



BLOOMINGTON'S LITERARY

Eight local authors who
have gained national
prominence in fiction,
nonfiction, and poetry.

Lights

BY JEREMY SHERE // PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM KRAUSE

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loomington's literary landscape has, perhaps, never been more varied or vibrant than it is today.

At once, several local authors are attracting national attention, achieving commercial success, and receiving praise from the media's

most discerning critics.

Michael Koryta, just 32, has already written 10 critically acclaimed novels, and nine have been optioned for film or television development. A Bloomington native, Koryta has multiple best-sellers, won several important awards, and is considered among the best suspense genre writers of the day.

Local authors (front row, l-r) Michael Koryta, Susan Gubar, Alyce Miller, (back row, l-r) Samrat Upadhyay, James Alexander Thom, Michael Shelden, and Scott Russell Sanders. Not pictured: Ross Gay.

Douglas Hofstadter, an IU professor of cognitive science, wrote *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 1980.

For this article, we have profiled eight writers who are making an impact and shining a literary light on Bloomington.

Michael Shelden's celebrated tome from 2013, *Young Titan: The Making of Winston Churchill*, is being developed as a six-part television series for the BBC by the creators of the popular *Downton Abbey* series. The prolific Shelden also has penned a biography of George Orwell that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, a controversial biography of novelist Graham Greene, and a detailed chronicle of Mark Twain's final years.

Renowned feminist scholar and literary critic Susan Gubar's *Memoir of a Debulked Woman* is a personal account of her battle with ovarian cancer and a revealing examination of a form of the disease rarely talked or written about. The 2012 book received reverential reviews and the kind of attention rarely afforded to such weighty subject matter.

Many others in Bloomington, at Indiana University and beyond, are writing novels, poetry, and nonfiction, abetted by entities including IU's Creative Writing Program, the Writers Guild at Bloomington, Women Writing for (a) Change, and the Bloomington Writing Project.

It's been stated over and over by authors: Bloomington offers an ideal environment in which to write.

Says Scott Russell Sanders, who has more than 20 fiction and nonfiction books to his credit, "The size of the city, its human scale and surrounding landscape, all inform my writing. There's a sense that writers and, really, anyone who lives here can make a difference."

Writing seems to be as entrenched in the city's firmament as its limestone foundation. Terre Haute, Indiana, native Theodore Dreiser was an IU alumnus who was among the first to eschew Victorian mores with his trenchant accounts of life, as it really was, in the early 20th century. Newspaper columnist and World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle learned his craft at IU and is now regarded with veneration for his clean, clear writing style and unerring compassion. Bloomingtonian Ross Lockridge Jr. wrote a number one best-seller, *Raintree County*, before committing suicide here in 1948 — just as the book was becoming a sensation. More recently,



MICHAEL SHELDEN

Michael Shelden is well aware of the perils inherent in writing biographies of famous people.

“There’s always a group of people ready to tell me that there’s nothing new to write,” says Shelden, 63, an English professor at Indiana State University. To find new, interesting material, Shelden bypasses obvious, well-studied sources and looks for lesser-known papers, letters, and other documents. While researching his Churchill book, Shelden explored the journals and letters of Violet Asquith, the daughter of WWI-era British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who the young Churchill courted and to whom he was briefly engaged.

“Asquith is not typically seen as central to Churchill’s story, but she knew him intimately and had a front-row seat to his life, so to speak,” Shelden says. “Researching peripheral characters is often key to gleaning new insights about a well-known subject.”

Similarly, while visiting a sanitarium in Kent, England, to work on a biography of George Orwell, Shelden was approached by a woman who put him in touch with a retired doctor who had worked at the hospital when Orwell was a patient suffering from tuberculosis. The doctor gave Shelden access to a gold mine: Orwell’s complete medical records, which had never been made public and which enabled Shelden to write with authority about Orwell’s illness and treatment.

For his next book, a soon-to-be-published account of how Herman Melville conceived of and wrote *Moby Dick*, Shelden used digital archives of newspapers from the 1850s to achieve a detailed sense of what people and places in Melville’s world were like. Being able to read firsthand accounts of prisons, pubs, and other places in mid-19th century America, Shelden says, “was like having access to a time machine.”

Shelden’s innovative sleuthing has paid critical and popular dividends. In addition to *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* being

shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, *Mark Twain: Man in White*, *The Grand Adventures of His Final Years* was honored as one of the Best Books of 2010 by *Library Journal*. Meanwhile, *Young Titan: The Making of Winston Churchill*, now out in paperback (both editions by Simon & Schuster), was recently selected as an Amazon Editors’ Favorite. With the TV series being developed by the creators of *Downton Abbey*, its shelf life and sales should surpass most historical biographies.

Although he teaches in Terre Haute, Shelden lives in Bloomington — an ideal place for a writer, he says, because it’s peaceful and quiet. “New York and London are amazing, but they have lots of diversions that can keep you from writing,” he says. “Bloomington has plenty of cultural options but not so many that you’re distracted from the work at hand.”



SUSAN GUBAR

complicated because I wanted to tell the truth but without damaging the reputations or hurting the feelings of the surgeons and radiologists who treated me.”

Previously best known for her works of literary criticism, most notably the pioneering feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic* [coauthored with Sandra Gilbert], Gubar found that her academic training was essential in writing a memoir. Bringing her critical faculties to bear on the book not only helped Gubar “tamp down the egoism of the autobiographical voice” but also led her to reread some of her favorite poets, such as Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose

writing about suffering and pain “became totally new for me, much more profound and meaningful.”

Hoping to reach an even wider audience, for the past few years Gubar has been writing the *Living With Cancer* blog for *The New York Times* online. She is also at work on a new book, *Writing Cancer* (due out in 2015), about how to write about the insidious disease and examining what has been written about it in movies, memoirs, stories, graphic novels, and TV shows.

“Writing about cancer has helped me distance myself from it and better understand what I’ve been through,” Gubar says. “It’s hard to calculate the impact of a book or newspaper blog, but I’m delighted to have a platform, and I hope my writing helps improve the psychological and social difficulties faced by many cancer patients.”

When the distinguished IU literature professor and feminist scholar, Susan Gubar, was

found to have advanced ovarian cancer in 2008, she coped with the diagnosis and gut-wrenching treatments by doing what she knew best.

“Writing about my illness was a kind of obsession,” says Gubar, 69, who retired from active teaching five years ago. “I don’t think I would have survived if I wasn’t writing things down.”

Gubar was also driven by the fact that while some types of cancer, most notably breast and lung cancer, receive lots of attention and research funding, ovarian cancer is largely ignored. Shocked by the lack

of an early detection tool for ovarian cancer, the “draconian nature” of the debulking operation — a massive surgery which may lead to the removal of the ovaries, uterus, fallopian tubes, appendix, spleen, and parts of the intestine — and the “extraordinary brain fog” induced by chemotherapy, Gubar aimed not only to tell a personal story of dealing with illness but also to lay bare a subject that little had been written about.

The resulting book, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman* (W.W. Norton & Company), was selected by *The New York Times* as a Notable Book for 2012 and glowingly reviewed in dozens of publications. Although pleased by the memoir’s literary reception, Gubar was also relieved, given the book’s highly personal subject matter and critical take on how the medical establishment treats ovarian cancer.

“Writing the memoir was unnerving because it’s so personal,” she says. “It was



MICHAEL KORYTA

Even after 10 critically acclaimed novels and numerous awards, best-selling suspense writer Michael Koryta still can't quite believe his good fortune.

"My dream was always to be able to have writing be my day job," says Koryta, 32. "I feel like I'm getting away with something every day that's true."

Koryta's success is no mirage. From the time his parents began taking him to the Monroe County Public Library, Koryta dreamed of becoming a writer. Reading was always encouraged, he says, "And so I got the idea that books were something enjoyable instead of just academic."

Drawn to crime, suspense, and mystery novels at an early age, Koryta plotted a path toward becoming a writer in that genre. At Indiana University he majored in criminal justice and, while still a student, worked at *The Herald-Times*, specifically asking to cover the police beat and soaking up wisdom from

veteran writers such as Bob Hammel. After college he worked as a private investigator while writing his first book, *Tonight I Said Goodbye*, featuring private detective Lincoln Perry. Published in 2004, the novel was an immediate success, winning The Private Eye Writers of America award for best first novel and the Great Lakes Book Award for best mystery, and being nominated for an Edgar Award by Mystery Writers of America.

Several novels, one short story, and many awards and accomplishments later — including notable book mentions in *The New York Times*, a *New York Times* best-seller, and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize — Koryta is regarded as one of the best crime genre authors writing today. His books have been translated into more than 20 languages, and Hollywood has taken note, too: Nine of his 10 novels have been optioned for film or television development.

"I have the approach [toward possible TV and film adaptations] of cross your fingers but don't hold your breath, because there are so

many moving pieces that have to align just right to get something made," Koryta says. "Compared to writing novels, it's a little frustrating because I don't have control over the process. Novels feel more like home to me."

Writing a novel, Koryta says, is "like sustaining a magic trick, making something real for people that doesn't actually exist." Many of his plots are driven by places and natural settings he knows well, such as the West Baden Springs Hotel, which features prominently in Koryta's novel *So Cold the River*. His latest work, *Those Who Wish Me Dead* (Little, Brown and Company), was inspired by a backpacking trip to Montana's Beartooth Mountains.

For the past few years, Koryta has split time between homes in Bloomington and St. Petersburg, Florida. But he's now living in town exclusively. "I've done a lot of traveling, but I've never run into another Bloomington," he says. "Good writing means something to people here, and that's special."



ROSS GAY

When poet and IU creative writing professor Ross Gay ran into his former 11th grade English teacher in 2006,

the teacher was shocked to learn that he had a book of poetry coming out.

"I was a brainy kid in high school but not a big reader," says Gay, 40, who grew up in Levittown, Pennsylvania. "The only book I remember reading was *The Stranger* [by Albert Camus]."

It wasn't until he attended Lafayette College and encountered the writing of African-American poet Amiri Baraka that he

became interested in reading and writing. "Baraka's work addressed concerns and questions I had about race and class that I wasn't able to articulate myself," says Gay, whose father is African-American and mother Caucasian. "I began reading other poets, like Sylvia Plath, and for the first time I began to identify seriously with writing."

Finding that he had a passion for not only reading but also composing poetry, Gay completed an M.F.A. at Sarah Lawrence College and later a Ph.D. in American literature from Temple University. His first book of poetry, *Against Which* (2006), established Gay as a serious, emerging poet. In the following years, dozens of poems published in eminent literary journals, including

the *Harvard Review* and *The American Poetry Review*, and a second collection, *Bringing the Shovel Down*, won Gay accolades in *The New York Times* and led to a Guggenheim fellowship in 2013.

Although Gay enjoys teaching poetry and literature, his approach to writing is not academic or cloistered. "In no way do I want to be writing only for readers of poetry and literary critics," says Gay, who is also a basketball devotee and co-editor of the sports-themed literary journal *Some Call It Ballin'*. "One of the nicest things I hear is when someone says, 'I generally don't like poetry, but I really liked your reading the other day.' That makes me happy because for me poetry isn't something up on a pedestal."



JAMES ALEXANDER THOM

Novelist James Alexander Thom wants his readers to suffer. “When people tell me they suffered right along with the characters, I think, ‘Good!’” says Thom. “I do my best to enable readers to not just follow along but really feel everything that’s happening in the story.”

The author of nine historical novels, Thom takes pride in learning exactly what his characters experienced to bring his stories to life. For the best-seller *Follow the River* (Ballantine Books, 1981), which tells the story of an 18th-century Virginia woman who was captured by and later escaped from Shawnee Indians, Thom ate the same kinds of worms and grubs that he describes his heroine, Mary Ingles, eating on her 1,000-mile trek to safety. Researching novels about the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Thom spent a spring and summer tracing the route from St. Louis, Missouri, to

the Pacific Ocean and even fasted for up to a week at a time to experience the explorers’ hunger.

“As a historical novelist, I feel obligated to not just point back in time to something that happened,” Thom says. “I try to take readers back to that time, and to do so I have to learn about the world in which my characters lived.”

Thom, 81, began writing historical fiction while working as a reporter at *The Indianapolis Star* in the mid-1970s. His first historical novel, *Long Knife* (1979), about the life of American Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark (older brother of William Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame), taught Thom a valuable lesson about connecting with readers.

“I started getting fan mail and learned that people really like reading about courageous, admirable characters,” he says. When, a few years later, *Follow the River* sold more than one and a quarter-million copies, Thom

became an established historical genre heavyweight, winning accolades for subsequent novels about Lewis and Clark (*From Sea to Shining Sea*, 1984), the life of Shawnee chief Tecumseh (*Panther in the Sky*, 1989), and the story of an Irish immigrant who deserted from the U.S. Army and fought against the United States during the Mexican-American War (*St. Patrick’s Battalion*, 2006).

Thom prefers writing longhand in the 19th-century log cabin he relocated to the deep woods of southwest Owen county in 1981, using ropes, pulleys, and other traditional tools to renovate and enlarge it. When he and his wife, Dark Rain, crave a little culture, Bloomington is not far away.

“Bloomington is paradise,” Thom says. “Plus, for a writer, there’s no better resource than the Herman B Wells Library, which has 95 percent of what I need.”



SAMRAT UPADHYAY

Samrat Upadhyay holds the distinction of being the first Nepali-born novelist writing in English to be published in the West. It’s a distinction that he does not want to define him as an artist.

“I’m proud to be the first, but I’ve tried not to take it as though I’m representing the country in any way,” says Upadhyay, 51, a professor of creative writing at IU. “It’s a little dangerous for a writer to claim or try to speak for an entire country, because I’m just providing a perspective.”

Growing up in Nepal in the 1960s and ’70s, Upadhyay had vague notions of wanting to be a writer. At age 21, he came to the United States where he attended Ohio University, studying journalism. He took a creative writing class

and was surprised to learn that he had a natural talent for fiction. At the University of Hawaii, where Upadhyay earned a Ph.D. in creative writing, he found his voice and subject: his homeland.

“It’s common for writers to be drawn to the place where they grew up and formed childhood memories,” Upadhyay says. “Nepal was a mostly closed society until the 1950s, so there’s lots to be written about the place and people who live there.”

Although all of Upadhyay’s work to date is set in Nepal, his themes are universal. His first book, the short story collection *Arresting God in Kathmandu* (Houghton Mifflin Company), explores tensions and desires in a changing society where marriages are arranged and family defines identity. The book won a Whiting Writers’ Award and was selected in 2001 for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great

Writers Program. His novel *The Guru of Love*, which was named a notable book by *The New York Times* for 2003, is about a love triangle in contemporary Nepal. And the story collection *The Royal Ghosts*, which was declared a Best of Fiction in 2006 by *The Washington Post* and won the 2007 Asian American Literary Award, uses the backdrop of Maoist insurgencies in Nepal to feature characters dealing with duties to aging parents and struggling against the country’s entrenched caste system.

Upadhyay travels to Nepal at least once a year, leading IU students on educational programs and researching his novels. But he always returns to Bloomington to write.

“I find that I can write about my home country only when I’m back in Bloomington,” he says. “I sit in my house in the woods, enjoying the natural beauty, and somehow I’m able to write about a place so far away.”

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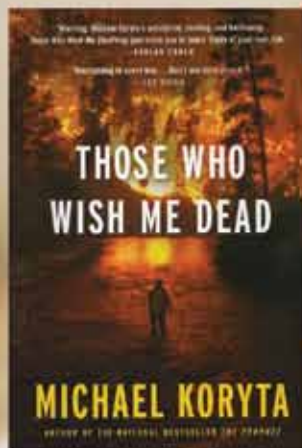
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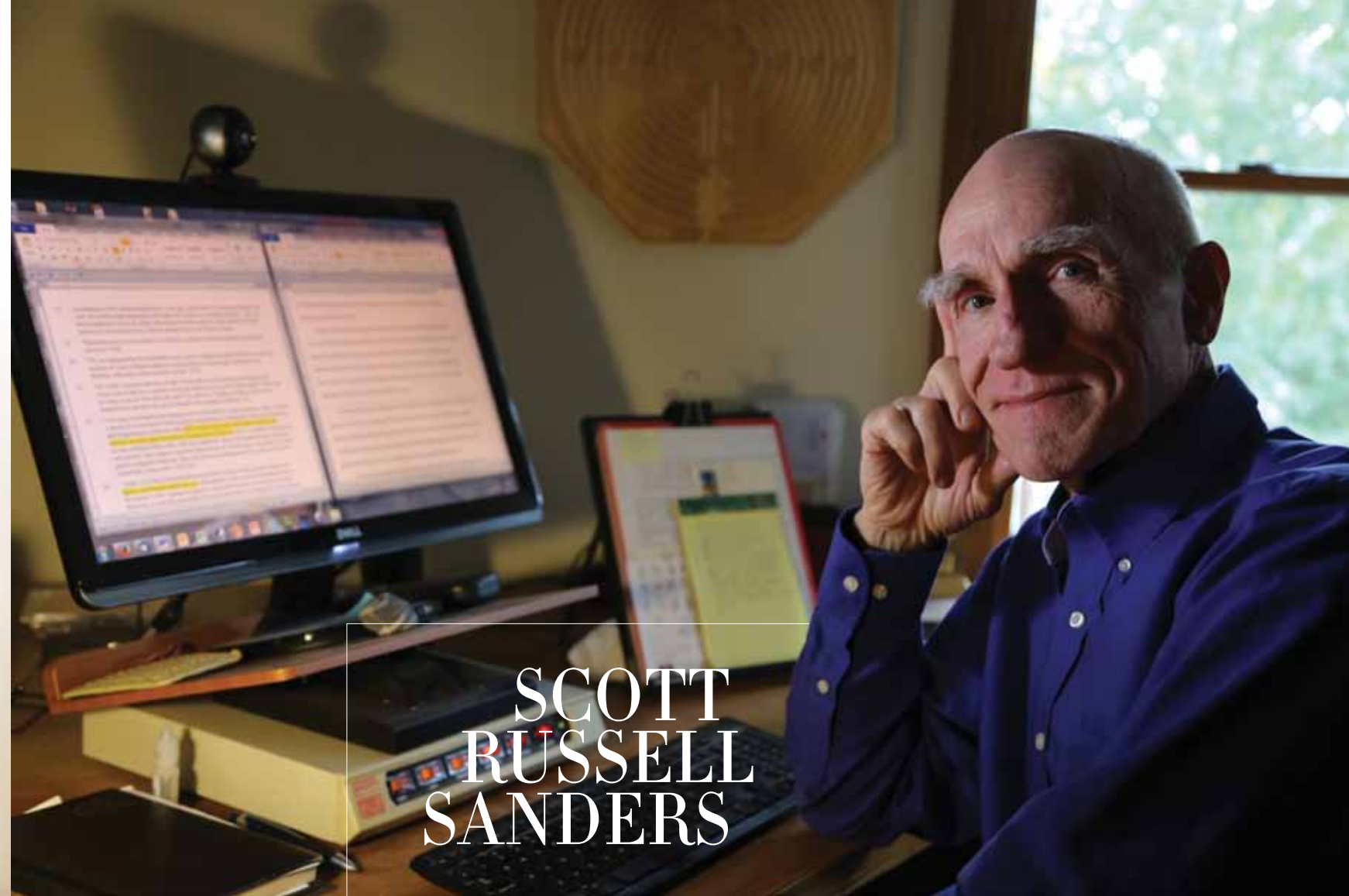
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SCOTT
RUSSELL
SANDERS

After Scott Russell Sanders completed his most recent book, *Divine Animal*, he decided to give it away as a free e-book download.

"I wanted to get back to the root impulse behind making art, which as I see it is to create a gift rather than a commodity," says Sanders, 69, who has published more than 20 works of fiction and nonfiction and was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2012. "Given the troubled state of the natural world today, I think we need more books about healing and restoration. It's hard to tell stories about mending, but that's what I set out to do in my latest book."

Divine Animal channels many of the themes that illuminate Sanders' oeuvre: the importance of place, respect, and caring for nature and how all living things are ultimately connected. Sanders traces these interests to

his college years, when, before discovering literature, he planned to become a scientist. Then he began reading American poetry and fiction.

"I was swept away by the beauty and craft, the scope of the ambition of writers like Flannery O'Connor and F. Scott Fitzgerald," Sanders says. "From physics and biology I learned the concept of all things being interconnected, and the more I read, the more I realized that the stories and poems that excited me were like little ecosystems, with every word, sound, and shading connected to the greater whole."

While working toward a Ph.D. in English literature at the University of Cambridge, Sanders began publishing stories in literary journals, gaining the courage to pursue a writing life. "I had no delusions of grandeur," he says, "but those publications encouraged me to believe in my ability to write."

Many books, literary awards, and honors later, Sanders, who taught literature and writing at IU for 38 years before retiring in 2009, is still embarking on new creative paths: He wrote the libretto for the recent Cardinal Stage Company children's musical, *The Birthday Feast*, and is working on a book about the nature of wealth.

He is also still exploring how art and literature can have a positive impact on a beleaguered world.

"When I started out, little pieces of the ecological web were in danger: The Cuyahoga River [in northeast Ohio] caught fire, forests were being cut down," he says. "But we've now come to realize that all living systems are coming apart, from ocean corals to melting glaciers. Can writing literature guide us toward more sustainable ways of living? Maybe only in small ways, but that's reason enough for me to keep writing."



ALYCE MILLER

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efore Alyce Miller became a published writer, she wore many hats: secretary, hospital admittance official, high school teacher, loans claim examiner, governess, and R&B lyricist.

Today, as an award-winning author and Indiana University English and creative writing professor, Miller's interests remain eclectic. In addition to teaching and writing, she does pro bono legal work in family law and animal law (Miller earned a law degree from the IU School of Law in 2003) and

serves as a faculty advisor for student groups interested in animal advocacy.

"I believe writers need to be engaged with the world," Miller says. "After I got tenure I began to see academia as a bit confining, so I do what I can to explore outside interests and pursue projects that are separate from my academic life."

Still, Miller, 61, is devoted to writing and has worked hard at perfecting her craft since she began penning stories and poems while working a variety of jobs and earning master's degrees in English literature and film at San Francisco State University in the late 1970s and '80s. When a story she submitted to the eminent journal *The Kenyon Review* won the periodical's Award for Literary Excellence in Fiction, Miller was encouraged to take her art more seriously.

While pursuing an M.F.A. in writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts in the early 1990s, Miller submitted a batch of stories to the University of Georgia Press and won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction — one of the most prestigious prizes for emerging writers. The resulting story collection, *The Nature of Longing* (1995), put Miller squarely on the literary map, garnering favorable notices in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Since her auspicious debut, Miller has published the novel *Stopping for Green Lights* (1999); another book of short stories, *Water* (Sarabande Books), which won the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction in 2006; and more than 200 stories, poems, and essays. Her nonfiction book, *Skunk*, a natural and cultural history of skunks, is forthcoming. Miller teaches a broad range of classes at IU, not only on writing poetry and fiction but also a course on critical race theory and another on animals and ethics.

Although Miller enjoys teaching, she advises young writers to read as much as they can outside of class assignments and to think twice before rushing to take writing workshops or applying to an M.F.A. program.

"Writers have been writing for many years before workshops were invented," she says. "A writing class can help you figure out what kind of writer you are, but it can also foster a kind of groupthink mentality where students start trying to impress each other instead of developing a unique and personal voice. I love my students, but sometimes I question whether the arts really belong in the academy." ✨

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