

Writers bloom at Compose

BY NICHOLAS ALLISON

Connect. Collaborate. Create. The simple statement on fliers all over campus advertise the Compose Creative Writing Conference on Saturday, May 20. Compose is a convention for writers to gather, whether they write poetry, novels, comics, songs or perhaps something even stranger. All are welcome here.

The event started at 9:30 a.m., and went until 5 p.m. It was divided into five distinct sections. It started with a welcome address from Tim Schell, then over the course of the day one could attend several workshops, run by individuals like Kate Gray, a writer of poetry and novels, Diana Schutz, a major figure in the comic book industry; and songwriter Luz Elena Mendoza, along with a number of others.

“There is no such things as writer’s block.”

— Tim Schell

The welcome address was, as all other welcome addresses are, unique. Going in, I had expected a fairly formal affair, I knew a little about Schell: he was the co-founder of the Clackamas Literary Review, he used to work on campus as a teacher, and he had authored a number of books and short stories over the years. I had thought he would speak with all the weight of an aged and experienced maestro of the written word, and we would all listen as he dispensed his wisdom.

In some ways, I was right. He clearly understood the field we all hoped to enter better than I, and much of what he said was easy to connect to.

In particular, Schell said one thing that resonated with me. He said, “In your poems and stories, in what you write, you depict the human heart on the brink of crisis. Yet, the very fact you made the effort to write ... is optimistic.”

One thing Schell was not, throughout his speech, was formal. It was a structured speech, he had clearly rehearsed it well beforehand, but every few minutes the audience would be beside themselves with laughter, as he made one more crack at his colleagues, himself, or the industry as a whole.

He spoke of the work he knew he would be facing putting together the CLR, and

knew it would haunt him.

Schell said, “Until finally, in Morpheus’s realm, the nightmares would begin. Nightmares of deadlines, and not any deadlines. Rather, deadlines from the original meaning of the word ... a boundary around a military prison beyond which a prisoner could not venture without risking being shot by the guards. There we were, towing the line...”

As his speech was winding down, he took the time to answer a number of questions from the audience, ranging from advice about making it in the field of literature, to questions about Schell’s own writing. One simple piece of advice he gave was to write every day, whether a single sentence or a hundred pages. He answered them all with the quick wit and amusing antics his speech had displayed, and with a final answer and a smile, he dismissed us, and we made our way to the first workshop of the day.

I chose to attend the workshop Schell held, “Character is Greater or Equal to Plot.” It was, as I had expected after his opening speech, insightful, entertaining and all around amazing. He spoke of Writer’s Block, that terrifying beast for all artists of the written word.

Schell said, “There is no such things as writer’s block.”

Instead, Schell said, if you could produce one sentence, then you were making progress. If in three months, you had produced a single sentence every day,

you would find yourself with more than ninety sentences, which starts to add up.

Schell also encouraged people to read their work before going to bed, and let their unconscious mind sort it out.

Another bit of advice he offered was to remember that all characters have flaws. No character is purely good or purely evil, the thief might participate in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, and the first grade teacher might have a drinking problem.

Later on I spoke with the founders of Compose, from before it even bore that moniker. They were attending like any other, and had only started coming again two years ago, having believed that it had ended years ago, not quite willing to believe people had been so invested as to continue it. This pair, Kyleen and Greg Stein, had eight years ago been walking around the second floor of a Barnes & Noble, talking and talking for hours one Friday afternoon.

“When we founded it, it wasn’t Compose, it was just the Writer’s Club Conference,” said Kyleen. “He was president of the club at the time, I was just a member.”

For Greg, part of the reason they started the writer’s conference was for the club’s sake. “We had some people graduating, we were trying to get more people,” said Greg.

“Seventy-two hours of chaos, and we went up to Kate [Gray], and said ‘Kate,



photos by Ahmed Almarai

Max Wedding, CCC business systems analyst reads one of his pieces at the open reading.

we have an idea!” Kyleen said, and a few weeks of rallying the Writer’s Club to their cause, and Compose was born in its earliest form.

Compose was ultimately a wonderful experience. It cost \$20 to get in, but compared to the price of similar workshops I’ve attended, which can easily pass \$100, it was cheap. I plan to attend Compose next year, and I invite any who writes in any form, or who wishes to write, to join me.



Writers at Compose work on their fiction skills in one of the workshops on Saturday, May 20, in Roger Rook.