

Steve Heller

Biographical Information

Steve Heller is Professor & Chair of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Antioch University Los Angeles. Prior to L.A., he taught at Kansas State University for 22 years, including 15 as Chair of the Creative Writing Program. He holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University and an EdD in English Education from Oklahoma State. Heller's collection of short stories, *The Man Who Drank a Thousand Beers*, has been called "a Hawaiian *Winesburg, Ohio*." His first novel, *The Automotive History of Lucky Kellerman*, received the Friends of American Writers Award and was a selection of Book-of-the-Month Club and QPB. His subsequent novel, *Father's Mechanical Universe*, has been called "a beautiful, elegiac book that races with 120 octane insight." Heller's individual short stories and essays have appeared widely in journals such as *Manoa*, *New Letters*, *Colorado Review*, and *Fourth Genre*, and have been reprinted in anthologies such as *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal*, and *Living Blue in the Red States*. He has been a resident of Yaddo and the recipient of an NEA Fellowship Grant and numerous other writing awards and distinctions. He helped found two literary journals, *Hawai'i Review* and *Mid-American Review*. He is currently finishing a novel called *Return of the Ghost Killer*. Heller has been an active member of AWP since 1980.

Campaign Statement

I attended my first AWP conference as an MFA student in 1980. The gathering was held in an aging but elegant hotel in San Antonio. At that point, the organization hadn't been professionalized: about three hundred rather scruffy-looking attendees in corduroy, tweed, and denim, with nary an MLA Trekkie in sight. My main reason for showing up was the chance to meet in the flesh a number of writers I'd previously encountered only on the page. I wasn't disappointed. The keynote speech was given by Richard Hugo, who made a prediction that has influenced my life as a writer and teacher of writing ever since. Hugo claimed that in the future, whatever our politics, as writers in the academy we were going to find ourselves functioning as literary conservatives, preservers of literature and literary traditions, even if our personal goal was to explode the canon, rip it open to include more writers of color, writers of different genders, and other groups underrepresented in its pages—or even to change the nature of literary conversation altogether. We would still find ourselves wanting to teach the writers and books that had formed us, Hugo claimed. We would struggle to make a place for them even as our individual tastes and perspectives evolved with the times. We would find this situation ironic, he said.

Nearly three decades later, I still feel the power of this irony. Even after postmodern theories have found their place in the creative writing classroom, and academic writers such as Katherine Haake, Francois Camoin, and the late Wendy Bishop have challenged the traditional workshop that was Hugo's stock in trade, his prediction still resonates. I especially feel it whenever I reflect on the chilling information found in "Reading at Risk," the report prepared by the National Endowment for the Arts. I won't repeat the findings here, as anyone reading this knows them all too well. The question I have is this: What can we writers who teach do to encourage our fellow citizens to read novels, poems, stories, essays, and memoirs, and discover the transformative power of literature?

I don't know the answer to this question, but I believe it is waiting to be discovered in all the forums where reading and writing are taught, from elementary through graduate school. It's clear to me that most Americans have never had the disturbing but invigorating experience many of us had when we first read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Stranger in the Village," or "Traveling Through the Dark." Why not? In my own case, I know it's not because I'm smarter or better educated than the folks I went to high school with in Yukon, Oklahoma. The difference is simply this: I fell in love with reading and most of them did not. I had a good teacher at the right time. I had a friend who handed me an interesting book. I had parents who encouraged me to read. I had opportunities for solitude that allowed me to discover the printed word can be more compelling than the moving image.

The MFA in Creative Writing Program at Antioch University Los Angeles, which I direct, is devoted not merely to the education of literary artists but to community service and the pursuit of social justice. We put the latter two parts of our mission into practice through the M.F.A. Field Study, which offers students the opportunity to put their abilities as writers to work in the service of their local communities. In the next year we plan to add a new concentration in writing for young people as an even more direct way to pursue our mission. Somewhere in most Americans' education, something important has been lost. Somewhere between the magic of actually reading the words of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* back to their mothers, and the potentially defining moment of thinking "hard for us all" in William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," something has gone missing: a connection with the transformative power of words, the thing Richard Hugo predicted those of us who teach would struggle to preserve. At Antioch I've had a variety of administrative experience beyond the M.F.A. Program, serving on our Budget Committee, Strategic Planning Committee, and many others. I'm interested in expanding AWP's relationship with public schools and community colleges, and the ways writing and literature are taught in those institutions. If elected to the Board of Directors, I promise to make myself useful in a variety of ways.