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CELEBRATING GREAT LAKES LITERATURE

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Michigan history has a place in our state's curriculum offerings from grade school through college. Every May, students celebrate Michigan history week studying explorers like Cadillac, Cass, Champlain, LaSalle, Marquette, Nicolet, and Nouvel. They learn about the state's Petoskey stone; the robin; and the state motto. But what about Michigan's literary heritage? Someone usually mentions Ernest Hemingway's northern Michigan literary roots, but what about the lyric poetry of Pulitzer prize-winning Theodore Roethke, the urban realism of Joyce Carol Oates, Ann Arbor's story teller Charles Baxter, the Native American lore of Pricilla Cogan, or the provocative nonfiction and films of Flint's Michael Moore?

After posing that question for many years of our career, we vowed to change this oversight of so many interesting regional writers by creating a new general education course at Saginaw Valley State University – Great Lakes Writers. We expanded our concept of Michigan writers to include writers influenced by the Great Lakes region, its land, water, people, and culture. The Midwest is more than topography; it exudes its own philosophical bent. In *Michigan: Visions of Our Past*, Richard Hathaway states, "Together this confluence of landscape, peoples, experience and educational opportunity has produced in Michigan a wonderfully rich and vibrant literary tradition." Charles Baxter, author and Professor of English at the University of Michigan, points out that "While the East and West Coast enjoy a solid literary reputation, if you write about the Midwest, you have to dig in order to find what motivates the characters you're writing about, the people you observe" ("Desire Rules" 4).

While this may be true for the Michigan

writer, we found as teachers that we didn't have to dig too deeply to find a wealth of literature to include in our course. Quite the contrary, we found it difficult to decide what to omit! We then created a course that retains core texts and adds various other selections of Great Lakes literature each time we teach a section. We're offering it for the fourth time this fall, and, again, it is filled to capacity. Mainstays of the course include Ernest Hemingway, Charles Baxter, Mitch Albom, Theodore Roethke, Michael Moore, and Joyce Carol Oates. We found a wealth of other Great Lakes writers in Jim Harrison, Phyllis Cogan, Terry Wooten, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Garrison Keillor, Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Studs Terkel to rotate into the course in alternating semesters.

As a general education course, Great Lakes Writers offers students exposure to the principles of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry through literature they may never encounter in traditional courses. We ask students to apply various critical approaches to the literature including reader-response, historical, psychological, gender, Marxist, and formalist criticisms. With an introduction to principles and theory, students evaluate the value of various works and focus on what constitutes a Great Lakes writer. This past winter, we introduced students to oral history, using Studs Terkel's classic, *Working*. Both individually and as a part of their *Working* groups, students interviewed older people from their hometown and drew comparisons of their working experiences to those oral histories done by Terkel. They were in awe of Terkel who at age 90 is still at work on the shores of Lake Michigan. For many, the importance of common people's histories was a new adventure. To begin to learn how to interview and record these lives and occupations was both inspiring and illuminating.

A writing intensive, interdisciplinary course, Great Lakes Writers develops students' appreciation of literature through a variety of formal and informal writing tasks totaling at least 10,000 words. Students respond to each story and novel with reports on 5 x 8" index cards, detailing elements of plot, characterization, tone, and theme, building on the

formalist training they may have received in high school. From there they move to writing a research-based critical analysis. Shorter writing assignments keep students actively responding to the texts. They write a short story sequel to Hemingway's "The End of Something," imitating the author's stylistic devices. This gives them a new respect for language. Diary entries for characters in Joyce Carol Oates' *Them* allow students to explore the various characters' motivations. Our course also uses a web-based discussion tool, Blackboard.com, to extend literary discussions outside of class meetings. We require students to post two 150 word entries per week in their interactive threaded discussions. The web-based nature of Blackboard allows them to log in from anywhere they have Internet access. This also enables each student to do "private" writing that does not become "public" to their password-protected groups until they are ready to push the "send" button. This encourages thoughtful and careful prose as opposed to careless diary-like entries.

Another way we achieve variety and allow for student interest is through Great Lakes author presentations, enabling students to fulfill the oral communication requirement of general education literature classes. Elementary education majors explore excellent young adult literature, while the sports minded in the class can read James Curwood's hunting sagas or Mitch Albom's essays on contemporary sports issues. Students engage in primary research as they work on their author presentations. Some even establish personal contact with their chosen authors. For instance, one elementary education major spoke with author/pharmacist Robert Lytle, who wrote the *Mackinac Passage* series. Another student found William Kienzle's widow gracious enough to discuss some of her late husband's best sellers, *The Rosary Murders* (1979) and *Death Wears a Red Hat* (1980). Experiences like these provide opportunities to evaluate what characterizes Great Lakes literature. They ask us, "What determines a best seller?" Are all popular novels literature? What *is* literature? When does a work become a classic?" They begin to

examine the whole idea of canonical literature. We allow them to find their own answers as we begin to discuss controversies within the academy.

In sharing a sense of place and local color through Great Lakes Writers, we are fortunate to have access to a real treasure in the Saginaw Valley, the boyhood home of Theodore Roethke. A nonprofit group, Friends of Theodore Roethke, headed by Caro English teacher, Annie Ransford, and Roethke relative, Mary Ellen Roethke, permits teachers to host tours and writing workshops funded by local grants. Elementary students hone their reading, writing, and listening skills by experiencing the early 1900's environment of the Roethke House. The children and their teachers read, write, and feast on freshly baked foods from the boyhood kitchen of "My Papa's Waltz." At Christmas time last year, a fifth grade writing workshop experienced an old-fashioned German Christmas. With the help of a local florist, the children made authentic ornaments and balsam fir door swags to decorate the house for the season.

High school and college students read Roethke's poems in the areas that inspired him to write "Root Cellar," "My Papa's Waltz," "The Bat," and "Child on Top of a Greenhouse." Students compose their own poetry in the attic, the cellar, the porch overlooking the now vanished greenhouses, or the garden. They also travel to favorite Roethke haunts around Saginaw that inspired his poetry. At Oakwood Cemetery, students locate Roethke's grave and read "To My Sister" and "Otto". While on the banks of the Tittabawassee, we read "The Pike," "River Incident," and "The Heron." We choral read "The Saginaw Song" at the former Schuch Hotel, the favorite drinking establishment of Roethke and his friends. For both instructors and students, this experience emphasizes the power of place in learning. Few students forget this aspect of the course.

An e-mail from Bryan Crainer, a junior at SVSU, sums up the power of this experience for our students:

That class was and still is one of my favorites, and I recently got to experience

something that I had been dreaming of doing since taking the course. In late July I went on a camping trip with two of my friends to the Big Two Hearted River. It was as exciting as I had hoped! I read Hemingway while camped on the River and I was even lucky enough to catch a few of "his" trout... before leaving the area I bought a new Hemingway book, a collection of the Nick Adams' Series. I have almost completed the book and there were really only a few stories in it that we did not cover in the class. My friends and I have already made plans for a return trip to the river in the fall when the salmon are running, so it looks as if this trip may become a regular thing!! Well, I just wanted to write you and let you know that your class had quite an impact on me, and I thank you for introducing me to Ernest Hemingway!

How often do we foster a student's sense of awe and wonder about literature in this way? Our dream goal for this course is to take it on the road for a weekend visiting Hemingway's Walloon Lake, Petoskey, and Seney in the Upper Peninsula. From there, we'd like students to experience Terry Wooten's Stone Circle poetry readings. Jim Harrison and Phyllis Cogan also live in that area part of the year. The possibilities are limitless, and constrained only by time and money!

We hope you, too, will celebrate Michigan's regional and local literature in your curricula this year. Your students will gain so much, realizing that they can draw inspiration from the rich diversity of our state. Wherever you live in this great state, allow your students to read and write in the places Michigan authors stood – at Terry Wooten's Stone Circle, in Phyllis Cogan and Jim Harrison's Traverse City, in Joyce Carol Oates' Detroit, in Malcolm X's Mason, in Theodore Roethke's Saginaw, in Michael Moore's Flint, in James Curwood's Owosso, on Iola Fuller's Mackinac Island, or in Ernest Hemingway's Petoskey and Walloon Lake. Students will leave your course with a deeper understanding of literature and an appreciation for the literary richness of the

Midwest. As Richard Hathaway states, "Great expanses of inland seas, miles of smooth or craggy shoreline, acres of silent forests, glistening yet poverty stricken cities, rich farm land, and sprawling mall-ridden suburbs provide grist for the writer's mind and pen" ("Introduction" *Michigan: Visions of Our Past*).

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About the Authors

Lynne Graft and Ruth Sawyers are former high school English teachers who have been full-time members of the Saginaw Valley State University English department for more than ten years. They are both charter members of Friends of Theodore Roethke. Feel free to e-mail questions or Great Lakes author suggestions to: lrgraft@svsu.edu or rsaw@svsu.edu