



Michelle Herman and Molly are at home on their front porch.

In good company

Tight-knit creative writing community allows authors and poets to flourish

By Beth Lindsmith | Photos by Chris Crook

Sitting on her front porch, Michelle Herman rattles off a slew of student achievements as she soothes her restless dog, Molly. “At least 75 books, Guggenheim fellowships, a bunch of literary prizes, and at least one or two of our grads from each class is landing a tenure-track job right out of school, which is almost *impossible*. It’s all amazing for a very small program that’s just 22 years old,” she declares, now in full-on proud mama mode. Molly barks, apparently impressed.

Such success demands a celebration, Herman has decided. A professor of English and director of Ohio State’s Creative Writing

Program, she also is the unofficial program matriarch and gala dreamer-upper. The woman loves a good party, particularly one that a) involves dancing and b) brings together past and present students.

“I thought we ought to be inviting alumni back more often,” she says, “partly to acknowledge their accomplishments, of course, but also because they can answer current students’ questions in a way that seems like advice coming from family.”

That idea inspired The Ohio State University Alumni Writers’ Extravaganza — Herman calls it OSU AWE — coming up Oct. 2–4. Nineteen graduates with books



published since January 2014 and three who work in movies or television will share their experiences during panel discussions and, between sessions, read from their latest works. It’s free, anyone can attend and, yes, there will be dancing. (A writer/dancer/DJ/MFA alumna will kick off the festivities with a Friday-evening party for students, faculty and alumni.)

The sense of family Herman alludes to dates back to the late ‘80s, when the founding faculty members forged their new master of fine arts writing program from scratch. Herman, poet and Professor Kathy Fagan, Emeritus Professor Lee Abbott

and the late David Citino, a professor of English and university poet laureate, agreed that teaching and mentoring should be just as important as their own work. “And we’ve always tried to hire new people who feel the same way,” she says.

They admit just 12 students each fall to the three-year program, not only to foster that connectedness but also to ensure adequate resources for each new writer. Because lopsided funding can create an uneasy atmosphere in any graduate program, they worked to ensure every full-time student receives full tuition and a teaching position with monthly stipend. Many writing programs offer little or no financial help today, she says, and students can rack up six-digit debts on their way to an MFA.

“We don’t want our students to worry about money,” she says. “We want them to write.”

Once they’re out on their own, she encourages alumni to stay connected with their writing family. “To sit alone writing day after day, week after week, takes so much discipline, so much patience. We need to support each other. Writing is exhausting, thankless work, and it usually doesn’t pay very well. But, thank God, people are willing to do it. Otherwise we’d have no decent TV, no movies and, worst of all, *nothing* to read. What kind of a world would *that* be?” ✨

THE MAKINGS OF A WRITER-RAMA

More than 20 accomplished writers are due back in Columbus for The Ohio State University Alumni Writers’ Extravaganza. The Oct. 2–4 event is free and open to students and the public. It will feature readings of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction and panel discussions on such topics as publishing first novels, getting started in television, memoir writing, and compiling and publishing poetry collections. For full details, visit go.osu.edu/2015AWE.

Reflections from three alumni panelists

REBECCA BARRY ’04 MFA is



the author of *Later, at the Bar: a Novel in Stories*, which *The New York Times Book Review* called a “marvelous debut” that’s “funny, fast and

addictive.” Her newest book is *Recipes for a Good Life: A Memoir in Stories*. She’s also written widely for women’s magazines and published short fiction in many literary journals.

“What I really liked about the program was that it was rigorous, but not cutthroat competitive. The goal was to love writing while honing your craft. Had I gone to one of the super competitive programs that drive students to become the very, very best in their fields, I think it would have overfed the anxious parts of me and gotten in the way of my work. Some writers thrive on that kind of pressure, but I was already hyper-ambitious. I loved that it felt like I didn’t have to fight for attention or support and could just relax into the creative work.”

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JOE OESTREICH ’07 MFA is the



author of *Lines of Scrimmage: A Story of Football, Race, and Redemption* (co-written with Scott Pleasant) and *Hitless Wonder: A Life in Minor League*

Rock and Roll. He teaches at Coastal Carolina University, where he directs the master of arts in writing program.

“What’s great about OSU AWE is that it will focus on how to exist as a

writer beyond the cozy atmosphere of graduate school. When you’re out there, you discover a hard truth: No one really cares if you write or not. In the real world, you need to work in a cubicle, pay your bills and mow your lawn. How do you do all that and write, too? How do you pay your mortgage, keep your kids alive *and* finish your book?”

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MIKE KARDOS ’03 MFA has



published the novels *Before He Finds Her* and *The Three-Day Affair* (an *Esquire* best book of 2012) as well as the story collection *One Last Good Time*

and the textbook *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer’s Guide*. He teaches English and co-directs the creative writing program at Mississippi State University.

“There’s a long tradition of writers discussing and encouraging each others’ work — Gertrude Stein’s famous ‘salons’ in Paris, for example — and these conversations now tend to happen mostly in creative writing programs. Your professor and the other workshop students read your work closely and give considered, in-depth responses, which was absolutely pivotal to my development as a writer. Outside of the workshop, it’s almost impossible to get that kind of feedback from people who are invested in your work and have time to give detailed suggestions. The sheer volume of submissions that agents and editors receive means they often have to say ‘no’ without detailing their reasons. A workshop, though, isn’t about saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ — it’s about helping writers improve.”