

Tribute to Senior Lecturer Jim Powell (1950-2020)

Solitary though Jim was, throughout much of his life he sought to bring writers and readers together. Just after he got his MFA in fiction writing, he and two friends, also writers, drove a van to California, where they started the bookstore Intellectuals & Liars in Santa Monica. The name came about from Jim's reading of Carl Jung: "There are two kinds of people you can't change: intellectuals and liars," which he saw as analogous to poets and fiction writers. The name stuck.

But even in the late Seventies, running a bookstore was not easy, especially one that specialized in "quality fiction" and vetoed New Age anything or genre stuff. So after a year, Jim returned to the Midwest, and he affiliated with the Free University here, secured a CETA grant, and started the Writers' Center of Indianapolis, now the Indiana Writers Center.

For twenty years, Jim directed the Writers Center, bringing to town major poets and novelists, but also running open mics at the Alley Cat, teaching classes, mentoring writers, and publishing journals and books. During much of that time, as associate faculty, he also taught for IUPUI, where he offered a popular Indiana literature course, sometimes at "remote" locations like Glendale Mall.

I met him in 1997 during my first week on the job. English Department chair Richard Turner had said to me: "He does so much for writers here, but he's pretty much stopped writing himself." At the time, Jim and I did not hit it off. I found him cynical, world-weary, not knowing that his first marriage had just ended, and his mother had

been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He saw me as teeming with too much energy and not authentic enough.

Despite this first impression, I went to many Writers Center events. IUPUI students won the College Poetry Read-Off, which Jim sponsored. When a faculty member teaching fiction quit mid-semester, Jim picked up that person's class. It was Jim's idea to have a reading series to bring part- and full-time faculty members to a single stage. And when the English department conducted a national search for a creative writing position, Jim agreed to be the external person on the committee. We hired Rob Rebein.

In spring 2001, I observed Jim teach Intro to Creative Writing as a prelude to his getting the Outstanding Associate Faculty Award. "Violate a standard, have a reason," he said to a student who didn't use capitalization. "Writers are always presenting preachy things—how do they make them not seem preachy?" he asked a man who had commented on "preachiness" in his neighbor's text. To the young woman who worried that it was not appropriate for her character to laugh and to cry at a funeral, Jim responded, "All of the emotions in this piece are legitimate human feelings, but they *are* kind of thrown together." In each instance, he validated the idiosyncratic but also pushed students to entertain larger questions of theory and craft.

That fall, Jim, now retired from the Writers Center, started at IUPUI as a full-time lecturer. He mentored hundreds of students, not only in creative writing classes but in his sections of W132, which focused on American Indians, and as Associate Chair for Students, where he served as the lead academic advisor for the English Department.

In 2003, after reciting Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" to each other in Cavanaugh Hall during a snowstorm, we started dating, and got married in the Roofless Church at New Harmony in 2008.

A couple years later, after a health scare, Jim began writing fiction again after a 30-year hiatus, and in his last decade he completed over seventy stories. His brilliant collection of fiction *Only Witness* appeared from the Indiana Writers Center last year to mark the Center's fortieth anniversary.

When Jim's COPD worsened in 2018, he began to make peace with his eventual demise. When asked how he'd like to be remembered, he said, "I have been pleased to know a book of my stories is here. I am very proud of building the Writers Center with so many others and gratified that the organization survives me. Say I did not fear death and would be glad my suffering is over. I found myself learning so much as I approached death, good things about resilience, hope, and especially gratitude."

Raconteur, writer, curmudgeon, covert kindheart, activist, dreamer, rake, husband, believer in Jung and Jesus: Jim Powell was all these things. Look for him in sunsets over large bodies of water or maybe at Long's Donuts! Jim, may the wind be always at your back.

Karen Kovacic

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