A Word from the Director

By: Geoff Becker

My very first attempt at writing fiction was in first grade, and was called, “The Wild and Woolly West.” I don’t remember what it was about, beyond the fact that it had cowboys in it, so I think the title was appropriate. (On the ultimate page, it featured a drawing of a smoking six-gun and the words, “First in a series”—I’ve kept my public waiting quite a while at this point.) It strikes me even now as a reasonable sign to hang over the front door. When you pick up a story titled “The Wild and Woolly West,” you know what to expect, and I delivered.

I like to write with a title. You can always change it later. Some titles give the impression that the author just sort of gave up. War and Peace. Okay. I’m sympathetic. A story that long, with that many plot lines, I’d have punted, too. Tolstoy’s working title was The Year 1805, which is a little dry. The Great Gatsby was originally titled Trimalchio at West Egg. I think we’re all glad that Fitzgerald changed his mind on that one, although if he hadn’t, there would be a lot more people familiar with the name Trimalchio (a character from the Satyricon by Petronius who hosts orgiastic dinner parties and serves his guests live birds). The second title is definitely better, but that first one is what got the author through the draft. It gave him something to look at, a way of defining his thoughts. I’m a fan of The Postman Always Rings Twice, a novel with no postman in it at all. Its working title was Barbecue. I like barbecue very much, but I think here, too, James M. Caine did well to make the change. (His publisher didn't care for Barbecue, and he says he sent the new title without even knowing what it meant himself—he just liked the sound of it.

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Travis Madden’s Grand Prize

A huge congratulations goes to PRWR student Travis Madden whose story “Party Tricks” won Writer’s Digest’s 12th annual Popular Fiction Award this March.

The winning story tells of Patrick, a young man who plays Russian roulette with his revolver to impress his friends and cope with his dark secret.

An interview with Madden, plus his grand prize story were featured on Writer’s Digest’s website and in the May/June issue.

In addition to winning $2,500 in cash, Madden will receive an all-expense paid trip to the annual Writer’s Digest Conference in New York City this August.

Well done, Travis!

Writing without a title can work, too, I suppose, but in the same way that Robert Frost saw writing free verse as “playing tennis without a net,” it seems to me a little organization can be helpful. I had a colleague who had a child and didn’t name him—the idea was that when he was old enough, he’d choose his own name. When the boy was six, he named himself after a dinosaur in a children’s video. He changed it again later. Who knows, he may have changed it again by now. I think naming your writing when it’s still only a paragraph or so long is a lot like naming a child. Allison, you think. This child is going to be an Allison. But by five years old you understand: she’s really Esmerelda. With kids, sadly, there’s nothing to be done. But your writing is your writing. And you don’t have to explain things to Social Security and the Board of Education.

My advice? Don’t fear the title, whatever it is you are working on. Don’t even worry if the title you choose has zing or not. You can figure that out later. A lot of writing is just taking a deep breath and committing to something. Go for it. Make mistakes. Make a bunch of them. That’s what revision is for.

Good writing to you!

A Glimpse of AWP

In February, PRWR sponsored The Association of Writers and Writing Programs annual conference in Washington D.C. and was represented by several students and faculty at the event.

By: Michele Corrigan

He asked if the coffee queue was moving as he didn’t want to be late for his ten-thirty panel discussion. The line stalled and word filtered down that fresh pots were brewing. Based on the faint brogue, I asked where in Ireland he was from and with a large grin he proclaimed “Dublin!” We talked of Ireland and how the weather is surprisingly better in the winter. He and his family now live in New York. We talked of New York and how disappointed I was to hear the Posman’s Books in Grand Central Station had closed. When the line stirred, he glanced at his watch, anxious to be on time, so I offered him my place. Juggling lids, sugars, and milks, I saw his name-tag said Colum before we ran off to our respective panels. The AWP program guide revealed Colum McCann participated on a ten-thirty Literature panel. A Google search brought up the words “National Book Award Winner” while the picture confirmed it was indeed the man I had chatted with waiting for coffee. I’ve since read his award-winning novel Let the Great World Spin and, to my delight, one of the characters is named Corrigan.
Catching up with Jen Michalski

By: Shelley DeMarco

PRWR alumni, Jen Michalski is the founder and editor of jmww literary magazine, host of the reading series Starts Here! and author of four books, most recently, The Summer She Was Underwater.

1. Where did you get the idea for The Summer She Was Underwater and how long did it take to complete?

Summer is not the book I set out to write, and it's kind of what's wonderful and also scary about fiction. I began it over fifteen years ago. In it, a young novelist, Sam, gets cold feet after becoming engaged to a responsible, loving, healthy boyfriend, her first. She breaks the engagement and spends the summer at the lake with her dysfunctional, blue collar family, convinced they are to blame for her brokenness. But when she is increasingly drawn to her unlikely friend, Eve, she realizes that her family may not be the cause of her troubles after all.

It had the makings of a very standard, boilerplate coming-out novel. But the heart of the novel felt missing to me: Sam's pain felt more searing, her strained relationship with her brother Steve more complicated to me than her repressed sexuality. I put it away, and in the years between, I wrote a magical realist novella, A Water Moon, about a man who finds himself pregnant. The pregnancy is actually symbolic of some heavy truths he must carry to term.

Although the structure, subject, and language were so completely different from Summer, somehow, the two projects felt connected to me. I realized I was still working on Summer the entire time. The pregnant man was Steve, Sam's brother. And Steve was telling me what Sam couldn’t, was perhaps too ashamed or confused to tell me: Sam wasn’t having cold feet because she was a repressed lesbian but because of something more dark, confusing, and painful. It was only coming to Summer from a different perspective that I was able to get away from its predictable storyline.
2. *The Summer She Was Underwater* addresses Sam Pinsky's traumatic experiences with her family and also her sexuality which was influenced by her trauma. How did you decide to handle this theme? Was this a struggle to depict or was it the clearest vision for the book?

It wasn't my intent to write a novel that many could characterize as controversial, but I have to say I write about things that interest me. I sort of back-doored my way into the most controversial parts of the novel by creating a surrealistic subplot (which is actually a novel Sam has written, spliced into the book). It wasn't something I did on a conscious level; I really wrote *Water Moon* as a separate book, and maybe my subconscious had something to do with it. If I had written those parts about Sam in the open, with full awareness as I was writing them, I may have shied away and not written them at all.

I'm surprised I finished, since so many years elapsed since I started it, but usually I just trust my gut and keep writing, probing, see what comes out on the page. I try not to think too hard about it because I think instinct is an important part of writing. A lot of my writing comes from dreams, actually, a place in which I'm literally a prisoner of my own subconscious mind. It's all fascinating and a little uncomfortable sometimes.

*The Summer She Was Underwater* is your second novel. Has the novel-writing process, from first draft to publication, become easier? What things have you learned along the way?

I tend to write first drafts very quickly, within a year or so. It's the revising process that's so hard, and one I think writers should pay very close attention (even as I hate it myself). It's like writing a rough demo on a tape and then trying to record it in a studio with very sophisticated equipment. You tinker with one thing, and then the whole novel changes in other places, and you have to equalize all the sounds. Sometimes for me a novel will go through three revisions and the only thing that remains the same is the characters! A story can be so fluid, because you can frame it in so many ways, and how you do so will affect plot, voice, even point of view.

4. Between writing and editing *jmww*, the literary journal you founded and edit, and the reading series you run, Starts Here!, how do you find time? What's a typical day like for you?

I work from home as a freelance copyeditor, so my schedule is a little flexible. If I'm feeling inspired and need to write in the morning I can or take off in the afternoon and update the jmww website. I’m very grateful for the flexibility that my work offers me, but the downside is that I feel like I’m always working—there's no division between the work day and after work. When you're a writer, you kind of have two jobs—your “career” job and the job of promoting yourself, your writing, of promoting other writers, their writing. And they both can be full-time jobs.

5. Do you have any advice for PRWR students and grads who want to write fiction?

I think making connections is the most important thing for any writer. I've always been a little introverted, but yet I run *jmww* and am coming up on ten years hosting a reading series, so I’m living proof that you don't have to be this gregarious, outgoing person to get involved. You have to put yourself out there, and it can be hard, but I think having a conviction that you have something that you want to share with the world helps. And then, when you start making connections, and you have a body of work you're proud of, take chances. I always tell myself, before I do anything, that the worst someone can say is no. The fact that people might read your work, that you might create a connection, well, often that's just a pleasurable surprise.