

Years ago, in the Harvard Educational Review, the linguist Martin Joos published an account of how he submitted a paragraph to a large group of English teachers, who were agreed that it was not good writing by any reasonable standard. Their reasons ranged from accusations of awkwardness and ungrammaticality to criticism of the paragraph's colloquialism. Only after a protracted discussion in which the teachers enumerated their reasons for giving the paragraph no more than a "C," he revealed to them that it was a selection (and a fairly representative one) from a prize-winning autobiography. Not only that, but an appeal to standard references on grammar, style, and usage, would show that there was only one technical mistake in the whole passage. And not a single teacher spotted it. Clearly a writer ought not to cast his lot with that kind of teacher. Not if he's interested in Good Writing.

Teachers, if they're interested in Good Writing, ought to cast their lot with writers. The way for teachers to learn to recognize good writing is to join the battle and fight the enemies, not just in the classroom or just through instruction, but also by writing themselves and showing their writing to their students. Good Writing is a social activity. If Good Writing is a gift, we must learn how to give it, rather than to demand it.

Outsiders

Tonight we meet visitors
from another world.
The whole sky speaks of it,
though the government denies it.
Perhaps the government does not know
some alien Columbus
is disappointed that we
are not the galactic Cathay.
Sitting in council,
planning to spread democracy
through the universe,
we have forgotten
that travelers to islands
come only for treasure.
At first.
What kind of scalps
will they teach us to take?
What kind of dances
will we do to send them away
too late?

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