



Excellence and Empathy:

Interviews with the Winners of the 2004 Outstanding Instructor of the Year Awards

By Linda Venis and Kristin L. Petersen

In December 2004, the UCLA Extension Department of the Arts honored nine teachers in the areas of architecture, interior design, landscape architecture, studio arts, computer graphics, creative writing, and screenwriting as recipients of its Outstanding Instructor of the Year Award. The Writers' Program winners—[Janna Gelfand](#) (screenwriting), [Judith Prager and Harry Youtt](#) (creative writing), and [Caroline Leavitt](#) (online writing)—

recently shared their reflections on writing, teaching, and what receiving this award means to them.

Judith Prager & Harry Youtt
Outstanding Instructors in Creative Writing

F. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked that “there are no second lives in American lives,” but he might have reconsidered had he met Judith Prager and Harry Youtt. This husband and wife teaching team enjoyed successful careers in law, entertainment, publishing, and advertising; simultaneously and beyond these careers, they published novels, short stories, poetry, and nonfiction books. Fifteen years ago, they added “writing instructors” to this prolific creative professional mix. Judith and Harry have taught over 70 courses in the past 15 years—primarily beginning-level courses. Their method for helping students to turn their creativity into craft—underscored by their philosophy that “there are no right answers or wrong answers...there is only your creative answer”—is nothing less than transformative.



Outstanding teaching duo Judith Prager and Harry Youtt at a recent Writers' Program event.

Q: You primarily teach beginning level courses. Are there any trends that distinguish the students in these classes?

A: Harry: Our classes are populated by a variety of types. Many have wanted to write for a long time and have finally gotten up the courage to take a class. Others have been arm-twisted by loved ones into signing up. Still others come to us as published and produced writers and journalists from other media, who want to turn the corner into fiction writing. We even attract experienced fiction writers who take our classes, sometimes several times, just to keep limber—much the way a professional ballerina would take a dance exercise class

A: Judith: Beginning classes only mean that people are less likely to be victims of bad habits or bad experiences that have shut them down. We always seek to reawaken the childlike innocence that allows a person to create without the self-censorship that curtails innovation and a healthy belief in the impossible.

Q: What advice do you give to writers who are just starting out, or writing again after a long break from any creative work?

A: Harry: Just keep writing and don't look back. Write for the sake of your soul. We

string the words out of ourselves and in their unfolding are the parts of our deep selves we never would have discovered if we hadn't looked at the words. Fill notebooks and journals with your words. Maybe your writing will make money for you. Maybe not, but money isn't the reason to be writing.

A: Judith: Don't censor yourself. Let it all out first and then shape it in the rewrite. John Gardner, author of *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, talks about the incredible experience of being lost in "the fictive dream," when carried away by a creative moment. At that time, the critical faculty should not be involved. Inspiration and discipline are two separate modes, each with its own rightful place in a writer's life.

Q: Could you share any secrets on nurturing creativity? Any favorite exercises?

A: Harry: We have one in-class exercise that begins with two characters in a dialogue. Then the characters step out of character, and, as if they were actors playing a role, they talk together about the scene. Finally, they confront the writer of the piece with their criticism and complaints, and the writer offers a defense and tries to handle these now-rebellious characters. That exercise blows the walls off everything and lets creativity run wild.

A: Judith: We believe with all our hearts and experience that when you tell writers what they do well, instead of criticizing their weaknesses, they lean into their strengths, take chances, and sometimes soar. At least they're never silenced or "blocked" out of fear of not getting it right. Our assignments are always open-ended. Often a student will come in and, before reading, say, "I'm not sure I did the assignment right, but this is how it came out." And generally speaking, it is innovative, sometimes even dazzling.

Q: What is your most rewarding memory of teaching?

A: Judith: We have an extraordinary collection of photographs that we use to stimulate creativity in various exercises. On occasion, a photograph has set a student on an exploration that ends up as a novel, a play, or a one-person show. Although we treasure the photos and hoard them so we can share them with each class, some of my favorite memories have occurred when we let a student keep the photo that inspired the larger work. Their faces light up and we like to say that we're "retiring" that picture, as if it were a famous baseball player's number.

Q: After teaching in the Writers' Program for well over a decade, how do you keep things interesting and stay motivated?

A: Harry: The energy that every new student brings to class invigorates everybody, most of all the instructors. If we have developed any unique talent in writing instruction, it is in our ability to energize our students to tap into that energy. It works every time without fail. Not only for us, but for our classes. We keep exploring new ways to accomplish this,

and even though our basic approach has never really changed, we implement our new discoveries, and this generally hones our teaching skills. Our writing skills just seem to evolve with our own maturation. Or is it just that our inhibitions wither? Whatever it is, everybody's writing style changes. Even John Updike's.

A: Judith: We don't teach a subject, we teach writers. And they're all unique. And every class is different. Every first night is a first night for us, too. What kind of class will it be? Will there be some one or two writers who will delight and surprise us? We drive home from school in separate cars because we come from different day jobs, and we have two-way radios in our cars. All the way home we chatter about the writers who have promise or whether we should try different exercises with this particular group.

Q: What does winning the 2004 Outstanding Instructor Award in Creative Writing mean to you?

A: Harry and Judith: We remember very well the day some 15 years ago when we walked into Linda Venis' office with a proposal for a course called "The Phenomenology of Fiction Writing" or something equally esoteric. Somehow, she understood what we were trying to do, trusted us, and quickly gave our courses more user-friendly titles. What does it feel like to be named "Outstanding Instructors for 2004"? We joke that we have that Academy Award sensation the recipients often mention, about it being an honor just to be among the other nominees—with every other Writers' Program instructor being one of those nominees. Receiving the award mainly means that for this year, we're singled out to represent the instructors for the distinction they all earn, working hard to continue the Writers' Program's strong legacy. And we are, of course, delighted and honored.

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