

[Ron MacLean on Writing](#) [1]

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Interview by Kelcey Parker

TW is pleased to join author Kelcey Parker in copublishing interviews with some of our featured writers. Kelcey's "How to Become a Writer" series appears on her website [Ph.D. in Creative Writing](#) [3], where she's been running interviews with authors since July 2011. Each writer answers the same five questions.



Ron MacLean is author of the novels *Headlong* (2013) and *Blue Winnetka Skies* (2004) and the story collection *Why the Long Face?* (2008). His fiction has appeared in *GQ*, *Fiction International*, *Best Online Fiction 2010*, and elsewhere. He's a recipient of the Frederick Exley Award for Short Fiction, a multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, and teaches at Grub Street in Boston.

Ron's essays have also appeared in *Talking Writing*. Be sure to read his most recent TW piece, "[Literary Criticism Is Dead.](#)" [4] in the Winter 2014 issue. Here's a sample:

I love literature and believe it has a future. I hope serious criticism does, too. But we'll only be able to attain that future by accepting the reality of the present.

The study of literature is dying, partly because of self-inflicted wounds. I'm happy to debate all the reasons why: the dominance of an elite school of mostly white, male academics; increased theoretical abstraction; easy-to-mock "littray" pronouncements.

But my focus here is more basic: Literary criticism has become irrelevant—the neglected lima beans on the cultural dinner plate. In order for criticism to matter, literature has to matter. It doesn't, and it won't again soon, at least not in the same way it did for a hundred-plus years of its history.

1. Why did you want to become a writer?

RM: As far back as I can remember, stories have been the way I've understood the world. Reading stories gave me insights I craved, and writing them gave me a way to understand my own perceptions and experiences.

I started out as a journalist. And I love journalism, especially investigative journalism. But I probably should have recognized my fate back in high school, when I complained to a friend about an assignment for journalism class: "The story would have been much better if I wasn't limited to the facts."

2. How did you go about becoming a writer?

RM: In the beginning, I was self-educated, and that's continued to be a huge aspect of my learning. I read a lot, and I reread work that moves me. Again and again. I puzzle at it, trying to figure out what makes it touch me. I trace an evocative sentence at the end of a short story back through the text, looking for where its power originated. And then I try to do the same.

Once I left journalism, I applied to grad school and ended up getting a Doctor of Arts from SUNY Albany. The community of writers and teachers I met there finally made me a writer. We formed each other.

3. Who helped you along the way and how?

RM: Wow. I could go on forever. I'll name a few, but there are many more.

Writers whose work I've read and studied, whose words now live in me and have helped shape me: Flannery O'Connor, Rick Bass, Jeanette Winterson, Donald Barthelme, Gertrude Stein, Marilynne Robinson.

Four books that literally changed my life: Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Barthelme's *Forty Stories*, and O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*.

Teachers and mentors who taught me through their commitment to the work (the joy of it, the value of it): Gene Garber, Judy Johnson, Don Schatz.

And maybe, most significantly for me, my fellow writers in the SUNY Albany writing program—where we learned and taught each other that we're part of the same tribe—that we each only thrive as we help each other thrive. They gave me permission to stop trying to hew to a "classic" short story style that didn't match the stories I wanted to tell. Another way to put it is they pushed me over the ledge into a free fall where I found my voice, which involves treating every new story as a brand-new thing that deserves its own brand-new way of being told.

I'll always be grateful for the community that held me safe as I explored such new territory (especially for Lori Anderson Moseman and Jan Ramjerdi). We are each other's best resource, and that's something I try to live everywhere I go; it's part of what I value now at Boston's Grub Street.

4. Can you tell me about a writer or artist whose biography inspires you?

RM: Absolutely. While it's a tossup between O'Connor and Stein, I'll go with Flannery. Writing did not come easily to her. It mattered enough to her to persist through physical (as well as emotional) pain and illness. And it was, for her, a means to grope toward an understanding of the mystery that lies beyond daily life. She always sought to convey an experience of mystery in her stories; at the same time, she was ruthless about the necessity of representing life in honest and real physical detail. That desire, that commitment, has been a major inspiration for me. She and I work differently in many ways, but we share a desire to get beyond the daily to explore what we would both define as the mystery at the heart of human experience.

5. What would you say in a short letter to an aspiring writer?

RM: Love what you do. Delight in the work, and let that be your primary joy. Don't let the business side of it discourage

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you. If writing matters to you, do it with everything you've got, and don't worry about how many people read it.

Read More by Ron MacLean

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- Stories: [Why the Long Face](#) [6]
- A cowboy-movie novel: [Blue Winnetka Skies](#) [7]
- Story: ["The Night Dentist"](#) [8]
- Essay: ["Is Fiction Empathy's Best Hope?"](#) [9] at *Talking Writing*
- Essay: ["Literary Criticism Is Dead"](#) [4] at *Talking Writing*

*This interview originally appeared in a different format as ["How Ron MacLean Became a Writer"](#) [10] in **Ph.D. in Creative Writing** on February 23, 2014.*

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