



This June Sandy Lingo, Teri Foltz and Claudia Kasvin, all of whom participate in WWf(a)C's Tuesday morning core class, attended the 2013 Iowa Summer Writing Festival at the University of Iowa. Each of them signed up for a different five-day, intensive workshop: Sandy in composing memoir, Teri in playwriting and Claudia in novel writing. Read about their experience in the interview that follows.

Q. What was the most valuable thing you learned as it relates to your own work?

Sandy: I became very aware of the multiple ways I can construct my memoirs. I typically write in chronological fashion, but I learned sophisticated structures that will tell my stories clearly but make them more interesting to readers. I also learned the parameters of memoir. For example, I learned it is necessary and acceptable to imagine dialogue that I can't remember verbatim. I realized how important it is to go beyond documentation; the reader wants to know what I learned *and* how I made sense of the experience—not just the “what,” but the “so what.”

Teri: The playwriting workshop gave me great confidence—which I needed. I learned there are so many ways to write a play and that I wasn't taking the easy way out, which was what I feared. I also learned the subtle differences between the way we write and the way characters talk. Dialogue in a play rarely includes adjectives!

Claudia: Echoing Sandy's comments, I found the workshop on structure to be extremely valuable since this is a topic I specifically wanted help with. If I came away with anything that will help me make progress, it is that in novel writing “chronology is your friend!” I also learned how to design the structure pictorially. Diagrams are just as useful as outlines and give you scope to play around and make new connections with the material.

Q. What's it like being immersed for a solid week among other writers who are working in your genre?

Sandy: It was stimulating and inspirational to be surrounded by other writers who, like me, invested money, energy and time to develop their craft. For an entire week, I unapologetically declared, “I am a writer.” I didn't have to explain it. I didn't have to justify it. I read hundreds of pages of exceptional memoirs during the week, and I apprenticed at the page. As I read, I was hyper-aware of techniques I learned in class and lectures. When I critiqued my classmates' writing, I applied what I learned. Because Teri, Claudia and I attended different workshops, we shared our different experiences. We taught each other.

Teri: Exciting! My class was so small—only four of us—that we got a great deal of attention from each other and from the instructor. Writers are naturally supportive, I find, since writing is difficult for all of us and we are all often plagued by self-doubt. I feel I got honest feedback from people whom I may not see again--although we hope we do! This immersion put a fire under me to finish this play! And I think I may have my first full and complete draft done now!

Claudia: There were twelve in my class! But this didn't lessen the attention each writer received from classmates and the instructor. Everyone was allotted an entire hour in which his or her work was discussed and critiqued by the full class, as well as a half-hour individual session with the instructor. I had the opportunity to read substantial sections of the other writers' works (we had to submit at least twenty pages), and to learn about the craft of novel writing by seeing it in action. We also had to compose a new scene—there was homework every night!—which we then presented to the class.

Q. Are there particular techniques that were new to you or that you are excited to try?

Sandy: There are two structural techniques I am eager to try. One is “vertical writing,” a strategy of interrupting the narrative with information and description which will enhance the reader's experience. The challenge is to anchor your narrative, then gracefully turn away from it, so you don't lose your reader. How does a writer know when to do this? Ask, “Does my reader need to know this *now*? Does my reader need to know this *yet*? Does my reader need to know this? I also learned how to use white space to engage my reader and enhance comprehension. I always thought of white space as a convention of poetry; it surprised me how I could use it in prose.

Teri: Not really, but I enjoyed trying to use the prompts given in a practical way for the play. I did write quite a few scenes which grew out of “homework” prompts!

Claudia: I actually chose to try out a technique I learned when I wrote a new scene, also for “homework.” This involves giving a character some sort of object which has personal meaning to that character and which deepens the reader's knowledge of who that character is. I was very gratified when classmates commented that they understood this particular character much better through her attachment to a childhood toy.

Q. Was there anything especially thrilling or surprising about your experience?

Sandy: I expected I would create lots of new writing and generate lists of writing topics, but that's not what happened. Instead, I discovered my writing, even my best writing, wasn't nearly as good as I thought. I know that sounds demoralizing, but this is what's thrilling: I now know exactly what to do to ramp it up. I can ask questions of my writing I never knew to ask before participating in the Iowa Summer Writing Festival.

Teri: I would have gone to Iowa alone, but I was so glad I didn't have to! Going to a workshop with other writers/friends was so much fun. I loved being on a college campus and being within walking distance of many restaurants, bookstores, coffee shops, etc. We stayed at Iowa House, a hotel right on campus. I was a little doubtful it would be nice—but boy, it was!

Claudia: I'm with both Sandy and Teri on this. I have so many more ways now to critique my own work and to subject my writing to higher standards. The people I met there had so much they willingly shared about the craft of writing and were so forthcoming with feedback (even though some of it was painful to hear!). And Iowa City is a great college town! The week was a joy through and through. And we all got free T-shirts!