

Writers Fees: Feeling Foolish, Talking Sense?

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Montaigbakhinian.com

September 2015

Being in such a mood (not the best?), today, on the spur of the moment I applied for a writer's residency, a month in an exotic country. Never heard of the place, but it sounded luscious. Lodging free, a little food stipend, and only a \$50 application fee. If the value of lodging + stipend equaled \$500, the fee was only 10% of the value.

But I had not been given or sought any information about how many apply for the residency, what my chances were. Supposing there were 1,000 applicants/year, and 10 were chosen. My chances might be 1 in 100, and the residency itself would be receiving \$50,000 in application fees in return for giving out lodging and stipends worth \$54,000. A nice profit!

This has been the business-like and likely naïve analysis. To get closer to what may be the truth, a little background information will need to be supplied. (And let me stress here that these paragraphs are *not* a response to my having been rejected for the residency, to which I only today applied. These paragraphs are, rather, my response to feeling a little foolish for having spent \$50.)

The background information. In many decades in the litero-academic world, I have learned (above all?) that it is a series of clubs. Some larger, some smaller; some prestigious, some not. Some book publishers, some journal publishers, some academic departments, some comfy residencies, etc. Once in a club, you can enjoy the perks of membership—tenure, front-page reviews, room-and-board among sociable potential blurb writers; whatever the perks may be. But to get into any club you have to have a personal connection to someone in the club. Could be a recommendation from a friend or a professor. In France it could well be a recommendation from an older person of the opposite sex (or of the same sex, in gay and lesbian circles). This well-placed (and sometimes generous) woman or man

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takes you on as a kind of project or decoration, and may hope that your future glory will add to hers or his.

In the US a recommendation of a writer of fiction, poetry or “creative non-fiction” will include a word like “wonderful”—e.g. “Sheila is a wonderful writer.” But this is, you might say, pro forma. The personal connection is key.

If you do not know someone in a given club, your application to it will either not be considered or not considered seriously. You can submit wonderful writing, but its wonderfulness will not be perceived. (Among other things, club members lack the autonomy and courage to make and stand by their own evaluations of others’ work or of other people. Outside the world of personal recommendations, or, say, of good reviews in the *New York Times*, club members are lost.)

I am not saying there are not exceptions to this rule. Rules come with exceptions, which can provide useful rationalizations for the rules as well as ways of overlooking them.

So then we come back to my application for the exotic residency. Last year I was accepted to one of these things, and when I got there I found the place was a real-estate-business/tax dodge. There were no artists-in-residence besides me. The other residents may have occasionally put paint on a canvas or bathroom ceiling, but, above all, they were locals in need of lodging and willing to pay rent for it. The proprietor was supporting (his or her) artistic career through this real-estate business; its profits untaxed because they went to an artistic foundation of which the proprietor was the proprietor.

But in that case, since it was not a club but a real-estate business, and I could afford the rent—no personal connections needed; no lengthy application process. There was a \$25 application fee, but from the get-go I was assured that my application was going to be accepted and for the dates I wanted. The only shock was to find myself the lone artist at the place; the only burden, a need to do some playing along with the charade. (And given that my writerly credentials and activities were helping hide the reality, even from the proprietor's consciousness, didn't I deserve a discount?)

I believe the \$50 exotic residency is also run by an artist-businessperson, and thus my application might avoid the not-belonging-to-this-particular-club problem. But business—many literary journals make less money selling copies of their work than they do from submission and application fees paid by non-club-belonging writers eager to get in.* The heart of this residency may be getting lots of fee-paying applicants. This does not mean that some people, me included, could win the lottery, actually end up in residence. But then again, . . . It is said of state-run lotteries: the chances are greater you'll get hit by lightning.

* Note, too, this curious dynamic: The fee-paying writers/non-club-members are eager for membership and publication in a given journal, but they have little time for or interest in reading the work the journal publishes. Similarly, academics are eager to win appointment to, get permanent jobs with academic departments; but, at least once they have succeeded, they rarely have time for or interest in reading the work of their colleagues, their fellow club members. We are ships of the same navy, passing in the night.

The tip off in this particular case would be the word “Free” right at the top of the residency announcement. Is this part of the magic trick (or con)? The fact that the lodging is free takes your mind off the fact that the application fee is not and comes without the least guarantees or assurances.

As noted at the top, my application is quite recent. I am not reporting sour-grapedly on some rejection. I am feeling foolish and trying to talk some sense. Above all, I would underscore the clubs analysis. This fact of literary life should be taught to, ingrained in, writers long before they apply for any MFA program. But of course most human beings intuitively, instinctively understand this aspect of life—our organization into families, tribes, classes, genders, sexual orientations, religious groups, interest groups and professional associations, etc. And, intermittently, we appreciate that there must be competition among and conflict between tribes; that a mind-and-soul-bending (and autonomy-and-courage-denying) loyalty is demanded; that those on the inside and playing along enjoy various perks.

A reminder that it's long past time I completed my essay on class conflict.

Amen.

Afterword: Academia & Generalists

Post-posting, I was reminded of a lesser-known practice of some clubs, of academic ones in particular. Of course all clubs are concerned about boundaries (between in and out) and rules (e.g. regarding membership and the comportment of members). Some clubs, however, have an additional concern: that club members *not* be members of certain other clubs. For example, the Republican Party is understandably loathe to have members who also belong to the Democratic Party. (Billionaire Michael Bloomberg here being an exception that proves the rule, and suggests how much it may cost to violate it.)

With academics there is a tendency to reject potential members or push out current members who have also shown an interest in, or capacity for, participating in non-academic clubs. Being specialists, and having gained a special social status (“experts”) on account of the interest in and capacity for specializing, academics are leery, even afraid, of fellow club members who begin branching out into other disciplines (or into interdisciplinarity). Of course a breadth of understanding may be gained in the process, but at the expense of calling into question the value of specialization. Worse is the specialist who, oxymoronically, wishes also to be a generalist—not claiming expertise and perhaps scarcely believing in it.

This last sentence leads me to close with a quote from **Jack Miles**’s superb 1999 essay, **Three Differences between an Academic and an Intellectual**. Therein Miles, who is best known for his books *GOD: A Biography* and *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, writes:

The generalist assumes, as the specialist too seldom does, that he is writing for readers no less intelligent than himself but trained in other areas. . . . A generalist is someone with a keener-than-average awareness of how much there is to be ignorant about. . . . If a specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less, a generalist is unapologetically someone who knows less and less about more and more. Both forms of knowledge are genuine and legitimate.