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An interview with Jennifer Finney Boylan

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Jennifer Finney Boylan, our beloved former professor of Creative Writing at Colby College, has moved on to new adventures as the inaugural Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence at Barnard College of Columbia University. We already miss her animated leadership of class workshops, her singing during readings, and her insistence upon bagpipe performances and séances as part of the Colby experience. Trying to fill this hole in our creative writing lives, we reached out to her to ask a few questions about what she's been up to and what advice she has to offer about creative writing. Thanks to Faiyaz Islam for interviewing Jenny, and to Jenny for taking the time to answer our questions!

**Inklings Magazine:** How did you get into Creative Writing?

**Jenny Finney Boylan:** Oh, I think I have been a writer for about as long as I can remember. I mean, maybe not in the womb, but right after that.

**IM:** How would you describe the department and the students here at Colby? What was the best part of your experience as head of the department?

**JFB:** Colby has one of the best English departments in the country, period. I never walked up those stairs without feeling a tremendous sense of anticipation about whatever was going to happen to me next. I was co-chair with Peter Harris for two years, from 2002 through 2004, I think. The best part of that experience was working with Peter, who is a lovely man. He is a talented poet, a legendary teacher, and just a decent human being all around.

**IM:** How important are workshops for the writing process?

**JFB:** The thing that workshops do, actually, is to help young writers learn how to be better critics of each others' writing. It's easy, when you're young, to see what's wrong with what someone else has done— but harder to recognize your own failings. Learning to talk diplomatically and graciously— but firmly and honestly— to other writers about their work means that you have to read with tremendous care. And in time, with any luck, you learn to turn that eye upon your own work. That's an essential thing to learn— how to be your own critic. It's the most essential tool for a writer. If you don't see your own work clearly, you can't revise. And if you don't learn to revise, you'll never learn to make your work shine.

**IM:** Any funny workshop stories?

**JFB:** Most of my funny workshop stories involve my own questionable behavior in class, like the time I kind of randomly made waffles during a lecture, and no one knew what was going on. Eventually a student asked, "Excuse me, Professor Boylan, why are you making waffles in class?" I believe I said, "Because I am driven by an unspeakable inner joy." Like I said, these aren't stories that reflect particularly well upon me.

**IM:** What are your thoughts on Inklings, the student-run writing workshop?

**JFB:** Anything that gets you to write more, and less naively, is great. Make sure you are tough on each other, but be loving, too. No one can listen, even to the most
reasonable of criticism, if they don't feel respected.

IM: What's something that you always try to get students to improve on in their writing?

JFB: Revision, Faiyaz. It's all about revision. It's the most important skill, and it's simultaneously the thing that no one wants to do, at least not when they're first starting out. And it's not exactly easy to teach.

IM: Your work as a professor has touched a lot of people. Have any interesting stories come up from former students getting back in touch with you?

JFB: You are nice to say that, but every professor at Colby touches people in some way, I hope. It is nice, though, to hear from students whom I've been out of touch with. The very best thing is when some of those students turn out to have become teachers their own selves. A former student of mine came to a reading by Edward Albee a few years ago; Albee had been my teacher, back at Johns Hopkins, and so there was a way in which my student— I can only remember his nickname, which was Nickles— was Edward Albee's grand-student. Nickles, of course, was using the same jokes I had been taught by Albee. His own students—some of whom he'd brought with him, must have thought of Albee as their great grand-teacher. It really is pretty great when you find a student is teaching. It really is like a torch is being passed, hand to hand, generation to generation.

IM: Can you think of a prompt you gave that resulted in a particularly memorable student work?

JFB: I don't use “prompts” in that sense— but one time a student who was on the football team was just apologizing to me in my office, saying, “Well, I'm not that guy who's ever going to write a great story.” And somehow I was able to shake him loose of that conviction. I asked him, “Who is that guy? Why not you?” That very summer he got a job working for the Waterville Sentinel. Then he headed west. Today he's a journalist. That's pretty great, although I can also assure you it wasn't me. I just happened to be on hand right at the moment he needed a shove.

IM: What are you up to now, if you don't mind me asking?

JFB: Your own Jenny Boylan is off to California, then Seattle, then back, as the second of the new Amtrak “Writers in Residence.” I am spending 17 days on the train— mostly writing, although I'm jumping off the train in Indiana to attend a meeting of the Board of Trustees at the Kinsey Institute. I'm working on a novel, as well as the third installment in my young adult series, Falcon Quinn, and writing an op/ed for the New York Times. And you know I'm the co-chair of the board of directors of GLAAD, a job which sucks up every possible moment of my spare time like Kirby.

I start teaching at Barnard as the new Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence in January. I’m on leave from Colby for two years while I test those waters. It’s an awfully sweet position they’ve come up with for me. But even if I end up with a serious continuing relationship with Millie the Dancing Barnard Bear, I will always love the Colby Mule. My first wife. I am hoping I can come up with a good way of staying connected to this community. I’m continuing to live in Maine 7 months of the year, May through mid-January, and I hope I’ll be able to be part of the life of this wonderful and very special place.

More info about the Amtrak residency is at my blog, jenniferboylan.net. [IM]