

A Brief History of In Print

*upon the occasion of the 15th anniversary festival in 2020

by Jill Christman

The idea for the In Print Festival of First Books was born in the year before I came to Muncie in an even colder climate:

In Fall 2001, taking no time to thicken my blood after getting my MFA at the University of Alabama, I took a job as the Coordinator of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. One of my responsibilities was to run a visiting writer series supported by an endowment so rich I had to work *hard* to spend it down as I'd been instructed to do. I mention the money not to brag about the leftover trays of baklava and extravagant bouquets of birds of paradise that sustained me in a tiny bungalow I could barely afford during the dark months of my first and only Minnesota winter, but because you need to understand how I was able to work with a prestigious speaker's agency to book extraordinary—and big-name—authors. That year, our program hosted W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich (on September 12, 2001—but that's the stuff of another story entirely), Margaret Atwood, Vivian Gornick, Charles Baxter, and Yusef Komunyakaa, to name a handful, and as I stood nervously by, star-struck and enraptured, I noticed a pattern: the *students* weren't coming to the readings or the talks. What did they *want*? I mean, I had brought them Margaret Atwood. I had served them fancy cheeses. I had offered them the chance to ask Adrienne Rich about prosody and the purpose of art in a world on fire.

And still, most of them were choosing to stay home. Was it the weather? The writing? Something else?

So I asked them. And it turned out the students felt as if these events weren't designed for them. These late-career, famous authors felt far away and out of reach. Some students were intimidated, while others just weren't going to get that excited about a writer who'd gotten her start twenty years before they'd been born. As I talked with students, I began to understand the problem: it would take some serious hubris on the part of a student poet to look at W.S. Merwin and think, yes, I could *be* him. I get it. (Mostly, as I recall, Merwin and I discussed the execution of Topsy the elephant on Coney Island.)

So I cooked up an idea and proposed it to my boss (brilliant and funny Julie Schumacher whose fiction you should totally be reading). For considerably less than the cost of one of our single-author events, I would bring in three writers, all of whom had published their first books in the previous year, and a publishing professional. We would host a two-day event: on the first night, the three writers—one each from nonfiction, fiction, and poetry—would read from their newly minted books, and on the second night, the writers would be joined by an editor, agent, or publisher, and we would have a panel discussion about their books' birth stories. The

idea was to bring the experience of writing, submitting, publishing, and marketing that first book to the students. As I saw it, this was a triple-win: the invited authors got a (paid!) invitation to promote their new books, and even better, to have invested readers study their books in classes; the students in the program got to ask all the questions they wanted of writers who were close to an experience they so dearly wanted to share; and the program could put on a big event with excited, generous writers without blowing the budget. I called the first festival at the University of Minnesota—wait for it—First Books. And do you know what?

On the inaugural night, the room filled up with students who came to hear Marie Arana, Laird Hunt, Chuck Klosterman, and Cate Marvin read from their freshly minted books, and on the second night the students came back for the panel, full of questions and scribbling in their notebooks. I was thrilled to have cracked the code—and First Books continues at the University of Minnesota to this day. The next year, when I left Minnesota to take a job here at Ball State University, I left the U with the name because that seemed like the right thing to do, but carried the idea with me. Naming Muncie's version of the conference the In Print: A Festival of First Books (see what I did there?), I received a grant to begin a program that has, over the fifteen years it's been running, become an annual event and a big, fat, sparkling, multi-faceted jewel in the crown of the Creative Writing Program's Visiting Writer Series.

The Creative Writing Program in the Department of English hosted our very first In Print Festival of First Books in 2005 with writers Amy Benson, Christopher Coake, Cynie Corey, and Brad Land—along with then-Sarabande-Books-marketing-director and now-published-poet Nickole Brown. Since then, we've hosted over sixty writers through In Print, including Joy Castro, Victoria Chang, Ander Monson, Mitchell Douglas, Kao Kalia Yang, Caitlin Horrocks, Elena Passarello, Marcus Wicker, Celeste Ng, Carolina Ebeid, and Nick White—to name a few. If we do say so ourselves—and we do, pretty regularly—we know how to pick them.

Developing and running each year's In Print festival falls to the faculty member directing the Creative Writing Program and given that this directorship passes among our faculty, the festival has benefited tremendously from the innovations of each new coordinator. For example, in 2004, poetry professor Mark Neely developed a literary editing course to support the production of our national undergraduate literary magazine—*The Broken Plate*, the very magazine you're reading right now; in 2009, when Professor Neely was serving as Director of Creative Writing, he had the idea to bring *The Broken Plate* into partnership with In Print, featuring that year's visiting debut authors in a special section of the magazine and launching the new issue at the festival. *The Broken Plate* has debuted at In Print every year since.

Additionally, over the years, we've deepened the student-centered focus of the festival with more and more faculty teaching our visitors' work in writing workshops and literature courses, open class visits, shared meals, and author introductions delivered by students. Year after year, the students for whom the festival is designed

fill the room, enjoying and participating in nitty-gritty, intimate conversations about the writing life: sources of inspiration, the daily process of getting writing done, influential books, elements of craft, publishing tips, the inside scoop on working with agents, and on and on. As a student once told me: “In Print makes what we do in the English Department real.”

That made me happy. I can’t wait for this year’s In Print authors to roll into town. It’s such a good week to be a writer in Muncie.