

EVENT TITLE: In Praise of Praise: Do Young Writers Need Encouragement Now More Than Ever?

Narrative Event Description:

Young writers entering the literary community are doing so during an extraordinary time. A global pandemic. The threat of a world war. Random acts of violence. Deeply entrenched political and social tribalism. The anxieties are too many to list. Is praise a way to keep students engaged in their work? How much encouragement is too much encouragement, and when does it become artificial? This panel will explore the concept of praise and how it can be a valuable tool in a time of great uncertainty.

EVENT CATEGORY: Pedagogy

Event Organizer & Moderator:

Luke Rolfes teaches creative writing at Northwest Missouri State University and co-edits *Laurel Review*. His books include the forthcoming *Sleep Lake* (novel), *Impossible Naked Life* (flash/short fiction), and *Flyover Country* (short fiction). He has mentored in the AWP Writer to Writer Program.

Event Participants:

Bronson Lemer (he/him) is the author of *The Last Deployment: How a Gay, Hammer-Swinging Twentysomething Survived A Year in Iraq*. His work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Southeast Review*, & elsewhere. He teaches at the University of Minnesota Rochester.

Rebekah Jerabek is a writing instructor at The University of Texas at El Paso, where she has been teaching for more than seven years. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a Bachelor's degree in English. Her creative work has been published in The Texas Review Press: *The Gordian Review*.

Teague von Bohlen is an Associate Professor of Fiction at the University of Colorado Denver, where he serves as Fiction Editor for the literary magazine *Copper Nickel*. He's a literary journalist for *Westword*, and his latest book is *Flatland*, a collection of flash fiction and photography.

John Gallaher is the author of two chapbooks and five books of poetry, most recently, the forthcoming *My Life in Brutalist Architecture* (2024), as well as co-editor of The Akron Series in Poetics, *The Laurel Review*, and *Time Is A Toy: The Selected Poems of Michael Benedikt*.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:

Welcome to “In Praise of Praise: Do Young Writers Need Encouragement Now More Than Ever?” A few reminders before we begin: • For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, (that’s me, Luke Rolfes), know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you. • Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers. • Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them. • Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products. • Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Let me give you some background on what led me to put together this panel. I teach creative writing and composition classes at a small school in rural Missouri, and we, like pretty much all learning institutions, migrated to online classes in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, my university decided to go back to face-to-face instruction in fall 2020, which was earlier than many schools nationwide. We implemented precautions such as mandatory masking, contact tracing, etc., and gave students an option to ZOOM into class if needed/wanted.

Needless to say, as many of you probably experienced, the semester devolved and attendance/participation dwindled with each progressive week. Many times, especially toward the end of the semester, I was teaching in an empty room, in a mask, to two or three blank boxes on ZOOM. Many of my students were, as a

whole, struggling with COVID-19 restrictions and this new style of learning. Many were having issues with mental health and lack of motivation. And, really, the only class that was having any traction as far as attendance and participation goes, was my fiction writing class. For the most part, the fiction class was about the same as it was in previous semesters.

In hindsight, I wondered why this class seemed less affected than the rest. Sure, students often like creative writing classes more than gen ed writing classes, but the difference seemed more significant.

One specific change I had implemented: In this class, given the landscape in which I was teaching, I had decided to mostly focus on praise rather than suggestions and questions about the students' work. In this class, I was using "praise-first instruction." Eighty to one hundred percent of the feedback I gave them was entirely positive.

I was surprised at how the students responded to praise-first teaching. Was this entirely anecdotal? Was this class an anomaly? Was this circumstantial to the strange world we found growing around us?

I began to wonder if praise-first teaching might be a more effective strategy in the current educational moment, and would it be an effective strategy moving forward. And that's what we hope to discuss with you today.

Let's move on to our panelists and their opening thoughts on this topic.

Bronson Lemer: I will discuss my use of praise and positive feedback in first-year composition and creative writing classrooms to encourage students to take risks, be creative, and explore ideas without feeling discouraged. I will also discuss my feedback policy from an "ungrading" perspective (inspired by ideas from anti-racism and anti-ableist pedagogies) where more attention and effort is put into the comments I provide students as a way to encourage thinking around their writing practice and motivate them to keep writing.

Teague von Bohlen: I am planning on talking about Creative Writing (Fiction) in regard to the battle between emotional reassurance and literary challenge. It's

always been a balancing act, but it's definitely become more so since the pandemic. Some bullet points:

- validation as an opening step to criticism
- measuring feedback from me in terms of rigor
- leading students in their feedback in terms of both challenge and creative compassion

Bekah Jerabek: I had my first-year composition students write about this topic for extra credit at the end of this past semester. I've spent some time sifting through those for valuable feedback from the student perspective that I will discuss. UTEP is a Minority Serving Institution with 84% of students being Hispanic and about half being the first in their family to attend college. I'll focus on praise in composition classrooms for 1st year, 1st gen students.

John Gallaher: I like the tactic of constructive praise as opposed to constructive criticism. I will give specific examples from my classroom experience in teaching poetry and multi-genre creative writing classes to undergraduate and graduate students.

Moderator Questions:

1. How have current students' needs changed since 2019?
2. How do we think young writers will respond to and progress from a praise-forward pedagogy?