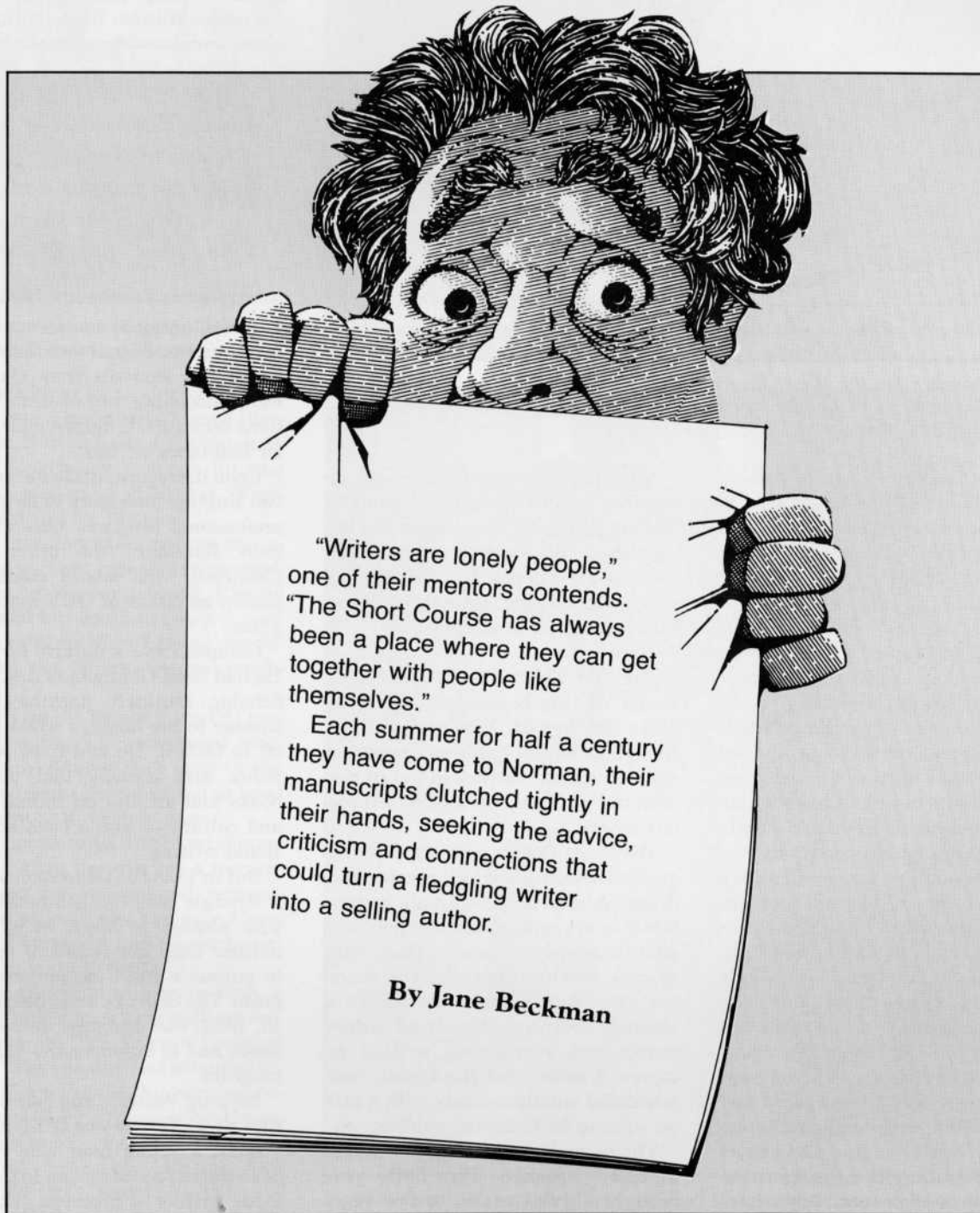


# THE HOPEFUL, THE HELPFUL - AND SOMETIMES THE HILARIOUS

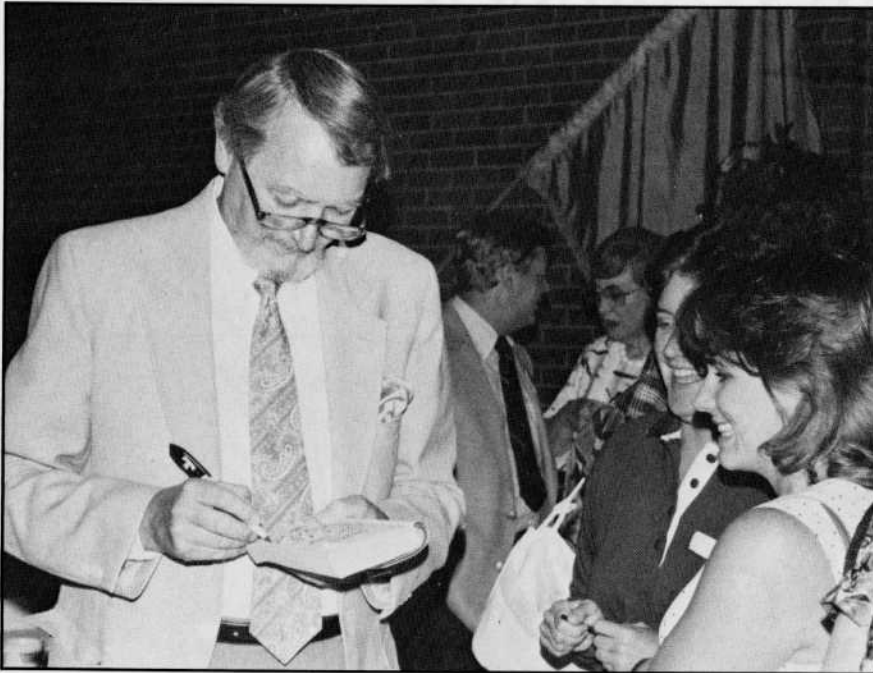


"Writers are lonely people," one of their mentors contends. "The Short Course has always been a place where they can get together with people like themselves."

Each summer for half a century they have come to Norman, their manuscripts clutched tightly in their hands, seeking the advice, criticism and connections that could turn a fledgling writer into a selling author.

**By Jane Beckman**

*Continued*



Featured speaker for the Short Course on Professional Writing, novelist Clive Cussler, left, autographs his latest, *Treasure*, for two aspiring young writers.

Clive Cussler is at the speaker's podium looking natty in his pale mauve jacket. Cussler's treasure recovery adventure novels — among them *Raise the Titanic*, *Iceberg* and *Cyclops* — have generated a following for the tall, slender, silver-haired writer. His latest book, *Treasure*, has been on the New York Times Best Sellers list for 11 weeks.

A record number of aspiring writers gathered for the 50th OU Short Course on Professional Writing are listening carefully to the novelist's banquet address. They note his advice for a little audacity and a lot of perseverance in pursuing a writing career. Cussler's accounts of some of his own treasure recovery experiences are as exciting as those of his protagonist Dirk Pitt.

Also listening to Cussler from their seats at the long banquet tables in OCCE's Commons restaurant are the other speakers for the 50th Short Course: successful novelists and magazine writers, New York agents and editors. In 1988, as throughout the previous half-century, the OU Short Course is fulfilling its commitment to provide a place where aspiring writers can talk with, meet with, listen to and learn from people for whom writing success is a reality.

Some Short Course speakers can remember when they too first came to Norman bringing their hopes and unpublished manuscripts. The 1988 event is an occasion for nostalgia, as well as for learning and making important publishing contacts.

The OU Short Course on Professional Writing began in 1938. In 50 years its format has varied little, though its length has been as short as one day, as long as five. In recent decades the conference settled on a three-day length.

The Short Course program features general sessions in which speakers address topics of interest to all writers. Other more specialized sessions run simultaneously to cater to those with specific writing interests. For example, the Short Course has offered a choice between a speaker on adventure novels and another on writing romance. A panel, "Ask the Agents," was scheduled simultaneously with a talk on writing for technical publications.

The second-night banquet features a noted speaker. The 50th year brought Clive Cussler. A few years back "On the Road's" Charles Kuralt stopped off to address the group. The conference closes with a short, instruc-

tive talk by the director and presentation of the Oklahoma Writing Award, given for a writer's body of work, and the Dwight V. Swain Award, presented to the outstanding OU senior in professional writing.

Like OU's professional writing program, the Short Course on Professional Writing came about because President William Bennett Bizzell at-

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*"That first Short Course was an unqualified success, repeated in succeeding years by popular demand. A world war slowed but could not stop it."*

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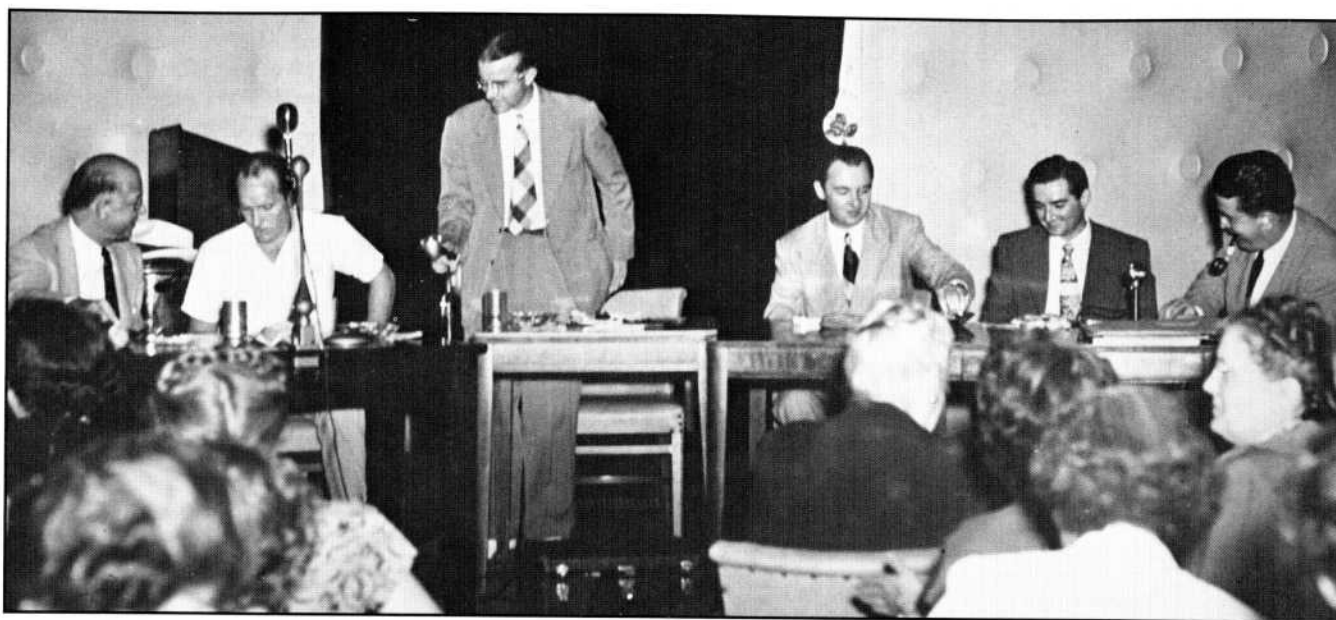
tended a national conference of writing teachers. Bizzell was dismayed to learn that students from Oklahoma were attending out-of-state institutions because OU did not offer courses for free-lance writers.

Upon his return, Bizzell encouraged two English professors to formulate a professional program. One was Kenneth Kaufman, the other Walter Campbell, who would come to be known as father of OU's writing program.

Campbell was a natural for the job. He had been Oklahoma's first Rhodes Scholar, routinely packing his six-shooter in his luggage when he went off to Oxford. He had lived with the Sioux and already had published books and articles on Indian history and culture — and a book on professional writing.

But in 1938 the Depression still had a strangle hold on Oklahoma. Many who wanted to learn to write had neither time nor financial resources to pursue a full-time university program. The Short Course, held July 11-15, 1938, was designed to meet their needs and to augment the University program.

Helping Walter Campbell with this first Short Course was William Foster-Harris, a young man who had just been named one of the top 10 pulp magazine writers in America. (Those pre-TV days were the heyday of the pulps.) Foster-Harris later would become Short Course director.



*One Short Course in the late 1940s on the North Campus featured a panel discussion by (from left) Monte Barrett, William Scott, Dr. Kester Svendsen, Leonard Snyder, Saul Levinson and William Foster-Harris, later the program director.*

The headliner for the inaugural conference was a nationally-known literary critic, Burton Rascoe. Although occurring long before women's lib, one morning session in 1938 was "Free-Lance Writing for Women."

That first Short Course was an unqualified success, repeated in succeeding years by popular demand. A world war slowed but could not stop it, and as soon as World War II ended, enrollment at the Short Course mushroomed.

Today Dwight Swain is an OU professor emeritus of professional writing, but he returns each year to the Short Course he once directed as loyal participant and resident sage.

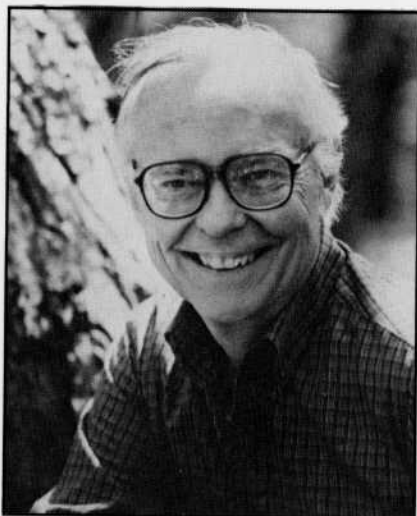
He remembers his first Short Course in 1946: "After the war was a tremendous time for professional writing. Men and women who had seen Casablanca, Normandy and Guadalcanal wanted to learn to write."

In one afternoon session in 1946, a pulp writer just back from military service spoke on "The Veteran Looks at Fiction." The speaker had attended an earlier Short Course, his writing potential noted by Professor Kaufman. The writer's name was Louis L'Amour.

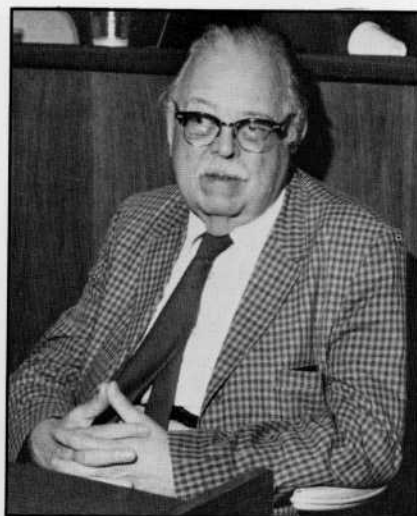
By 1951 Swain was writing film scripts for OU's Extension Division and, like L'Amour, having great success writing for pulp magazines. It was Swain's first year as speaker at the



*Novelist Harold King, left, a veteran Short Course participant, talks shop with New York literary agent Phillipa Brophy at the banquet in OCCE's Commons Restaurant. As a result of earlier Short Courses, Brophy now represents two of the more successful Sooner writers, novelist Judy Wall and mystery writer Carolyn Hart.*



Program Director Jack Bickham



Elder Statesman Dwight V. Swain

Short Course; later he would go on to the director's position and to write a text on fiction writing. *Techniques of the Selling Writer* comes as close to being a bible of OU professional writing as any other book.

The next year, 1952, marked a step forward for the Short Course. It moved from North Campus to the newly remodeled and air-conditioned Oklahoma Memorial Union. Progress continued. In 1954 the Short Course added sessions on scripting for the hot, new medium of television.

About this time, probably 1953, she thinks, Hobart attorney and writer Nellie Perry attended her first Short Course. She remembers an editor from *True*, *The Magazine for Men* assuring participants that he could recognize stories written by a female writer even if she disguised her sex by using only her initials in the byline. Later, after the *True* editor praised the swashbuckling quality of M. R. Ryan's stories, the moderator, Robert Duncan, asked participant M. R. Ryan to stand. Maggie Ryan, with "blue hair," shawl and cane, stood. And smiled.

1957 was the current director Jack Bickham's first year at the Short Course. "I remember standing in the hallway of the Union watching the successful writers, feeling out-of-place and wondering if I would ever publish," he says.

By the 50th Short Course, Bickham frequently was stopped in the halls by fans of his books. They had read the recent review of his 66th novel in *Pub-*

*lisher's Weekly* and were looking forward to the July release of *Day 7*.

Another novelist who first came to the Short Course as an unpublished hopeful (in 1973) and returns regularly as successful novelist and speaker is Harold King. Of hundreds of speeches in the history of the Short Course, Hal King may have delivered the most unforgettable. After his introduction, King stepped to the podium and placed his glass of ice water on it. Unfortunately, the top slanted. The glass tipped, the icy water spilling down the front of his pants. King's first word into the microphone was an anguished "Auuuugh."

1975 was novelist Judith Wall's first year at the Short Course. She had not yet begun to write; the speakers inspired her to enroll in OU's writing program. Wall has continued to be a regular participant as she has graduated from romance novels to mainstream novels.

"I met everybody who's been important to my writing career at the Short Course — my agent, my first romance editor and the editor who bought my first mainstream book," Wall says. Her latest novel, *Love and Duty*, was Viking Penguin Books' lead fiction in October 1988, chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club featured selection and due out in paperback in 1989.

Illustrious names in professional writing sparkle like literary diamonds down the roster of 50 years of participants who began or honed their craft at the Short Course. From the early

years, there are L'Amour and Bill Scott (*Onionhead*); Bill Brinkley (*Don't Go Near the Water*); Bill Gulick (*Hallelujah Trail*); Mary Agnes Thompson, a queen of confessions before they were supplanted by TV soaps; and Angie Debo, whose books are definitive works of Oklahoma history. Bill Burchardt built the state tourism magazine *Oklahoma Today*, and Ed Montgomery made his name as a writer of short stories for *Saturday Evening Post*. Others are Jeanne Williams, Clifton Adams, Al Dewlen and Harold Keith, whose children's book, *Rifles for Waite*, won the coveted Newberry Award.

Names from more recent Short Courses are Robert and Wanda Duncan, co-authors of *China Dawn* with Robert's name on the cover. Other novelists include Jean Hager, Deborah Chester, Mary Lynn, Marilyn Harris. Carolyn Hart's Annie Laurence and Max Darling whodunits have a growing following among mystery lovers. Jim Morris, a former Green Beret, is author of three published novels and now senior editor for Berkley. In 1988 Morris won the Short Course's annual Oklahoma Writer of the Year Award.

In the 1950s, director Campbell, writing to *Daily Oklahoman* book review editor Edith Copeland concerning the length of the Short Course, said, "We also prefer a three-day conference because our patrons are very serious and do not, for the most part, wish to spend the time on campus in social gatherings or play."

There is still much work and little play. The Short Course kicks off at 9 a.m. the first day and ends at 4:30 p.m. on the third. There are evening speakers. But invitations to something called "the Texas party" are coveted. The informal gathering after the second-night banquet given by some Dallas-Fort Worth participants is a chance to make friends and talk writing.

As Dwight Swain points out, "Writers are lonely people. The Short Course has always been a place where they could get together with people like themselves."

After all, where else could an aspiring writer from Poteau have coffee with a best-selling author like Clive Cussler and learn firsthand about his writing philosophy? 