person I know who has come into this program has left as a radically different poet. I’ve seen my work change a lot over the course of this year in ways I’m excited about.” - MARTY

“I FEEL LIKE THERE’S A LOT of different and diverse writing. [Gives several examples of colleagues’ work.] Women writers, and more culturally Asian-American or African-American stories. The level of writing in our program has definitely diversified just within the last two years that I’ve been here, I think. I still think that we’re kind of a more conservative program, just because, you know, our [fiction] faculty is very much grounded in the Southern tradition. It makes for a pretty interesting mix, all-around.”

- LIZZIE

“THERE’S OBVIOUSLY A STRONG INTEREST in Southern literature [here], and for me, that’s a perk, because it’s not Southern literature at the exclusion of other literature. I feel like being here gives me a rare opportunity, actually, if I want to pursue that, to learn a lot about Southern literature. But I don’t feel pressured to, like, write like a Southern writer. One of my friends, when I was weighing different schools, said, ‘Well, if you go down there, they’re going to turn you into a Southern writer.’ And I don’t really feel pressured in that way at all. I feel like, ‘Yeah, there is this history of Southern literature here, and there’s a strong appreciation of that, but you can really write whatever you want.’ Another thing I didn’t expect was how accepting they are here even of commercial fiction, and commercially successful authors. I had expected a lot more snobbery with that, just because [Oxford] does have such a strong literary tradition. But, I mean, we had Laura Lippmann come and speak, and she’s very successful commercially, a best-selling author. And Megan Abbott [2013-14 Grisham Writer in Residence], her new book [*The Fever*] is everywhere. So, I guess I’m saying, like, popular writers are not necessarily forbidden. [Laughing] It’s not like you can only write here, be appreciated here, if you’re a Southern writer in a garret. [Laughing].”

- KATE

“I LIKED BEING IN A SMALL MFA PROGRAM. I thought it was really cool to get to know my peers’ writing so well, to be in the workshop with the same people year after year. I feel

like that made strong relationships as friends and as critical readers of each others' work. I like how our workshop is not competitive. I've heard of other programs where people are competing for scholarship money every year, and I'm glad that that just wasn't an aspect of my life here."

- MCKAY

"**THERE'S NO 'OLE MISS SCHOOL OF WRITING,**' there's no 'Ole Miss style.' There is an 'Ole Miss standard.' Everybody comes from a different place, but everybody's stuff measures up. It has to measure up. That's the good kind of competition, the good pressure." - JIMMY

"**THE WORKSHOP HAS KEPT ME ON MY TOES,** it's been very interesting. I've had four workshops now, and each one was very different. Their teaching is always coming at me from different angles, and sometimes I'm wanting to fight against it. There have been moments, usually in the first few days of class, where I'm like, 'You know what, I don't like the way that they look at poetry.' But how it always turns out is that, in every workshop, I've done work that I'm proud of, and that has everything to do with the way that they teach it. No workshop's going to be the same as the last. And I think that's great. Because it always keeps you guessing, it always keeps you changing. It forces you to evolve."

- ANDREW

"**EACH WORKSHOP HAS BEEN VERY, VERY DIFFERENT,** in a good way. There have been some that focus on bigger picture issues, and some on, you know, more line-edit-y issues. But the tone is generally supportive, especially from the student end. People are less concerned with bashing you and more with helping you write what you wanted to write in the first place. It seemed like people were eager to have me write the story that I wanted to write, and not the other way around. And I also feel like everybody's kinda got each other's back, in a good way. Anytime I've asked for help outside of class, people have

always done it, you know. ‘The workshopping doesn’t stop in the classroom.’ [Laughing] I will say one other thing, since you’ve got me started: in some workshops you worry about a little pettiness creeping in; there’s no pettiness in our workshops.” - JIMMY

“**MY PROFESSORS WOULD ALWAYS TAKE THE TIME** to heavily and thoroughly mark my manuscripts. I’ve heard of other programs where people get, kind of, cursory comments — you know, like, the teacher had to be teaching the class but wasn’t really interested — and with both of them I felt like they were heavily invested in improving my writing. It was obvious they had read the manuscripts several times, that they’d thought about them. Just the amount of time invested is really apparent.” - KATE

“**THE BOTTOM LINE OF A WORKSHOP** is to get to know the people in the workshop and their writing. I think that everyone genuinely wants to help you. I don’t think anyone thus far has seemed malicious; like, no one has ever cut me down or anything like that. And that dynamic continues outside of the workshop. The workshop here is very beneficial in creating relationships. I’ve sent my stories to the visiting Grisham writers after they were gone, and they’ve read them and helped me out. I’ve sent my stories to [many of my MFA colleagues] and it’s the same thing there. You learn in the workshop the people who are sort of on your wavelength, or who’s going to be most helpful to you in your writing. So you find those people, and you create stronger relationships with them, and they help you, and it’s great. I think that’s the most helpful thing about the workshop, the relationships.” - LIZZIE

