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Madwomen In The Attic

by [Elizabeth Hoover](#) / December 15, 2010 / [3 Comments](#)

Women Who Don't Bite Their Tongues: Writing Workshop Celebrates More Than Thirty Years

On a recent October morning, the Madwomen in the Attic poetry workshop began with an argument. A student shared a poem written by a man and some of her classmates took umbrage at its depiction of women. "He's generalizing," a participant argued. "It's lovely; men don't usually celebrate women this way," someone countered. "It's sexist," another woman disagreed. One student balled up her copy of the poem and tossed it aside.

"Alright, we have an issue we disagree on," Jan Beatty, the workshop's instructor, calmly said. The student who had balled up her copy smoothed it out, and the class came back to the task at hand: the discussion of the craft of poetry.

The twelve women ranged in age from their early twenties to their late nineties. What brings them together — beyond their gender — is a commitment to good writing. The class laughed over shared jokes, good-naturedly lampooned poor word choice, and praised especially nice turns of phrase. This was a typical day, according to Beatty, who also directs the program.

The Madwomen in the Attic started in 1979 at [Carlow College](#), now Carlow University. (<http://www.carlow.edu/>) Writer Tillie Olsen had given a reading on campus and was mobbed afterward by students with questions. Recognizing the need for writing workshops for women, Dr. Ellie Wymard, now director of Carlow's MFA program, and fiction writer Jane Coleman decided to start Madwomen in the Attic.

The program is housed at Carlow, but is open to the public. Currently, they offer six different workshops that meet throughout the week on Carlow's campus. Sixty-four students are enrolled in the current twelve-week session and there is a waiting list for the next round. Students can choose workshops in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction.

Coleman and Wymard took the name from a landmark work of feminist literary criticism: [The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination](#) by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. The madwoman in Gubar and Gilbert's title is the wife Mr. Rochester keeps locked in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

By and large, participants have embraced the name. For Beatty, the moniker saves time. "If you call yourself a Madwoman, you don't have to be presentable," she said. "You can just write what you want and make sure it's good."

Beatty came to the Madwomen in 1990, while still an MFA student at the University of Pittsburgh. "Here I had the support of readers who had an understanding through shared life experiences," she said.

While the workshops are supportive, that doesn't mean you can get away with bad writing. "If you bring in some poem about your grandkids with unicorns and rainbows, we'll tell you it's corny and it's not working," Beatty clarified.

According to Beatty there is a "serious hunger" among female writers for workshops where they feel they are taken seriously. She has students who drive up from West Virginia or make a three-hour trip from Maryland. Other participants have formed ancillary groups of Madwomen that meet in each other's houses.

Beatty started teaching at the Madwomen after receiving her MFA and struggled with teaching older students. "I have this thing about respecting my elders and I was too cautious," she recalled. One day she brought a poem to class and warned them that it had some explicit language in it. Lucienne Wald, a student in her eighties, asked, "What do you mean?" Wald listed off words that would make a late-night comedian blush, then added, "Do you think that we haven't lived?" Beatty said that it was a "turning point" in her teaching: She would no longer stereotype the older women.

Shortly after, Beatty decided to change the program's image. She started by asking her students if they wanted to be seen as old women writers or as writers. "They all started banging on the table," she related. "They were chanting 'writers, writers, writers.'"

When longtime director Patricia Dobler died in 2004, Beatty stepped in to fill the role. She also edits the program's nationally distributed anthology, *Voices from the Attic*. Over the years, she has heard countless stories of women fleeing sexist teachers, receiving patronizing rejection slips, or feeling unable to write with the pressures of being wives and mothers. "Sexism isn't over," Beatty remarked. "It's especially poignant with women who come after their husbands have died because they feel like they couldn't write before that. They are limited by their traditional roles."

Lucienne Wald: "Women's problems aren't men's problems."

Tragedy brought artist Lucienne Wald to writing. After her 29-year-old son Phillip died in 1982, she could no longer paint. She saw an ad for the Madwomen workshop and signed up for a fiction class, where she started her novel.

The book is loosely based on Wald's experience living in Japan in the 1950s with her husband, an Air Force physician who studies the effects of radiation. She is still struggling to finish the book, but has joined Jan

Beatty's poetry workshop and found a vibrant community there.

"We get to know each other through poetry. It's a different kind of family than a real family, but it is a family," she said.

At 88, Wald isn't the oldest Madwoman, but she is the student who has been there the longest. She plans to attend the workshops for the rest of her life. "It's like going into a womb with the Madwomen. It's a little enclave," she says

Read Lucienne Wald's "[Knock on Wood](#)"

Tess Barry: "A woman is more than being 50 and pretending you're 30."

Growing up in a family with ten children in Pittsburgh, Tess Barry saw how people "catered to the boys." As an adult, that became "deferring to the men." Barry, 39, described herself as a "strong woman who doesn't take any shit," but added that these culturally ingrained attitudes are difficult to escape.

Barry attended New York University's dramatic writing program, but finished her studies at the University of Pittsburgh to be near her family after her father died. She also has a Master's in literature. She lives on the South Side with her husband and works as the administrator of a legal mediation group.

When she started attending the Madwomen workshop, she was surprised by the "level of commitment" from the participants. "The quality of writing is tremendous," she added. In addition to writing poetry and fiction, Barry is collaborating with her husband on a screenplay about street fighting in the 1960s.

Barry loves the intimacy of an all-women workshop and finds the diversity of perspectives to be one of the most exciting aspects. In particular, she finds the mix of generations inspiring. "Culture is geared toward celebrating youth, especially for women. These women defy that," she explained. "They bring in poems about being 70-years-old and still enjoying sex. They constantly reinvent themselves."

According to Barry, being a Madwoman means "accepting and loving yourself."

Read Tess Barry's "[Shagging Albert Einstein](#)"

Liane Ellison Norman: "There is always a masculine thumb on the scale."

"Get a life," is Liane Ellison Norman's advice to young women who refuse to call themselves feminists. "If you care about women, you're a feminist. If you care about human beings, you're a feminist."

Norman, 73, is a retired literature professor who founded the Pittsburgh Peace Institute, and ran for Senate in 1982. It's not just women who suffer from sexism, Norman believes, but all of society. "When you diminish or repress a whole group of people, you lose their talents. It's stupid and it's wrong," she said.

Although she has been writing her whole life, she turned to poetry in 2003 when her daughter Emily, died of cancer. She joined the Madwomen shortly thereafter. Norman said the Madwomen help her "be brave," and for this intellectual that means exploring her emotions.

By the time she came to the Madwomen, Norman had already published a novel, *Stitches in Air* and a biography, *Hammer of Justice: Molly Rush and the Ploughshares Eight*. She credits the workshop with helping her develop as a poet. She said her early poems were "embarrassing," but the workshop has helped her become a more sophisticated writer. Since joining the Madwomen she has published two volumes of poetry, *The Duration of Grief* and *Keep*.

Read Liane Ellison Norman's "[Pool](#)"

Sarah Williams-Devereux: "These women will be damned if they will be silenced."

Sarah Williams-Devereux began her literary career at age of 3 with a story called "Gonzo and the Thunder." Now this 31-year-old visual artist is taking her writing to the next level in the Madwomen's workshop.

She joined in 2003 and found that she could have conversations there that she couldn't have with a man in the room. "With men, there's another gaze and you realize that you are being watched," she said. "You're almost stepping outside of yourself to see yourself through that other person's eyes."

At the Madwomen workshops she found a "sanctuary." Now she is the administrative assistant in the English department at Carlow and works closely with the women she called "brutally and lovingly honest." She is working on a chapbook, which she hopes to publish soon.

While hoping for a publication, Williams-Devereux draws inspiration from working with older women, some of whom started publishing in their 70s. "Just because you come to the party late, doesn't mean you can't bring the best dish," she added.

She was also quick to add that the workshop is also a lot of fun, even "bawdy." According to her, Madwomen not only have a serious commitment to poetry, but also an enthusiasm for literature, friendship, and immeasurable joy.

Read Sarah Williams-Devereux's "[Exodus](#)"

[Read](#) Elizabeth's bio.

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Really fine piece. Captures the essence of a creative incubator for many, a spiritual haven for some.



2. Madalon Amenta December 20, 2010 at 1:39 pm ·

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