

75, and Counting

This is the sixth in a series of books celebrating the tradition of the Avery and Jule Hopwood Writing Awards for students at the University of Michigan; it is, however, the first of its kind. Each of the previous volumes collected the lectures delivered at the annual awards ceremony, where, under the general rubric of “Advice to the Young Writer,” an accomplished author talks about his or her trade. Often the Hopwood Awards have functioned as an imprimatur, a signal to the world beyond that the recipient is someone now to watch. The prize offers cachet as well as cash, and the former continues long after the latter is spent.

Avery Hopwood graduated from the University of Michigan in 1905. He became a successful Broadway playwright, by most accounts the “richest” of his era, and at his death endowed the prize that bears his name and that of his mother. This year the Hopwood Awards Program observes its seventy-fifth anniversary. The first awards were offered—and the inaugural lecture delivered—in the academic year 1931–32. No other program in the nation equals it; no other system of institutional reward has recognized so many with so much and for so long.

That may sound like hyperbole, but it is researched fact. In the world of higher learning, the Hopwood Awards reign supreme. As of this present moment, we have awarded more than twenty-three hundred separate young writers more than three thousand prizes; half of those writers, approximately—a percentage maintained in this volume—have therefore received more than one. In aggregate, the program has dispersed well over two million dollars, and though it may happen in the future that some other university decides to challenge or surpass our record of institutional generosity, that day has not yet come.

I served as editor for the last two volumes in the series, *Speaking of Writing* and *The Writing Life*, published by the University of Michigan Press in 1990 and 2000, respectively; I have served as the program’s director since 1987. Always before we have published the talks, and we will do so again. Yet as a way of recognizing the deeper purpose of the Hopwood Lecture Series, we decided to reproduce here the work of those to whom the speakers speak: young artists in the room. This

anthology, therefore, celebrates the achievement of Hopwood Award winners over the decades of the contest—a representative sampling of their poetry and prose.

My colleagues Andrea Beauchamp and Michael Barrett and I shared the unenviable task of dealing with an embarrassment of riches. We could well have published a series of books; the authors represented are at best the iceberg's tip. So we here acknowledge that our choice has been constrained by space; in a program with more than two thousand honored writers, exclusion is the rule. We have weighted the selection slightly in favor of the past, since many of our more recent winners have a long future ahead. Next year, the *Michigan Quarterly Review* will publish a special issue of the work of recent Hopwood winners, and that issue can and should be read as a supplement to this volume. To those authors not included here, we offer our apologies; to those who are, our thanks.

Some editorial decisions may bear some explaining. First, we chose not to represent the categories of drama, screenplay, and essay writing, since the book's focus would have then become irredeemably diffuse. For the same reason, we selected short poems and stories, not excerpts from novels (with the single, self-contained exception of the extract entitled "Nelson in Nighttown" by James Hynes). Many important playwrights, screenwriters, and journalists have won these contests; you will not find their work here.

Second, we decided not to reprint the Hopwood Award-winning entries themselves; these authors have traveled much writerly distance from their achievements while enrolled at the University of Michigan, and it seemed simply dutiful to reprint apprentice work. Early promise is everywhere attested by the receipt of a Hopwood Award, but we wished this book to document more than mere potential; it's the rare author indeed who hopes to be remembered by the pages of his or her youth. *The Hopwood Awards: 75 Years of Prized Writing* is not intended as a historical curiosity but as an engrossing read.

Third, we did ask the contributors to select their less-than-routinely anthologized poetry and prose. We wanted this volume—or else it would have been only a grab bag of much-printed work—to represent, where possible, personal preference; when we asked for permission and reprint rights, we urged those writers still alive to send us something that not everybody knew. So this collection is idiosyncratic and, to a degree, original: women and men who earned their first im-

portant public recognition through a Hopwood Award here recognize the work of which they are privately fond.

A writer who makes a career as poet does not always win in poetry, or a writer of fiction in short fiction; the adjectives *major* and *minor* represent not the level of achievement but the level of enrollment and can be roughly translated as “graduate” or “undergraduate” awards. Our arrangement is chronological, and we provide a listing of the prizes won. The book concludes with both a full listing of Hopwood Award winners down through the years and a complete list of the lecturers in the Hopwood Lecture Series.

The inaugural lecture of the series was given by Robert Morss Lovett in 1932. The writers referred to therein are all dead, and many long-forgotten—as has been, indeed, the speaker. But for three-quarters of a century established authors have talked to those who hope to emulate and perhaps surpass them, and there’s something timeless in the occasion itself.

It has to do with the instructed awareness of tradition, and one’s relation thereto. My model is that of the medieval guild, with its ordained sequential progression from apprentice to “master.” These last must teach the first. They do so from the page when they have quit the stage. Their voices speak with undiminished resonance to a private reading audience, as well as to the public one gathered each April to hear . . .

The previous lines comes from my Introduction to the omnibus volume, *Speaking of Writing*, and it feels worth restating. This tradition of passing *down*, of handing *on*, of urging *along* a younger artist is one of the ways we can honor our art, and does include repetition. So I want to repeat some paragraphs of what I wrote.

Among the writers mentioned in that inaugural lecture, by Robert Morss Lovett, is the author of the second, in 1933. And this man, to my glad surprise, was someone I had known. The sense of collegueship as “handing-on”—of membership in a community—became therefore immediate. What follows is a private account that may suggest in its public accounting what one writer owed to another and each of us to all.

Max Eastman was in his eighties when I was in my twenties. We met on Martha’s Vineyard and grew close. He welcomed me, whether in Gay Head, New York, or Barbados; he was tolerance

incarnate, with an amused abiding sense of how youth preens. I postured; I was working on a book (*Grasse*, 3/23/66) that was recondite in the extreme. I'd labor in an ecstasy of self-congratulation, producing perhaps a hundred words a day, intoning the sibilant syllables until they appeared to make sense. One such passage, I remember, contained a quotation from Villon; a description of Hopi burial rites; an anagram of the name of my fifth-grade teacher; an irrefutable refutation of Kant; glancing reference to Paracelsus; suggestive ditto to my agent's raven-haired assistant; paraphrase of Cymbeline's dirge; and an analysis of the orthographic and conceptual disjunction between Pope and Poe. I took my time; I let it extend to ten lines. That night I brought my morning's triumph to Max and permitted him to read. He did so in silence. He tried it aloud; so did I. When he said it made no sense and I explained the sense it made, he looked at me with generous exasperation. "Sure," he said. "That's interesting. Why don't you write it down?"

I remember staying with him on Martha's Vineyard one October. His wife, Yvette, was off to New York for a shopping trip, and she asked me to stay in their house—a favor to me, really, since my own hut was unheated. I was full of beans and bravado then, and would get to work by six—waking up and clacking at the keys in my upstairs bedroom. In the first pause, however, I could hear his steady hunt-and-peck in the study underneath; he'd been at work well before. So we'd share a cup of coffee and a comment on the news, then I'd fuss at my novel again. At nine o'clock I'd take a break—tear off my clothes and run down the hill to the pond. The morning would be glorious: that crystalline light, those sizeable skies, the pine trees somehow greener against the sere scrub oak. And always, out there from the still warm water, Max would lift his hand to me, his white mane on the wavelets like some snowy egret's, grinning.

Time passed. He died at eighty-six, in 1969. But it takes no effort to see this again, see it always as tradition's emblem: an old man waving from the water at the youth on the near shore. They are naked, both of them; the sun slants over Lobsterville. A few day sailors might be on the pond, or someone in a kayak, or musseling or digging clams. The sea-birds settle, incurious; the beach smells of sea-wrack and tide. There's a busy imitation of silence: the man in the water, bobbing, flutters heels and hands.

The young one runs to meet him and it's all a perfect clarity until he does a surface dive and, splashing, shuts his eyes.

Young writers are both brash and abashed; we will none of us displace our masters but all of us must try to, and the distance between aspiration and achievement narrows, with luck, over time. So, to read a collection of published work by those who began their careers with a Hopwood Award is to chart the distance traveled in the course of a career. This conjunction of the finished work with the trace of its old origin is, for me at least, inspiriting; it's why we study, after all, and teach and try to learn. *One Writer's Beginnings*, as Eudora Welty phrased it, necessarily entail a sense of continuity: whatever's worth preserving began with a first word.

The Hopwood contests are entered pseudonymously, and the national judges are strangers; they have neither taught nor previously read those students who enter their work. So the system of judgment is double-blind, as close to objective as such contests can be, and there's a special pleasure in the allocation of prizes and prize money. When the members of the Hopwood Committee sit to assess the verdict of the judges, there's the sense of a succession and distant laying on of hands: A chooses B, Y favors Z, and says of a career begun that it may plausibly enlarge. This volume demonstrates that.

The Hopwood Awards: 75 Years of Prized Writing represents, therefore, both creative potential realized and early promise delivered; it signals both what these artists have done and what others still may do. In and of themselves, these stories and poems are each and all rewarding; the whole is, however, more than the sum of the parts. And this is the comfort the editors took in our difficult task of selection; we chose examples of a lasting process and not a procedure now lost. The Hopwood Awards will continue when Max Eastman's young friend is as long gone as he, and the language of art will continue when no present practitioner writes. Carrion comfort, possibly, but real.

One Michigan alumnus and author has been most famously associated with the Hopwood Awards Program and the receipt of Hopwood Awards. The late great Arthur Miller was, all his life, a devoted proponent of the program; he delivered two of our lectures and never returned to Ann Arbor without supportive words. In his autobiography, *Timebends*, he re-created luminously the experience of winning a Hopwood—both as recognition of work done before and as a kind of

prior ratification for the work yet to come. The following passage is emblematic of what such encouragement means.

On the day my name was called out before the assembled contestants and their guests as a Hopwood winner, in the spring of 1936, I felt pleasure, of course, but also something close to embarrassment, praying that everybody would soon forget my poor play in favor of my next one, which would surely be better.

I immediately called my mother, who screamed and left the phone and rushed outside to arouse relatives and neighbors to the new day dawning while my new wealth trickled away into the phone company's vault. On Third Street I was now famous and no longer in danger of watching my life shrivel up in touch football games on the streets all day, and there is no fame more gratifying.

Here, unforgettably, is the paragraph in which the fledgling playwright learns the effect of his language and dreams of taking wing. This happened seventy years ago and happens every year.

Outside, Ann Arbor was empty, still in the spell of spring vacation. I wanted to walk in the night, but it was impossible to keep from trotting. My thighs were as hard and strong as iron bars. I ran uphill to the deserted center of town, across the Law Quadrangle and down North University, my head in the stars. . . . The magical force of making marks on a piece of paper and reaching into another human being, making him see what I had seen and feel my feelings—I had made a new shadow on the earth.

So wrote Arthur Miller. It is to his memory we dedicate this book.