

September 21, 2006

Report on 2006 BIRS Workshop in Creative Writing in Mathematics and
Science

Like its two predecessors, the third BIRS workshop in Creative Writing in Mathematics and Science brought together twenty participants from a range of backgrounds: a mix of mathematicians and scientists with active vocational interests in writing, and writers with active intellectual interests in science and mathematics. Again we included writing in all genres, and required that participants bring work in progress, rather than published work. In a departure from previous practice, this time only ten places were filled by invitation; the other ten were chosen by The Banff Centre method, adjudicated application. The Banff Centre handled all aspects of the application process, from advertising to sending applications to the organizers for adjudication, to notifying the applicants of the results. We received thirty-three applications for these spaces, more than for many programs that draw from a strictly literary clientele through the Banff Centre. Most were of outstanding quality.

By all criteria of evaluation, the workshop was, in the phrase used by several of the participants, 'wildly successful'. Several used the word 'transformative'. Many have already reported exceptional creative activity coming out of the workshop, on revisions and on new pieces. In fact, play that was revised in the light of comments received at the workshop has already been accepted, in its revised version, for a public reading in San Francisco.

Here's how the workshop proceeded. We met for five forty-five minute sessions each day, drafts having been circulated between two weeks and a day in advance. Without exception, participants came to the sessions well-prepared to comment on their colleagues' efforts; everyone spoke in nearly every session. In some cases, the session consisted of feedback on a proposal – reactions to the ordering of chapters, to the sketched content of chapters, sometimes to the shape of a whole manuscript. In one case, we spent the session putting together a reading list for a theatre project on the nature of time. In cases where we were presented with drafts of completed work, the sessions tended to focus on two elements, often simultaneously: the success of the piece as writing (often very detailed suggestions were offered) and the accuracy of the science or mathematics that was in or behind the piece. Writers found the presence of working mathematicians and scientists extremely helpful in this regard. Mathematicians and scientists found the presence of writers (perhaps especially poets, with their awareness of craft) illuminating. The testimonials attached to this report show how valuable the workshop was to many; and underline the many different ways in which it was valuable. The on-line recording of the final reading will convey some sense of the quality and range of the work. Please go to <http://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/program.aspx?id=438>. This audio record will be supplemented by the anthology that the organizers are currently putting together. Work is being solicited from participants in all three workshops, and editing will occur over the coming months. The much-respected Canadian literary journal, *The Fiddlehead*, has expressed interest in devoting a special issue

to the anthology. The Banff Centre has also expressed interest in publishing the anthology.

Two of the organizers, Chandler Davis and Marjorie Senechal, are mathematicians (and co-editors of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*). We agree that cooperation with The Banff Centre was also critical to this workshop's resounding success because it brought to the mix of participants outstanding literary professionals who were able to assist the mathematicians in their writing far more effectively than we could have assisted one another.

The third organizer, Jan Zwicky, has been a faculty member of many workshops and literary arts programs, including The Banff Centre's May Studio, Saskatchewan's *In the Field* residencies, UBC's Booming Ground, The Kootenay School of

Writers, Campbell River's Writing on the Water Workshop, and the Maritime Writers Workshop. She has also taught Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick, and edited for Brick Books for many years. She reports: "My experience with this workshop was unique: I have never before encountered such an intensely focussed, nor such an *adventurous*, group of writers. There was a tremendous sense of communal effort, of generosity mixed with deep respect for the need to get the work right. Criticism was often stringent, but was never offered, nor taken, personally. Was this just the result of a lucky mix of people? I don't think so, though I am sure we were lucky. I believe these features of the workshop were due, in significant measure, to the clientele: people interested in art with a specific, often difficult, intellectual focus. The writers who came were not, could not possibly be, anti-intellectual; the mathematicians and scientists who came were not, could not possibly be, impervious to aesthetic questions. It is this mix that, I believe, accounts for the extraordinary success of the workshop. Collaborative, cross-disciplinary intellectual-aesthetic interests were of the essence."

Other features also contributed to the workshop's success: calling for and adjudicating applications (new for a BIRS workshop); the collaborative process in the sessions themselves, the absence of a designated 'senior'

writer leading the workshop (new for a Banff Centre writing workshop); the length of the sessions; the decision to circulate work in advance; the scheduling of two round table sessions for the discussion of *ideas* relevant to writing, science, and mathematics; the length of the workshop (five days); and the provision of time each afternoon for writing. It was also important that assistance with funding was made available to participants: we are grateful to BIRS for its generous support of the participants' program fees,

and equally grateful to The Banff Centre for covering administrative costs and the costs of the final reading and reception. We are also grateful to The Banff Centre for its promotion of the program via its website and Summer Festival promotional material. We urge that all these features be retained in future workshops of this nature. Additionally, we suggest that *all* places be filled by adjudicated application; and hope that future workshops will be advertised through BIRS' website as well as The Banff Centre's/

But, most importantly, we urge that there *be* other workshops of this na-

ture. No other creative writing workshops anywhere are devoted to the shape of mathematical and scientific content. The success of this workshop points to the importance of future collaboration between BIRS and The Banff Centre, the pooling of resources and expertise to facilitate genuine and exciting cross-fertilization.

Respectfully submitted,
Chandler Davis, University of Toronto
Kim Mayberry, The Banff Centre
Marjorie Senechal, Smith College
Jan Zwicky, University of Victoria