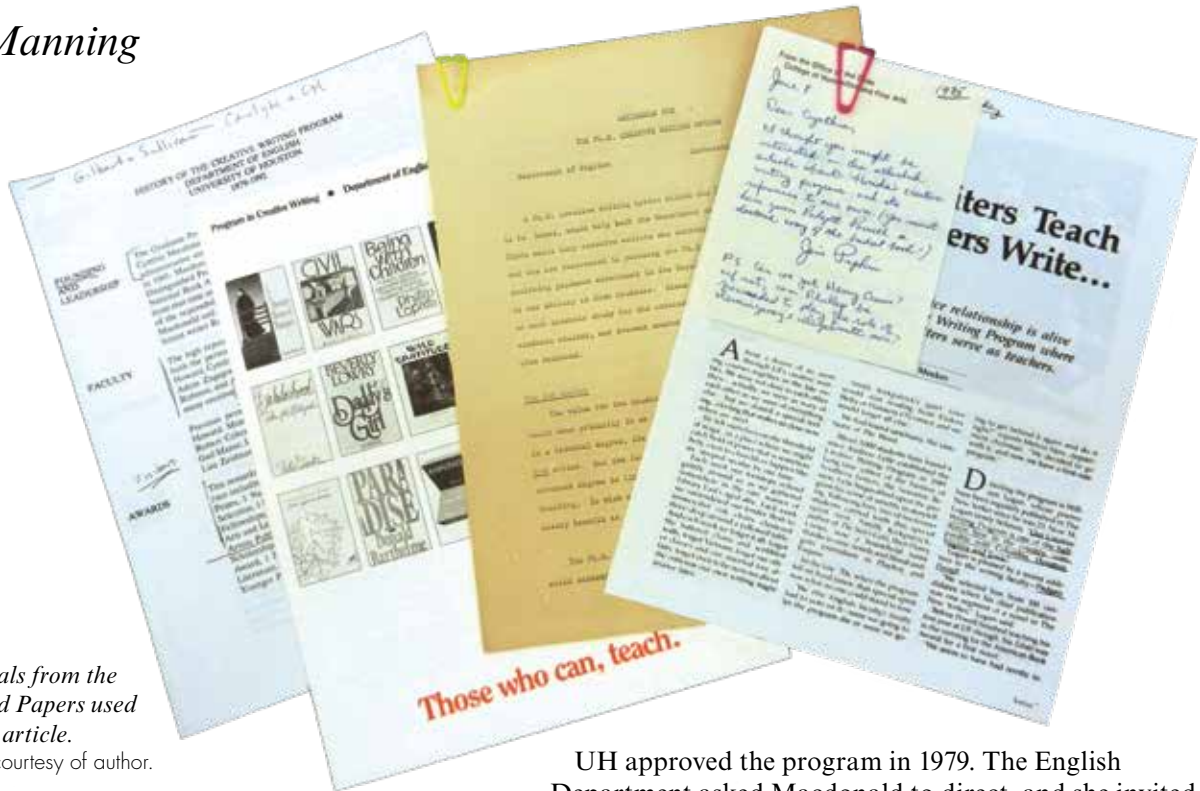


## The First Decade of the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program, 1979-1989

By Mary Manning



Manuscript materials from the Cynthia Macdonald Papers used as research for this article.

Photo courtesy of author.

The UH English Department, with John McNamara as chair, shaped its creative writing program in the late 1970s, when such programs were sprouting up across the country, as a way to draw students at a time of “steadily declining graduate enrollment in the Department.”<sup>1</sup> In 1978, the department asked poet Cynthia Macdonald, then at Johns Hopkins University, to advise them on the proposed program.

One highlight of the program was the Ph.D. in literature and creative writing to be offered alongside the MFA in creative writing. Many college or university English departments offered curricula focused mostly on literature with just a few creative writing courses. The UH English Department theorized that having a Ph.D. in literature and creative writing would make UH graduates more marketable when applying for academic positions. The department’s “Rationale for the Ph.D. Creative Writing Option” explains:

*The value for the student of the Ph.D. option in creative writing would come primarily in an enhanced ability to find a teaching job. As a terminal degree, the MFA is the highest qua artist. But the fact is that a majority of artists who take an advanced degree in literature earn their livings not by writing, but by teaching. In view of this fact, the Ph.D. looms as an increasingly necessary benefit to securing employment, promotion, and tenure.<sup>2</sup>*

UH approved the program in 1979. The English Department asked Macdonald to direct, and she invited poet Stanley Plumly to join her in developing the program. The two served as co-directors, each serving as director on alternate years, until Plumly departed in 1985. From that point, the creative writing faculty collaboratively directed the program with Macdonald, Edward Hirsch, Phillip Lopate, and Donald Barthelme bearing much of the responsibility until Lopate left the program and Barthelme died in 1989. This left Macdonald and Hirsch “to assume co-directorship until mid-1991 when poet and fiction writer Robert Phillips became director of the program.”<sup>3</sup>

The department hired prominent, respected authors who published extensively and to great acclaim. Faculty during the program’s early years included the aforementioned Macdonald, Barthelme, Hirsch, and Lopate but also included Ntozake Shange, Rosellen Brown, Robert Cohen, and Richard Howard. Visiting faculty included Mary Robison, James Robison, Beverly Lowry, and Adam Zagajewski. The new UH faculty members came from teaching appointments at prestigious institutions, including Boston University, Columbia, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Brandeis, Princeton, Harvard, and other institutions.

UH Creative Writing faculty publications during this decade are too many to list here, but the faculty published for many major publishing houses and university presses as well as the most distinguished magazines and journals. Faculty included Guggenheim Fellowship Award winners and the recipients of many grants and awards as noted in the table

## Selected List of Grants and Awards Received by Creative Writing Faculty, 1979-1989

National Endowment for the Arts grants  
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Awards  
Janet Kafka Prize for the Best Novel by an American Woman  
Lavin Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poetry  
Delmore Schwartz American Poetry Award  
National Book Award for a Translation  
PEN Translation Medal  
Academy of American Poets Fellowship  
Whiting Foundation Award for Excellence in Writing  
Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award for Fiction  
CUE Awards for Excellence in Teaching  
PEN Syndicated Fiction Award

above. The strength of the UH faculty attracted the brightest, most talented writers, both faculty and students.

Getting published is a sign of student success for creative writers, and the first group of UH creative writing students did indeed succeed. They also received numerous awards such as the Richard Hugo poet-in-residence, Wallace Stegner Fellowship, Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry, Whiting Foundation Poetry Award, Robert Frost poet-in-residence, Academy of American Poets Award, and Norma Farber

First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America as well as National Endowment for Poetry and Arts Fellowships, Guggenheim Fellowships, and PEN Awards, including Southwest Discovery Prizes. The creative writing students published extensively as illustrated in the table on page 41.

This first decade of UH's Creative Writing Program was marked by strong, rapid growth, which is reflected in the media of the period. A 1985 article in *University of Florida Today* states that UH's program is one of the top programs in the country, comparable with Columbia and Iowa.<sup>4</sup> The article focuses in large part on the University of Florida's hiring of Padgett Powell who studied with Barthelme at the UH Creative Writing program. Powell's UH master's thesis was released as the acclaimed novel *Edisto* that was chosen one of the ten best novels in 1984 by *Time* magazine. In the mid-1980s, UH quoted *The Washington Post* in a fundraising brochure, "The new energy one feels in Texas letters is simply due to the fact that so many good writers are, for one reason or another, now living here, and nothing is more responsible for that than the creation of the state's—perhaps one of the nation's—most ambitious creative writing programs at the University of Houston."<sup>5</sup> This brochure also asserts that the UH Creative Writing Program "is now considered one of the two or three most successful and distinguished such programs in the country."<sup>6</sup> In 1989, *Esquire* magazine published a diagram of the literary universe with Houston and Columbia "as moons orbiting the original creative writing planet, Iowa."<sup>7</sup>

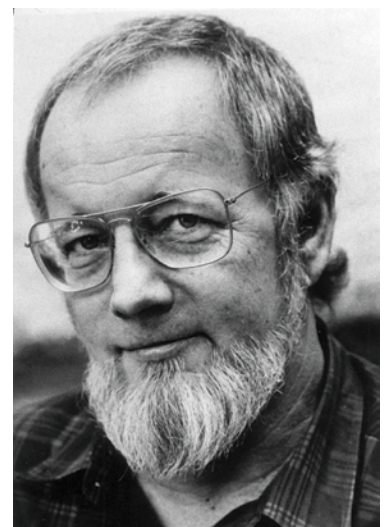
The UH Creative Writing Program also founded successful programs that contributed to student success and the creation of a literary community in Houston. In 1981, the UH Creative Writing Program teamed with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to bring readings from renowned writers to the city. During the Creative Writing Program's first decade, the Houston Reading Series presented major, contemporary writers such as John Ashbery, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, E. L. Doctorow, Phillip Levine, Bobbie Ann Mason, W. S. Merwin, Grace Paley, Richard Price, Susan Sontag, and Mark Strand.



Cynthia Macdonald.



Edward Hirsch.



Donald Barthelme.

All photos from the University of Houston People Collection courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

## Selected List of Creative Writing Student and Alumni Works, 1979-1989

Padgett Powell: *Edisto, A Woman Named Drown*

Pattiann Rogers: *The Expectations of Light, The Tattooed Lady in the Garden, Splitting and Binding, Legendary Performance*

Lynn Doyle: *Living Gloves*

Tracey Dougherty: *Desire Provoked*

Olive Hershey: *Truck Dance*

Arthur Smith: *Elegy on Independence Day*

Thomas Cobb: *Crazy Heart*

Richard Lyons: *These Modern Nights*

Marilyn Stablein: *The Census Taker: Stories of a Traveler in India and Nepal*

William Olsen: *The Hand of God and Few Bright Flowers*

Leslie Miller: *Staying up for Love*

Michelle Boisseau: *No Private Life*

Writers in the School (WITS) was formed by Lopate and Marv Hoffman in 1983. This collaboration with Houston Independent School District took UH creative writing students into HISD schools exposing K-12 students to poetry and fiction writing and offering workshops for teachers to develop their writing and teaching skills, while providing UH creative writers teaching experience and income.

Inprint, Inc. formed during the mid 1980s primarily as a fundraising group for the UH program. A UH Creative Writing fundraising brochure describes Inprint, Inc., during its early years, "In an effort to promote the vital activities which the program has engendered, a group of community leaders have [sic] come together to form a new organization, Inprint, Inc. Primary among Inprint's projects is the funding of twenty \$10,000 fellowships in writing for graduate students."<sup>8</sup>

Another major undertaking of Inprint, Inc. was "to provide financial backing for a journal of international stature which will publish new prose, poetry, and critical

articles of consequence." Emerging from its predecessor *Domestic Crude* (1982-1985), the journal *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts* published its first issue in 1986. This student-run journal of literature and visual arts provided opportunities for students to learn the literary publishing trade and is still funded, in part, by Inprint. The UH Creative Writing Program brought literature into the Houston community. As early as 1984, an article in the *Houston* magazine states that "from that seed" of Macdonald and Plumly "Houston's literary community has bloomed."<sup>9</sup> Other Houston arts and literary organizations launched readings, and shelves of local booksellers such as Brazos and Diverse Works bookstores were soon filled with the poetry and fiction of UH Creative Writing faculty and students. The UH Creative Writing program grew to become part of the fabric of UH and the city of Houston. It is difficult to imagine UH or the city today without the program and its great impact.

In 1989, at the tail end of the first decade of the UH Creative Writing Program, the program's leadership was in flux. Lopate left the program and Barthelme died that year, leaving many to wonder whether the program could sustain its level of success. It did, and it grew.

The programs developed by UH Creative Writing in its early years have also grown. Inprint assumed custodianship of the Houston Reading Series, now called the Inprint Margaret Brown Root Reading Series. It still funds graduate students in the UH Creative Writing Program, including "\$3 million to date in Inprint fellowships, juried prizes, and other direct support."<sup>10</sup> Adding writing workshops and additional readings series, Inprint currently serves more than 12,000 readers and writers annually. Writers in the Schools still brings creative writing to K-12 students and provides professional development to their teachers but has expanded its services to approximately 36,000 children, making it the largest literary arts organization in Texas. The *Gulf Coast* journal is still student run and going strong. Enjoying a readership of 3,000, *Gulf Coast* has added community programming such as the Gulf Coast Reading Series and its MenilFest, held at The Menil Collection with more than seventy-five local and national exhibitors and over 2,500 visitors attending each April. The University of Houston's Creative Writing Program is still one of the top programs in the country—still attracting eminent faculty and the best and brightest students.

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## THE UH CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM EXHIBIT

UH Libraries' Special Collections will exhibit materials related to the founding and first decade of UH Creative Writing Program in the exhibition area on the first floor of M. D. Anderson Library in Fall of 2016. The exhibit will run from August 22 - December 31, 2016. Please contact exhibit co-curators Mary Manning ([mmmanning@uh.edu](mailto:mmmanning@uh.edu)) and Julie Grob ([jgrob@uh.edu](mailto:jgrob@uh.edu)) for more information.

The Special Collections Reading Room is open 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday and 12:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays when school is in session.