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### Interview with Shawn Shiflett, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

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## Shawn Shiflett

*It's the 11th of May, 1999, and I'm interviewing Shawn Shiflett.*

And now back to 1971, Columbia College—or so—well, actually, older, if you count the time my mother taught before I was even here, I probably go back to about 1967, '68.

**When did you first hear of Columbia College?**

Well, John Schultz started the—what used to be called the Writing/English Department, he hired the people out of the Story Workshop, and my mother was one of those people, so I guess that would have been in the mid-'60s, I guess. Probably '66, around there, maybe '67. I was just a kid. That was back when the school had 100 or 150 students, and every student counted, and there was not full-time people except for the chairs. That was when I started hearing about it. It was very small.

**What did you hear about it? I'm curious.**

What did I hear? Oh, it was a paycheck—in my family, it was a paycheck. My dad was running the Body Politic Theater, and there was no money there, and what little money we got from that, from my mother teaching workshops, was pretty much what we were living on at the time. I mean, she became—she was one of the first full-time people in the Writing/English Department, so it was stable, it was a stabilization, economically. Not that we were doing very well, but it was, you know, it was keeping us afloat at a time when Lincoln Park was changing rapidly. It was an exciting time.

**When was the first time that you set foot in a Columbia building, that you recall?**

I was in high school, and I was taking a workshop for college credit. I was a senior. It was over at the place over at Lake Shore Drive.

**540 Lake Shore?**

I think there was either—tops, 400 students total. I was really in over my head. I was even young for graduating for high school, so I probably had just turned 17, and I was sitting in this workshop.

**Had you just graduated?**

I hadn't graduated. I was actually a senior in high school, and I was getting college credit, somehow. Some loophole, some kind—it was nice. I had taken a couple of workshops at Metro High School, also, supplied by Story Workshop-approach teachers. So it wasn't my first Story Workshop-approach class, but it was the first one where I was sitting with a lot of people older than myself.

**Were there other—now, were you kind of unusual among people your age and that sort of thing? How?**

**In having this kind—doing this kind of—**

Well, the high school I was in at that point was a sort of a progressive, alternative high school, so Columbia College was really a very easy move (*laughs*) over at that point.

**Can I ask what high school?**

Metro High School. It was the first school without walls, you had classes all over the city.

**Yeah, yeah, OK. So you were at Metro full-time as a student, and then—**

Right, right. I literally was someone who did not, and I tell Bert Gall and people this, I was someone who really came into writing very late. I mean, most people tell you "I knew I was gonna be a writer when I was seven, in first grade, I gave my report and got such a great response." I didn't like to read that much, I didn't like to—I really was turned on to that late, in high school, and mostly, at Columbia College.

**Really?**

I can remember being such a poor reader, out loud, that John Schultz accused me of being stoned one night, sort of jokingly, but that's how bad I was. And it really was at Columbia that I completely got turned on to literature and, you know, the wider world, and really, I was a complete product of the Chicago Public Schools at that point. It started at Metro, Metro



was in some ways a very good place, but really, I think, as far as blossoming, it happened at Columbia, over a long period of time. It was exciting.

**So you took the one course, and then you finished—**

[Started] full-time, went full-time, still had it in my blood to be a baseball player, kinda went as a walk-on to University of Madison for a semester, with hair down, halfway down my back. They said, “I don’t think so, buddy,” and so I came back to Columbia and really settled in, learning how to write.

**Now, at that point, were you committed to the idea of writing as a career?**

Yeaahh... well, you know, people weren’t—I don’t think my generation was—you know, I run into this thing with my students now, where they’re just going “I’m 22, I’m graduating, things should be coming together for me, I should have my career,” and we weren’t like that, at all. I think it’s really changed. I was sort of... “Well, you know, maybe I’ll paint houses for a while while I’m writing on the side.” But Columbia was growing so fast that—I was fortunate enough to do very well. It was my first really positive—academically, you know, as academic as Columbia might have been (*laughs*), and we’re not gonna argue about that—but, you know, I went from being just sort of a so-so student to being the valedictorian of the class. So I got a job immediately, Columbia was growing so fast that they would hire their own people to be part-time, and that’s how, you know, I started on this slow track to a career. And so I was part-time for two or three years, and then adjunct for two or three, went and got my Master’s degree in

Oklahoma, came back, got a full-time job, it’s about, you know, five, seven years and then suddenly, I’m teaching.

**Huh. Well, tell me how academic it was when you were a student.**

Well, some things were—I think it’s much more rigorous now, I think, you know, I look at it terms of our own program here, it’s much more academic—academics are much more rigorous at this point. But that said, I don’t think that would have been right for that time period. You know, I’d have to say that, you know, just the 60 page minimum—I don’t even know if that was in effect yet, where we had to write 60 quality pages every semester—but I was certainly doing more than I would have done in other programs. I was writing more, I was suddenly doing things like taught myself how to type—I mean really type, not just henpeck. Things that were just—seem so simple now, but for someone who was just kinda coming out of that fog of adolescence, Columbia was perfect.

**Tell me about other students.**

**Was it perfect for them?**

I think—you know, it had to—it was perfect enough for enough people that it was growing like a weed, and it was all word of mouth. So you go from a school, when I’m a freshman, that’s two or three hundred people, to, by the time I’m a senior, it’s about 1,000 or 1,200. So you’re talking 20-30 percent growth a year, all of a sudden. And it kind of—I was there right when it really boomed. Probably my junior year, it started to boom. And you have to say, that was all word of mouth. It certainly wasn’t advertising. It was on the street. “This is a good place to go, this is a place you can get hands-on, you know, experience right

away.” I’d have to say there was always what I’d call a Columbia - even back then, so I feel like I’m just repeating history for the last, you know, 30 years, just about—this negative view of it, that, you know, all you have to do is wear a Nikon camera around your neck and you get a degree, and this positive view of it, which was that it could be very rigorous if you got into what you were doing. And to this day, people will still say this is a school for dummies. No, it’s not. No, this is a school where you can really, you know, if you know what you’re about and what you want to do, you can go a long way. So I had that positive experience in it. And I’ve never really understood the negative view that I hear sometimes. It kind of irritates me, because it was so good for me. I would say it was almost a lifesaving experience... I don’t think that’s any exaggeration. I had no idea where I was going at that point. I came out of, before Metro High School, terrible school experience in the middle of the King riots, you know, just, like, “What is this about?” So Columbia was a safe haven for a lot of people back then, where you could... if you fell outside of the traditional school setting, or you didn’t really thrive in that, suddenly it was an upside down world where you were doing very well. And actually, learning was fun.

**Were you conscious of the growth?**

Yeah! It was exciting. It was exciting. Suddenly there were just a lot of—I remember—suddenly—you knew you were, like, a hot spot when suddenly all the pretty women started to come to your school. (*Laughs*) You knew suddenly you were cool. That was one way of telling that you were,

like, it was known as, you know, a place that was exciting.

**Did you have a sense that it was—that it meant anything more than that the institution grew and that you, individually, and your fellow students, would profit by it? Did you have a sense that it had some larger meaning?**

Mmm... as much as you can have a sense of that, at that age. I don't think so. I think I was—I think, as a generation, we were less career driven and less aware of "Where is this supposed to take us?" and more just doing it for now, like, "What is it getting us now?" If it feels good, you know, and it's not hurting us, and if it's opening ourself to the world around us, then good. That's good in and of itself.

**Did it seem to have social significance?**

Mmm...

**You mentioned the King riots, and...**

For me, it just really felt like a place where I could relax a little bit, and completely delve into what it was I wanted to delve into. It wasn't as simple as pass/fail here, you got graded, you had to perform, you had to be there or you could flunk out... it was just a good place. It had a good feeling. I mean, I was sitting in on a class where John Schultz came in to do some teacher training again, and it just felt very comfortable again, to re-energize as a student, you know, it brought me back to, you know, how many years have I sat in a semi-circle while he's teaching me something? It was real good.

**Now, who were some of the people that you remember from that time, when you were a student?**

Oh, there was Bert Gall, who was just made... some kind of dean, I

don't remember what his title was, running around with hair longer than me, so to me he was, like, ultimately cool. And you know, he'd do things like—he'd have toilet paper rolls in his hand, going to supply toilet paper to johns, you know, and he was, like, into everything, and then finally, he got some helpers, so he finally, by the end there, he had a staff, where he could say, "You go put the toilet paper in the stalls." But that was just, you know, he was just—I didn't really know him, he was always nice to me in the hallway. And Lou had just been made chair of the department—he was even dean, he was dean for a while, so I've seen him, like, in all these different levels of that, what he's gone through. There was, you know, Mike Alexandroff, he was there. I remember the day we got accredited

**Do you?**

Yeah. We were in the halls and suddenly, they broke out the champagne and, you know—that was nice. That was back when you could do that with the students without getting arrested. And we all had champagne, there was a pool table up somewhere, we were all playing pool... There wasn't a lot of social life, though, and that started to happen as I was there a little bit. It was really a commuter school. Like, I remember just, like, walking around by myself a lot of times. You felt very isolated, socially. Until you got into class, because you were there about class. But that was changing. Some of that's just being a writer, I think there's more social life for some of my artist friends who I hung out with a lot back then. They had a whole big social life. Some of it's just that all writers are into them-

selves, don't know how to go on sometimes in life.

**You say you knew people who were artists. Did you know people who were other things in the school?**

Uh, pretty much the art—I mean, this is the way—I think writers tend to gravitate towards artists anyway, on a wider scale. Well, we would see—I mean, some of them we'd make fun of, there was, like, the radio broadcasters, who are really nice people, but back then, I used to say they were all four feet tall but they talk like this (in deep radio voice). And they were around. I don't really remember making really good friends. There was such a cramped space that you might end up right next to a radio room, so you're in there trying to concentrate on writing stories, and there would be this speaker, just blaring hard rock music. (*Laughs*) And I remember one time, John Schultz, he got so angry, because he'd gone to the control booth a couple of classrooms down and said, "You know, could you turn down the music?" And these guys were like "No, we just can't, we just can't do it." Finally, he went into the other room, and he just ripped the speaker (*laughs*) right off the wall. So after that, there was a little note under the speaker: "Music too loud? WAIT! Don't rip this off! There's a dial!" But, you know, it's just kind of funny when your chair goes in there and just, like, enacts violence in order to have his storytelling concentration not broken.

I was really—I think the generation of Betty, my mother, and John, they were sort of the ground, on the ground floor, they had a different relationship with Mike Alexandroff. By the time I taught, we were sort of—we had a different relationship with him. We were



definitely the next generation, treated like the next generation, for better or for worse, and there was a certain—it had gotten too big to be like that. And it was then—the politics of it were a little bit bigger, it wasn't just 10, 15 people deciding what they were going to do. And that's been expanding ever since. But I really feel like there's a definite difference, even though I was around in '71 as a kid, between the way I relate to Columbia College and, say, someone like Betty Shiflett does. Or some of those people, Lou Silverstein, some of the old-timers around that Bert's referred to them as the long marchers.

**Huh. What courses did you take? Did you take just writing courses?**

Mostly writing courses. I regret that a little bit. I would have loved to have taken some photo classes. I was one of these guys, you know, you put me in a direction and I just keep going, you know. I did a lot of ceramics, I like ceramics a lot and that stuff, you know. I like working with clay. I couldn't see making it my life, building pots, but I still—it was very meditating. But mostly writing courses, you know. I was one of those—you know, I really didn't want a lot of distraction from what I was doing. The general studies were pretty lightweight at that point, and I was able to really focus on my writing. I got involved in a novel, you know, which I was able to complete years later, I'm almost done with the second one at this point, so I think—if you had pointed to me and said, "This kid has the concentration to stick to something like that," I would have never, ever said that was within my capability. And no one else would have, either. If you put the flag on

ten kids, and said, "Who could maybe write a novel here?" I think I would have been tenth on the list. And you know, I have to attribute that to the fun that it was. It was really fun, and it wasn't—you know, when work becomes fun, you forget it's work, and you forget how long you've put into, you know, learning how to build a scene, or learning how to build a story, or learning, you know, how to interconnect the scenes in a novel. It's not—I look at it] as sort of an enjoyable puzzle—enjoyable's not the right word for it, 'cause sometimes it feels pretty miserable to do it—but you feel like you're really getting something out of it, and you're not aware, sometimes, of how much time has gone into it.

**Now, so, what year did you graduate?**  
'76.

**And you were the valedictorian?**  
Yeah, yes I was.

**Tell me about that.**

Oh, it was just— it was funny. I mean, I just—to this day, I think it's funny that I was, you know, up there. I mean, back then it was—you know, I see the valedictorians now, and they have this whole speech for it fixed, and I think I had, you know, like a few notes, and I was slouching all over the podium, going—a little bit above, you know, "You guys are cool." *(Laughs)* You know, it was so much... maybe it was just me, you know, but it was a lot more laid back, I think, than it is now. I think Columbia doesn't realize how much it's taken this—and, you know, I would argue, to some extent, for the better, how much more rigorous it is now, how much more serious it takes itself now. But I do feel something is being lost. And maybe that's just inevitable. It

might be just inevitable. But I do think that we are still insecure with our own identity, and we were back then. I can't tell you how many times somebody said, "Well, at a real school..." I mean, for me, this was pretty damn real. This is about as—because I went to Madison for a semester, I mean, it was just—I was so lost, and it was so set in its ways, and... to me, you couldn't get more real than this, as far as what it was doing for me, what education should do for you, expanding my knowledge of the world around me. And people think back then that wasn't happening, but it was happening hands over feet. That might be people who would go other places, and it wasn't right for them. But for me, it was right.

**Mm-hmm. How did you get to be picked as valedictorian?**  
I had the highest grade point average.

**Really? Wow.**

Well, you could argue, it was nothing but writing courses and ceramics, you know, so I think that I still had a ways to go in certain aspects of my education, and it probably needed a little bit broadening. But I felt positive about myself at that point, so I was able to do a lot of that on my own. Education wasn't something to be afraid of anymore. If I put my mind to it, I could do it. And that was a fundamental change, personality change, I think, in four years. Now maybe you do that anyways, you know, maybe that's just the point where you can kind of get it together a little bit; but for me, I'd have to directly relate it to Columbia.

**Now, to graduate were there all sorts of requirements? I know there are now.**  
No, there were very few. There

were some general studies, and I think they implemented that amid my time. I remember thinking, you know, we were all in line for registration—and registration just all took place where the classrooms took place, I mean, there was only like three floors or something in the whole place - so they said, “Remember your general studies,” and I thought “What’s that?” That’s how out of it we were. That’s how out of it. So, you know, I was a typical—had to get them all done when I was a senior. Now I don’t know if that was because they implemented them midstream—it was probably because I just didn’t want to hear it. *(Laughs)* So I ended up taking a lot of those kind of courses at the end, and certain things could transfer in that I took at Madison.

**Oh yeah.**

And graduation was just over at the Prudential Building. There’s a third level auditorium there, it’s very small.

**How many people were there in that class?**

Oh, if there was more than 50 or 150 I’d be very surprised. By the time I was a—you know, when the school was about 1200, probably 600 of them were freshmen, or 500 of them, you know. Each year was so much bigger than the year before it that we were—we were very small. We probably took up the first five rows, you know.

**Wow.**

So when I’m talking to them on a personal level in the valedictory speech, it’s a very different feeling than, you know, you go to UIC Pavilion now, the place is packed, and it almost demands more from you. It’s a whole different, wider audience.

**Hmm. Tell me, what other teachers did you study with here?**

Ah, let’s see... Harry Bouras was here, you know, John Schultz was here... an incredible ceramics class was farmed out, for a while, to a place called The Clay People, which no longer exists. But he was just incredible, what he could teach you about clay. Maybe that sounds silly to some people, but he was someone who could really say, “Here’s the way people do it, this is why they do it, but this is what I found,” which completely contradicts why they do it, you know. He sort of approached it with an engineer’s mind. I can’t remember his name, he’s gone out of business, but he was phenomenal, if that’s what you wanted to do. Later—

**That was in another location?**

Yeah, yeah, because—later, as we got bigger, you know, they started to house the things here, and get faculty here. Some things were lost when they did that, unless you really had someone who was an expert here. Going out—which was Metro’s philosophy, you know, going out to where it’s done and doing it, sometimes like that you get some incredible instruction - so it was called The Clay People, which was a takeoff on the old Flash Gordon clay people, actually, aliens. Who else? They’re starting to get lost in the amnesia in my mind, here.

**Did you take literature courses?**

There weren’t a lot of those. I took a lot of those in grad school—and actually, that was a big—we read nothing but literature, we did a lot of our reading in our writing courses, we’d read about five books. So they were sort of mixed, and you talked about literature a lot. It was more process-oriented discussion of, you know, what’s been happening on the page than it was, say, liter-

ary history or that sort of thing. So that was—I had some deficiencies in there that I had to pick up later, through reading. And I think that now, you get a much better education. It’s much more rigorous—it’s not better, it’s much more rigorous and much more in tune with this generation of America. There’s not a lot of time, usually, to jump around here.

**Huh.**

I would say now, you’re getting a much more broad education than—definitely more rigorous, broad, all-encompassing, with our critical reading and writing classes, tons of specialty writing classes, still have the Workshop. The Story Workshop approach itself is so much more developed, and a lot of that was happening while I was an instructor, so I just went from learning about how to write to learning about how to teach, which are two completely separate skills, which ended up giving me a living.

**Tell me about the development of Story Workshop, and I’m gonna come back to your career.**

Well, see, I’ve gone through about three generations. There was a—I think that it was—it was never something that John looked at as a finished thing. So he was continually developing it, continually developing exercises, and I, you know, sometimes, people just didn’t want to keep developing. So it was—I’d see revolutions happen and go and come, but his... he always knew that he had to keep developing this thing, that it couldn’t just stay inert, it had to—and so slowly, you know, all the basic forms that we use, the prose forms, a lot of the individual assignments, became more and more developed and higher and

demanding a higher and higher degree of training to keep up with them, keep up with what was happening. Hopefully, that's still happening. So—but I was there and it was just leaps and bounds and he was, you know, developing material to finish *The Story Workshop Writer*. We just used to have all these little notes and memos and little handouts he would give us and now, you know, it was a textbook, and all the teacher and students could go to the examples he was pointing to. But that in itself was a huge difference from what we did.

**So when you graduated, what did you do then?**

I painted for about six months, and then they needed teachers, because Columbia was growing so fast.

**You were house painting?**

I was house painting. And I also wonder what would have happened to my life if I'd have gone that route. I'd probably have more published now—who knows? But I just fell into it. They said they needed a teacher, and of course, the enrollment was so big they gave me two classes instead of one. I was 21 years old, I was much too young to be teaching college. I just shudder at some of the mistakes (laugh) I made, but I'm sure it helped in the long run. I wasn't much older than the students out there, living in fear that they'd find that out any second. They probably did, and just didn't tell me. So I lived on that money, part-time money, \$4,000. I had an apartment for \$138, which was, ooh, a lot of money, and I had to pay half. I pretty much was out of the house, I think back—you see kids nowadays, like, still in the house in their thirties, and with us, we were like "Get out, get out, get out." I was on my own, pretty

much, living on \$4,000, saving \$1,000 of it, so it was—you know, you can't do that now, even with inflation. So it was—then it went up to three classes, and then they turned around one day and said, "We're all teaching a full-time load," sort of like what part-time teachers are—some of the same gripes. We were teaching three classes and, you know, we started a few revolutions and suddenly we have medical insurance. And once you have medical insurance, well, maybe you should be thinking about, you know, just call everyone adjunct instead of part-time, you know. It's the growing pains that were—looking back, we were all [relative] about this and that, but the growing pains of the school was having trouble keeping up with its size. And looking back, they were pretty much—I would say Mike Alexandroff was pretty concerned with people's welfare. In fact, at one point, I wrote him a card. I said, "Thank you for feeding three generations of Shifletts." Because that's the bottom line. Columbia College kept my family afloat, it certainly kept me afloat, and it's now putting food in my daughter's mouth. And it's—I'd have to say—I would have been painting houses, I don't know what I would have been doing. I probably would have gone about a working class life of some sort. Who knows what I would have done, though.

**So you became an adjunct after—at what point was that?**

I think I was part-time for either two or three years, and then eight of us were made into adjuncts.

**Oh, my.**

Yeah, it was—major moves were happening around the school. So then your salary went up to \$8,000. Ooh! Which seemed like a lot of money (*laughs*) back then!

You know, it was—it kept you afloat. And then, of course, we none of us had Master's degrees, so we all went off, got Master's degrees, Columbia continued to grow, came back, full-time positions became available, I was hired with about four of the people who were at my level at that point. Randy Albers was hired, I was hired, a couple other people. Some people aren't at the school anymore. And... different things. Learned how to run the tutoring program, to teach more advanced classes. Before you know it, you've been doing it for a while.

**Tell me when you went off to get your Master's.**

That was a good experience. I have to say, I went to a traditional—Central State University in Oklahoma offered me a full scholarship. But I learned how to write. I have to say that I was treading water there, just, you know, waiting to get out and get the piece of paper. Though literature classes were very important for me.

**What year?**

I think that was '82, '83. I probably had been teaching about four or five years. So it was a good break. Wednesday night came around, when you were usually in the Advanced Workshop, and I suddenly had this feeling I was supposed to be someplace. And I really, for like, you know, eight years, I had been as a student and teacher sitting in that class, somewhere on Wednesday night every week. And I suddenly realized that's what it was. So just to break that pattern was good. But they did not really teach you how to write. You got there, everyone else teaches [the Iowa method], where someone reads your stuff, rips it up and takes notes, you go home. Where Columbia, the Story Workshop



approach, can actually draw a story out of somebody. That's pretty amazing.

**I'm just curious, was it sort of a shock to be in a place with a totally different kind of method?**  
A little bit, not really. It was much less rigorous, in some ways. In other ways, you know, I had to learn how to write research papers, that kinda thing, which back then—now, you would get tons of that at Columbia, but back then, there really wasn't a lot of that. There was some of it, but not a lot. And so you'd have to be able to, you know, (snaps his fingers) whip it out pretty quick. Um, I was never a big one on academe. To this day, you know. I have to use some of the Story Workshop approach things to get into—and some of them I've had to unlearn, you know, some of it I had to unlearn. My writing took a dive for a few years. I had to get back to my voice.

**Did you get reactions from other people?**

Oh yeah, I got all kinds of various—

**About your Columbia methods and experiences and stuff?**

Um... they don't really ask a lot. People cling to their training. They don't really ask about what we do a lot. They're not really—they don't really have—I've noticed this, it's sort of a fault, I think, in the writing scene. It's a one-party system, and they're not really interested in a different approach, that I can see. They don't even assume that there is a different way to teach writing. Why ask? Everybody does it the same way, so... I don't really feel like an evangelist proselytizing the new method. I see people like that,

and I see students react. It's almost like a religion to them. I try to guard students against that, because eventually, they realize it's not. It's really, you know, just about a way to get to story. Some people like it, most people do, some don't.

**So you came back in '83 or '84 here, and started working full-time...**

Full-time, running the tutoring program—

**OK, tell me about the tutoring program. Was that old or new at that point?**

It was—it had been around. I had done it part-time, adjunct, but now I was sort of coordinating the program. It was a hard time at Columbia. It was really—the tutoring program, and maybe the English Department people will say the same thing, I'm not sure - was really on the firing line of the whole Columbia College mission, because there were people who were saying "You know, what these kids need are more grammar. Grammar, grammar, grammar." And if you're into the field, unless you wanna jump on a political bandwagon, which you can get a lot of hay out of, you know that there's not a single study—not a single study in this whole century—that says grammar does any good, the sake of grammar on its own does anybody any good, you have to do it in combinations with other things, and it really, you know, it comes after the cart, not before. And so, for people who aren't in the field, they're just on this mantra: "Get back to basics, get back to basics, come on, that's how I learned" And it really isn't how they learned. They learned by reading a lot. So you have to deal with that whole misconception, and you've gotta realize that you're gonna be a political football. There's always going

to be a political football. So that whole "Remediation/non-remediation/what is remediation?", I feel like I'm just reliving history, all the time, all the time, and the answers are never simple, and people are always looking for a simple pill to give a kid who comes out of the Chicago Public Schools, or wherever, and they're gonna be fixed in a semester. The irony is, is that I was one of those kids. And really, it was a life-changing project, and I had to continually - still am - evolving and learning different audiences and different forms of writing that, when left alone, are just left to what I was good at, and trying to get what I was good at, my springs just to kind of flood out into where my weaknesses were. That is what worked. It wasn't someone telling me everything I did wrong. God only knows, there was plenty I was doing wrong, that they could have said, "This is what we're gonna focus on." So I'm sort of an example of not doing it back to basics, you know?

**Right.**

Or what people mean by "back to basics," because I think what we did back then was really back to basics: read a lot, write a lot, do it a lot, think about it a lot, that to me is back to basics. That's how our grandparents learned

**Were you able to, sort of, implement any tutoring, specifically?**

We did, but you always were—you had people thinking "Oh, this is just writing stories." But really, we were doing very rigorous things, research papers and that sort of thing. I would think, to some extent, that's always going to be the case at Columbia. To me, that's good remediation: tutoring one-on-one, with a teacher, whereas reme-



diation classes really is—it's insulting, for one thing. You're in a roomful of people who, for whatever reason - many different reasons - can't get up to the standard they need to be at, and they're just feeding off of each other, there's no example for them there except the teacher. A lot of times, the positive example has to come from the better student. So it's bad news. I mean, I see all this remediation that's happening at Columbia, it's bound to fail. And all you can do right now is be silent and wait. All you can do is be silent and wait. It's just—there's nothing that says it's ever succeeded to a point that justifies the philosophy. So that part of Columbia is very troubling. But believe me, I'm a lone voice.

*(Laughs)* So that is Columbia's need to get to a "real school."

**Now, that raises another issue, which is—**

Oh, I wanted to just say this: There's another fantasy that back then people were more motivated, or older, or more together academically. That is such bullshit. We were so un-together. We were so spacey. We were so up in the air. We were so not driven by career. It's really—that's a fantasy. That's a fantasy. Kids now are much more in those areas, much more aware of career, much more driven. And this idea that it worked back then because we somehow better prepared is just complete bullshit.

**Hmm. Yeah, I wanna ask you—let me ask you about, I wanna ask you about changes in students over time, bet let me just ask you about the open enrollment part of the mission. Columbia's been an open enrollment institution since—for a long time.**  
Mm-hmm.

**Has the meaning of that changed?**

Oh, I think there's a real... the more we make this change to our fantasy of what a real school is, um, the more you hire Ph.D.s—although some Ph.D.s are great, Lou's one of them. But the more that they want, you know, the more your standards of what they think is a more elitist school. I think that's behind it. No one says that, but I get the feeling that that's the move. To us, in the Fiction Writing Department, open admissions is a very viable way of going. And most schools - not all, but most schools - are basically open admissions, they just don't say it as unequivocally as we do. UIC, OK, they'll turn you down, but we have this special program over here, and you can get in this way and we'll counsel you and, you know, keep track of you a little bit more. But you can get in. So I would say the open admissions classroom, the diverse classroom, is, for a writing program, is the way to go. It's much more vigorous, it's much more exciting. But you have to come up with pedagogies that work for that, and so many people don't have the pedagogy. They just don't have it. They don't know how to relate to this kind of diverse classroom, at all. So that's the problem, not that the kids are necessarily less driven, less prepared. I think it's that they really don't want it, on some level. Although no one will say that, but that's the feel I have. And it's also Columbia's schizophrenic personality, just continuing now on a bigger level. So we're very strong for open admissions, and I think that we're on the verge of losing that. Now, you have some problems, like the Film Department, and they just can't keep up with their growth. So that's a very real problem. They don't have enough equipment, so, you know—I have to listen to that,

but that's different than capping enrollment but still trying to keep requirements for who does get in even, I don't know if that's some kind of lottery system or something, but that, to me, is still over and over. So I understand that aspect of it, that we, you know, that we just can't keep up. And we've reached this critical mass where simply growing doesn't provide the bucks to expand. At a certain point, it just gets more expensive. You can't just keep ahead of it with enrollment. We definitely need to change and develop and move into this next stage. But open admissions, this entire department feels very strongly—and, you know, we do it, we win national awards every year, we have people publishing, and we're taking, you know, people off the, you know, street, and I used to think that we attracted more educated kids, their skills level, but actually, our surveys show that we attract a lot that have low skills.

**Really?**

We sort of attract a lot of low and a lot of high, and not as much in the middle, according to some of our computer printout surveys. And if they come here not to become the great American writer, but because they've heard, word of mouth, the way it used to develop, back when I first was a student, that this is a good place to learn writing skills. This is a place where you'll be treated with respect. So we're going, and we're able to, you know, reach some of these kids, and it's through open admissions. So I would hope that Columbia does not lose sight of that. I think there's a lot of people who think that it's just a mill, and it—for students, you know, to come here and get their degree and they don't really

learn anything. That's ridiculous. There's something going wrong in the classroom. That's what should be addressed. You never hear people addressing that.

**Have students changed?**  
Yeah.

**Since you were a student?**  
Yeah, I think generationally—I think we touched on this, and we were talking about this in a training meeting, is that they much more now—we were... John Schultz was talking about this, I remember, and it's the absolute truth. We were much more—it was almost uncool to say, "Why are we doing this? What's the purpose of this exercise?" We would just go—because that would almost ruin the abstract spirituality (*laughs*) of it, you know. But now, you go and you do an abstract word exercise—"Well, what's this got to do with my novel?" Right away, they've gotta know. And so your first response is "Man, will you just lighten up, you know, just like enjoy it for enjoyment's sake?" But you can't do that with students now. They really—they've had a kind of fundamental change in the society, and we have to explain what it is we're doing, how it relates to what they're doing, all the time. They have such pressure on them now. On themselves. And it relates, I had this student last night, going on 22, I've said this already, "I don't have a job yet." I'm thinking, 22! You're just a kid! And she's already worried about, you know, where her first career is coming from, and what her job is. I mean, she hasn't even graduated yet. And we were just sort of like "What will be will be." At least, I was. I saw this fundamental change in the generation right after us. I think it had to

do with the whole... that generation, looking at the drug culture—not that the drug culture didn't continue, but there was a certain time where they said, "Enough of that. We wanna get our degrees, boom boom boom boom, and go on and make our money, and be successful, and it's not about spiritual development, it's not about that, it's about career." And that's much more on their mind now. It's painful, almost, to watch.

**Well, yeah. I'm used to people saying, you know, "What's history gonna do for my career?" But I'm shocked to hear, you know, people that wanna be writers, and are writers, asking why they should do a word exercise.**

Well, the reality is that only two percent of writers, at the most - probably less now - Harry Petrakis used to say that 30 years ago, 20 years ago, it's probably less - so it's, you know, it's a legitimate thing. We try not to say, you know, we say up front "You're not gonna make your living writing, but, you know, you'll do very fine out there with writing skills," and usually our graduates do extremely well out in the job world, in advertising, our they go into—anything that takes writing. They turn into lawyers, they do all kinds of things, and they say, "Boy, writing briefs was such a snap after the Fiction Writing Department at Columbia College." So they're really prepared. But they—you have to let them know that, because it's not a direct—it's not like you're a chemical engineer getting off the stage going to be a chemical engineer, you have to sort of make the connection: What is it you learned here, how can it be applied to the business world? So there is some, you know, understandable apprehension that happens. But they

really are [impressionable]—much more so than our generation. It's almost like they're doing much more of what everyone says they're not doing. If they were any more worried about their careers, I think they'd all die of heart attacks when they were 23.

**Has your vision of education changed over the years?**

Uh, I think it's expanded, I think it's had to change with the time and had to change with that generational shift in viewpoint, and I've had to—I think I'm just now reaching an age now at 44 where I have sort of enough distance so I can both enjoy watching them, remember what some of these things were like to go through, and at the same time worry about them. I worry about them, care about them on a different level than—really a completely generational gap between us, and enjoy—have observation about it, enjoy it, worry about them, you know, whatever—that's changed. I think in the last two or three years. So I don't know if that's an education shift as much as just a maturation process that—I mean, at this point, because I started way too young, I have about 22 or 23 years of experience at a relatively, you know, early midlife level. So I can't... I have to say, I definitely feel like I'm going to a new stage, you know, an understanding of what I do, but I don't quite have my finger on that, but I'm enjoying it. I'm still enjoying it.

**What are some of the biggest challenges that the College has faced in the time that you—**

Growth. Growth. It's always been growth. And it's always been trying to stay on the point of the mission, which is constantly under attack.

And it always has been, there's nothing—the arguments that I'm hearing now were the arguments that I heard 22 years ago.

**Really?**

Yes. They haven't changed a bit. They're just bigger and at moments of extreme dark moods, I say that the forces are darkness are winning (*laughs*), so hopefully they're not. But I think that the open admissions has always been under attack here, it is nothing new.

**Really?**

And sometimes it's from the same people who were attacking it 20 years ago, claiming that now things have changed. They're just reinventing themselves and reinventing the argument.

**Huh. Is bureaucracy a problem?**

Yeah, but I think that the teachers are much—yeah. There's been a fundamental change in the last three years. There's too many committees, there's too much committee work, there's too much bureaucracy, there's too many reports that have to be done, there's assessment now, I have to assess everything—everything, I have to assess it, I just can't say, "This was good." And assessment takes time. And everything begins to take time away from what's happening in the classroom. So some of that is me moving up in the ranks and taking all the responsibilities that, say, other people had to do before. But a lot of it is bureaucracy that [is] both pressure that the school is responding to, that they can't respond to, but it's also within the school too. You know, I think that when you have committees, they have to find work to justify themselves, and there's a lot—I think for a while, there was even a committee to oversee committees. It's getting a little Kafka-esque at this

point, and we need to backtrack, re-prioritize, keep teaching at the forefront, and do something more than just give that lip service. So, yeah, I'm up to my neck in just paperwork. Columbia was known as a place where you could cut through the red tape, and it's almost is in love with red tape now. Much more so, I think, than my fellow colleagues at other schools. I think we've gotten to where we're actually at the other end now. We've swung so far with committee work and assessing and how thorough assessment has to be, I mean, we're just hopping at any government agency instead of saying "You know, we might want to put an argument forward to say, 'This isn't quite right here. This is what's important, and this is why we're an exception.'" Having faith in what our mission is and putting it out there as an argument. And probably people will respect it if we were to do that instead of to really underneath it all think we really don't do what we say we do. That's when the schizophrenia of the school really harms it. And the later you came—the later you are from the long—what do you call it, the long marchers, the less it is you're inclined to really realize the validity of what it is we're about.

**How much of this assessment and the other stuff is a response to the accreditation process?**

Well, accreditation is separate, I think it's a response to government. At some point, I think, Bennett, he said, "I'll just do away with the Education Department." Which, I don't know, part of me thinks that might not have been bad. But they just went "Uuuhh!" and started to say, "We need this, we need that, we need an assessment," and sending out these ripple effects to the entire country. Some people, I think, depending on your prestige

as a school, ignore it more than others, and Columbia's pretty... you know, they're pretty pro-active when they hear they have to do something, they jump on it right away. So it's a lot of different forces. It's a lot of different forces. Both within the school and outside the school. But something's gotta give. People have to be able to continue to develop in their fields, whether it's writing or photo or whatever, and that takes some time.

**Where do you see the school headed in the future?**

It's hard to say. I think it's got to... it's hard to say. I think the last three years have been very difficult, on faculty in particular, and we're going to have to have a retrenchment of re-prioritizing teaching and self-development in our fields. I think that, you know, you can't keep teaching and do it in a vacuum. You have to continue to write, you have to continue to develop, you have to have, you know, feel like you're not asking your student to do anything you haven't done. And that takes time. And administratively, they have to understand that that takes time. Summer is not play time, summer is a time to rejuvenate. But you can't just wait for summer, you have to be able to do some of that along the way. So I think we're gonna have to keep up with growth, we're gonna have to deal with that. We need more full-time people, the part-time people are over-worked... there really isn't a divide, there shouldn't be that divide, but we need to bring some of these people along. I think the school is dealing with that as best they can, but they're hitting a ceiling now where, you know, it's gonna be hard. We've lost enrollment. For the first time in 23 years we've gone down. Bert Gall called



it a million dollars, poof, gone. Is that a result of all these new—you know, kids saying “I don’t want all this remediation.” Is that a result of so-called higher academic standards? It might be. It’s a more fragile boat here than people realize it is. Jobs can be lost very quickly by making the wrong turn. There was a competition, a competitor, called Central Y for years, back in the ‘70s. They made a couple wrong turns and poof, they were gone. We bought their library, we have their books, no one remembers them anymore. So it can happen. It can happen.

**It’s a big institution, it’d be hard to think—**

Well, I think that if you really started to take a hack job at open admissions, you’re gonna find some very... some trends—people want to have hands-on experience, that’s why they come to Columbia. And the more you put requirements on—and I’m not saying, you know, I don’t wanna go back to the old days, where, like, I basically was going “What’s a general study?” I mean, that’s ridiculous. But there is a middle ground here, and we’ve sort of—like everything else, swung the pendulum too—I think farther than people realize. We need to swing back a little bit.

**I’m trying to think if there are—I haven’t asked you very much about the late ‘80s or the ‘90s’ and your career here. Tell me about it a little bit.**

Gee, I don’t know. It’s a blur, it’s just sort of like I woke up one day and I was 44. You know, I’m struggling to still, you know, pop the big one with a novel, and I’m getting closer, and if I can just find the time to do the work, which is difficult around here, I’ll be all right. So it’s really been... it’s

almost like a blur. It’s really almost a blur. I remember students, memories, and maybe some of this is just writer, like it was yesterday. You know, someone will be talking about something that happens, and I’ll go, “When was that?” “Oh, 30 years ago.” Get a life. *(Laughs)* Some of it, the ‘80s and ‘90s, has just been phenomenal growth here, it’s a completely different institution. You know, just the other day I was thinking “Man, we’re doing the things that, you know, used to be—there’s no higher place to go, at this point.” You pretty much know the whole functioning of what happens around here.

**So you are now the—what’s your title?**

I was Acting Chair, now I’m the Assistant Chair, but I’m really the coordinator of faculty involvement, which is in charge of training teachers on the freshman level courses, core writing courses.

**So you probably deal with part-timers a lot?**

A lot.

**Yeah. Tell me—**  
My major job.

**Tell me about that.**

Well, we’ve always had a very vigorous in-service training, and I think that’s been our success, that we don’t just let people out there, and they do whatever they want to do, you know. We train, we talk to them about what’s happening in their classes, we try to continually—if a teacher stops developing, they don’t stand still, they go back. They never stand still. They’re either going forward or they’re going back. So we observe them, you know, we have conferences with them, we have training sessions with them, we listen to their problems, we talk about

different ways they can solve them. You know, we’re a community, basically, and I think that that is appreciated. I worry about the—I think the union was—I would have been right there with them—I worry about that this will set up an adversarial thing that we haven’t had in our particular department, though I think they’re completely underpaid and the school, you know, needs to do more for them. I don’t think anyone in their right mind would say anything different. But I’m hoping that the new relationship doesn’t... you know, like, I’ve never had to fire anyone. Never. And I can say things to them very directly, what needs to be done, and if there’s any hope at all, then I let them go ahead and try again, and usually I can get them to the point where they decide whether is this for them or not for them. Now, you know, I’m worried that I’ll have to, like, keep everything in writing, and, you know, be much more rough and I can’t really—we have this thing between us right now, the legal implications and everything else. So it’s the kind of thing that if you were concerned about part-time faculty, your hands feel a little bit tied. If you were a jerk, and you were high-handed, which happens some places in Columbia College, it’s a good thing, because you can’t do that anymore. To me, you try and avoid those things as long as you can and obviously, part-timers felt that they could no longer avoid them. So we’re moving into another new skin.

**No, you’re right, there’s a danger to something [very klutzy going on here]. So have you been doing this—**

I haven’t had any contact with the union, this is just my opinion. I’ve



talked to part-timers about it, or I don't talk to them about it, until everything is finalized. But many of them I consider my friends, so maybe that's management's fantasy, at this point, but...

**It's true. It's true. So you just took over this job of running—**When John Schultz, I think it became clear that it was too much of a job for the chair just to be in charge of training teachers, though Randy is active in it. [And we needed] someone who really—where we really were actively aware of what was happening in our whole department. So I moved into that position when John Schultz retired. They created it.

**So when you were teaching, when you first started teaching here, though, you didn't go through anything like that.**

Well, no, no, John did a lot of teacher training. It was more informal, and sometimes—and in some ways it was more rigorous. I mean, we'd sit there for four or five-hour training sessions, and we were really into it. Now, there's been less time for that, but we still do as much as we possibly can. God, how many were there then? Five, ten total part-time people in the department? You could observe everyone twice, give them critiques. Now I have to say, "OK, these 15 had it last semester. I'm gonna go to these 15 this semester. This person really needs another one, though, I better repeat—" you know, it's a whole different ballgame now. And we still bring John in to do trainings, so he's still actively—he's professor emeritus. So we still use their expertise as much as we can. It's helped my training immensely, because you get into a rut real fast. To have to

train other teachers, I have to go back into training myself. I sat in on John's class practice teaching, and that was just an eye-opener, [in terms of] the things I had gotten into a rut about, and really connecting my teaching skill now with what I'm doing with theory in the classroom. More and more, I just feel like the Story Workshop approach is just an extension of my own expertise as a writer, and it takes a long time to get to that, where it's just not something you're imposing on what you're doing in class, rather than combining it with your skill as a writer and seeing what is the application of the theory here, and why are you doing it, and how can you just put it in your own words. How can you make it clear to them? I think that a lot of teachers, when they learn an approach, they get too rigid. A lot of what I'm doing is saying "You've gotta make it your own. You can't just be imposing this." You will get a certain result that way, it works fair—I'm amazed at how far it can work, with this particular approach—but you're gonna hit a wall. You've gotta merge it with your expertise in the discipline you're in.

**Hmm.**

That was a- that's a new thing. I guess that's part of the new phase, over the last two or three years. And probably—there's a definite feeling that I'm moving, I've gotta pick it up a notch to do this job. I've gotta really decide that I was as serious about teaching as I am about my career. So that has different tugs and pulls to it, as we all know. *(Laughs)*

**Yeah, yeah.**

I'm sitting here, and I've got 40 pages to go on a novel, and I can't get to it.

**Ooh.**

I can't get to it, you know, so that's a hard thing to... you know, the summer's coming, and [I'm just kinda waiting], and once in a while I blow up. You know, it plays on your family a little bit. My wife and daughter are constantly going "Dad... Dad..." You know, my mind is just gone. You know, when your daughter, five, is doing that to you, you know, I wonder what the effect of that will be...

**Do you know what the last 40 pages are going to be?**

Pretty much. Yeah, pretty much. And then I'll have to rewrite the whole thing. So you're looking at a year. When I had my sabbatical, I literally wrote a third of the novel. It's been five years, though. So I could get a third done in a semester? That's how much—that's how much time commitment is to this job. I could literally write a novel in two years. They're paying my paycheck here, it's not a free ride, though.

**Well, thank you much.**

Sure. I feel like I talked too much, but—