

# Colby



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# An Interview with Lewis Robinson

*Lewis Robinson, who published his first book, Officer Friendly and Other Stories, in 2003, is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English/Creative Writing at Colby College this year. Before coming to Colby, Robinson taught creative writing at the Iowa Young Writer's Studio and then served as the Writer-in-Residence at Phillips Academy Andover. We reached out to him to ask him a few questions about his experiences as a writer and his advice about workshops and the creative writing process in general. Thank you to Jess Greenwald for interviewing Lewis Robinson, and thank you to Lewis Robinson for taking the time to answer our questions!*

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

**Lewis Robinson:** Well, I was always a big reader, an introverted kid. I loved to escape into the world of books. I didn't really think about the author of these books as people until I read E.B. White's books, *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. I knew that he had spent some time in Maine (I was living in Maine at the time). And I sent him a letter, and he responded! So that was the first time I really thought *Oh, wow, this is actually something people do*. I still didn't think right away *This is what I want to be*, but it's when the possibility first existed for me. I started writing stories of my own in earnest in high school, and they weren't for a class. In college, I started to study fiction. I was studying the craft of it, and that's when I became obsessed, writing full-length stories on my own, and I had a great teacher there, this guy named Jay Parini, who is a poet and a biographer and a novelist, and he was really encouraging. He was the first person who said to me, *this is something you could and should keep doing*. That was extremely valuable to me, someone I liked who could recognize me like that.

**IM:** Do you remember the first thing you ever wrote?

**LR:** I remember things I wrote for school, and I still have some of them. In high school, I wrote a series of little vignettes about these kids who go on these adventures in this big yellow pickup truck, called the Hog. That was the first time that I really had fun with writing stories, episodes in a longer narrative. I remember writing a "Choose Your Own Adventure" story in fifth grade...but those things, I don't know. I don't see them as being connected to the work I do now as much. I was reading a lot of fantasy...I wrote a retelling of the Headless Horsemen.

**IM:** Do you think Leo and Maizey [your kids] could be writers someday, too?

**LR:** Yeah, I think they could! They both really like to work on projects on their own, and I think that's something a writer needs to really enjoy doing. To just find delight in your own work, challenging yourself, being gratified by the work that you do, writing for yourself, working on creative problems only you can solve that only you get gratification from, not being over-

dependent on outside validation. They like that, they like to work on things on their own, they can be pleased about something that no one else can be pleased by, which I think is key. I hope they find their own path, which could take many forms. It's cool to see that they're both very interested in stories... they're both good storytellers, and they have fun with it. We do this thing at home called TMB, Type My Book. This means sitting with them on the couch and they'll just tell a story, and you just transcribe it for them. I try to type as fast as they're speaking, they love it. They like to rereading it later. It's usually extremely surreal, they make a lot of weird, creative connections.

**IM:** At Colby you teach fiction writing classes, what other genres have you explored?

**LR:** I taught poetry at a prep school, which I loved. When I was in grad school, getting my MFA, most of my friends were poets, and I always loved reading poetry. I've written some poetry, even. I loved teaching poetry, because the way I approached it was doing

the assignments with the students and I felt like I was learning alongside them. The question we kept asking the entire term was 'What is a poem?' We were reading some great stuff that I had read over the years, revisiting it, and trying to figure out what makes it poetry, and how we might emulate that. It's a good way to learn more about writing. I was lacking a little practical experience in the making of poems, but I loved teaching it, and learning poetry alongside them.

**IM:** In your opinion, how important are workshops for the writing process?

**LR:** Well, they're not essential. But I think they can be really helpful in providing a writer with deadlines, and learning how to receive feedback. I think you can learn a lot by critiquing other people's writing, you can learn how to revise your own work. The author of a given piece may not necessarily be getting the "Big Solution" for revision, but they will probably be better equipped for it, from just that process—looking at things critically. So that's why I love it. And I just think they're fun! **[IM]**

**"I think you can learn a lot by critiquing other people's writing, you can learn how to revise your own work."**

**[IM]**