

Why a Literate Culture is Important, *or* Why I Founded The Writer's Garret
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by Thea Temple

The day after 9/11, a highly valued member of The Writer's Garret asked me, "What are we doing here? People are *dying*. What is the point of supporting literature in times like these?"

The Writer's Garret had planned a publishing party for that Thursday night. The featured publisher almost cancelled, wondering the same question. By Wednesday, government officials were urging us to return to our daily lives. So, about 20 literature supporters met upstairs at Paperbacks Plus bookstore in Dallas to hear two talented writers read their latest work; yet, Tuesday, September 11th, 2001, a mere two days earlier, was in the forefront of everyone's mind.

In the introduction, our publisher-friend, true to the spirit of literature, met the unspoken head-on. He concluded, quite rightly, that the sharing of literature is maybe even *more important*, because it is "civilized." True words. Not only does literature promote creative and complex thought, literature allows us to walk in another's shoes. Literature shares a common humanity that absolutely, by its very nature, will not tolerate ignorance.

Writing and reading literature—*real* literature—is a courageous act. There are reasons why Nazis burned books and why fundamentalists ban them, why despots imprison their greatest authors, and why whole political organizations spring up to help them escape with their lives.

Literature is Public Enemy Number One of simple hate doctrines and governmental propaganda. Literature seeks, and often tells, *the truth*, with and without a capital "T." Literature caters to no one, is impolite, and often politically incorrect. Literature can be compassionate, and it can be cruel, as can life, its source. Literature shines a stark light on all that is beautiful and all that is ugly in the human condition. Literature is civilized precisely because in the safety of our homes, we can remove the clips on ideas dangerous as grenades. The writer's work is sometimes the work of the prophet, sometimes the confession of a sinner, but it always forces us to see ourselves through others, and, in the process, to "know thyself."

What so many of us, including our hires in Washington, sometimes forget in these patriotic times is that few things are as basically "American" as literature. Our forefathers were great readers of *everything*: fiction, poetry, essays, classics, philosophy, history, science, newspapers, pamphlets, doctrines, treatises, and more. They amassed books and built libraries and made sure that the early educational institutions of their new country were founded on the wisdom of the ages. Many themselves were great writers and masters of rhetoric to which the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution will attest. James Madison read widely and deeply on past fallen governments so that he could study their ideologies, theologies, policies, and practices. He believed that if we could understand why governments failed, we might be able to craft a constitution founded upon a wiser, more complex understanding of what people need in order to live freely.

It is undeniable that our forefathers loved words and knew that literature, paradoxically, contained uncontainable power. Luckily for us, they also knew enough to know that they didn't know everything. They understood, almost instinctively, that this country, for which they'd bled and fought and died, could only grow wiser than their own short lives if it were guaranteed the

opportunity to mature through the expression of many voices, past, present, and future. An acid test for any country's proclaimed liberty is the enduring vitality of its freedom of expression.

Despite our country's sometimes paranoid and repressive reactions to 9/11, generally speaking, I want to believe that our forefathers would have been amazed and proud to see how America has grown into a microcosm of our global culture, and how their drafted and redrafted Constitution still serves us well. Madison and his fellow founding fathers had openly hoped that their greatest achievement would guide the country through several decades before needing an overhaul. They would be astounded today at just how right they got it. Even with Internet, television, corporate takeovers and scandal, nuclear applied physics, space travel, two world wars, and more, the well-crafted and well-considered words from well-read men reach beyond the grave, across time, and shape the world in which we live.

So, How Can Literature Help Us in Times Like These?

Almost every time I'm invited to give a talk on The Writer's Garret, someone invariably remarks that modern technology is destroying literature. The standing argument goes something like this: if you watch a lot of TV, spend blocks of time e-mailing or surfing the Web, go to a lot of movies, or play too many video games, then you will end up simple-minded and illiterate. My angle is this: while most of us love the feel and smell and weightiness of a good book, we sometimes forget that books are just another technology, the stage upon which literature performs, not the literature itself. While most people don't see "Books on Tape" as a threat to literature, they do interpret the ubiquity of films, television, and the Internet as harbingers of doom. Before we had books, we had scrolls, before scrolls there were tablets, before tablets, we ritualized and recited epics aloud for posterity. Reading, writing, and the alphabet itself are inventions to preserve and further communication, no more. The great poet Basho said, "The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself." Going back even further, we had cave drawings, song, and dance, all expressing the human need to tell stories about ourselves. Robert Pinsky notes in *The New York Times*, "In ancient societies and even today in oral cultures, poetry has had a public function, as the repository of stories, genealogies, moral ideas and collective emotion." Literature (poetry, fiction, essays, plays) is cultural DNA, and like our children, it allows us to live beyond our own frail bodies.

Who wouldn't agree that oftentimes a successful film based upon a literary work shares many of the same virtues as the book, with the added bonus of sending the film-goer back to the source? Film versions of *Emma*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Dune*, *Harry Potter*, *Catch 22*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *L.A. Confidential*, *American Psycho*, *Seabiscuit*, and others, propel rather than impede viewers to read the original work. Growing up in the 60s, I took my hard-earned weekly allowance to the local bookstore to buy a thin paperback of *Romeo and Juliet* after seeing the Franco Zeffereilli film version at least three times. On the cover Olivia Hussey stood over the poisoned body of Leonard Whiting, ready to plunge a dagger into her star-crossed, teenaged heart. As a 12-year old, I read and re-read *R&J* so many times, that, should someone ask, I could play any role in its entirety. I also bought the LP and memorized the oral cadences of the speeches so thoroughly that I could recite the play in perfect harmony with each actor. Was the movie a threat? The LP record? Years later, as an English major in college, I would read 24 more Shakespeare plays and fondly recall how Zeffereilli "turned me on" to the great Bard.

New York publicists know that when an author appears on TV or is heard on the radio, more people will buy and read the book. Oprah has made more than one author a millionaire. "The Glenn Mitchell Show" thrives on authors, literary works, and book tours, and they on him. We should be encouraged by the success of the Internet, not frightened by it. As a language-based

technology it can't help but promote writing and reading; virtually 100s of new e-zines and literary websites appear on a daily basis. Some argue that e-mails hurt complex writing and reading skills through their reliance on immediacy and abbreviated language. E-mails strike me as providing a bridge between writing and speaking, not a detour into decadence. Anyone who knows me knows that I talk *a lot*. Someone once transcribed *verbatim* an interview with me, and I was embarrassed to read all the "uhs" and "ums," single word answers, repeated adjectives, and malapropisms. The way I speak has little bearing on how I write or what I read. E-mail and the Internet give us one more language-based way in which to express ourselves, and that has to be good.

Even if one insists on seeing these new technologies as a threat, I would recommend applying the cliché "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." They're not going away any time soon, so why not exploit the opportunities that they can afford literature? Radio, television, film, newspapers, the Internet— with a fearless and creative approach--can all become kindred spirits capable of making more people aware of the power of reading and writing. As opposed to killing it, these technologies might actually keep literature alive. And one could argue that literature remains the first "virtual reality," a place to practice what we feel and know and to challenge the possibilities of existence.

The very nature of literature is the nature of the human condition, and it's not very likely we will lose our need to understand what that means. To paraphrase Octavio Paz's famous quote about the nature of poetry, literature will continue "against all odds," from person to person, generation to generation, because it is as vital and essential as the air we breathe, the bread we eat, the water we drink. And here's something else Paz didn't say: literature is the closest thing we have to telepathy; it's a voice that can put you right inside some else's head, and before you know it, you can't help but understand what makes another person tick. And then something *miraculous* happens. In the process you end up understanding yourself better than before. With the camaraderie of a good book, the experiential bond can run as deep as friendship.

My first really great friend who died was Anne Frank. She has been the best friend of millions of young girls since her death in WWII, pathetically just weeks before the Nazis' surrender. In 5th grade I wrote a letter to her father, Otto, expressing my grief over the loss of "Miss Quack Quack," as she was called in school. I begged him to tell me it was a lie, that she was really still alive, and that her belief in the essential goodness of man still held true. I was only 10 then, when the memoirs of a young girl had taught me the horrors of the Holocaust and the value of human life.

Similarly, I've never been orphaned or homeless, but have glimpsed how it must feel through *Moll Flanders* and Dickens. I've never been an imprisoned Black male revolutionary, but, at 16, I experienced feeling trapped in a prison cell and trapped in a culture through Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. I learned about incest and survival from Maya Angelou and Mona Simpson; adultery and ostracism from *The Scarlet Letter* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; macho American courage through *The Right Stuff*; growing up as a 10-year-old Latina from Sandra Cisneros; the tragedy of Apartheid from *Cry, the Beloved Country*; psychosis, split personalities, drug addiction, and electroshock from *The Bell Jar*, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can*, and *Sybil*. Literature has given me more life experiences than any one person could survive, and far more than I have the talent or patience to distill in these few paragraphs.

Shaping our global fears for the last four years, 9/11 hit us hard, as have other crises: genocide in Rwanda, the spreading AIDS epidemic, the Iraq War, North Korean threats of nuclear holocaust, global warming, and more. On a more personal and cultural level, we are all struggling with shifting gender roles, disappearing ethnic barriers, economic challenges, birth, death, marriage,

divorce, and aging. The world in which we now live is vastly more complicated than what the Pilgrims knew when they first set foot upon Plymouth Rock—although no less threatening. One can see the shifting sands just by following the evolution of American literature. Even the thickest dolt must admit something has indeed changed from the early sermons of Edward Taylor to the works of Thomas Pynchon, Gertrude Stein, Milan Kundera, and Toni Morrison.

But while literature is often two steps forward, our ideologues and their patriotic zeal are often one step back. A well-read person is far less likely to indulge in easy answers and will typically anticipate the twists and turns of diverging paths with less certainty. A well-read person will be far less likely to be bullied by clichéd rhetoric that can sometimes justify immediate and imprudent action. It is no small coincidence that a recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) links volunteerism, philanthropy, and civic service with being well-read. Not surprisingly, these same “readers of literature” also tend to excel as community leaders, and, because of their ability to successfully tackle complex intellectual and emotional challenges, demonstrate more upward mobility than nonreaders.

Our new global culture and technological advances require both understanding and tolerance. Our many pasts have converged into a single day, and that day leads to an uncertain future. The very destinies of our lives and our cultures can be changed almost instantaneously by the decisions of people from countries we barely consider in the daily bustle of our lives. The oft-cited metaphor for “Chaos Theory,” of a butterfly flapping its wings in Argentina resulting in a tsunami in the Philippines, holds even truer culturally. It is incumbent on all of us to open our minds to unexplored social rules and changing morés and to invite in new paradigms of thought.

If our leaders insist on throwing around Christianity and God like rice at a church wedding, they must also recognize the awesome responsibility behind easy virtue, by offering compassion and understanding, not just historical posturing. A white dress or a white horse are only symbols, unless you’re an unthinking person who empowers them far beyond their true significance. We must be able, as citizens of the world, to deliberate with complexity and clarity the ways in which our lives and decisions impact others. We must be able to *read* and grasp the true value of metaphor and symbol, their ability to convey a multitude of meanings through a single articulation, without raising them beyond the qualities they are intended to represent. I am reminded of Sharon Olds’ poem on racism and the collective unconscious, “On the Subway,” which demands in its lines a new consciousness, even in terms of coexisting with our fellow Americans:

*He is wearing
red, like the inside of the body
exposed. I am wearing dark fur, the
whole skin of an animal taken and
used. I look at his raw face,
he looks at my fur coat, and I don't
know if I am in his power--
he could take my coat so easily, my
briefcase, my life--
or if he is in my power, the way I am
living off his life, eating the steak
he does not eat, as if I am taking
the food from his mouth . . .*

Immediately following the events of 9/11, at a banquet dedicated to the contributions of Asian Americans, one speaker explained that the Chinese symbol for “crisis” is the same as for

“opportunity.” As I looked around the room at my fellow Americans whose ancestors hailed from a different continent than my own, each of us teary-eyed and sobered by the senseless deaths of so many people, we welcomed the shared grief. We were not alone, not in this room, not in this country, not in the world. We all have each other, and we owe it to our little blue planet and all of its people to look carefully into those words we hold dear, “and justice for all.”

The Dis-Unified “Field” Theory

For a short period following 9/11 the field of literature found a singular unity of purpose, before slowly falling back into its usual disarray. I would be fairly certain that when most of us think about literature, we don’t even think in terms of literature as a “field”; a discipline perhaps, an art form *maybe*, possibly even a body of work, but certainly not a field. In Robert Johnson’s book *He*, when recounting the Parsifal myth, Johnson describes a fish who spent his life searching for the miraculous thing called “water.” Writers search their whole lives for human connection, and it is there all the time, but the isolation necessary for the writer to cultivate independent vision obscures the writers’ milieu and the writers’ own physical and social needs. The writer is engulfed in an ecosystem peopled with readers, fellow-writers, editors, publishers, agents, distributors, teachers, mentors, and literary arts administrators, and yet few writers know much about any of them.

The isolation of the literature field begins with the isolation of the writer, or, another variation on the scientific assertion that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (and, for the sake of this argument, vice versa). Because writing must be conceived in solitude, because the writer must cultivate a healthy ego that says, “Hey, my ideas really are special enough to expect others to read them,” the field of literature is in the worst shape of all the nonprofit art fields.

In 1991-1993, I was the Special Assistant to the Director of the Literature Program at the National Endowment for the Arts. My second boss, Gigi Bradford, left me with truisms that enter like sound bites but exit with a resonant punch: “Literature is the Third World of the Arts” and “Literature is the poorest of poor cousins.” Many perceive literature as an esteemed Humanity based in the Academy, but it reminds me more of poor Tess Durbeyfield, overwhelmed by the austere portraits of her D’Urberville ancestors hanging in the great hall, powerful, rich, and influential, confused as to how she ever ended up a milkmaid with a buried bastard child.

Writers and poets who once ruled English departments on two continents are now frequently “ghettoized” and “marginalized”--two terms frequently used in MFA circles-- EVEN IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS. *If* a writer is paid in cash for his/her work, New York publishing houses pay on average 5 cents on the dollar. Literature is the most under-funded of all art forms, so it is little surprise that the reading of literature is in steep decline, as reported in the earlier cited federal study. Many writers feel contented if their work appears in a journal with 100 subscribers. The conditioning of this literary poverty reminds me of Blake’s “manacles of the mind.” So, how did this happen? How did the mighty D’Urbervilles become the poor sods of the English Departments and the “Third World of the Arts?”

While the aforementioned NEA study finds that there’s been a steady decrease in reading among Americans in every age group, what goes unreported is that there’s also been a concurrent, rapid rise in the number of people writing. Now why is that? You’d *think* one would feed directly into the other.

Physics dictates that an object in motion stays in motion until a force acts against it. In the early 60s and then in the late 70s, three forces shifted the movement of literature in America. One

accelerated its growth, while the other two nearly brought literary publishing to a standstill. The exhilaratingly rapid expansion of MFA programs in the U.S. unfortunately coincided with the corporate buyouts of publishing houses by companies entirely unaffiliated with publishing (e.g., Coca-Cola, Sony/Warner). This shifted the thrust of New York publishing away from the editorially-driven sensibility upon which it was built towards stockholders and profits as the new bottom line. Perhaps even more devastating, and further magnified by this shift to corporate interests, was the Supreme Court decision of 1979: *Thor Power Tool Company vs. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*.

The Thor ruling no longer allowed any company to claim a normal depreciation of goods within a taxable year as a deduction. This made it far more expensive for publishers to carry inventory from one year to the next. As a result, publishers began cutting print runs in order to minimize inventory. They also moved more quickly to dispose of inventory-- i.e., pulp it --before the end of the fiscal year. And so here we are 26 years later, and the adverse influence of this ruling has created a system in which publishers, distributors, and bookstore chains primarily promote books capable of generating huge monetary gain in a single quarter. If your book becomes popular six months after it has been published—too bad--it may already have been pulped. Thor forced publishers to earn quicker, higher profits just to keep their rates of equity, and stock prices, constant. This motivates publishers and their distribution-outlets to avoid books that might show sluggish sales, e.g., poetry and other high literary works, first novels, collections of short stories, etc. Meanwhile, we have MFA programs all over the country cranking out more and more “literary” writers and poets unable to find a readership, not because people don’t want to read or because they’ve suddenly developed a taste for bad books, but because quality writing takes time to write, takes time to read, and takes time to catch on.

Physics also dictates that for every action there’s an equal and opposite reaction. One reaction of literary professionals was flight to the nonprofit world, where taxation wouldn’t be a key issue. Hence a huge market exploded almost overnight in three forms: 501(c)(3)’s, including the first fully nonprofit publishers and literary centers (e.g., Copper Canyon, Story Line, White Pine, Poets House, Just Buffalo, The Writer’s Garret, Gemini Ink, etc.); university subsidiaries (e.g., the Poetry Center at the University of Arizona, The Associated Writing Programs, hoards of new university magazines and presses, etc.); and “piggy-backs,” literary programs installed inside pre-existing nonprofit organizations (e.g., the Writers’ Voice through the YMCAs, Arts & Letters Live through the Dallas Museum of Art, etc.). Interestingly, the new mecca for literary writers was no longer New York City, but Minneapolis-St. Paul, home of the Loft, Milkweed Editions, Gray Wolf Press, Coffee House Press, and others.

The distribution of books, however, was hurt worst of all by the Thor ruling, and has never recovered. The IRS will not grant book distributors nonprofit status, and they are the ones who carry the most inventory since they actually warehouse the books. Alluding to another Gigi Bradford truism, the field of literature is shaped like an hourglass. Forming the top of this hourglass are the numbers of writers coming out of MFA programs and the works they write. The narrowing slope of the hourglass shows the decreasing number of works being published, and the contracted waistline represents the number of distributors willing to carry literary books. At the bottom of the hourglass are the waiting readers, with as much potential to serve literature as the top has to produce it, but the lack of distributors clogs movement. So, simplistically stated, by the onset of the 80s and on through today, America has far more writers producing serious work in greater numbers, but fewer publishing opportunities, and even fewer readers able to buy these works, much less read them. Meanwhile, the marketing thrust of the New York houses has moved quickly to fill this void by promoting “disposable” writing of lesser quality.

To make matters worse, the nonprofit lands, where disenfranchised writers, publishers, editors, and teachers suddenly found themselves, were already occupied--even crowded--with dancers, actors, musicians, composers, art museums, symphony halls, theatres, ballet and opera companies, and libraries, not to mention hospitals, churches, social services, etc. In 1991 when I showed up at the NEA to work, I was welcomed by the then Director of the Literature Program, who was a writer from the Academy. You might think, "Hey, that's good," but actually it was very bad. Out of all the discipline programs (Music, Opera, Theatre, Folk Arts, Media Arts, Dance, and Visual Arts) *and* all the non-discipline programs such as Expansion Arts, States, and Locals, Literature was the only program run by a practicing artist who lacked substantial nonprofit administrative experience. Running the NEA's Literature Program was less about the creation of literature (the province of the artist) and more about the conquering of new funding lands for literature to inhabit.

Lacking experienced champions to conquer and defend our lands, it's small wonder that the Literature Program processed 28% of the agency's applications, but received less than 4% of its money. Out of 56 state arts agencies, fewer than 10 fund literature as one of their regular offerings. Out of seven regional arts agencies, two support literature, which is one more than ten years ago. Then there is the additional confusion resulting from whether or not literature belongs with the arts or with the humanities. This trickles into the private sector, which often takes its cues from governmental funding trends. Run an Internet search on "Arts Centers" or "funding for the Arts," and you'll understand why literature is the Third World of the Arts. For the most part, we're still homeless.

To this day, still no one—not writers, not readers, not educators, not funders--understands why or how literature fits in. But like the thematic "green world" in literature, it is precisely this confusion that can enable us to reinvent ourselves. Literature is rife with possibilities and extraordinarily flexible. Its noble history with education and the once-respected New York publishing houses, and even its sleazy slide into corporate marketing, provides the literature field with skills and opportunities begging to be explored. Just as those first D'Urbervilles stepped onto that misty island long-dominated by Saxons and Celts, literature is stepping into a world dominated by scholars, charities, and arts on one hand, and corporate mergers on the other. Still, it's a brave new world for a pioneering spirit.

The Writer's Garret Has a Story to Tell

Many of you may remember the great literary advocate, Rita Starpattern of the Texas Commission on the Arts. In 1993 we met when she traveled from Austin to Washington D.C. to meet with the NEA's Literature Program, and I was the one lucky enough to work with her. Among Rita's many concerns was her feeling that "Literature stopped in Austin," and that Dallas and North Texas had "special needs" as gateway to Texas's most densely populated region. Rita described to me how the Texas Poetry Circuit, Texas Institute of Letters, Austin Writers' League, and other presenters tended to leave North Texas off their tours, not knowing of an existing, year-round literary organization with which to collaborate.

Interestingly enough, about three months later, I met my future husband (2003-04 Poet Laureate of Texas), Jack Myers. Shortly after, we married, and I ended up moving to the DFW Metroplex; but while still at the NEA I went on a "field" trip to Minneapolis-St. Paul, and had fallen in love with the Loft, the largest and oldest of the literary centers. Jack actually knew that I had been wanting to start up a literary center and had used Dallas's need for a center of literary activity as one further enticement. So, shortly after moving here, we launched a critique group with several area educators and writers, and, working together, The Writer's Garret was born. In addition to writing and reviewing one another's work, we sent members to teach memoir-writing

to senior citizens, host readings, and approach schools to try and launch a Writers-in-the-Schools program. Since most of us were educators as well as writers, we were deeply concerned about the growing absence of literature in our schools and in our lives, and what that might mean for future generations.

In the last ten years, not only has reading in this country declined at an alarming rate, but so have basic skills. Reportedly one person in seven cannot read or write well enough to decipher maps, answer want ads, or read story books to children. Schools all but exclude imaginary writing and the reading of literature even though both have been shown to effectively combat soaring dropout rates. Meanwhile, our world is putting an ever greater premium on strong communication and thinking skills ranging from test-driven school performance to employee advancement. According to two national studies, employers rank communication skills as the first and second most important factors in hiring. In the final analysis, literate and educated adults hold higher paying jobs and have more money to spend; they have better developed critical skills and are less likely to be involved in crime; and they are better connected socially. And as we have already mentioned, people who read and write well are also more inclined towards community service.

Jack and I laughed the other day about how far we've come since the days when we sat on our living room floor licking envelopes and addressing them with a rubber, moveable-type stamp that inked out the words "The Writer's Garret." Jim Sitter, former E.D. for the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) called our rise "meteoric."

Upon obtaining our 501(c)(3) in May, 1995, The Writer's Garret became the only full-service nonprofit literary center in North Texas, launching an array of year-round programs, including classes on writing, literature, and publishing; several reading series; panels; student contests; college-credit internships; and a lending library / computer room for the general public. Each project clearly expressed The Garret's mission "to foster the education and development of readers, writers, and audiences by putting them in touch with quality literature, each other, and the communities in which they live and write." Our vision was that "One day, most Texans will understand the impact and value of reading, writing, and the literary arts in our daily lives." The Writer's Garret's main goals were to achieve the following through events, educational outreach projects, and professional development programs:

- (1) Build a community of readers, educators, and writers that care about the development and dissemination of literature, reading, and writing
- (2) Educate our young to understand, appreciate, and support the impact of literature, reading, and writing
- (4) Enable wide and equal access to the stories, letters, and cultural ideas that underscore and challenge our most recognized and cherished ideologies
- (3) Provide opportunities for the education and betterment of individuals and communities through enhanced reading and writing skills that cultivate an appreciation of quality literature and critical thinking
- (5) Strengthen the infrastructure of educational, literary, and cultural partnerships capable of furthering the impact of literature, reading, and writing

Our break-through came with the publication of *jTEX!*, a magazine showcasing Texas fiction, poetry, and visual art. Co-published with the Today Foundation / Today Newspapers, *jTEX!* won national support for its excellence and praise from (then Texas) First Lady Laura Bush, who served as keynote speaker at its “kick-off,” calling *jTEX!* “a Texas treasure.” Distributed as a free newspaper insert and reading tool for DISD secondary students, *jTEX!* has since reached well over 1 million people in only five issues.

In its short life, The Writer’s Garret has several times been ranked the #1 literary arts organization in Texas, received eight NEA grants, and won recognition as the *only nonprofit* in Dallas to be funded in the NEA’s “Challenge 2001” category. This award was instrumental in helping us to FINALLY develop our Writers-in-the-Schools (WITS) program, which sends writers into classrooms to share their passion for reading and writing. We began with 8 kids in one elementary school in 2000; last year we served over 3,200 students in more than 50 in-and-after-school programs. This has since become the cornerstone for our newly formed “Teachers & Writers Institute,” which offers professional development training for both writers and teachers, who then can impact test-driven school curricula. We have also been the only nonprofit organization in the entire Southwest featured in the NEA’s *Guide to Learning Through the Arts*, and just last year, our “Writers Studio” was voted “Best Reading Series in Dallas” by *D Magazine* in its annual “Best of Big D” issue.

And now, ten years later, we have become *the* focal point for literature in our region, a vital link between the community and the writing that speaks on behalf of it. The Writer’s Garret promotes literature through a system of partnerships, delivery systems, and networks utilizing both a “top down” and “bottom up” approach. Goethe insisted that the proof of any great city is its great literature. The Writer’s Garret believes that in order for Dallas to have a great literature, we must first involve the whole city and its surrounding communities by demonstrating the relevance of the literary arts in all walks of life.

We do this through partnerships that underscore our commitment to diverse, far-reaching, artistic, and educational programming. Our first partners included SMU, The MAC, Paperbacks Plus, Bath House Cultural Center, and Black Images Books. We have since welcomed to our expanding circle KERA, ArtsPartners, Campfire Kids, DISD, Girl Scouts of America, Today Newspapers, YMCA, Dallas Dance Council, DISD, and others. We’ve made good friends with media, reaching the city and surrounding region through radio, Internet, and newspapers, and also offer more traditional literary events and educational projects. In less than a decade, The Writer’s Garret has put nearly 500 writers and their art in touch with over 1,200,000 readers and audience members. By collaborating with many different partners and pooling otherwise limited resources, we strengthen our common cause of developing a rich, vibrant, and diverse literary culture.

Practice What We Preach

As a full-service, nonprofit literary center, The Writer’s Garret offers an array of year-round community events and programs featuring over 70 writers a year—winners of the Pulitzer, Nobel, Guggenheim, and National Book Awards—as well as emerging talents. Programmatically we have three major goals:

- 1) Developing audiences for literature; 2) Providing people in diverse communities access to literature; and 3.) Facilitating the improvement of reading and writing skills. We express these goals through a holistic approach we call Community, Education, and Outreach (CEO), which encompasses Community events; outreach/youth projects; and professional development to

teachers, readers, and writers. Ongoing event-based programs, which are open to the public, include:

- **WORD of Mouth**—a reading series often pairing nationally-known writers with regional talent
- **Write Stuff!**—classes and workshops exploring aspects of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction
- **Write Stuff! ETC.**—non-writing seminars on literature or its dissemination (such as publishing)
- **Writers' Block & AfterWords**—a free community forum on cultural or literary topics
- **Stone Soup**—weekly peer critique groups
- **The Starbucks Reading Series**—a monthly series featuring students (and sometimes their families!) in our WITS program, their instructors, and TAWI teachers and writers

Outreach, Youth, and Professional Development projects include:

- ✎ **North Texas Writers in the Schools (WITS)**— The only project of its kind in North Texas, Writers in the Schools (WITS) sends professional writers into K-12 classrooms to provide creative writing and reading instruction to mostly at-risk youth. WITS programs have been in the school districts of Ft. Worth, Dallas, Garland, and Mesquite, as well as in some private schools. Just this year we reached over 3,200 students during and after-school.
- ✎ **¡TEX!** — A multicultural magazine showcasing Texas poetry, art, and fiction, *¡TEX!* is published in partnership with the Today Foundation and *Today Newspapers* with the goal of making FREE quality literature accessible to all Texans. Since 1998, *¡TEX!* has reached over one million people through newspaper inserts, libraries, bookstores, universities, and secondary school classrooms.
- ✎ **The Writers Studio**— Our high-profile literary reading and talk series is also a radio program developed in partnership with KERA 90.1. Winner of "Best Reading Series of Big D" for 2004 by *D Magazine*, The Writers Studio is both an event and an educational experience, as writers are interviewed and read excerpts of their work before a live audience. Episodes are taped for broadcast on KERA 90.1 and NPR affiliates across the state and region, and to major markets, reaching approximately 90,000 listeners. Featured authors to date include Alice Walker, Julia Alvarez, T.C. Boyle, Tracy Kidder, Maxine Hong Kingston, Umberto Eco, Margaret Drabble, Walter Mosley, and others. Confirmed so far for the 2005-2006 series are Bret Easton Ellis, Joan Didion, Scott Turow, and J. California Cooper.
- ✎ **Teachers and Writers Institute (TAWI)** —TAWI's professional development courses for K-12 teachers and writers build enthusiasm for the study of creative writing and confidence for teaching it to others, including youth, seniors, and community members with special needs. Through TAWI, teachers can team with writers to set up writing programs in schools.

TAWI in turn serves as the umbrella for the following two inter-related programs:

The Writers' Community and Mentorship Project (CAMP) — A non-accredited degree program, *CAMP* offers budding writers who are challenged by time or financial constraints the chance to study their craft in depth with professional writers. Tuition waivers through community service are available for financially-challenged CAMPers through our Work-Exchange Program (WE).

Write Ways! --Available for teacher accreditation and non-accreditation, *Write Ways!* offers teachers the opportunity to learn the value of creative writing in today's changing classroom. While, unfortunately, schools remain test-driven, the good news is that TAKs now tests for originality, voice, and organization—skills that our enrichment programs teach in abundance. Additionally, this year, SAT is once again testing writing skills and reading comprehension, doing away with the useless analogy-testing of the past. We help teachers navigate these forgotten waters by reminding them of tried and true—as well as the very latest—methods for getting young people excited about reading and writing.

Funding Remains a Challenge, but as We Progress Towards a Unified Field. . .

As you might have realized from everything said above, literature is still the “Third World of the Arts,” but things *are* looking up. Two years ago, headlines exploded onto the world of philanthropy: “RUTH LILLY'S \$100 MILLION BEQUEST TO POETRY MAGAZINE SETS PRECEDENT FOR GIFTS TO LITERATURE ON THE SCALE OF GIFTS TO MUSEUMS” (New York Foundation for the Arts). While mega-gifts are fairly common to Operas and museums, it may have been the largest such donation to literature. Lilly, then 87, a poet whose work was once rejected by *POETRY*, also established the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize of \$100,000 and poetry student fellowships.

When glass ceilings break, there's often a splintering of opinion. Amidst the rejoicing among literary professionals, *The Village Voice* asked, "Wouldn't it be amazing if instead of one poetry magazine getting 100 million, 400 magazines got a quarter-million?" Around The Writer's Garret, we heard similar murmuring. I surprised most of the writers I knew by disagreeing.

Sizeable donations often necessitate the formation of a foundation to protect philanthropic dollars from taxation. With proper planning, the interest alone over 50 years can help create more than 400 one-time gifts. To me, giving that money away it is like roasting the goose who lays the golden eggs and offering everyone a wing or drumstick. Interested in their plans for the gift, I called *POETRY* to talk about plans for the future, and felt heartened. *POETRY* wants to utilize the interest to develop audiences for poetry, notably by facilitating the teaching of poetry in schools and improving the overall literature field. *POETRY* plans to develop a grant program similar to that developed by the Witter Bynner Poetry Foundation (of which The Garret was a grant recipient three years ago), but is working with consultants to analyze the best possible strategies.

I'd like to think that literature is entering into a Golden Age, and that there are signs of this prophecy all around: Oprah-inspired book clubs, a poet serving as Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dallas having formed its own literature panel to review Cultural Projects, newly commissioned operas based on novels, and the Lilly gift. My sincerest hope is that funders are beginning to see literature's “bang for the buck (another Gigi-ism). Books and writers are cheaper to support; the art lasts longer than a single performance; literature interfaces *perfectly* with education; and donors can see their name printed right inside the book—spreading the word of their donation to at least hundreds, perhaps thousands, and maybe even millions. Waiting for the day when it will come in handy, I've thought up a slogan for capital campaigns, “Books, not bricks.”

Literature is About the Question, Not the Answer

So, in the final analysis, is there an answer to my original question: “In times like these, why is a literate culture important?” My husband is Jewish, and while I'm a *Goy*, I've learned how good Jews answer a question with a question, so my answer is, “*How can it not be?*” Literature goes straight to the root of the word “compassion,” which literally means, “shared pain.” Sharing another's pain not only heals, but it can prevent injury in the first place. If war-training

ritualistically destroys individuality and reduces human beings to stereotypes only worth killing, then I'll be so bold as to offer literature as the exact antidote: it makes all humanity knowable at the deepest level, and in the process, magnifies all humans into beings worth knowing.

A friend in Washington D.C. once called literature “the most intimate and social art form,” and I tend to agree. One person writes down an understanding, in all its complexity; then across the world, across time and beyond death, another person opens up a book, and this understanding, penned in private, jumps off the page and into another’s life, which will then never again be the same. In my own life two scenes from plays resonate for me the extraordinary power of reading and language.

In Peter Shaffer’s ambitious *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, the Inca God-King, Atahualpa, asks the Spaniards how they know that the Bible is the “Word of God.” Atahualpa puts the book to his ear to listen and declares that he hears “No word.” Later he is told the process by which Europeans have been able to store the wisdom of the ages through their elaborate alphabet and centuries-old texts. Atahualpa is amazed and immediately wants to learn how to read and write. When Atahualpa discovers that Pizarro “never learned the skill,” he is surprised. “A King needs it!” he says. “There is great power in these marks.” The majestic Inca King intuitively realizes what the great conquistador does not, that our ability to read and write is a source of real power.

The other scene that will always bring chills to my arms comes from William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*, which is taken nearly verbatim from Helen Keller’s memoirs. Many of you undoubtedly remember this famous scene, but here Helen Keller describes it herself so eloquently:

She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew that W-A-T-E-R meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it life, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that in time could be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned into the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.

The transference of meaning from person to person is utterly profound. To be able to read is to be able to wield knowledge and power, and our desire to share stories makes us fully human. As writers, as readers, as a nation, there are “barriers still,” but with tolerance, learning, patience, and the “mystery of language” to “awaken” our souls, we will somehow make it. I feel certain.

And so, about that second question, “Why did I start The Writer’s Garret?” The answer is simple: “How could I not?”