

Elise Blackwell

Biographical Information

Elise Blackwell is the author of four novels: *Hunger*, *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish*, *Grub*, and *An Unfinished Score*. Her books have been translated into several languages and named to numerous best-of-the-year lists. Her short stories have appeared in *Witness*, *Seed*, *Global City Review*, *Quick Fiction*, *Five Chapters*, *Coal City Review*, and elsewhere. She has written for *The Atlantic* and currently writes a monthly column on creative writing in the academy for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Blackwell earned a BA in English at Louisiana State University and an MFA in fiction at the University of California-Irvine. She is Associate Professor and Director of the MFA program at the University of South Carolina, where she has been awarded the English department's Excellence in Teaching Award as well as the university-wide Mungo Teaching Award. She has given a hundred public readings and served on the faculty of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers.

Campaign Statement

I am honored to be nominated for the AWP Board and hope that I will have the opportunity to work for an organization that serves writers, writing teachers, and writing students in all their variety.

Across my career and in my current position, I have given considerable thought to the challenges faced by writers both in terms of professional employment (within the academy and outside of it) and in terms of gaining the publishing credentials required to secure and maintain that employment. Like most moments in history, this one is both difficult and ripe with possibility. Applications to writing programs increase while criticisms mount and budgets are chopped, new modes of text appear while traditional publishing struggles to survive, writing-program graduates multiply while permanent teaching positions do not, and new readers and writers bring fresh enthusiasm to literature as other voices are neglected. As writers attempt to navigate all this, AWP's advocacy is more important than ever—as its leadership on particular issues.

I am a product of an MFA program and have taught in two, so certainly many of my concerns lie at the intersection of writing, publishing, and the academy. My regular column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has required me to educate myself about broader issues facing writers in the academy and also given me a venue for advocating for those writers. As a program director I am acutely aware of programmatic issues, including the effects of ranking systems, the relationship between writing programs and the departments and institutions that house them, recent criticisms of MFA programs (some fair and some not), and the needs and goals of programs of various kinds (such as full- and low-residency programs, programs that are fully funded and those that are not, and programs granting different degrees).

Yet between receiving my final degree and starting my first teaching job, I spent more than a decade outside of the academy working as a freelance writer, editor, and translator and later as senior copywriter at Princeton University Press. During many of those years I also

served on the board of directors of a nonprofit organization, raising money and advocating for political refugees. This varied professional and volunteer experience—together with my identification as a writer first—positions me to advocate for writing program students and graduates who may not land in the academy nor on the bestseller list but who nonetheless want to spend their lives mixing words. I'm also interested in serving writers without access to traditional programs, including those unable to attend college and those in detention centers and prisons.

If elected, I will bring a variety of organizational and interpersonal skills to the board. I have raised money for a nonprofit organization, overseen editorial schedules, organized the production of a university press's seasonal catalogue across four years, and run more than one reading series. While I'm slightly embarrassed by my ability to write promotional and marketing copy, I would love to put that skill to use for AWP. Currently I direct a program that went without a general director for nearly a decade, and I have learned a good deal about administration from the experience of reuniting it, tending its standing, and successfully advocating for its growth to my department and college. What may serve me most, though, is my experience advising a tremendous range of undergraduate and graduate students embarking on uncertain and wildly varying writing and/or teaching careers. As a writer, a teacher, and an administrator, I feel called to help each succeed. If I am elected to the AWP board, I will work hard on behalf of the many constituencies that AWP represents.

Over the years, the AWP has helped me choose a graduate program for myself, obtain a writing job that I would not otherwise have known about, improve my teaching, meet dozens of friends, get my placement file to more universities than I want to count, interview for academic positions, identify writers to invite to campus, meet editors, gain attention for the program I teach in, and professionalize and find opportunities for students. I would like the chance to give something back.