

## Introduction

This book has its origins in the Ohio University Spring Literary Festival, a remarkable yearly gathering of some of the nation's most talented and celebrated writers here in this most rural corner of Ohio. The university brings them here, but the event is not *only* for the campus—for its entire twenty-five-year history, the Lit Fest (as we call it) has been free and welcoming to the public. It is a shining example of public access to art in an unlikely and beautiful setting.

What also distinguishes the Lit Fest is that, from its beginning twenty-five years ago, it has given its writers no theme to follow, no boundaries on what they should read or talk about. An invitation to be a Lit Fest featured writer has required only that, in addition to the usual readings and socializing that characterize such gatherings, all writers must, at some point, stand up for forty-five minutes and talk about writing—the issues of craft that interest them, the elements of the writing life that excite them (or otherwise), the parts of the calling that only one writer can tell another.

Frankly, this has scared some writers off. But those who have agreed to join us here in Athens, Ohio, find themselves speaking, for the benefit of the students, teachers, and others in the audience, to questions like: What makes this work so difficult? What is it possible to do next? And how can I convey to you how much it matters?—those beautiful questions with which all writers grapple.



WHAT WE HAVE tried to do, in this collection, is to reflect the level of the conversation about poetics and the craft

of writing that has taken place over the Lit Fest's twenty-five-year history. Our contributors have been generous with their time and their thinking, giving us a number of essays that are being published for the first time here.

We also have chosen to honor the Lit Fest's history by reprinting two essays, one by Charles Baxter and another by Francine Prose, that appear in recent books by those writers. Like several others published here, these essays grew from lectures first delivered at the Spring Literary Festival—continuing the Lit Fest's legacy as an engine for new writing as well as a celebration of writing already completed.

The result is a varied, sometimes funny, and always thoughtful conversation about writing by and for those who are serious about their commitment to this difficult and rewarding art form. The essays gathered here are not limited or organized by genre, but instead are arranged to generate the unexpected collisions of meaning and inspiration that occur when one piece of good writing crosses another. In his essay "Only Collect: Something about the Short Story Collection," Peter Ho Davies celebrates the internal "communities of collections" formed when essays or stories within a book comment on each other in surprising ways. "The assembling of a collection," he writes, whatever its unifying or disunifying factors, is "another step toward how we as writers read ourselves and our work."



AS MOST OF us know, putting a bunch of talented writers together anywhere—a literary festival, a book, a room with an open bar tab—can yield unpredictable and hopefully pleasing results. We see that here. Claire Bateman's essay "Some Questions about Questions," which poses any number of questions a serious writer might consider, has its echoes later in Maggie Nelson's "All That Is the Case: Some Thoughts on Fact in Nonfiction and Documentary Poetry." Nelson takes up the issue of questioning once again, applying the issue particularly to the role of fact in one's work, while directing us finally to Thoreau's clarifying statement for writers: "The question is not what you look at—but how you look & whether you see."

Looking at the self, as both a reader and a writer: this thread, woven by long experience, connects Mary Ruefle's and Stephen Dunn's essays. Ruefle shares a moment that would be devastating to any writer: "When I was forty-five years old, I woke up on an ordinary day, neither sunny nor overcast, in the middle of the year, and I could no longer read." The solution, as it turns out, is reading glasses, but this gives Ruefle the opportunity to examine the multifaceted role reading plays in her life and ours. Dunn, meanwhile, performs an act of reading that many recognize as the most difficult: reading one's own work, twenty years later. He does this carefully, "like an interested stranger," he writes, but like a dedicated parent, too, willing to allow space for the work and himself to grow.

Not all the themes here are retrospective or inward. Many are practical, funny, and rooted in the challenges of the moment. Lee K. Abbott and David Kirby, beyond the obvious fact that their essays both catalogue "Thirteen Things," show that writers are equally obliged to respond to others. Abbott, one of America's acknowledged masters of the short story, explores what he sees as thirteen serious flaws in contemporary short story writing, and challenges today's writers to overcome them. Kirby, one of the greatest current ambassadors for poetry and creativity in general, gives his trademark odd and often hilarious testimony of being a writer—and then tells us, with utter seriousness, how he answers those who would disregard or minimize our work.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite words like "poetry" or "the short story" in the titles of the essays collected here, all of these essays hold valuable advice and thoughtful provocation for writers of any genre—poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. For instance, Carl Dennis's discussion of Louise Glück's poem "Walking at Night" is as much about how a character is built on the page as it is about poetics. (Glück, by the way, is also an Ohio University Spring Literary Festival alum, from our fourth year, 1989.)



AN UNLIKELY CONFLUENCE. That's what any gathering of poets, fiction writers, and nonfiction writers is, after

all, when so much of society tells us to find work—and meaning—elsewhere. Our unlikely confluence occurs in Athens, a town founded when, according to one lively account, a wayward explorer crossed the Hocking River while shooting at (but missing) a large buffalo. Settlers from the East Coast soon followed, building cabins of walnut and ash, setting aside funds for the formation of a university outside the original Thirteen Colonies, and naming their town in honor of the city of classical learning. All within the larger context of southeast Ohio, a very rural borderland of the Midwest and Appalachia—a place of economic struggle and natural beauty.

This past quarter century of literary festivity has been both wonderful and memorable. Here's to another twenty-five years.

—Kevin Haworth and Dinty W. Moore