

## Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada



**Lise Jaillant, Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities (Oxford: Oxford UP 2023), 288 pp. US \$40 (Hardback) ISBN 978-0-192-85530-5**

**Zak Jones**

Volume 60, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107941ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v60i1.41296>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada

### ISSN

0067-6896 (print)

2562-8941 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Jones, Z. (2023). Review of [Lise Jaillant, *Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2023), 288 pp. US \$40 (Hardback) ISBN 978-0-192-85530-5]. *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada*, 60, 1–4.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v60i1.41296>

© Zak Jones, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## REVIEWS

Lise Jaillant, *Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2023), 288 pp. US \$40 (Hardback) ISBN 978-0-192-85530-5

Review by ZAK JONES  
University of Toronto

Lise Jaillant's *Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities* is situated at the cutting edge of book history. In Jaillant's rendering, her new monograph examines not the "macro-history of creative writing programmes" writ large (9). Instead, it looks at the voices, attitudes, personas, and histories of those integral writers associated with the epoch-shifting advent of creative writing as a university practice. Creative writing, then, is seen as more than an extra-academic artistic endeavour that fits uncomfortably, at best, in the structure of higher education. The rebellious nature of the academized discipline of creative writing is shown to have an immense impact on universities across the United States and the United Kingdom. Tenuous in nature, the discipline within the academy is growing – with the ceiling of that growth fast approaching. In her investigation of these programs' foundations and aims, Jaillant examines their bearing on the future of creative writing, as such, both in and outside of the academy.

Jaillant homes in on the progenitors of two elite American creative writing programs: Stanford University's Wallace Stenger and the University of Iowa's Paul Engle. She then links their American ontologies with work done by their English counterpart, Malcolm Bradbury of the University of East Anglia. *Literary Rebels*, in turn, becomes, in Jaillant's words, a "book 'history from below,'" an analysis of the tiny base that fueled the spread of these programs in the twenty-first century (9). In this way, *Literary Rebels*

is a timely examination of the beginnings of an academic behemoth of a discipline within the growth of the humanities. How better to understand where we are in the development of the study of creative writing than to look at those who ushered in its institutionalization?

Up until reading Jaillant's book, my participation in the creative writing field of the academy had never led me to consider who the founders of particular programs were, which programs they founded, or what ideals drove their endeavours. Jaillant's history from below "seeks to recover the voices of writers associated with these programs" and, indeed, those who created the field as we know it today (9). Engle, for example, is not the most famous writer associated with the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He nonetheless built the model for creative writing education in Iowa and helped shape the *oeuvre* of American arts and letters for the better part of the century. In founding the Workshop, Engle was determined to push American writing into the international sphere by keeping aspiring American writers out of the metropolises. By examining Engle's hopes, disappointments, and frustrations throughout his founding of the Workshop, rather than focusing simply on notable participants, Jaillant recentres the narrative of the ur-creative writing program into a phenomenon with its own genesis story undergirding its success (39). Imagine my surprise as a student and teacher in creative writing at my own university that all this success and infamy is not entirely owed to Iowa-alum Flannery O'Connor or the lore surrounding John Berryman.

Jaillant's work establishes a necessary from-the-ground-up examination of creative writing's history in the academy, and she interweaves that history with an analysis of where academized creative writing stands today. The tensions between the "*radical individualism model*" of a writer's career outside of the university and that of an academized writer within the *system* of creative writing departments continue to stir impassioned debates among practitioners of the craft (228–30). Indeed, Jaillant's approach allows writers, students, and historians the freedom to continue the "still-unresolved debates about its institutional location: does it fit in Literature Departments? In Arts Schools? Or should it be on its own?" (9). Jaillant

returns to this debate again and again over the course of *Literary Rebels*, which documents the origins of the question and its effects on an ever-increasing pool of creative writing programs in the academy. All too often, enrollment levels allow creative writing programs to be seen as bailouts in otherwise shrinking humanities departments across the anglophone world.

Further distinguishing Jaillant's research in *Literary Rebels* is its transatlantic scope; Jaillant focuses not only on American programs, but creative writing initiatives in UK schools as well. There is a tendency among MFA graduates and instructors to view the institutionalization of creative writing as an "American trap" in which the discipline has struggled to balance the scholarly identity of its participants as either "rebel[s]" or "professional[s]" (228). By examining the history of UK programs as well, Jaillant proves that this conundrum is prevalent across a wider anglosphere and is inherent to the discipline. This tension, it seems, continues to propel skyrocketing enrollment because the programs have and continue to attract, protect, and nurture real art while simultaneously offering their participants a *certification* as bonafide artists.

This certification, however, juts up against the once normative understanding of writers as individual rebel artists. *Literary Rebels*, however, shows how these competing ideals – that of the rugged individual artist versus the nurtured, institutionalized one – formed the dynamic, if not fraught, atmosphere of competition that continues to attract students of all sorts. In short, the rebels and founders in Jaillant's study created the groundwork to attract select students with artistic drive and a desire to prove themselves as *rebels* whose work is verified by a value-adjudicating authority. For everyone else, these programs built a non-rebellious cottage industry of teaching, administrating, and workshopping, offering a safety net for those who never escape the academic bubble.

*Literary Rebels* addresses the limits of the dichotomy between the outsider and rebellious writers and the institutionalized creative writers by looking at the University of East Anglia. Its academization of creative writing led to a high-profile but now-defunct partnership with Guardian

Masterclasses. Jaillant uses this case study and many more to identify the limits of the institutional crossover from the academy to for-profit cultural spaces and vice versa. Rather than a means for humanities departments to simply make money, creative writing program enrollment is driven by students' desire for professional acknowledgement and encouragement rather than a promised pathway to financial success through writing. It cannot be any other way.

Creative writing in the academy, then, can be seen as an incubator for the students who occupy and the teacherly writers who direct such programs. Indeed, academic, institutionalized creative writing has become a self-fulfilling industry with its own career pathways and established milestones, each separate and distinct from the artistic merits supposedly inherent to a writer's work. Whether the programs transform the excessive writing of untrained rebels into refined prose becomes tangential to their institutionalization. In my experience, the most valuable assets to writers that these programs provide is the space and time to hone their craft, and the tint of *professionalization* that encourages vigorous output. The conflict between the literary rebel and the institutionalized expert, then, exists both despite and because of the interests and aspirations of the program founders. The biographies of the foundational rebels and the histories of the programs offer teachers and students of creative writing foundational knowledge of the field itself. *Literary Rebels* is successful insofar as it shows us where the study of creative writing has been and looks towards where it is going.

*Copyright © 2023 Zak Jones. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).*