Alan Ziegler

AN INTERVIEW

by Lacy Crawford

Alan Ziegler was born in 1947 in Brooklyn and began his writing career working on his high school newspaper. After graduating from Union College in Schenectady in 1969, he worked as a journalist and a machine operator before pursuing an MA in poetry at CUNY. In 1974 he accepted an offer to teach in a public school, and so began a career that led to fourteen years teaching grade-school children with the Teachers & Writers Collaborative and twenty-three years working with undergraduates and graduate students at Columbia University, where since 2001 he has been chair of the Writing Division in the School of the Arts. Ziegler is the author of two books on teaching writing, *The Writer's Workshop*, volumes 1 and 2; two collections of poetry, *Planning Escape* and *So Much to Do;* a collection of short stories, *The Green Grass of Flatbush;* and a collection of prose poems, *The Swan Song of Vaudeville.* He is at work on a book about writing—which will be published by Soft Skull Press in 2007—as well as a memoir, *99 Stories,* an excerpt of which appears in *Narrative.* Ziegler lives in Manhattan with his wife, Erin Langston.

Alan Ziegler's office, reached through the busy headquarters of Columbia University's legendary graduate programs in writing, opens via enormous two-story windows onto a scene of university grandeur: the central plaza of the main campus, with the halls of art history and philosophy across the way, and the long procession of steps up to Low Memorial Library glowing granite and cold. On the November afternoon I met him, the formality of the view suggested a certain gravitas, a hush.

But inside Ziegler's office, every surface is covered with stuff. The space houses several collections: fountain pens in special stands, a row of tiny model typewriters, photographs Ziegler took on holiday in Tuscany, various figurines, the silver clerk's bell that belonged to his father when he worked in a motel, books. It is a tinkerer's space, a workshop in the craftsman's sense. Often, as he spoke, Ziegler got up from his chair and rummaged around the room, looking for objects related to his stories, pulling books from the shelves, ringing the clerk's bell.

The office wall opposite the high windows is covered top to bottom in framed photographs, with

the notable exception of one small tacked-up print, placed high and to the left, at the heart of the display: Courbet's 1848 portrait of Baudelaire. The young poet is bent over an open book, one hand braced on cushions in the foreground, the quill in its well. It is a rich and solemn image. Ziegler has surrounded the print on all sides with a wide array of elegantly matted and framed, vivid portraits of a small dachshund. This is his dog, Latte, and she is well loved. Ziegler has pictures of Latte the way other people have pictures of animals on safari: Latte running across an open field, ears aloft, sun streaming; Latte in close-up, sniffing the wind; Latte in repose. The author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is almost, but not quite, lost in the display.

As a writer, Ziegler has published journalism, profiles, poems, and short stories, but across genres his work turns on the whimsical, the much-loved, the observer's eye at play. In his introduction to Ziegler's collection of prose poems*, The Swan Song of Vaudeville,* Richard Howard writes, "One reason I know that Ziegler's performances are poems is that the language, the voice has been altogether honed to memorable speech, Auden's working title for modern poetry." Ziegler has recently settled on short prose poems—which in their brevity and novelty can be, as Howard suggests, thought of as performances—as his ideal form.

Ziegler's career as a writer, however, has been somewhat secondary to his career as a teacher of writers. One year out of graduate school, when he was first publishing his own poems, Ziegler began teaching elementary-school children with the Teachers & Writers Collaborative. He has been in the classroom at one level or another ever since. His current post could not, in some senses, be farther from the PS classroom. For the last five years, he has been chair of the Writing Division in the School of the Arts at Columbia, overseeing the MFA programs in writing. It is a powerhouse division with perhaps the most illustrious stable of instructors of any writing program in the world.

When Ziegler steps down this summer, he will assume the title of Director of Pedagogy and Teacher Training, a position that has grown out of his contributions to the program during his years at Columbia. Part of his goal has been to train writers as teachers. Ziegler has provided MFA students with bankable skills, never a bad thing for an artist to possess. He has done so in spite of the mythology surrounding MFA programs: the idea that writing is an inscrutable mystery, that one has talent or not, and that the knowledge that permits good writing is nontransferable.

As an administrator and teacher, Ziegler has a light touch, borne out in his writing about teaching. Writing is accessible to every student: "There is perhaps no art for which the normal person is better equipped." With children, he is acknowledged as an especially gifted teacher, and he draws from them sophisticated poetry. He is willing to encounter the world with them, to observe, describe, reflect, imagine, as much as he does with older writers. A graduate fiction-writing student at Columbia smiled to think of him. "Ziegler?" she said. "He's like *sugar*."

He speaks of his own experience of writing as if it were play. He tips back in his chair when he talks. He digresses. He laughs. He has clear, mischievous blue eyes. Whereas many teachers approach writing workshops with the belief that students are in the service of literature, Ziegler gives the sense that literature is in the service of students. There is only this life, he seems to say, and writing is one thing that people do, and isn't that fantastic?

LACY CRAWFORD

You were first introduced to writing by an elementary-school teacher who assigned you to the school newspaper because you didn't have the voice for chorus. Do you remember learning to write, what appealed to you then?

ALAN ZIEGLER

Going back to high school, *Crime and Punishment, Moby-Dick,* and, of course, Shakespeare, went simultaneously to my head and my gut (much like Picasso's *Guernica,* which I visited frequently at the Museum of Modern Art). But I was transformed into someone who wanted to write through the lyrics of singer-songwriters—early Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Eric Andersen, Richard Fariña, Leonard Cohen. They were a half-generation older than I was, playing gigs in Greenwich Village, making albums, and my dream was to follow in their footsteps. As you noted, the problem was that I couldn't sing. But I collaborated on songs with a folksinger in college, and I played backup guitar for him until he moved to the Village, when I was replaced by a real musician; I did get to hear my lyrics performed around the Village, including at the Gaslight (one of Dylan's early places). My partner didn't get a recording contract, so my career as a lyricist was the equivalent of a poet doing readings but never getting a book. But the writing totally captivated me. And there was journalism, too—I was editor of the high-school newspaper and in college was features editor and a columnist for the school paper, and I also co-edited an underground magazine called *The Paper Highway*. This was a tumultuous time; I began Union College in staid 1965, and by 1970 (when I graduated), the antiwar movement was in full bloom, and my political journalism was inseparable from my role as a campus activist. I was reading the likes of Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, and I also wrote about social issues. As a "big" social step forward, Union—an all-male school—decided to let us have females in our rooms, *but only until 2 a.m.* So I wrote a piece for the newspaper saying that the school was not only tolerating "screw 'em and leave 'em," but *enforcing* it; I made my points through vignettes rather than polemics. (My lead was sophomoric but attention getting: "Insensitivity at Union stood out last night like an erection in the gym shower.") I was shocked by the reaction to the piece. The All-College Council censured the newspaper for publishing it, and the newspaper was besieged with letters to the editor, the shortest being: "Ziegler: Just who do you think you are?" (a question I've never stopped asking myself). An English professor, Sam Ullman, defended me by writing that if I had used "the embalming fluid of journalism,"

no one would have noticed the article, adding, sarcastically, that "metaphor menaces and must be shunned." So I got a taste of the power of figurative language. Though I was writing songs, I was really intimidated by poetry. I considered poetry to be at the top of the pantheon of literature, and I just wasn't ready to reach for it yet. I was comfortable on the lower perches of journalism and songwriting.

CRAWFORD

A particularly nasty comment about your poems was made by an editor of the college literary magazine when you were a sophomore—"I don't like word games." The comment caused you to stop writing for two years.

ZIEGLER

Yeah. Looking back, it was probably a good thing, because I didn't stop writing, I just stopped writing poetry. I put everything into the journalism and songs. Songwriting allowed me to explore imagery and emotions and narrative with a boost from the music. By working within the confines of rhyme and meter—which none of the campus poets were doing in those days—I had to pay very careful attention to each word. You go to the coffee house, you perform your songs, they applaud; they don't sit around a table and pick you apart. You publish something in the newspaper, maybe someone writes an angry letter, but no one is going to analyze your writing. I needed that room: I needed to be reading, and I needed to be earning my chops. In my senior year I took a class in modern poetry with Jocelyn Harvey, who introduced (or reintroduced) me to William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H. D., Amy Lowell—and I was fortunate to read them under the guidance of someone who truly loved poetry and who knew what she was talking about. I got very excited about their work. I did a paper comparing such songwriters as Joni Mitchell to the imagist poets. So, when I started writing poetry again, in my last semester in college, I was more confident, and I had a better sense of what I wanted to work toward. By then I needed to break free of the formal confines of the song. I loved that a poem could be just a couple of lines, like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro."

CRAWFORD

Was it completely different work from the poems you had been writing earlier?

ZIEGLER

Yes, it was. I wasn't trying to impress anybody. I wasn't trying to be literary. I had given up on being the Campus Poet (I already had the title of Campus Activist). And I didn't feel I needed "word games." I felt simply there were things I wanted to write, and I had role models for writing them. The key moment came when I took my new poems to a young, hip English professor, who had offered to read them. He said some nice things to me, and then, as I was walking out the door of his office, he said, "I just want you to know that they're not

good poems. Not these. But you can become a good poet." That was the most invigorating thing anyone ever said to me about my work. He was confirming that I could be a poet and, implicitly, giving me permission to carry on. That's the kind of comment which, as a teacher, you hope to make for your students, a comment to move them forward without negating where they are; to push, but not so hard that they stumble. Another example is something that was said to me in graduate school. I had majored in psychology in college, so I didn't have a strong literature background. Leo Hamalian, the chair of the writing program, said something about Yeats, and I confessed that I hadn't really read Yeats, except for the stuff in anthologies. And he said, "I envy you." It's like the experience of seeing people walk into a wonderful restaurant that you are leaving, and you think: I envy you for the meal you have in front of you. And there I was, starving for literature, and he said, in effect, Try the Yeats!

CRAWFORD

How did you spend the time between college and the MA program at City College of New York?

ZIEGLER

It was three years. I started out working for a newspaper, and then I became a machine operator, and I started taking poetry workshops.

CRAWFORD

Machine operator?

ZIEGLER

In the early days of computers, these big reports would be printed on huge rolls of paper in five carbons, with these crazy, flimsy holes on the sides, and the copies had to be separated and the carbons thrown away. I worked a mean machine called a decollator that separated the copies into piles; my job was to feed the reports into the machine and control the speed. Too slow, and it took forever to complete; too quick, and the machine would jam, and it would take an hour to rethread it and sort out the frazzled copies. I kept pushing the envelope and regretting it. My shift was generally 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. Sunday was the big shift: I'd come in Sunday night and leave in the late afternoon on Monday.

CRAWFORD

Did you write in your head during those nights?

ZIEGLER

Oh, yes. Some of my earliest poems were written that way. Usually I had a workshop on Tuesday night (I studied with David Ignatow and Michael Goldman at the 92nd Street Y), so all Sunday night I'd be thinking about what I wanted to turn in. I remember one: The office was on the west side of Manhattan, and it had windows on three sides. I tried to watch the sunrise at each of the exposures, and I wrote a poem about it. I remember the joy of writing it in my head simultaneously with the actual experience of running from room to room, knowing that I had a workshop to bring it to.

CRAWFORD

How did you find your way to the MA program at City?

ZIEGLER

After I retired from decollating, I took a job as an editor at a place called the Environment Information Center, which published a magazine called *Access*. It wasn't real journalism. Though I did some reviews of films about environmental issues, mostly I wrote abstracts of articles on the environment that I didn't fully understand. By that time I had begun publishing my poems in little magazines, including one called *Connections*. The editor invited me to dinner, and her husband was the deputy chair of the English Department at Bronx Community College (which, like City College, is part of the City University of New York). He liked my work, and he said, Why don't you come teach for me? You have a master's, don't you? I said that I didn't. He said, Get one. So that brings me back to the confidence issue, my need for permission in those days. I was spurred to keep writing poems by that professor in college, and my decision to apply to graduate school was jump-started by this offer of a teaching job.

I applied to Columbia and to City College (narrowing my choices to schools between 116th and 137th Streets). Columbia was way too expensive, and City College offered me full tuition and some additional money. Still, I was undecided until my father called me and said that he had heard on the radio that Kurt Vonnegut was going to be at City College. I withdrew my application to Columbia and went to City. The chairman at Columbia wrote me a note lamenting that Columbia was losing good writers because of money; I've written that same note many times in the last few years. When I got to City College, I learned that I wouldn't be able to study with Vonnegut because I'd been accepted as a poet. So I did what students here at Columbia try to do all the time—and I'm the one who has to say no, they can't—I went to the head of the program and asked to take Vonnegut's fiction workshop. And he said that as long as my thesis was poetry, he would let me do it. I also did an independent study with William Burroughs, who came for a semester.

CRAWFORD

What was it like to study with Vonnegut?

ZIEGLER

The class met once on campus, and then he said, Let's meet at my place. So we met there—a townhouse on the East Side—but the class wasn't going well for him, and around the middle of the term he disbanded the workshop and kept some of us on as tutorials.

CRAWFORD

The workshop wasn't going well?

ZIEGLER

I think he was just too kind. He mentioned to me how one woman kept introducing new characters in her novel, which Kurt described as: "So, you've met all my friends, now let me introduce you to some more." I went to his house every week or two, and we talked about my work. When the term ended, I called him to arrange a meeting about some new work. His wife answered and she said, The term is over. I told her he'd said that I could call. Kurt picked up, and she said, It's one of your students. He asked which one. And when I said my name, he said, "Oh, it's OK." I had the sense, in that moment, that he wasn't just doing his job, but that what we were doing together was part of his literary life. I felt like we had gone beyond the contractual relationship, and that felt good. Many years later I sent him the galleys for a collection of stories *(The Green Grass of Flatbush)* and asked for a blurb. He prefaced his blurb with "I am honored to have known you." As I said, he is a very kind man.

CRAWFORD

What were you working on, leaving graduate school? I know you and some friends published a literary magazine, among other things.

ZIEGLER

Right. Larry Zirlin and Harry Greenberg were two poets I had met in David Ignatow's workshop. We started a magazine together, *Some,* and a press, Release Press. We published ten issues of the magazine and fifteen books, over a period of eleven years. You know the joke, that literary magazines' lives are measured in dog years, so *Some/*Release Press had a relatively long and fruitful life.

CRAWFORD

Why was the magazine called *Some*?

ZIEGLER

We were very young. One of my coeditors was still in college, and the other one had just gotten out when we started. We were beginning to publish our own work, and the precursor to the magazine was an informal publication of a few people in our workshop. We wanted the least pretentious title, and we came up with *Some Poetry*. Later, when we decided to launch it as a real magazine, the night before we went to press we thought (correctly) that we might someday want to publish works other than poetry, so we decided to call it just *Some*. And the press name is a pun on *press release,* of course.

CRAWFORD

It was during this time that you published *Sleeping Obsessions,* a collection of poems written collaboratively, under the nom de plume "Mercy Bona." How did that come about?

ZIEGLER

Quite organically. Larry and Harry and I would get together, as editors do, to read manuscripts and make decisions and talk about layout and things like that. We were also friends, and we would see each other socially, and sometimes it was hard to distinguish between a working session and a social evening. We usually met in my apartment, and I had an IBM Selectric typewriter. Occasionally, one of us would drift away from the conversation and type a couple of lines and then return, and then someone else would go and sit down and add some lines, and so on until one of us declared the poem finished. The only rule was that when you finished your segment you'd tap the typewriter case and get up and walk away.

CRAWFORD

Were there bottles of wine involved in all this?

ZIEGLER

No, we weren't big drinkers, nor were there drugs. We just wrote the poems. And when we'd finished a bunch of them, we decided we wanted to send them out, and at that point it felt awkward to send out our own work since we knew so many other magazine editors. So we came up with a pen name for the collaborations. Harry had written a poem called "Ode to Mercy Bona" (someone he had gone to high school with), and we three became one Mercy.

CRAWFORD

Did you clear it with her before you started publishing?

ZIEGLER

No—we were naive not to think anyone would actually notice the book. We heard she was not happy when the book came out, and we regretted appropriating her name. Those who blurbed the book—Russell Edson, James Tate, and Terry Stokes—were in on the joke: "Where has Mercy Bona been all this time?"

CRAWFORD

Were you in some way thumbing your noses at some of the dynamics of publishing, particularly of publishing poetry?

ZIEGLER

No, we were just having a ball. We liked "Mercy's" poetry, and any sting of rejection was spread among three of us. We even did a few readings of Mercy's work, at which we would come out and say that Mercy Bona couldn't be present but that we were Mercy's literary executors. We did one reading where Jerry Leichtling (now a screenwriter) read an excerpt from his "dissertation" on Mercy Bona, and the line I remember is: "Her work is in the tradition of Malraux, Mallarmé, and Malanga." So it was fun. A few years ago I saw a catalog of rare books, and it had a listing for *Sleeping Obsessions* with a note that "rumor has it that Mercy Bona was three men from Brooklyn." Not true, but close.

CRAWFORD

I think when a workshop is really working best, it comes close to a collaborative. Not in the sense that anyone is writing anyone else's work, although a terrific editor might add a line or two here or there. In the sense that there is a real collaborative spirit about the work.

ZIEGLER

Absolutely. You invite others to pitch in during the revising and editing phases of the work. But you remain the writer of first resort and the editor of last resort.

CRAWFORD

And it was about that time—right out of graduate school, 1974—that you began to teach.

ZIEGLER

I had a brief writers-in-the-schools experience while I was still in graduate school. And when I came out of the program at City, the professor at Bronx Community College who had suggested I pursue the MA followed through and did hire me to teach composition and literature. Teaching was an extension of my editing as much

as it was of my writing—another opportunity to be engaged in someone else's work, but without the pressure of public display as the payoff.

CRAWFORD

How did you come to teach children?

ZIEGLER

At that time, in the early '70s, the poet and teacher Kenneth Koch was doing wonderful work with children for, among other places, the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, which began in 1967. By 1973 he had published two books about this work—*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Others at Teachers & Writers included Ron Padgett (who had worked with Koch), Bill Zavatsky, and Phillip Lopate, and Teachers & Writers was putting out publications that carried their work far beyond the classroom walls. Many writers I admired were teaching in the schools. I was extremely intimidated by this. I mean, it had never occurred to me that I could go into a school and get kids to write—adults, sure, but children? That was a scary prospect. Stuart Millstein was a classmate in graduate school who ran a poets-in-the-schools program in Brooklyn; another poet in that program had signed on to teach six sessions and then quit after two, so he needed someone to finish. I don't know why Stuart chose me. Maybe he liked the way I talked in workshop. It was four sessions, fifty bucks a shot, which was decent money. I said to myself, Okay, if I don't do this, I'm really a coward.

CRAWFORD

I don't think many writers in that position would say, If I don't take this job teaching poetry in an elementary school, I'm a coward.

ZIEGLER

Well, I *wanted* to do it, someone *asked* me to do it, they were going to *pay* me to do it, and I felt it took *courage* to do it—for me that added up to being cowardly *not* to do it. So I went and observed a class of Stuart's (a wonderful teacher who tragically died a few years later), and I read a lot of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative stuff to prepare, and I did it.

CRAWFORD

Do you remember that first class?

ZIEGLER

The experience was chaotic—I couldn't quite distinguish whether the kids were excited about poetry or running amuck because they looked at me and thought, this

guy doesn't know what he's doing. I remember feeling a bit shaken and disappointed in myself when I got home. After a nap, I read what the kids had written and I was practically giggling with joy. I remember thinking, Wouldn't it be something if I could make a living *and* a life out of this kind of work? The next week, when I walked in, the kids applauded. They were like, "The poet's back!" I was hooked. After that, my mother helped me get a residency as a poet-in-the-school at the elementary school where I had gone and where my much younger brother was a student. She mentioned to a teacher what I was doing, and it just so happened they were looking to bring in a poet. I wound up starting a program for the whole school district. Also, I was hired by Teachers & Writers, and I worked with them for fourteen years.

CRAWFORD

How did you learn to teach?

ZIEGLER

I started using some exercises other people had done, but this was unsatisfying for me. Teaching was almost as much of my creative life as writing, and teaching someone else's exercises felt like using someone's ideas for poems. So I developed exercises and methods of my own, building on the influence of my colleagues. For me, teaching was not only close to writing, it *was* writing: I'd think of assignments, write first drafts, rethink, revise, try them out, change them and, eventually, publish them with Teachers & Writers.

CRAWFORD

That strikes me as unique. Other writers have spoken about having to split their minds, their lives, in order to write and to teach successfully; it's often said that teaching takes away from the writing.

ZIEGLER

The energy fed my poetry and, when I wasn't working on a poem, I wrote about teaching, and I had an audience: Other writers and classroom teachers were trying my exercises and approaches in their classes. Yes, sometimes having to teach wrenched me away from my writing, but don't all jobs? What does driving a cab do for your writing? What does selling stocks do? If you're rich, OK, that's fine: stay home and write. Anything one has to do to make a living affects the writing. For me, having a schedule less oppressive than nine-to-five, and being paid to be in a room talking about poetry and stories, was a good fit for my writing. It was much more invigorating than the job I'd had abstracting those environmental articles—after pounding out so many words each day, it was hard to sit down in front of the typewriter.

CRAWFORD

I think you approached teaching from a creative, imaginative, and generative place, rather than an editorial one.

ZIEGLER

Yes, the editorial part of it came later, when I started teaching college workshops. But for writers-in-the-school work that's the key word: *generative*. I was constantly thinking about generating words—my own and those of my students.

CRAWFORD

Some writers grow frustrated reading large amounts of student writing, because it makes it more difficult to advance their own voice, to reach the quality of work in their own writing that they are hoping to achieve.

ZIEGLER

Of course, great writers can inspire, but they can also intimidate. Yes, some of your students' pieces will be enervating, and there are times when you throw up your hands in surrender—but, again, if you're the writer who drives a taxi by day, there are days when the traffic is bad, the radiator doesn't work, and your passengers keep bending your ears with less-than-inspiring language.

CRAWFORD

In addition to the potential frustration of having to read piles of student work, there's a sense among some writing teachers that having to extrovert the process of writing in order to teach it jeopardizes their own process. There's a resistance to an analytical approach to writing, and there's a sometimes ferocious need to defend the gates of the mystery.

ZIEGLER

I do think it is a danger to teach writing as a procedure rather than a process. You can demystify the process quite a bit and still have plenty of mystery left over. All who wish to join me at the gates of the mystery are welcome. That word, *gates,* makes me think of a hugely discouraging thing I heard in college. John Malcolm Brinnin, the poet and biographer who was famous for bringing Dylan Thomas to America, and who was teaching in the writing program at Boston University at the time, gave a lecture, and some of us had lunch with him. One of the Union professors asked him, How's your class at Boston? And Brinnin replied, "Well, you know, out of the twelve, there's maybe one with real talent." And I think that kind of attitude is just . . . well, for me, talent is not the only relevant question. If there are twelve students in my classroom, my job is to help twelve people do the best work

they can. Now, to be fair to Brinnin, maybe this attitude did not seep into his teaching, but I don't stop to divide students in such a binary fashion—talent/no talent. I work with them as students, as people, and I work with their work, and in that room I am not the guardian of Literature. It's not going to be the worst thing in the world if someone gets through a writing program and goes out there without having the kind of talent that I think someone might need in order to make a life as a writer. I don't look at it that way, for a number of reasons, one of which is that I could very well be wrong. Some writers grow in unexpected leaps and bounds (sometimes after they've left the program). If a student isn't working at a high level, maybe we can help something change. We're *teachers*. Maybe we can tap into something, perhaps the student has just been looking in the wrong direction, hasn't found a voice.

When you're dealing with an MFA program—as I do now—we do have to make our best judgments on talent and potential when we read applications. We get hundreds and hundreds of applications, and we make decisions, and yes, we decide who gets to walk through Columbia's gates; we don't choose students by lottery. But when students *do* come into our program, we have determined that they are going to be our colleagues for two years, and the idea that I as a teacher would do anything other than help those colleagues become as strong and interesting as writers as they can be is irresponsible. In some ways, the best teaching you can do is with those students who aren't as obviously talented. There's a winnowing process in the marketplace out there—agents, editors, publishers—I don't have to separate anyone from the pack in my classroom.

I'm not saying that you have to love everyone in the classroom, but you have to teach as if you do. You don't coddle—you have to give more than just praise—but you want them to feel at least a modicum of safety in what is a very unsafe endeavor. There are all sorts of dangers in writing. You're dealing with constant judgment and the ever-present possibility of failure, you're dealing with indifference, you're dealing with rejection, so we in the classroom should risk erring on the side of opening arms rather than closing gates. The most crucial thing you want your students to leave you with is momentum—maybe they'll be able to run right through those gates.

CRAWFORD

You've written about talent in *The Writing Workshop*: "No one knows exactly what talent is. . . . The writing teacher should nurture spirit as well as develop skills. Like muscles, imagination and emotional capacity develop with use." I think *talent* is a word and a concept often used as a means to handle the mystery of success and failure in writing; it's an easy thing to point to, more often than not in hindsight, to explain the progress of people over time. And when the mystery so often takes the shape of defeat, especially for students, lack of talent is an easy, and perhaps the

least painful, explanation for failure. But the way you approach teaching writing isn't on the talent-based model; you work with a much more democratic spirit. That's unusual.

ZIEGLER

When they put talent into a pill, then the teacher can just double the dosage if a student is lagging. Meanwhile, encouragement can do wonders. A totally off-the-wall comparison: I wasn't the greatest athlete in the world as a kid, but I was picked as the cocaptain of a team, and the coach had us do pull-ups. Everyone was watching me, and I did three times more than I had ever done; being named cocaptain had led to a visit by the muscle muse. There's a wonderful James Tate poem called "Teaching the Ape to Write Poems." They strap the ape into a chair with a pencil tied around his hand, and they whisper into his ear: "You look like a god sitting there. Why don't you try writing something?"

CRAWFORD

The idea that creativity is intrinsic to everyone, and that it can be drawn out, and that talent is largely irrelevant, has become a popular, new age fascination.

ZIEGLER

I don't think talent is irrelevant; it's just that I may see it differently. There are people who have more innate ability, and there are people who can do more with less. Some writers grind it out, and others make sparks right away. My point is that in the classroom the focus isn't on getting your books published and winning awards. We're talking about doing it. Writing. The main impediment to writing is simply not doing it. The evidence I have is from many years working in the schools, where a high percentage of kids were writing things that I found extraordinary. I remember one poem by a high-school student with the line "You and I make a triangle with the moon." If I hadn't gone into her class and done what I did that day, that line might not have been written. Whenever I'd show professional writers the anthologies that I put together of my Teachers & Writers students, they were knocked out. I had one student, Gerry Pearlberg, who has gone on to be a publishing poet; she started in my after-school poetry class in the eighth grade. She showed her English teacher some of the work she had done with me, and the teacher replied, "You're not this talented." I don't think I "taught" Gerry to write, but I did create a felicitous environment (including comments, readings, and so on), and she wrote these incredible, imaginative poems, and people realized this was one very talented writer.

CRAWFORD

Some of the exercises you've designed are meant to get children simply putting words on the page. A fair number of them are almost goofy. But the utility of these exercises might not be limited to children. In an essay about teaching writing at the graduate level, Lynn Freed commented that a writer must have not only a story to tell but also a story that must be told. In other words, if you're not burning to tell your story, you should give it up; if you set the alarm, get up at 5 a.m., sit there, and find you have nothing to write, then that's your answer.

ZIEGLER

Sometimes we write because there are *these stories we must tell* and sometimes because *we must tell stories*. Or both. Students say to me, I don't have a story, and I say, Yes, you do, and we can find it if you *want* to tell a story.

CRAWFORD

Maybe that speaks to the phony distinction you've noted between writing and being a writer. And also to Hayden Carruth's statement that "writing is a way of being in the world."

ZIEGLER

I love that quote. Why do we dream when we're asleep? Our minds need to make images, process experience, tell stories. If the mind can do that on its own, think how much better it can be when we're awake and we *set* our mind to do it. I've been thinking a lot about memory lately because I'm working on this book-length sequence, *99 Stories Based on a True Life*. There were years in my life when I kept journals, and many more years when I didn't, and for the years I did, I have access now to all sorts of things, because I took the time to put them into language. But in some ways I am more interested in times for which there is no documentation—when language meets memory without an intermediary. Writing is not only a way of "being in the world," it's a way of extending our opportunity to process—or create—experience.

And I say somewhat flippantly, but not completely so, that I had a girlfriend-muse many years ago. We saw each other for about two years. For six months it was great, for another year and a half it was misery and heartbreak and betrayal, and in that time I wrote some of the best poems of my life to that point. When we were breaking up, she said, I make you unhappy and I don't want to do that anymore. And I said, Please don't go, I'm writing this incredible stuff! I was not only able to ease the pain, but I could turn it into something satisfying and career-advancing to boot—a way of being successful in the world. There's a poem by Bill Knott that I think sums it up in a way that cannot be put into words except by the poem itself:

The only response
To a child's grave is
To lie down before it and play dead

That is Knott's only response—not necessarily to *do* that, but to do it with language. To be able to write that poem—and for us to be able to read it—is a way of being in the world.

CRAWFORD

Many writers talk about the horrible uncertainty of writing, the proverbial blank page, whereas you describe uncertainty as luscious.

ZIEGLER

The poet Gerald Stern once made me happy when, after reading a book of my poetry, he said there was one he particularly liked because "I got the idea you didn't know what the hell you were doing." I remembered writing the poem and, indeed, I didn't know what I was doing—but I loved doing it. Even in a lost state, you can write something decent. Even if you don't know where you're headed you may wind up someplace readers will want to visit.

CRAWFORD

In your books about teaching, you write about how inventive poetry allows the students freedom from meaning-making. And meaningfulness is where the reader's desires are taken into account. One thing that students often have to learn is that there is someone else in the transaction whose desires must be considered, so very often the job of teaching writing is to bring to light the needs and wants of the reader. But you validate the first half of that stretch, the sheer pleasure of writing for the writer. Not even for the writer as reader; just as writer. That must be a gift to students, particularly children.

ZIEGLER

There's that book, *How Does a Poem Mean*? The flip answer is, If I could tell you, I wouldn't have written the damn poem. But poems and stories do have meaning, and the irony is that a lot of times students come up with something meaningful when they stop worrying about making meaning. Because often what they've thought of as meaning—you know, the way "the three causes of the civil war" has meaning—is about really just trying to mean something for the teacher. Many of the exercises I've developed are devices to allow students to arrive at meaning in a different way. And for them to appreciate that the sheer beauty—or terror—of language has meaning, in the way a Rothko painting has meaning.

CRAWFORD

Meaningfulness perhaps takes a backseat to something like truth. You've written that "a major concern in teaching is the marriage of language to emotional, experiential, and imaginative impulses. There can be no illegitimate offspring." That there can be no illegitimate offspring: Is that a wish, or is that a fact?

ZIEGLER

Well, there are no illegitimate offspring, but some kids are better than others! There's the attitude of teachers who say, This is not a poem, this is not a story, you can't do this or that. But I think that everything that everyone writes has its own legitimacy. That doesn't necessarily mean that just because a piece is strange or different it's going to be good. Hemingway, in *A Moveable Feast,* refers to paintings that he "did not understand but they did not have any mystery." Part of what writers discover in workshops is how their work connects with others. But we get back to the point that responding to or judging individual pieces of writing against an absolute aesthetic scale is not the best kind of teaching. Teachers often make the mistake of evaluating students on the basis of an unmoving set of standards. A writer may have to produce many legitimate but not very interesting offspring before the work starts to shine.

CRAWFORD

There may be a fair amount of overlap, but I have to guess that teaching children in an elementary-school classroom is very different from running a graduate workshop at Columbia. First of all, how did you come into the post of chair?

ZIEGLER

First, I was director of Columbia's undergraduate program for twelve years. I started teaching undergraduates at Columbia as an adjunct in 1982. There were two full-time lines in the undergraduate program, and one of them belonged to the director, Dick Humphreys—a legendary teacher. In 1988 Dick was about to retire, and he asked me to have lunch. Dick tended to be enigmatic, and he was asking me a lot of questions; halfway through the lunch at Faculty House, it occurred to me that this might be Dick's version of a job interview, and that I should think carefully about my answers. I was right. At the end of the meal he said, You know, I'm retiring. I said that I'd heard. He asked me, Who do you think ought to take my place? I said I didn't know. He asked if I would do it, and I said, Of course, I'd love to. And a few weeks later the dean called me in and offered me the job.

CRAWFORD

Do you think it was based on your teaching?

ZIEGLER

Yes, and I was able to make things happen in the program. I was brought in to teach a class on literary editing and publishing because the literary magazine was in a lot of trouble. I designed a two-semester course; it was popular, and the magazine started thriving. Then I started teaching other courses as well. Also, from an administrative standpoint, while I can be very stubborn and I can complain with the best of them, I'm also good at figuring out how we can ultimately make something work as best as possible.

CRAWFORD

At that time the undergraduate program was completely separate from the graduate school. You presided over a lot of change en route to your current position as chair of the graduate program.

ZIEGLER6

The undergraduate Writing Program was part of the School of General Studies, which took a backseat to Columbia College. Over the course of several years and three different committees, the future of undergraduate writing was kicked around. If Columbia College was going to buy into it—Columbia College students could cross-register for our classes, but they didn't have a formal program—it was clear that all undergraduate creative writing would have to merge with the MFA program in the School of the Arts. The question was whether we would move over intact, or if the School of the Arts would replace us with a much smaller, more elite program. One proposal called for the program being available only to English majors who would have to apply for admission into the program their junior year. The existing program was larger and more egalitarian—no applications were required for the introductory classes, and satisfactory progress almost always resulted into moving up through intermediate and advanced levels (as it does in other departments). I fought hard because I cherished the program I had inherited from Dick (which went back to 1918). Fortunately, our approach prevailed, with the addition of honors options for the senior year (which was entirely appropriate). The programs merged in 1996, and we now have hundreds of Columbia College students participating. But it was an extremely difficult period for several years. After I was named chair of the MFA program, I ran into one of the deans of Columbia College at lunch, and she said, I remember when you were hanging by a thread.

CRAWFORD

You have said that putting creative writers in the English Department is akin to putting painters in the Art History Department. What is the argument for housing creative writing in the English Department? It occurs to me that a school might want young writers to have a sense of the tradition in which they're working, and as English majors, presumably they're more likely to have developed an awareness.

ZIEGLER

It's probably tradition as much as anything else: *Writing goes into the English Department, and English Department professors teach writing.* But if a university does have a School of the Arts or an Arts Department—for actors, painters, filmmakers, and the like—then I think it should include the literary arts. The study of literature is vital for writers, and in our graduate program we teach our own literature seminars ("by writers for writers"). There's a story I heard—it might be apocryphal, but the person who told it to me swears it's not: During the Reagan years, as part of sweeping budget cuts, Congress was considering the elimination of the whole literature program of the National Endowment of the Arts. The proponents of the cut said, "We have a literature program in the National Endowment for the Humanities, why do we need one for the arts? Literature is not an art." In a caucus room, one of the senators from Mississippi stood up and said, You go back to my state and you tell Miss Eudora Welty that she's not an artist. And that saved the program. Here's a smaller story from my own experience: At a school in Brooklyn where I was working for Teachers & Writers, I came across one of my third-grade students involved in a heated argument with another kid. He looked at me and he said, You tell her, Alan, ain't I an *artist*?

So Columbia's is one of the few writing programs in a School of the Arts. And it just makes sense to me that creative writing classes should be in the same academic home as painting classes.

CRAWFORD

Does the fact that the creative writing program is housed in the School of the Arts help to explain some of the budget battles over fellowships?

ZIEGLER

Yes. Columbia PhD students are funded in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, but MFA students are outside that structure and receive very little funding, and they go into enormous amounts of debt. We keep pointing out that the MFA is the terminal degree in our field.

CRAWFORD

Columbia has an excellent reputation, of course, but tuition is also impressive: $35,000 a year. Which raises the question about MFA degrees: Why do one?

ZIEGLER

It's a decision that each student should consider carefully. The MFA is by no means the only route to being a writer. I'm often in the position of talking to writers who are thinking of applying or who have applied and are deciding whether or not to come, and I tell them: I'm not going to try to sell you on spending the money. You should talk to other students, both those who came and those who went elsewhere, and determine if it's worth it to you. All I can tell you—and I spend a long time doing so—is what can be gained by spending two years here (plus up to three years to complete the thesis). As for an assurance that there is a concrete benefit from investing (and I mean time as well as money) in Columbia's program, I can guarantee that you will leave with a thesis that will be the makings of a book (if not a completed book), and I can virtually guarantee that, coming out of this program, your submissions will be read by agents, magazine editors, and book publishers. So that's a nice thing to have in the back of your mind, as a student of writing.

CRAWFORD

Perhaps at a program like Columbia, where the faculty and the students are top rate, the question of the value of an MFA is not as pronounced as it might be at a school with a less stellar reputation.

ZIEGLER

All I can say is how fortunate I am to be where I am and not to have to deal with that. I feel guilty and enraged at what our students are spending, but I believe in the program—the value of the courses and what goes on outside the classroom. I don't think I could work someplace where people are paying a lot of money for a program I don't believe in.

CRAWFORD

If this were medical school, and students came along who weren't going to be successful doctors, you'd have an obligation to say, this isn't working out. But that isn't how it works in an MFA program, even though it too is preprofessional. It would be lovely to think that people spend two years here just to become better poets, but with the amount of money and the ambition involved, that's just not the case. So maybe it's a question of understanding the relationship of MFA programs to tuition and a college's need for funding, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to the industry, and how many people can reasonably find work.

ZIEGLER

Sometimes a colleague might say about a student at the end of his or her first year, You know, I don't think we should be taking this person's money. And my answer is, Well, did you fail the student? Are you communicating something within the academic structure? No? Well then, at this point, it's the student's decision about the money. I have seen many students make remarkable progress in their second year (or beyond). Of course, you shouldn't pump up students, give them false hopes, in order to keep them in the program. That would be a scam. But if you're giving honest, helpful, and challenging criticism, and the student wants to stick it out and is meeting requirements and actively engaged in the work, then that student should stay. This approach is also better for the overall health of the program; it's hard enough without students feeling like the assassin's knife is hovering behind them. This doesn't mean that students will never leave a workshop feeling kicked around, but everyone should receive the same level of editorial support. A student recently came to me, upset because she had received a harsh critique and was concerned about losing her fellowship. I told her we don't do that here.

I say to incoming students during orientation: You don't have to raise your hands on this, but how many of you think you're the mistake? The nervous laughter indicates that many of them fear that they may be The One. I tell them that we don't make mistakes, and that if we do, we fix them. And the students laugh. But they have to stay engaged with the work. Extremely rarely, we have students for whom this is not the right thing to be doing, and usually they know it; they realize that for the time and money it is just not worth it for them—at least not at this point in their lives, and they leave on their own.

The MFA credential is not like a medical degree. You're not credentialing someone to cut people open (at least not physically). No one is going to hire you to teach, and no one is going to publish you, simply because you have the MFA.

CRAWFORD

How are applications handled?

ZIEGLER

The Admissions Committee is the faculty. Every application is read at least twice before the final round. The finalists are read by more faculty. At the end of the process, we might take another look at applications that came close, to see if anything might have slipped between the cracks.

CRAWFORD

And what, as a committee, are you looking for? Can you articulate an ethos?

ZIEGLER

Something that gets us excited in some way, that makes us feel that the writer is doing something distinctive and/or distinguished. It's a good sign when we lose sight of the fact that we are reading an *application* and are just *reading*. The mythical, cold workshop story, the story that's been stripped of all imagination and made to be perfect and clean and uninteresting—that story is not going to be admitted here. There have been applications in which there were one or two passages that were so electrifying that we accepted the author—on potential—despite other weaknesses. This doesn't mean the work has to contain pyrotechnics to gain our attention. The work can be very simple. I tell potential applicants, Take risks with your writing sample, but don't forget the risk of simplicity. If you write without fireworks, then that's who you are. We're not predisposed to any school or kind of writing. Just send in what you have the strongest feelings for—and if it grabs you, it might very well grab us.

CRAWFORD

The profusion of MFA programs around the country has coincided with arguably large changes in the publishing industry, in which increasingly more money and attention are devoted to marketing and selling books rather than to developing writers. Do you see a correlation between these two trends?

ZIEGLER

There have been a lot of changes in the book industry, most lamentably the lack of value placed on literary, mid-list books. Editors in the big houses often have to deal with marketing projections based, in part, on sales figures of the author's previous books. Oddly enough, this may be providing more opportunities for recent MFA graduates—they don't have track records that will work against them. And it may even help short story collections to get published—many MFA theses consist of short stories—because publishers sometimes take them on in exchange for rights to the novel-to-follow. What's sad is how much work might be languishing, unpublished, by previously published writers whose careers, instead of being nurtured, are hampered by the bottom line. But even here, there is good news. Independent publishers are doing wonderful work, dedicated to publishing good books.

And technology is counteracting some of what's going on in publishing; online publishing is thriving in large part due to the enormous improvements in computer displays that now make it feasible to read on the screen (and, for those who hate that, the printers are better, too). The Internet allows readers to meet writers—that's the basic transaction, isn't it?—and editors can make decisions on factors other than economics. Plus, books stay alive online. Amazon is a huge company, but, through them, I can look for an out-of-print book and hook up with someone in

Montana who has a copy. There was probably a lost generation, when publishing took the turn it did and the Internet was not yet ready for prime time. But students today are in a place where they can publish their work online in well-designed settings. Yes, I love books and magazines I can hold in my hands, and the idea of a paperless society is frightening to me and must be resisted, but it is comforting for a writer to know that one can get the work out there online and, if you should publish a book that doesn't get good distribution or goes out of print, people will still be able to find it.

The MFA program plays a part by creating communities of writers who read each other. Maybe this is a stretch, but one of the things we say around here is that it's like Paris in the '20s: a place writers can go to be with other writers to serve their apprenticeships, amid the other artists in the school. Students here not only develop friendships, but they also become each others' extended editors. I notice this all the time, when books by former students acknowledge the editorial support of their classmates here. That phenomenon helps counteract the dearth of Maxwell Perkins figures in the publishing industry.

What it comes down to is that the MFA is one way to guarantee yourself that for two years you will live as a writer, whatever that brings. Some graduates may never publish, but they can look back and say, well, my education included two years spent studying writing rather than history or math, and that's just part of who I am as an educated person.

CRAWFORD

In an elite program, there must exist a fair amount of competitiveness, and the possibility of burnout. How do you handle this as a teacher, and an administrator?

ZIEGLER

I do everything I can to make this a program where jockeying for position and wasted energy are the exceptions rather than the rule. Many of us on the faculty talk to students about this early and often, starting with orientation, when I jokingly (but with underlying seriousness) say: Backbiting leaves marks, and we have access to your dental records; instead, we go in for a certain amount of back-scratching, even a little back-kissing once in a while. But if you think this is a backbiting, my-success-is-your-failure-and-vice-versa type program, then you've come to the wrong place. I tell students not to try to be the alpha writer or the alpha critic in the workshop; it doesn't work. Writers who bond together often help each other for years to come, recommending agents and editors. The only way you can feel safe enough to write and to respond to others' writing is to feel you're in a collaborative community. I love how so many of our students attend student readings and respond so warmly to one another.

CRAWFORD

Friendship improves the level of aesthetic achievement?

ZIEGLER

I think so. I think it provides the foundation from which students can challenge themselves and each other to produce better work. Which isn't to say one can't be spurred on by harsh or insensitive treatment, but there's plenty of that out there in the world if you need it.

CRAWFORD

Do you still teach children?

ZIEGLER

No. There's no place I could fit it in right now. Maybe when I step down as chair, I could do it. But I still *train* people to teach children.

CRAWFORD

You've designed a course about the teaching of writing for grad students. Are you training them to teach undergrads?

ZIEGLER

In "The Writer as Teacher," we cover the whole age/talent gamut: working with children as a visiting writer, as well as teaching undergraduate and graduate students and community workshops. We cover all aspects of teaching, but I basically divide it between, in broad strokes, "stand-up teaching"—the song and dance of entertaining a class of twenty-five fourth graders while getting them to write on the spot—and "table teaching," which is the basic workshop model of sitting around the table discussing each other's work. The art and the joy of teaching involves synthesizing those two modes as appropriate—I've done workshops with ten-year-olds and stood up in front of graduate students and presented in-class writing exercises. I give my writer-as-teacher students lots of readings, including theoretical pieces and testimonies by writing teachers. We divide into small groups and replicate classroom situations. I have several writing teachers visit class, including some of my old Teachers & Writers cohorts—Phillip Lopate, Bill Zavatsky, Dale Worsley.

CRAWFORD

Do you think your ability to teach writing so well is somehow related to your experience of writing as a wonderful process?

ZIEGLER

It's not always wonderful. When I'm writing about teaching, it's very painful in the way that running or lifting weights is painful. It's really hard. I have to be so careful not to say what I don't mean. Teachers are going to use the things I say with their students. And it's difficult not to be concerned about repeating what's already been said. It's like that line from Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George,* when the painter, who has not been painting, laments, "There's nothing that hasn't been said," and his companion responds, "Said by *you*?" That's something I tell students all the time—it's a great mantra.

But when I'm writing a prose poem, for example, once I get inside of it, it's just a glorious experience. When I get inside of the work, I want to be there more than anywhere else. It only gets painful when I start wondering whether it's any good; I fear something being just OK more than I fear it being bad. That's painful.

CRAWFORD

Are you more comfortable with the uncertainty of the creative process than some other writers are, or are you just disciplined at holding off the critical eye for a certain period of time?

ZIEGLER

Pete Seeger, introducing a song at the Bitter End many years ago, talked about learning a banjo technique by following the advice he had written in one of his own books. Likewise, I try to pay attention when I drum into students' heads that they should have faith in the process and not pass judgment on a piece until all the testimony is in and the jury has had a chance to deliberate. With the demands of teaching and administrating, I don't always have the luxury to linger in front of the blank page, because there's always something else useful and productive that I can be doing. If it's not happening, I have other tasks I can do. So, if I were to have a patron, with the condition that I quit my job, I would probably struggle more with the blank page. As it is, I scribble notes at odd times in various media (notebooks, index cards, on the backs of folders), so when I sit down to write there's always something to reach for if I am not in the middle of a project.

CRAWFORD

Columbia has what might be the most illustrious roster of professors and adjuncts of any writing program in the world. I would think it might be somewhat crippling to be a writer who is also an administrator among so many great artists.

ZIEGLER

Theoretically, yes, but, thankfully, not an issue in practice. Before I had acclimated myself to the graduate program—after being an undergrad for so long—the first time I was in a meeting with Richard Howard—we happened to be sitting right next to each other in those two chairs over there—I had no idea whether he had any sense of my work. And he leaned over and said, I have to tell you how much I admire . . . your tie. Luckily there wasn't a long pause between "admire" and "tie" because my heart would have skipped more than one beat. I told Richard recently, now that I know him in all his sartorial splendor, that I realize what an incredible compliment that was. I mentioned this to a writer who seemed crestfallen and said, "Richard never admired one of *my* ties." Once Richard had affirmed my taste in ties, it was important for me to have his respect as a writer, and that came when he wrote the introduction to *The Swan Song of Vaudeville*. Lucie Brock-Broido had given him the manuscript, and Richard told me, over dinner, that he would write the introduction. That was one of the most fulfilling moments in my life as a writer, because when I was coming of age, Richard Howard's introductions and editing shaped some of the books I most admired, including Charles Simic's first full-length collection, *Dismantling the Silence*. I always wanted Richard Howard to write an introduction for me. When it happened, it was great. But the period of time between his admiring my tie and his writing the introduction to *Swan Song* was nerve-racking!

CRAWFORD

Other writers who have taught, and in particular who have been department chairs, have spoken of not producing as much work over the course of a career as they had wished, or perhaps as people had hoped they might. Do you feel an obligation to have written more, or published more widely?

ZIEGLER

Yes and yes, but on balance it's been worth it. I have not pursued publication and public profile as tenaciously as I should have, and I have switched directions too many times to have carved out a focused career as a poet or fiction writer or pedagogue. After publishing a collection of poetry *(So Much to Do),* and the two *Writing Workshop* books, I did the collection of short stories *(The Green Grass of Flatbush),* which won a national award judged by George Plimpton, and then I stopped doing stories for a long time.

CRAWFORD

Why?

ZIEGLER

Good question. I had just done the story collection, and I had an agent. I met with Roger Angell, who had published one of my short shorts in *The New Yorker,* and he was interested in seeing more of the form from me, saying what I do is so difficult. And I had just been hired to direct the undergraduate program at Columbia in addition to teaching a full load. So, what did I decide to do? Write a novel. Which was the one thing I had no experience in and no time to do. I loved writing it, and I thought it was publishable, but none of the editors my agent sent it to agreed. Eventually, I settled on short prose—prose poems, short short stories—which I had previously written as side trips; I realized that for me this was the main road.

CRAWFORD

Because you're drawn to them, or because it's a market niche?

ZIEGLER

Because I'm very drawn to them. (I wish it were more of a market niche.) I think it's my natural form.

CRAWFORD

How much time do you have to write in a given week?

ZIEGLER

This is a very demanding job. The course load for a professor is four courses, and I teach three, as well as administrate and do independent studies and serve on committees, and so on. There are tons of emails, a lot that goes on outside my office. But I can always grab some time either early in the morning or late at night. I feel that for the kind of writing I do, time is not an insurmountable issue. It's not like a novel, or a collection of stories, in which there is a great deal of physical labor involved. Much of my writing can go on in my head, and in short bursts. And I've always been fortunate in that, if I get a start, I can work with it in what for some may be less than conducive circumstances, perhaps a benefit from my newspaper experience. As an example: I gave two readings recently within a week of each other, and I opened both of them with a piece I had written just that day. For the first reading, I got an idea on the bus on the way to school. I had to teach, and then hold office hours, and then go straight to the reading. So I wrote the first draft on the bus, and during a break in class I changed a few words, and then I thought, this is nuts, that room is going to be full, I can't just wing it . . . and then I thought, the hell with it, I'm going to read it. And I did. And then a week later I did it again. On two of busiest days of the year I wrote a poem. It can happen—not all that often, but it can happen.

CRAWFORD

You're quite comfortable with spontaneity and having your work in the world when it's not final. You sent me *99 Stories* in working form. Most writers have grilles over the windows until the work is in galleys.

ZIEGLER

It's probably from being around workshops for so many years, when finished pieces are the exception rather than the rule. I haven't been a student in a workshop for a very long time, but perhaps sending out unfinished pieces to you was, for me, like my students passing their manuscripts around the table. Being comfortable and open about the process makes me think of Vonnegut. One of the most striking memories I have is of him showing up for workshop looking awful—he wasn't totally present in the room with us. He revealed that he was having a really hard time trying to write about hell. He couldn't figure out how to do it. So he canceled class for the following week. And the week after that, he looked great, and I asked him how the writing was going, and he stuck his thumb up and said, A-one. That was a real inspiration to me—that he shared his struggle with the process. I'm careful not to do that *too* much—because it's not about me—but, in its place, it's a valuable part of teaching.

You know, John Berrryman said that he refused to read his reviews until he was thirty-five years old because he "had no skin on." I think I've reached a point where my skin is thick enough, and I do what I do, and no one can stop me. On the other hand, I was solicited recently by an editor at a nice, high-profile magazine who loved *Swan Songs,* so I sent some work. And they held on to one piece, but ended up rejecting it because they had published something similar recently. It was like 2 a.m. when I got the email, and I thought, fine, I'm giving up. But in the morning I was better. So, it never completely goes away. (And they wound up publishing something else of mine.)

I think the way I *try* to handle exposure and rejection is best expressed by a story about my red socks. I had these red socks, which my wife hated. That's why I don't have them anymore. I would only wear them around the house, usually when she wasn't home. One day I was wearing my red socks, and I went to get the mail without putting my shoes on. And once I got in the elevator, I looked down and realized, I'm standing here in my red socks. A woman got on the elevator. I had seen her enough to say hello. She looked down and she said, "Now *there*'s a man with confidence." And I thought, Yeah, I guess so. So, when I write the literary equivalent of red socks, and I like it, I'm going to wear it.

CRAWFORD

You've settled on prose poems as your chosen genre, and you mentioned students here who want to jump from one program to the other, from poetry to fiction or

vice versa, as you did in order to study with Kurt Vonnegut. Obviously we consider poetry and fiction two different genres, and publishing is structured in that way. You're working at the intersection of the two, if such a place exists. Does it say something about readers, or about the marketplace, or about the form itself, that the genres are held to be so distinct?

ZIEGLER

I think it's getting more and more accepted that the distinctions are less than discrete, but categories are needed for marketing purposes. There are books marketed as "novels" that don't resemble most novels. There's the phenomenon of the "novel in stories"—I can't quite figure out what that is, but it's alright by me. I know of one book that is blurbed as a novel on the back cover but called "stories" on the front. I subtitled *The Swan Song of Vaudeville* "Tales and Takes," and it's usually categorized as poetry, which is fine with me. A book has to go on the shelf somewhere. I do believe that there are distinctions between a prose poem and a short short story—if nothing else, you can take advantage of the fact that readers tend to approach them differently. If you call it a prose poem, the reader is likely to go into it with fewer preconceived expectations and be more open to discovering what the piece is doing and not doing. The prose poem is about as wide-open a form as there is. I particularly like that prose poems—like all poems—are never categorized as being fiction or nonfiction; it's not that the boundaries are blurred, the question *is never asked* (except perhaps by a close friend or a nosy reader). Anything else in prose has to be declared as fiction or nonfiction—short story or personal essay, novel or memoir. With prose poems, if you're willing to give up the line breaks, then you can have everything else.

CRAWFORD

In prose poems, such as "Love Potions and Bitter Pills," and also in *99 Stories,* one element that emerges is the use of juxtaposition in the placement and accumulation of short pieces; the works have dramatic movements similar to those of a short story or a novel but rely on poetic juxtapositions to do work that might otherwise be done in short scenes, movement across time, or in thematic or descriptive imagery.

ZIEGLER

Can I use that as a blurb? That's exactly what I am trying to do. I've always written short pieces, but writing sequences is what I am most excited about now. The sections in "Love Potions and Bitter Pills" were written over a long period of time. I was able to revise them to fill holes, to move things around. The pieces in *99 Stories*—while most can stand alone—really do need to be near each other for the

fullest effect. For the first time, I feel like I am not writing pieces—I am writing a *book*.

CRAWFORD

Several of your pieces read almost like koans.

ZIEGLER

I like that.

CRAWFORD

I was trying to understand why. I wondered if you could help me think that through.

ZIEGLER

[Smiles.] If I start to tell you what it all means, hit me over the head.

CRAWFORD

Exactly. In my brief, very limited experience of koans, I have come to think that they are not illustrative stories so much as parables of a sort. What they provide is an entirely different narrative logic, such that something resonates, but also something doesn't quite work; there's a riddle, and in the riddle is the source of the real feeling. We're left thinking that we want to pick the lock. There's one turn of vision, not only for the character, but for the reader; a change in meaning that happens to me, rather than to the characters alone. I think some of your pieces ask that.

ZIEGLER

I can't be any more flattered than when someone not only appreciates and enjoys something I have written, but also gets involved in the inner life of the writing and vice versa. The true response to a koan is not to know the answer, but to melt into the story. One of the works that has influenced me is by John Cage. It's called *Indeterminacy*. The music is very modern, dissonant, and frankly I wish it would go away and just leave us with the spoken text, which is John Cage telling stories: anecdotes from his life, Zen stories. My favorite is about two monks who are traveling on foot. They come upon a woman who needs help crossing a stream. They are not permitted to touch women, but the first monk picks her up, carries her across, and puts her down on the other side. The two monks continue walking, and finally the second monk scolds the one who picked up the woman, and he replies, "Put her down. I did two hours ago."

I love the dimensions of that story, I love the proportions, I love the turn it seems to take but that is not really a turn at all.

CRAWFORD

I'm reminded of your piece "Love at First Sight":

> It was a novelty store and he went in just for the novelty of it. She was in front of the counter, listening to the old proprietor say: "I have here one of those illusion paintings, a rare one. You either see a beautiful couple making love, or a skull. They say this one was used by Freud himself on his patients—if at first sight you see the couple, then you are a lover of life and love. But if you focus on the skull first, you're closely involved with death, and there's not much hope for you."
>
> With that, the proprietor unwrapped the painting. They both hesitated, looked at the picture, then at each other. They both saw the skull. And have been together ever since.

That kind of reversal, the riddle, the turn that makes you smile. You get the joke.

ZIEGLER

That piece came fairly naturally and easily. But if I can point to any specific growth in my work over the course of my career, it's that in the early work I relied *too* much on that turn you talk about and, when it was less successful, it didn't transcend being a punch line. I was prone to that. I think that now I'm better able to get to the turn, and then keep going.

CRAWFORD

Many of the pieces in *The Swan Song of Vaudeville* bear that out. Your collections, the body of your work, have something vaudevillesque to them; a variety show, a collection of short acts, but in the classy old sense of vaudeville. Not shtick so much as a great night out. How did you come to title the collection? And the piece, "Swan Song," itself?

ZIEGLER

When I was working as a newspaper reporter just out of college, I covered a county fair, which had a small circus. Really, really small. The star animal was a tiny "bear" named Bimbo (it was like being proud of a particularly large bonsai tree). And I interviewed the fire-eater. About a week later, I got a call from the hospital. The fire-eater had scorched his throat. He had done something really stupid, he had used the wrong torch or something. And there he was in the hospital, with his career as a fire-eater over, and he didn't know if he would ever talk normally again. He didn't know anybody in town whom he could call, and he felt he had made some connection with me, so he called me just to tell me what had happened. That experience has stayed with me, and I started with the image of a distraught fire-eater.

And as for vaudeville, my parents took me to the famous Palace Theater on Broadway when the Palace was trying to revive vaudeville. I was transfixed by the

power and brevity of the acts—someone makes you laugh, then someone sings, then three guys do impossible things with dinner plates. So, when I was kid I did indeed witness a chorus of the swan song of vaudeville.

CRAWFORD

We haven't talked much about your family; you're writing some about them, especially your father, in *99 Stories*. Your father worked as a clerk in a motel, among other jobs; your mother was a waitress at Woolworth's. How did they take to your announcement that you wanted to be a poet?

ZIEGLER

They always liked that I wrote, especially for newspapers—they both enjoyed reading newspapers. And, as I mentioned, my mother helped me get one of my first poets-in-the-schools jobs. She sat in on one of my workshops at a local library. I showed my father the profile I did in the *Village Voice* of the relationship between Allen Ginsberg and his father, Louis, when Louis was dying. I was proud of the piece. I asked my father what he thought, and he said, I didn't like it. Why not? He said, Because he's dying! It had reached him emotionally. The human aspect is what got to him, not the writing.

With my father, there were a lot of secrets. His father had been a bank robber, and he played a lot of things close to the vest. For many years my father worked seven days a week, and my mother was pretty much the only person he really talked to. After she died in the early '80s, he started talking to me more than he had my entire life. I think it was easier for him because I was a writer—there was a *reason* to tell me things; he used to say, You'll put this in your book. It was almost like, I don't have any money to leave you, but here are these stories. There's a piece in *99 Stories* about a turning point, where he really started opening up. We were together on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. My father was claustrophobic, and the elevator ride up was terrible for him. He was stalling, avoiding the ride back down. And he began to tell me stories.

But when I first knew that my father got it about my switch from journalism to poetry—when I felt warm approval—was in 1974. I was finishing graduate school as a poet, giving readings, and we had started *Some* magazine. Phoebe Snow had a hit song called "Poetry Man." My father bought the single, and when I came over for dinner, he had it playing.

CRAWFORD

You're soon stepping down as chair of the division. What's next for you?

ZIEGLER

My term as chair ends in July—it's a five-year nonrenewable term. I'll move into a smaller office, teach one additional course, and have the title Director of Pedagogy and Teacher Training. I'll continue to work on *99 Stories*. I've also been working for several years on another writing workshop book, tentatively titled *The Writing Workshop Note-Book*. This one is aimed at students of writing rather than teachers, and—using small sections, or "notes"—I am attempting to distill as much as I can that I feel is important for a young writer to hear, especially those who are toggling between the private act of creation and the public arena of the workshop. The book will be published in 2007.

And then, we'll see.

November 2005

Lacy Crawford is senior editor of Narrative.