

EDITOR'S NOTE

Thank you for taking the opportunity to open this issue of the Rio Review. I would like to personally thank ACC for the emphasis it places on the importance of the creative writing and Professor Charlotte Gullick, for her ability to empower and inspire me and my fellow writers to find our voice and use it in its purest form, searching for that creative wonderland sandwiched between audacity and humility. I had never realized the true necessity of poetry, prose, and creativity until I was given the opportunity to work as an editor. It has been enlightening to see the world through the eyes of so many different people.

This collection is a testament to the power that writing can have on the wholeness of an individual. What spoke to me the most in this issue was the paths that we all take to finding our voices and the opportunity that we have in a community college environment to cross paths with fresh, raw talent in a nurturing environment as we all follow our journeys to being writers. Despite natural disasters and economic recession, a passion for the arts remains. We must look inside ourselves to keep creativity and the human imagination illuminated in our lives. For if we spend a few minutes each day enjoying the creative work of others and embracing our own creativity through writing, we will make light in these dark times. It is my hope, especially as a 53-year old woman whose untraditional path to writing mirrors what is becoming more commonplace, that these poems and prose spark a passion in you and that this journal is your invitation to tap into the creativity within yourself and to join our community of writers.

Sincerely,

LaVonne Roberts

LENS LINEUP

—LaVONNE ROBERTS



Interview with Barry Maxwell - founder of Street Lit, a free writers workshop for the homeless.

What inspired you to go to ACC and study Creative Writing?

All I wanted to achieve when I first walked in the door was a GED. (I had bailed on high school--one credit shy of graduating, to play drums and be a rock star. That obviously didn't work out.)

Over the years, I'd promised my mother again and again that I'd get off my butt and get it done, but, of course, I never did. After her death, I didn't forget, and once I managed to get sober and somewhat clear-headed, it seemed time. Turns out I did so well that I won a small scholarship for credit courses, then another from the Peierls Foundation, who still help out today with substantial transfer scholarships for UT. I can't thank them enough.

The encouragement was as important as the funds, and I decided it would be foolish to pass up the opportunity.

Originally I planned to major in web design, but only as a potential freelance venue to write in a tech market. Site design and content creation seemed a good way to generate an independent small biz income. I switched, though, before my first semester. The Creative Writing program at ACC was too appealing, and I knew I wouldn't have another chance like this come up, so I switched majors and went for what I loved to do most. Regardless of how the future plays out, I'm convinced I made the right choice.

If you met you today, what advice would you have?

Don't limit your vision. From GED prep classes on, I only saw the possibilities in the next baby step and was blind to options that each step would open up. This led to some willy nilly planning and honestly, some self-indulgent choices. If I would have ever dreamed early on that I'd be transferring to UT, winning the Terry Foundation scholarship (Another amazing organization--I owe them deeply

for both their monetary and hands-on moral support.), and now working with my Street Lit group and looking toward finding an MFA program that will have me, I would have plotted my scholastic course more carefully. Then again, that willy nilly self-indulgence led me to take damned near the entire menu of writing courses at ACC, so I can't complain!

How long has Street Lit been around, and how did it begin?

In the Fall semester of 2013, my Public Speaking class at ACC required a "Make a Difference" project. I pitched the idea to the room of collecting books from students and faculty and delivering them to the ARCH and the Sally (Salvation Army) as they came in. A handful of crazy classmates--good crazy--teamed up with me and we ran with it. Our first effort collected over 700 books. I've still got unsanctioned collection bins over at the ACC Rio Grande campus (shhh!), and books are still coming in, along with donations now from folks who I've met along the way through UT, or who know the project through various school or online connections. I didn't actively 'do' Street Lit book collections after the class project was done (got an A, by the way), but it kept going forward with a life of its own. I just ran along, trying to keep up!

As to the current expansion, the Street Lit Authors Club, it's something I'd wished to do from the outset, but had no idea how to make it happen. I didn't feel qualified in any way, and those doubts kept me stalled out. I knew it could be done: folks around the country have initiated similar programs--even here in Austin there are programs like Free Minds, with both credit courses and free writing workshops.

This past summer, Kay Klotz, of Front Steps (the nonprofit that runs the ARCH), accidentally emailed me. She sent a note intended for a different Barry to my address. I don't believe in signs and wonders, but I took the opportunity to ask if they'd be willing to work with me. Within days we'd met, Kay, hooked me up with Hannah Ford, the volunteer's coordinator, and before a month passed the project was underway.

Those doubts were all me in Chicken Little mode, and I realized most importantly that teaching, per se, was not actually my role. That's why I don't call the meetings classes, but workshops, and I'm not a teacher, I'm the facilitator. I'm the bringer of coffee, the provider of pens and paper, and head of the structure and encouragement department. It's good work if you can get it.

Street Lit does all kinds of different work—runs classes, donates books, solicits student work, etc. Can you tell us a little more about each of these efforts and how they benefit Austin's homeless community?

Sometimes homelessness feels like that sort of confinement. Even when someone is doing their best, the obstacles are huge. The homeless people we—meaning us more fortunate individuals—see around town may be actively pursuing work, or they may be disabled or mentally ill, and waiting for responses on Social Security benefits or access to care. I remember how hard it was jumping through the hoops simply to reestablish ID, and trying to keep sober while living downtown—imagine shaking off an addiction in a milieu often composed of drinkers, dealers, and drug users. It's a struggle to work one's way back to real-world viability, and there are days, long ones when nothing can be done. You're stuck with no place to be or anything you can do, and nothing within reach offers up any sense of worth or accomplishment.

That inner desolation is what drives Street Lit. Books were the start, and are still incredibly valuable. You'd be amazed at the security and point of psychological contact a simple novel in one's hands can supply. It is somewhere safe to go when the reality is a full-on dystopian horror of the day in and day out exclusion from the world you knew. It's escapism that harms no one and enriches the reader in the process.

The writing group takes it further. We're developing a community in that room, and even though it's a tiny one now, it is growing. It's been called a bright spot

in the dark weeks, a safe place to be one's Self with a capital "S," and a confirmation of our collective value that dismisses labels of race, social status, and gender. Everyone at the table shares a level of respect and appreciation that we'd be hard pressed to find out on the sidewalk or as an isolated data point in the system.

At its most intimate, the group allows expression that isn't part of the everyday experience. We've got poets and short story writers, budding journalists, and even a playwright. We discuss the work, we make the effort to understand one another and help the work grow in its own way.

Nothing is discounted or dismissed: a word on the page is golden, no matter what. While I can't claim that anything we do is going to help someone escape the homeless situation, it will certainly make it more tolerable until that happens, and if coffee and kind comments add to someone's self-worth and confidence in their heart, then this little gang of writers has accomplished something rare and wonderful.

How can people help out (other than donating books during-and after-the department's potential Street Lit book drive)? What types of assistance would be most beneficial to Street Lit at this point and moving forward?

Street Lit's primary needs these days are ideas, expertise, and openness to meeting the group as people and not statistics or societal liabilities. We've had great sessions with visiting professors and fellow writing students. Interested "guest stars" are a treat for everyone, and I think it also adds a feeling of being cared about by the bigger world outside. When a guest, a "real" writer, you know, shows respect for us strugglers and our pieces, and sincerely pitches in to help the work along, everyone benefits. The group gets a shot of confidence and fun from the visit, and the enthusiasm lingers afterward, along with better writing in the long term. As I mentioned, I'm no teacher, and it's an honor when bona fide instructors take the time to help us out.

Of course, money is an ongoing issue. It doesn't take much to keep us going, but groceries add up over time, and the basics that go with them. Snacks may sound trivial, but simply having decent coffee and something healthy (or just delicious!) to munch on is one of my bribes to get people in the room to begin with. Someone may be shy about attending a writing group, but once the coffee pot lures them in, the rest flows more smoothly, and they keep coming back. And there are writing books to acquire, good reading material—I like to offer quality books to the group, and they are always appreciated, along with notebooks, pens, etc.

Do you plan on teaching someday?

In the Street Lit workshops, I back away from the title of teacher, and I don't treat the group as students, or the meetings as classes. We're all in it together, trying to find words that suit our thoughts and feelings, and if I must have a label, the one I've chosen is "facilitator." In reality, I'm just the guy that makes the coffee. Whether it's humility or insecurity, I don't know, but the concept of me teaching anything to anyone sounds crazy. Who am I to claim that role? Where do I get off thinking the title would be appropriate? I wonder if I will ever wake up one morning and feel qualified, or if a particular degree will give me a strong enough hand to effectively bluff my way through a day. The future usually makes plans for me without my knowledge, and I'd like to think they include teaching in some form. Maybe I'll continue to see myself as "just" a facilitator, but have solid credentials to back it up. Credentials or not, a sense of forward motion and some as yet unknown level of achievement as a writer may help bring some confidence to the bluffing. We'll see. Until then, the best I can aim for is to provide the room--both physically and psychologically--for folks to open up to express themselves, and to try to keep up with them while they run with it.

Do you have a long term goal for your writing?

Right now, I feel like I'm in a place where I'm not as productive as I want to be, but the SLACers (That's the Street Lit Authors Club) are inspiring me, and giving me some accountability, too. I'm in training, practicing, learning more, and trying--*trying!*--to develop better judgment of my own work, as well as simply recognizing the joy of *doing* the work. Sometimes it's a matter of getting past the critic and the sluggard and the negative self-talk. Sometimes I'm just lazy or defeatist. Sometimes (and these are the moments I tend to ignore), it's a stupendous pleasure to cut loose and get the guts of a topic onto a page.

In some ways, I think I've touched on a lot of the important parts of what I need to write, all of it centered around my homeless experiences, but even the finished works don't feel finished. I haven't discovered yet whether it's all going to end up as a memoir, fictionalized as stories or larger pieces, or some combination of all these forms. It's a puzzle, and I'm still creating it while hopefully bringing the big picture into focus. The long term goal is one that will reveal itself while I take care of the more immediate steps and learn my way through the process. I've got a lot of revisions in my future, a lot of recombinations of existing material, a lot of deeper digging to take on. Faith is a word I tend to avoid, but I have to keep moving along with the faith that I'll know my goal when I see it. Is that vague, or what!

What did you like best about your Creative Writing experience at ACC? Any suggestions or thoughts on how to get the most out of your creative writing experience at ACC?

If I were writing a Yelp review for a business, I'd give ACC's writing program five stars based on a wide selection, attention to detail, and personal service. I took my first writing class online over the summer break, and even with the separation in space, the class was a team, pulling for each other with enthusiasm and care, urging each other on.

Charlotte taught the class, and when it came time to turn in the semester portfolio in person and meet for the first time, I didn't feel like a stranger dropping off a packet. Charlotte knew immediately who I was and greeted me not with a handshake and a "Hello, I must be going," but with a smile and a hug.

A writing class of any genre will tend to open up a student to areas they might be shy about, or places in them that might normally be hidden, and these tender spots are treated with respect and honor. Once in the classroom, I felt accepted and welcome, and it was obvious all the students felt the same level of comfort. Each class became its own community, and to me, the classes were one of the few times and places in daily life where I felt safe enough to open up those tender subjects that begged to be written about. You can't write freely if you don't trust your audience, right? My professors made the effort to foster that atmosphere of safety and had their hearts in the work of building and protecting that trust. The confidence this gave me carried through outside of the classroom, and today I realize that the honesty and transparency I learned at ACC is as important as any lesson in craft—it's where the real work gets done.

Take that as a student and hold onto it, it's a gift you won't find much out in the "real" world, and it's more valuable on levels personal, professional, and in the deep levels of your heart, than you might know at first. The emotional honesty that drives your work will infuse the rest of your life as well, and that is an amazing step to take, even if you never write another word.

Advice or thoughts on going back to school as a non-traditional student?

I'm 55 now...ugh...and though I bitch and moan a lot about it, it's actually quite fun being the old dude talking nonsense in the front row. I've come to accept that no one will get most of my jokes, and my professors are often young enough to be my grandchildren. I try to keep up, though.

I bailed on high school in 1978, and many of my memories of school were of social awkwardness, shyness, a handful of awful teachers who instructed by humiliation, and a couple of rare ones who helped me feel human in the world.

Overall, the idea of school was a place to run from, far and fast. I carried that baggage to ACC, so yes, I was intimidated at first, but found that I was capable enough for the work and that in spite of leftover paranoia, no one was out to see me fail. They wanted me to succeed!

I know not everyone comes to school with their knees shaking, so I can't speak for you confident folks out there, but if, like me, you're a little creeped out by the whole idea, I promise you this will pass. And if it doesn't, it will certainly mellow. I've been fortunate enough to go to school full time, with the assistance of Pell grants, Peierls scholarships, the ACC Creative Writing scholarship, and now the Terry Foundation scholarship at UT. I'm a little bit poor but get by, and since I started GED prep at ACC with a backpack and no money at all, I feel privileged and even rich some days.

The lesson is that wherever you stand monetarily, you can make this work, and that age is not a drawback, but an advantage. If you get stuck, there is help at every turn. Just ask. And if, like me, you're the oddball in the room, well...I suggest you revel in it. As a voice speaking from middle age, I also suggest you make friends with the young'ns in your classes. The energy and fresh ideas of my classmates constantly amaze me, and it's fun to tell them about the days of horse and buggies, and about how people once lived happily without Snapchat.