

**GRADUATION SPEECH  
CLASS OF WINTER 2005  
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POPULAR FICTION! OR AS WE SAY, *POP FIC*...SOUNDS LIKE A DISEASE. WE HOPE IT'S INCURABLE. THERE'S NO GRADUATING NON-FICTION STUDENT THIS TERM, THAT'S HOW WE GOT HERE, POPULAR FICTION AT THE PODIUM – THE MFA WILD CARD TEAM. IT SEEMS LIKE AN ACT OF FAITH THAT – AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF POPULAR FICTION – I SAY SOMETHING ABOUT GENRE V. LITERARY FICTION. YOU PROBABLY AREN'T AWARE OF JUST HOW OLD THIS ISSUES IS.

IMAGINE THE VERY FIRST PROTO-HUMAN, A HAIRY LITTLE THREE FOOT TALL *AUSTRALOPITHECENE* WITH NEWLY ACQUIRED BINOCULAR VISION PEERING OUT OVER THE SAVANA THREE MILLION YEARS AGO. WHAT DOES HE SEE? *DIFFERENCES!* SURE, SOME SIMILARITIES. WHY DIFFERENCES? BECAUSE THERE'S A SURVIVAL ADVANTAGE TO DISCERNING DIFFERENCES. HE KNOWS HE CAN EAT THE LITTLE ANIMAL AND THAT THE BIG GUY'S GOING TO EAT HIM. *DIFFERENCES.*

IMAGINE THESE SAME HAIRY LITTLE BUGGERS SQUATTING AROUND A FIRE: ONE OF THEM BEGINS TO TELL A HUNTING STORY, A PLOT-DRIVEN TALE. A CUTE BARE-BREASTED FEMALE – THAT'S A CONCRETE DETAIL – CUTS IN AND SAYS, "ARISTOPHANES!" (WHERE DID YOU THINK THESE NAMES CAME FROM? GREECE?) SO SHE SAYS, EMPLOYING HER BEST AUSTRALOPITHECENE VOCABULARY, "MAN, THAT PLOT REALLY SUCKS! I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HIS *CHARACTER.*"

AND NOW THREE MILLION YEARS LATER, WE BIG BRAINED HUMANS HAVE ELABORATED DIFFERENCES INTO A LIABILITY. BLACK/WHITE. JEW/GENTILE.

DEMOCRAT/REPUBLICAN. LITERARY/GENRE. WHAT WOULD DISTINGUISH OUR PROGRAM FROM OTHERS MFA PROGRAMS? I WOULD SUGGEST, BORROWING A TERM FROM DAVID DURHAM, WE DEVELOP *A BOMB-PROOF ATTITUDE OF TOLERANCE* BETWEEN LITERARY AND GENRE FICTION WRITERS. WE'LL MAKE THE STONEHOUSE SMOKE FREE AND SMUG-FREE. BECAUSE HIGH OCTANE HUBRIS REALLY STINKS.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING OFFENSIVE REMARK MADE BY RALPH PETERS WHO WRITES AS OWEN PARRY. WHEN ACCEPTING THE 2003 CRIME WRITERS HAMMETT PRIZE, HE WAS ASKED WHY HE WROTE *THAT* KIND OF BOOK. PETERS REPLIED, “DO WE REALLY NEED ANOTHER LONG-WINDED, SELF-PITYING, EXCRUCIATINGLY DULL AND SELF-IMPORTANT NOVEL ABOUT AN AUTHOR’S THINLY DISGUISED DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY AND TROUBLED CHILDHOOD?” WELL, DO WE REALLY NEED ANOTHER BLOOD-DRENCHED, SEMI-LITERATE THRILLER WITH THE SHELF LIFE OF A MAYFLY HATCH?

YOU WILL RECALL THE OPENING SALVO IN *THE ART OF FICTION* BY HENRY JAMES WHEN HE SAID, “THE ONLY OBLIGATION TO WHICH IN ADVANCE WE HOLD A NOVEL, WITHOUT INCURRING THE ACCUSATION OF BEING ARBITRARY, IS THAT IT BE INTERESTING.”

I KNOW I SPEAK FOR ALL OF THE STONCOAST POPULAR FICTION STUDENTS WHEN I CONGRATULATE ANNIE FOR HER FORESIGHT IN CONTINUING TO DEVELOP THIS PROGRAM ALLOWING POPULAR FICTION STUDENTS TO EXPLORE THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF GENRE FICTION. THIS MFA PROGRAM *HAS* DISTINGUISHED ITSELF IN THIS REGARD. AND WE SHOULD GO THE EXTRA STEP AND FOSTER EVEN MORE INTERACTION AMONG OUR AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST.

NOW, IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT A MODERN READER: A WOMAN CLOSES HER BOOK AND TURNS TO HER SIGNIFICANT OTHER AND SAYS, “I JUST CAN’T READ THIS CRAP.” WAS IT A LITERARY NOVEL? OR WAS IT A BEST SELLING THRILLER? I SUBMIT THAT IT IS *THE RISK OF ABJECT FAILURE* THAT JOINS LITERARY AND GENRE WRITERS AT THE HIP. THE *ELUSIVE STATISTIC* I WOULD LIKE TO SEE IS NOT HOW MANY BOOKS ARE SOLD BUT HOW MANY ARE *ABANDONED*.

SO WHO THE HELL ARE WE KIDDING? THE TRUTH IS, GENRE WRITERS CRAVE RESPECT FOR WELL-CRAFTED STORIES – AND LITERARY WRITERS WOULD LIKE TO MAKE PILE OF MONEY. SO MY PLEA IS TO CONTINUE TO *MAKE STONECOAST UNIQUE* BY NOURISHING A UNIVERSAL *GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT* TOWARD EACH OTHER. WE HAVE A REMARKABLE FACULTY. THIS PROGRAM WILL GROW AND DISTINGUISH ITSELF MORE AND MORE AS STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED BY MENTORS WHOSE EDUCATIONAL COMPASSES POINT COLLECTIVELY TO *A CORE VISION OF THE CRAFT OF WRITING*.

IN HER BOOK, *THE LANGUAGE POLICE*, DIANE RAVITCH QUOTES A CALIFORNIAN TEACHER’S EXPRESSION: “*THE NARCISSIM OF IGNORANCE*”, REFERRING TO STUDENTS WHO READ ONLY BOOKS THAT REFLECT THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES. AND SO IT WOULD SEEM OUR PROBLEMS AS WRITERS EXTEND BEYOND THE ISSUE OF LITERARY VERSUS GENRE FICTION.

IN THE END ALL WE CAN DO IS STAY ON THE HORSE. WRITE THE BEST PROSE AND POETRY WE CAN AND ENCOURAGE GROWTH IN THE RANKS OF SERIOUS READERS OF WELL-CRAFTED STORIES.

IN CLOSING, I WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE MY FELLOW GRADUATES AND THANK THE ENTIRE FACULTY – FOR YOUR PATIENCE, YOUR MARVELOUS TEACHING, AND YOUR FRIENDSHIP.