

Powers that be work in mystical ways

by Terry Shields

"You could always teach ..."

WRONG! If there's only one thing this godforsaken institution has taught me. It's the simple fact that I should not become a teacher. Granted, I probably wouldn't be all that bad. But let's face it, being a passed-out wino with an empty bottle of Thunderbird in my hand would be less destructive than being a poor to mediocre teacher. Out in the gutter, the only person you hung is yourself.

Real teachers are a breed apart from the professional go-through-the-motions types. Students tend to make this distinction quite easily. Hell, we've only been sitting in front of them for 15 years. After all that practice, it's rather simple picking the real "teachers" out from the talking rutabagas.

Administrators, however, cannot fall back on this valuable first-hand knowledge when evaluating an instructor's ability. In general, they

tend to make a slightly more eclectic approach. For instance, witness the mystical ways of the Powers That Be in the arena of Creative Writing.

Every summer, the Powers have evaluated the list of aspiring applicants for part-time teaching positions, ranked them, and filled the available spots. Everyone found their proper place and was painlessly appeased. Until this last summer, that is.

In keeping with the hard-line stance that has been plaguing the country since last November, the Powers decided to toughen up their evaluations. As a result, they came up with their ranking that, for the first time, listed names of people NOT RECOMMENDED to teach creative writing classes.

Sounds okay so far, right? Every competition has got to have its winners and losers (yes, even in budget cuts, Caspar). Fine. So will somebody please explain to Richard Astle, Mary Armatrout, Melvyn Freilicher

and Stephanie Mood why they are not competent to teach creative writing here?

Dan McCleod can't, and he's the Chairman of the English Department, the power over the Powers. He's still waiting for the list of criteria that the Powers used to make their judgments — three months ago. Understandably, he's not the only one who's waiting.

Somewhere along the way, the Powers apparently overlooked a minuscule component of the evaluation process. They forgot to make the rules. A trivial point, I know, but occasional..., it's helpful to the people being judged.

Now the Powers in this strange cue of "guess my list" happen to be the three members of the Creative Writing Subcommittee. And they will readily admit that they indeed

used a fair set of standards in judging CW teachers. They just can't show you what they are. Three simple guidelines: quantity and quality of published work and, oddly enough, teaching effectiveness.

It may seem a tad strange that the Powers rely rather heavily on written word when they themselves have yet to write out their own criteria. Stranger still, when you realize that listening to a good writer is not quite the same as listening to a good teacher. They both might be interesting, but you only learn something from the teacher.

Teaching effectiveness seems a bizarre criterion in light of the previous two, and I'm glad that the Powers threw this one in. But how do they judge such a seemingly tangential quality? By sitting in on a lecture or maybe talking to students? Of course not. Too biased. They used the

objective student evaluations from past classes. Remember filling those out every semester? Have you ever taken those things seriously?

All this, of course, is hearsay until the Powers get it together and write out their criteria officially. To the people involved, though, it's rather dizzying. For the moment, they have been banished to the purgatory of English 100 classes for failing to live up to the unknown standards. They have all taught CW classes before; why are they just now found to be incompetent?

My particular beef in all this? Besides the principle, which we all know is bullshit, I've had Richard Astle for three classes in the last three years. He's had a rather profound effect on my writing. Now he's declared as an incompetent teacher. Where does that leave me and all of his past students?