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## Connecting

Helen Walker  
*Section Editor*

Lisa Ruddick


Kathleen McColley Foster

Chauna Craig

Steven VanderStaay

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Connecting

### Authors

Helen Walker, Lisa Ruddick, Kathleen McColley Foster, Chauna Craig, Steven VanderStaay, Meg Peterson, and Linda K. Parkyn

# Connecting

## Section Editor's Message

The purpose of education is to give people a “glimpse of the force of human creativity.” I like this definition of Lisa Ruddick’s from her narrative included in “Connecting,” so I borrow it here. We get educated; we study in “content areas.” History teaches us the span of human creativity. The other humanities deepen our knowledge of its dimensions. The sciences define its operable rules. The arts provide opportunities for its practice. If we are lucky, through our study we glimpse this force of human creativity—and then situate ourselves in our particular spheres to *be* the force. Breathing, walking, collective human creativity.

Do you like the definition too? Let’s go with it then.

Let’s go straight to the paradox. The collective force of human creativity is at once magnificently powerful and fragile, both “volatile and eternal,” in Lisa’s words.

The narratives that follow, with collective force I might add, point out the dilemma we experience as we pursue the best within ourselves and within our profession.

Lisa Ruddick’s story, “We are the Poetry,” is the paradox itself. Although she speaks of the wrongness present in educational institutions, the power of her story and the honesty and courage in her telling are the glimpses of the force of human creativity that lead us on.

Kathleen McColley Foster’s narrative follows, a portrait of commitment to our profession, a portrait you may recognize as yourself some years ago. Next are three stories of the complex, fragile, and yet powerful work we perform in classrooms—where answers are seldom clear. Where we fail often—but fail in the service of *being the force* and so ultimately succeed. Where students perplex us but also show us the way, by teaching us to “live wildly,” as Meg Petersen explains in her narrative. Finally, Linda Parkyn’s “Coming Full Circle” narrates her journey to help learners catch their glimpse of *the force*.

Just now, I look up to see it is almost 6:00. I ran into Erin earlier today and promised I would come to the art studio; she is excited about this semester’s work in painting class (her major). She was in my first year seminar two years ago. We spent lots of extra time together; she has a learning disability and slaved over each paper.

I am back, and my mind is exploding from this fresh glimpse of the force of human creativity! The feisty persevering Erin I loved from Foundations of Composition—with her paintings *bursting* with ... human creativity! I had no idea! I want to *sing*—for her, for the glimpse she allowed me, and for the paradox which allows for eternal amazement and the eternal need for each of our very particular, courageous work.

## We Are the Poetry

Lisa Ruddick

Teaching an undergraduate poetry course this term, I'm feeling that I'm just now appreciating what English poets of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century were driving at when they spoke of poetry as existing in a timeless realm, where what happens happens for good, as if inscribed in the heavens. I was pondering this image the other day, and asked my daughter Ellen, who is twelve, whether she thinks that poetry is eternal. She said that she did, and I countered, "But what if all the poetry were burned?" Her response was that it would be here all the same, for "we are the poetry." This phrase has since been woven into the poetry of this week of my life; I keep coming back to it. But what does it mean? Virginia Woolf said virtually the same thing: "We are the words. We are the music" (72). Something connects the ways in which poets pull together the filaments of a created world and the ways in which our ordinary experience peaks in moments in which we pull things together and shape meanings. Why I think of this process as at once volatile and eternal, as I guess Ellen does, is something I'll have to think more about.

What seems clear to me in any case is that the feeling that "we are the poetry," the very feeling that makes life worth living, is easily sent into hiding when it encounters whatever force it is that drives academic institutions. What our educational system seems to do, from the early grades through the Ph.D., is to give people a glimpse of the power of human creativity but then to throw this awareness off, just enough that students and teachers have trouble feeling viscerally that they themselves, singly or in their work together, are part of the poetry. One of the things I've found striking, as I've shared stories and read work by other AEPL members over the last couple of years, is that no matter how different the teaching environments we work in, almost all of us seem to feel that we have to fight and fight, often against a numbness in ourselves, to create a space for our students in which the tentative, sometimes lonely process through which each person creates an imaginable world is honored rather than reduced to something else or simply overridden.

The particular intellectual world that is my professional home is *gratuitously* antithetical to the notion that there is a poetry in ourselves. My field is that of mainstream scholarship in kuteratyre, a field that in the last two decades, as most of the people outside it have had an easy time observing, has partially lost its moorings in reality and become dizzyingly "playful" and eccentric. I'm talking not about what happens in classrooms, where there is still a lot of diversity and humanity, but about the kinds of thinking that get rewarded with the highest prestige at professional conferences and in journals. While some valuable thought

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*Lisa Ruddick teaches English at the University of Chicago. She is the author of Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis and is working on Intuition and Brutality in Academic Life, a small portion of which appeared as "The Near Enemy of the Humanities is Professionalism," in The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

has emerged from this period of upheaval and innovation, the general atmosphere of intellectual license has resulted in a dehumanization of thought that I've spent some time trying to figure out. It's scary enough that teachers, in K-12 schools, constrained by standardized testing and standardized curricula, teachers can feel gravely impeded in helping their students to learn and grow. What's at least as scary to me is that in the upper reaches of the academy, where no one is constraining those with tenure to say or do anything, the poetry of life gets thrust aside just because people seem to take pleasure in repudiating it.

Against the idea that each life has its own precious and distinctive creative momentum, its own voice, professionals in my field are under pressure to agree that creativity is a historical construct, that the "singular voice" that any one person might evolve within a lifetime is not a precious thing but a spurious ideal emanating from the needs of the liberal state (Lloyd 109) and that "the poet" for that is not a person, offering something meaningful that each reader may weave into his or her own being (or choose to reject), but is merely "a discursive formation embedded in particular historical conditions and disciplinary needs."<sup>1</sup> These words may sound merely pretentious and technical, but, if you spend months or years in the presence of ideas like these, you can get very depressed.

What I make of this situation—though I'm almost ashamed to have come to such a bleak view—is that there is something in the life of contemporary institutions that, unless it is persistently noticed and fought, conduces to what the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls the "hatred of life." Bollas believes that the default position within our culture as a whole is to reward people for developing a "false self" that mirrors convention, in place of fully developing a personal "idiom" or a unique, metaphorically rich inner world, a poetry of self. In fact, what often happens is that the personal idiom gets reviled: "As many contemporary individuals exchange difference for sameness, *the loss of the urge to disseminate [one's personal] idiom is transformed into an unconscious hatred of difference.*" Whole institutions will offer, in place of the pleasure of putting one's irreplaceable, vulnerable voice into communion with other voices, the security or even exaltation that comes with "the dismantling of idiom" in oneself and others (98-99).

This destructive pleasure motivates much of the published work in my field. When in the Editor's Column of a recent issue of *PMLA* I read, "the four superb articles gathered in this issue have as their common horizon the exploration of various forms of affect as embodiments of discrete ideological negotiations" (284), I hear in these words the hatred of life, the pleasure in losing consciousness of whatever is poignant and precious in any one human voice or heart.

A colleague at another institution recently confided to me, "I don't even read *PMLA* because it always puts me in a bad mood. I don't care about any of it." Another colleague said, "No, I don't read *PMLA*. I look at the titles of the articles, and I say,

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is from a recent issue of *PMLA*. Since the author of the article is at a relatively early stage professionally and is more or less summarizing the current thinking in the field, and displaying expertise—something that is demanded in the process of making one's way up the ladder—I'm not naming the author here, though anyone who cares to look up the article will find in it a good synopsis of the multiple ways in which one can discount the idea that writers have anything special to offer.

‘Why would I want to read about that?’” For some people, then, the destruction of idiom is a pleasure that fails to captivate. It quickly gets boring, or sad. For myself, I can say that with every step I take away from the intellectual and moral universe of journals like *PMLA*, my world gets bigger. *PMLA* becomes the small world. That experience, of watching the coordinates reverse themselves, has probably happened to a lot of readers of *JAEPL* in the course of their lives.

I’m grateful to AEPL for existing and for helping to expose me to the voices of a myriad people who, however diverse, feel that the sacrifice of a personal idiom is a sad thing when it happens under institutional pressure and a ghastly thing when it happens for no good reason. This fact seems so obvious that maybe in time it will penetrate the world of literary studies and prompt a different kind of conversation. That’s my hope, particularly since right now there are signs that a large subset of the people in English have had enough and are wishing for change. In any case, it will be interesting to see what happens; I tell myself that, either way, I’ll find out something about the world.

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## Becoming a Professional: A Coming of Age Narrative from the 4Cs

Kathleen McColley Foster

“Surprise,” they said smiling as they handed me a large, carefully wrapped package. “We thought you would need this for your conference in Denver.”

I quickly unwrapped the gift and was holding a beautiful black leather briefcase with side pockets, zippers and locks. “Wow, it’s great,” I said with a big smile. “Now I’ll really look like a professional. Everyone will think I am a real professor or something.”

The hotel lobby is filled with many other 4Cs attendees. I feel lost and look around me. I don’t know anyone. Two professors from my graduate university are attending, but, with over 3,000 people in attendance, finding them is next to impossible. As a first time conference participant, name tags don’t really help,

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*Kathleen McColley Foster received her MA from the University of Hawaii and now teaches at a community college in Washington. She specializes in online instruction utilizing Syllabase, a virtual classroom made for and by English instructors.*

though I occasionally see a name which I recognize from having read composition journals and books. Of these “greats” I am in awe. They are my idols.

At the Newcomers Breakfast, a few “big name” scholars come up to me and welcome me. I’m sitting at a table marked “Scholars for the Dream.” Next to me sits a very nice young lady whom I just met and with whom I feel an instant friendship. People I don’t even know come up to congratulate me. I still haven’t realized the significance of this honor, but it gradually starts to sink in as I stand on the podium for a few seconds in the plenary session, shaking hands and looking out into a sea of faces, all smiling back at me. They are applauding me, a lowly part-time college instructor still struggling to finish her PhD.

In the ballroom and corridors strangers come up to me and offer their congratulations and encouragement. Strangely, I feel as if I’m being accepted into their fold as an equal. It is a completely different feeling from standing alone in the middle of a crowd at the MLA. After attending many interesting sessions given by scholars whom I have long admired, I find myself in a blissful daze. Not only am I enjoying the sessions, but also I am actually having engaging conversations with these colleagues of mine who amazingly express an interest in me and in my scholarship.

With a sigh of relief, I gather my papers and transparencies placing them into my new briefcase. My presentation is successful, and people surround me, asking questions and sharing from their own experiences in the classroom. Finally, the last professor leaves, and I look around. My new friend and colleague is standing a little to the side, waiting for me. She smiles beautifully and simply says, “You were great.”

As we pass by a lobby mirror, I glance out of the corner of my eye and see a young professional dressed in a suit, looking confident and discussing teaching strategies with a colleague. For a split second I hardly recognize that person, but it is myself. The moment passes, and this time I stop, looking squarely at this radiant face in the mirror. From deep down I feel it. A sense of accomplishment, of having grown almost overnight, of being acknowledged, accepted, and embraced by respected colleagues. “Yes, I am a professional now,” I think to myself as I lift my chin, adjust my briefcase, and head off to the next session.

## Writing the Bully

Chauna Craig

You’ve had Justin before—in your nightmares. The boy in the back who slumps in his desk; his head is a square block, eyes close together, forehead sloping. You’d describe him as Neanderthal, except it’s a cliché. And not nice.

Justin holds the door closed from the inside when you try to enter the

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*Chauna Craig received her doctorate from the University of Nebraska and is currently assistant professor of English at Indiana University of PA where she teaches composition and creative writing. Her writing has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Connecticut Review, Crab Orchard Review, and the Writing Lab Newsletter.*

classroom. He pulls girls' hair and bullies the boys into letting him copy homework. He harasses Nehla, the girl from India, for how she speaks English. He challenges every direction you give and whispers lewd comments. And most students can't help but laugh.

This is a college writing class. *College*. And nothing in your pedagogical research or seminars or previous classroom experience prepares you for this. You have to write your own text, call it *Pedagogy of the Bullied*. But, first, there's Justin whose attendance is maddeningly perfect. There every day to torture, mixing odd moments of insight with his special brand of aggravation.

Your colleagues, all male, advise you to kick him out, show him who's boss. And you hesitate. Fear of your own authority? Fear of some inability to work out the problem? Or do you really think this one can be saved? From what? By whom? You're no messiah. Tell yourself what you tell your students. "Write about it. Just start to write."

*Chapter One: Sympathy.* Try a heart-to-heart talk. Watch Justin nod then shake your hand as if in agreement. Watch hopelessly the next day as he throws a pen and bonks Lamont on the head.

*Chapter Two: Outrage.* Immediately shout that you will *not* tolerate that kind of behavior. Notice how the classroom collapses into silence you can't interpret. Study Justin's dark stare and reflect it back. Complain to your colleagues who repeat, "Just kick him out."

*Chapter Three: Bargaining/Begging.* Say, after class, "Look, if you can just keep your attention on the work itself for this hour, we can have a really good class. What do you say? Will you try harder? Please?"

*Chapter Four: Flattering/Lying.* Say, after the next class, after he's expressed in loud grunts the stupidity of the latest assignment, "You're a leader, Justin. The others look up to you. And with that comes power and responsibility. You can influence everyone's education in such a good way if you focus on positive things in your comments." Smile warmly when he replies, "Yeah, I never thought of it that way."

*Chapter Five: The Problem of Interpretation.* He tells a shy young woman in the front row that she has "great tits." He reminds you he's focusing on positive things.

*Last Chapter: Admitting Defeat.* Kick him out. Wrestle privately with guilt, humiliation, failure, and that gang of emotional bullies you'll never be able to roust. Return to class with a new lesson plan. Fill the gap of quiet with an assignment: "Write About a Time You Felt You Had No Control." Realize that most of these students have no idea where to start. Like you.

*Epilogue:* Read Nehla's paper late at night when you're tired and vulnerable. Read how she feels she has no control over the English language as it wrestles with her tongue, how she tries to coax it, force it, beg it to come out right, and how sometimes it doesn't and she feels like such a failure.

Consider into the dark, silent hours how maybe our only choice is to keep on trying.



# Discipline 101

Steven VanderStaay

By the time we asked about it, the semester was over. We had studied a wide array of teaching models and approaches. We had written unit plans and lesson plans, objectives and outcomes. Everyone thought it a great course. But in our moments together—speaking softly before class began, or meeting to study together for exams—we wondered if the professor would ever get around to saying something about it.

After all, he had been a high school teacher himself. He would know what to say and do. And wasn't his job to prepare us for student teaching? But soon the last day came and still not a word about it.

It was now or never. Sharon, the bravest of us, raised her hand. "Professor," she began, "what can you tell us about classroom discipline?" The class fell silent in expectation.

"Don't yell at them," he replied. "Any other questions?"

Looking back on this moment, I suppose the professor meant that a teaching approach which created proper contexts for learning would create a classroom where discipline problems were rare. By refusing to talk about discipline, he sought to keep us focused on this goal. "So-called 'discipline' approaches come at teaching from the wrong direction," he might have said. "They create contexts defined by restraint rather than learning."

But he didn't say these things. He said, "Don't yell at them." A nervous, pre-service teacher, I left the class disappointed, angry, and not a little afraid that I would find myself unprepared when faced with discipline problems of my own.

And so it was with no sense of betrayal that, finding myself at the tail end of a bad day in my first year of teaching, I directed a short, surgical strike of a yell at a group of boys who had ignored my requests to "please read quietly." The impact was immediate: the boys looked at me, grumbled once, put their noses in their books, and read quietly for the rest of the hour.

Assuming that what works once will work twice, I yelled again the next day, and then in another class, too. My success was startling. Students who once disturbed my classes began to eye me with a glint of respect. Conversations ceased at my approach. I found that even a quick turn of my head held a certain silencing power. My classes (excepting, of course, my own outbursts) became paradigms of order. And when the principal poked his head in for a quick look around before the Thanksgiving break, he gave me a big thumbs up, remarking, "Nice to see you've got everything under control."

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*Steven VanderStaay taught high school, working in urban, rural and bilingual settings, before resuming his graduate studies. Now an associate professor of English at Western Washington University, he teaches courses in literacy, linguistics, creative writing, and literature and published *Street Lives: An Oral History of Homeless Americans*.*

Then, recalling the emphasis in my methods class upon a student-centered classroom, I distributed a mid-term course evaluation, asking students for their thoughts on how the class was going and how I might improve it. Debra was the first to turn hers in. A quiet, solitary student, Debra sat at the front of the room, nearest my desk. Debra wrote charming, pastoral narratives about events on her family farm and had once given me a thank you note for the response I had written to one of her essays. Confident of her praise, I took Debra's evaluation and read the single line she had written.

"Don't yell at us," it said.

## To Live Wildly

Meg Petersen

This morning, in my composition class, we had our final readings of the semester. I was amazed at how so many of the students read the most personal and intimate thing they had written all term. In the absence of specific instruction on what to read, they seem to have chosen to make their writing a gift. They selected the piece which would reveal the most about themselves and offered it up, not for response, not for praise, but in a simple act of giving.

As we worked our way around the room we heard stories of suicidal depression, deaths of grandparents and high school friends, and two pieces dedicated to mothers—one about a mother who had left her 11-year-old daughter in order to overcome a drug problem, the other about a mother who grew up in such poverty that she named the rats in her apartment as pets. These extraordinary revelations of these students' selves, most beautifully written, all carefully chosen, bring me back again and again to the richness of this work we have chosen, but none so deeply, on this day, as Lindsay's.

Lindsay read the paper she had brought to me the week before in conference. She had arrived for our weekly meeting, clutching her paper. Before she read it to me, she said, "This is really personal. Only three people know about this." She wrote of how she had to escape to the wilderness "to live wildly" because her secrets "had become louder." I guessed that she was writing about an abortion.

I felt odd counseling Lindsay about how to make her meaning clearer to readers, as so few people knew her secret. I wondered if she wanted readers at all. But, in this final reading, it was this piece she chose to share. She clutched her paper tightly as she read about how she wanted to give herself back to the earth, but wondered, "Is my soul good enough to be taken back as a flower, or will I be a weed?" She concluded her paper by resigning herself to take the life she had left—her own—and live it.

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*Meg Petersen is an associate professor of English at Plymouth State College in Plymouth, New Hampshire. She is an editor of the Plymouth Writers Group anthologies of teachers' writing and the director of the Plymouth Writing Project.*

So many times when I meet with students and they talk to me about their writing, I marvel at the teaching relationship—and how it can be so intimate and so formal at the same time. We work with another person's thinking as they discover their truths, yet we work always within the constraints of our role. We are privy to the most intimate details of their souls, yet the price of our entrance is an almost reverent respect that compels us to treat them as a character in their own lives.

Sometimes I leave the writing classroom awed at what has transpired there. These are the moments in class when my skin prickles, when I know that something genuine has occurred. In a writing class, we can enter another person's universe through their writing and emerge changed for having been there. The world can become, for all of us, a bit more complex and interesting.

Often the truth resonates most clearly in those minutes of respectful silence, those times when a student quietly gets up to shut the door to cut off the noise from outside, those times when we allow ourselves to be transported by a classmate's words into a life we will never know first-hand, or those moments when someone has finished reading a piece and you can hear everyone in the room just breathing it in. In these moments, I too feel as if I am living wildly, and know there is no more important instant, no more essential vocation, than breathing in those stories, receiving those gifts.

## Coming Full Circle

Linda K. Parkyn

I came full circle last month when Katherine Patterson, author of the Newberry award-winning book, *The Bridge to Terabithia*, came to speak at the college where I teach. I joined this gracious woman on a panel discussing censorship issues. She was the author of a story that was influential in my struggle with censorship a few years ago. The sense of closure which this experience brought to my struggle prompted me to write my own story here.

The circle began when my son's fifth grade class was assigned to read *The Bridge to Terabithia*. I was the Vice President of the school board in our community, and the concerned parents of students in my son's classroom came to a meeting determined to stop the reading of it. I read the book and thought it was a wonderful, honest book about friendship, death, and dying. The parents objected to the death of a child in the book and the way the characters dealt with it. They did not think that the book was age appropriate and asserted that they should be the ones to talk to their children about these issues, not teachers and students in the classroom by themselves.

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*Linda K. Parkyn is professor of TESOL and Spanish at Messiah College. She was a Fulbright Scholar this year, teaching at the Universidad Autonoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico.*

The upshot of this meeting was that it did not stop the reading of the text, but it left me shaken with the sense that children were prevented from exploring things that were a part of their world. My response was to write an article entitled “Circling the Wagons: What Should Children Read?” published in *The Executive Educator*, a journal associated with the National School Board Association. Here is part of the text:

Children need to read about others who struggle as they do. They need to think about those who argue, dream and remember in different ways. For an afternoon, sprawled on their bedroom floors, they need to read about life as Huck Finn experienced it. They need to imagine that they have a friendship as close as Jess and Leslie in *The Bridge to Terabithia*. They need to see the perseverance of Helen Keller and the integrity of *The Call of the Wild*. They need to sift through the agony that made Anne Frank pick up her pen. One of the best ways to teach ethics to our children is to embed the choices of life in stories. Sometimes stories are all we remember when confronted with the difficult choices of life. Actions, taken years later, are triggered by stories that we once read.

In response to my article, a local clergyman wrote expressing his discomfort with allowing children to read widely. He asserted: “Our children do face real threats, savages that lurk in the brush: pederasty, pornography, drug abuse, bigotry, violence, depression, to name a few. Yes they are real, and yes they must be confronted. But do we want to invite them into our children’s encampment? Should we encourage our children to try out Nazism? Should we allow them to make a choice of *Hustler* magazine in the school library? These illustrate that circles of morality must be drawn.”

The editors of the journal responded: “We won’t censor you Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. But for the record, our author referred to Helen Keller, Anne Frank, Huck Finn, *The Bridge to Terabithia*, and *Call of the Wild*. She did not advocate exposing elementary school students (or any other children) to Nazism, *Hustler* magazine, or cocaine. The distinction between license and a liberal education seems to have eluded you.”

One little boy in my son’s fifth grade class lost his father while the students were reading *The Bridge to Terabithia*. One of the things that the teacher did in trying to help the boy come to terms with his father’s death was to have him write notes and feelings down to include in the casket in order to help him say good-bye to his dad. I am grateful that this controversial book helped this little boy to know that he wasn’t alone in experiencing this tragedy. Some of the parents kept repeating in our meetings that death was an unsuitable topic for children. They were right: death was unsuitable to this little boy and his family, but it did happen. And children need to read and write and talk about unsuitable topics.

Circling back in my thinking makes me wonder about things that I deem unsuitable. When I don’t like what I read, I hope that I can ask the question—how has my tradition not informed me? What gives me a platform to speak but not this person and their ideas? How do we become informed so that all of us do not reduce the world to categories of suitable and unsuitable? Stories help us not to reduce the world. They tell of the complexities of life; they engage us with irony, paradox, and inconsistency in concrete ways. These contrast mightily with circling the wagons around us and around our children. We must allow for narratives to help all of us make sense of the world. ☹