

An Interview with Grub Street

Grub Street is a Boston-based literary development center. It also runs YAWP, the Young Adults Writers Program, and a workshop for seniors called the Memoir Project. More information can be found at www.grubstreet.org.

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Front Porch: What is Grub Street?

It's a non-profit literary arts center. We offer a professional development organization for writers at all levels. We offer MFA level workshops in pretty much all literary genres, fiction, poetry screenwriting, etc. We also host a national literary conference held every year in April or May. We also have a national book prize, and we offer free writing classes for seniors and teens. People pay for the other classes, but the ones for seniors and teens are free.

FP: And that's the YAWP program?

Correct. The teen one is called YAWP, and the one for seniors is called the Memoir Project.

FP: How do Grub Street workshops differ from an MFA or college workshop?

They follow the traditional MFA format. They're small classes, maximum twelve students, and they're meant to be rigorous but supportive, not for therapy. People don't come to us to be told that their writing is good, or that they're healthy people. They want serious feedback on their writing. What makes us different, I guess, is the age range, which is anywhere from nineteen to ninety. So you get a whole range of people in class, from different socio-economic backgrounds, different parts of the city, giving each other feedback. And there are no grades, but everybody gets written evaluations from fellow students and the teacher.

FP: How do you find the age range influences the workshop?

The benefit is that it breaks down barriers between generations. If writing is about empathy, it offers people in workshop a window into lives they don't know about. It's different to critique someone from another generation. You learn about them and their generation in a more profound way than talking to someone you know or someone from your family. And that dynamic is what a writer needs most: a sense of empathy.

There are a lot of programs like Grub Street, but what makes us different is that we're not sitting around babysitting each other or being primarily social. A social component is important. But we're engaging in a serious way with the written word, with character, with plot. It's that seriousness that makes Grub Street valuable.

FP: You mentioned varying socio-economic backgrounds. Are you seeing groups of people you think aren't reached by standard MFA or college programs?

I'm not saying everyone at Grub Street is working class, but I think we get a bigger population of blue collar or working class people than at MFA programs. For example, we have a student who's a lobsterman. All day he fishes for lobsters, and at night he works on his novel in our workshops. And that's somebody who would probably not choose to go to an MFA program, but who's very serious about the novel he's writing.

FP: What do you find the students are reading?

It's all over the map. People are reading stuff that's very contemporary. Our indie bookstores in Boston are very strong, and they showcase a lot of current fiction. If not, then they're reading the classics. Hemingway, Faulkner, the American classics.

In general I would say people aren't reading enough. We get a fair number of people who come in and say they want to be writers, and when we ask them what they read, they say they haven't read a book in a while. I always find that strange.

FP: How often do you have someone like that, who comes in with the desire to write, but is totally unversed in the craft?

Pretty much every day. They know something about it, because most people have been writing, but they don't know about the craft. They don't know what second person point of view is, or the difference between round and flat characters. They don't have the vocabulary, I'd say, but they know these things by instinct, because they've been writing in journals, or have even started sending their stuff out.

FP: What do you tell them?

We try to find the right fit. If we're a professional development organization for writers at all levels, as I said we are, then that's a level. It's just entry level. We have a number of classes geared toward entry-level writers. We also have a number of classes that are purely generative, that are just writing exercises. Often times, people don't want to learn about the craft so much as they want to keep writing, and that allows them to write. We want to offer that range of options.

FP: Who are the teachers?

All emerging writers. They must have an MFA or a publication history, either have published a book, or have placed stories or poems in recognized journals.

FP: What are their motivations?

It's certainly not money, which is less than you'd make as an adjunct professor at a college. But you get a group of energetic writers as students, and it's very inspiring for the teachers to have an audience like that. And, it's kind of a cliché, but many instructors have said that teaching at Grub Street has improved their own writing.

FP: Do the students' reading interests change as a result the program?

Yes. When they start, they tend to be reading either books recognized as classics or more contemporary writing. Through the classes, though, they're introduced to, for lack of a better word, writer's writers, more literary writers who are not as well known but beloved by other writers. Charles Baxter, Jim Shephard. Oh, and Alice Munro. A lot of people have never read Alice Munro until they've taken a class here, which always amazes me.

FP: Do you find they embrace these writers?

There's not a whole lot of resistance. Many people come in already accomplished in their field, they have a career, they're well established, and they meet a teacher who's twenty years younger than them, someone who's just starting out in the field of creative writing. And yet they really respect the instructors' expertise and level of commitment. But they're taking this class because they're open, so they're hungry for things they don't know yet. Which is refreshing.

FP: What do they write about?

Like most people, they write about things they've experienced. Family, relationships. It's pretty traditional. This is not a very experimental group. They usually stick to traditional stories, traditional forms. Usually it's thinly-veiled autobiography. [Laughs] I can't say I'm not guilty of that myself.

Some are more interested in historical work, fiction or non-fiction, they're more interested in research, in constructing particular moments in history. And there's a strong subset of people interested in genre, fantasy...I wouldn't say sci-fi, more mythical stuff.

Overall it skews more literary than commercial. We get more people who want to be an Alice Munro than a Nora Roberts.

FP: And there is a portion of Grub Street that helps with the publishing side as well?

It's a subset, but it's becoming a bigger subset. We have a conference divided between craft and marketing/publishing. And every term we offer a series of workshops and panels on finding an agent, writing query letters, placing your poems in journals, etc.

We have a strong philosophy that it's not enough to write well. As an organization of professional development, we have a responsibility to offer students ways to put their stuff out into the world that's smart. We write to be read, so we want to teach people how to get their stuff read when it's ready.

FP: How much success have you had in establishing students as writers?

It's hard to quantify. We don't have hard numbers on it. We do know that a healthy amount have gone on to MFA programs or gotten published. But everybody defines success differently. For most people the success is in getting better. And we have a good track record in helping people get better.

But I don't want to shortchange those who have published. Between our instructors and the students, we've gotten people into the best MFA programs, they've had books published, bestsellers.

But if someone came into us with a manuscript that wasn't very good, but got it placed with an agent through Grub, I guess that's a success, but it's not the kind of success we get excited about.

FP: Do you find writers are establishing themselves through other outlets, besides major publishing houses or literary journals?

With the rise in self-publishing, blogs, publishing on-line, a lot of people are having success getting their work out there. They also have a lot of success performing, either at Grub Street readings, or around town. Different bookstores have events for Grub Street. It's almost a badge of honor...I don't know, that may be too strong, but if you're associated with Grub Street, it means you're serious.

The literary journal market is tough, mercurial, unforgiving. But I'd say our students have had about as much success at placing their work in journals as someone coming out of an MFA program.