

Guest Editorial

Inspiring the Muse in the City of Literature



What distinguishes Iowa City, IA, from all the other towns in North America? Iowa City is a UNESCO City of Literature, the third in the world and the only one in North America.

The University of Iowa is largely responsible for UNESCO's recognition of Iowa City. Our highly acclaimed Writers' Workshop was the first creative writing degree program in the country and continues to be the model for contemporary writing programs. Graduates of this top ranked, highly competitive program have won sixteen Pulitzer Prizes, as well as numerous National Book Awards and other major literary honors. Three recent U.S. Poet Laureates are among our graduates. In 2003, the Workshop received a National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the first Medal awarded to a university, and only the second given to an institution. Since 1967, the University and Iowa City community have also hosted thousands of established and emerging writers from one hundred and twenty countries through its International Writers Program (IWP).

The University's Center for the Book also played a key role in this UNESCO designation. An innovative, interdisciplinary arts and research program, the Center integrates the art of book production with the study of the book in society, through courses and a certification program. The Center's world renowned papermaking operation was chosen by the National Archives to formulate and create the paper used to support the restored Declaration of Independence. The University's top ranked Printmaking Department undoubtedly influenced the UNESCO distinction as well.

An appreciation for literature permeates this town of just 62,200 people.

Scarcely a week goes by without an author reading at the local independent book store. Verses are even embedded in a downtown sidewalk. The College of Medicine has hosted a conference on creative writing and medicine.

So what is the role of the University Libraries in this City of Literature?

The rich collections and knowledgeable staff have long been a source of information and inspiration for writers and book technologists. These resources have been especially helpful to many of the international writers from countries where libraries are less extensive and accessible. A librarian meets individually with each of these visiting writers, orienting them to our services and providing assistance during their visit. These authors' books have helped enrich our collections of creative works. During occasional international buying trips, librarians have contacted former IWP writers to see if we can acquire their works as well. The Libraries archive author papers and actively collect literary journals to highlight creative works and provide emerging authors with ideas for publishing venues. In addition to our permanent author archives, we have made it known to our international authors that the University is a willing sanctuary for their papers/files, without any commitment for permanent deposit, if threatened by political unrest in their countries.

Librarians have also partnered with faculty in some writing classes. For many years, a faculty member in poetry worked with Special Collections on a session in which students studied the relationship of a poem's words to the choice of print font, page layout and the paper on which it had been published. Our conservators

also teach courses in book preservation and provide invaluable internships for students seeking certification from the Center for the Book.

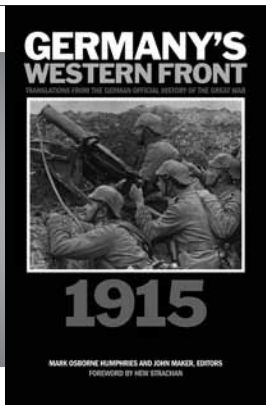
We have not overlooked the importance of new technologies. The University Libraries digitally archived the Virtual Writing University's recordings of hundreds of audio and video readings, interviews, and conference panels held over the years in Iowa City. This impressive archive features best-selling and award-winning writers and poets from around the world.

Last summer, the University Libraries and University of Iowa Press organized the first annual Iowa City Book festival, bringing the community and campus together to celebrate what makes life in the City of Literature so special. This day-long event featured talks and readings by prominent authors plus demonstrations of historical printing, papermaking, calligraphy, and marbling. Electronic publications were also highlighted, along with tours of Special Collections, book sellers exhibits, and informal discussions of writers groups, literary blogs, book clubs, and literacy programs.

This is just a sampling of what we have done.

While other colleges and universities may not share this special interest in creative writing and book technologies, all of us can foster the established and emerging writers within our communities. With all the current emphasis on science and technology, it is easy to overlook the writers and artisans on our campuses and communities. Showcase their works through online exhibits, readings, and interviews and provide the assistance and tools that can inspire their respective muses. The fruits of their creativity are what make life enriching for all of us. All of our libraries can play a critical role in this creative process.

Nancy L. Baker
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Germany's Western Front

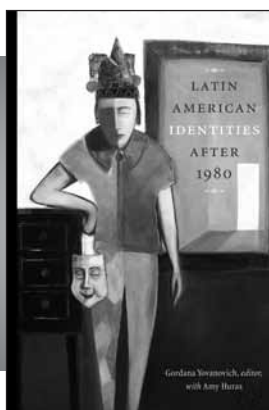
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