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MacMillan Retires (But Not Really)

By Tamara Pavich

"He was exactly the kind of writer I wanted to be—someone who had completely given himself to the art. I'd consider myself lucky if I were half the inspiration to my students that Ian was to me and to many others in Hawaii."

—Samrat Upadhyay, award-winning author and associate director of Creative Writing at Indiana



Tamara Pavich and Professor Ian MacMillan.

During his forty years as a professor of English, IAN MACMILLAN has brought honor to the department, the university, and the state of Hawai'i by virtue of his contributions to the arts. As a fiction writer, he has authored seven novels and four short story collections and has made more than a 100 appearances in literary and commercial magazines. He continues to be remarkably prolific, and his works have frequently been honored for literary excellence. Surely Ian's extraordinary record of publication and recognition is well known to everyone in our department. The inclusion of his stories in prize anthologies, his O. Henry Award, and his Pen-USA-West Award in Fiction are only a few examples of his many literary accomplishments.

Recently, however, and just at the point of his retirement to part-time status, he has again brought honor to our department for his exceptional commitment to teaching and mentorship of student writers. In the fall of 2005, a group of faculty, alumni, and students, both graduate and undergraduate, worked together to nominate Ian for a new university honor, the Distinguished Graduate Mentoring Award. As we learned in April, he was indeed the Graduate Council's choice, and I would like to describe for you what the Council learned about Ian through the selection process.

Over a five-year period, Ian either chaired or served on over twenty MA thesis or dissertation committees. During the same five-year period, he chaired or served on a dozen undergraduate honors committees. For two years, he has been meeting regularly with small groups of students—undergraduates, MAs, and doctoral students, all registered for directed readings—for intensive writing instruction. He receives no additional compensation for these "mini-courses," for reading and evaluating up to three dozen manuscripts and offering approximately thirty extra hours of direct instruction per semester.

The Council also learned about the impact Ian has made on many award-winning alumni of our Creative Writing program. Chris McKinney, author of three novels including THE TATTOO described Ian as "the most stand-up professor I've ever had. I have been out of school for seven years, but I know that if I asked him to look at a manuscript, he'd do it." Nora Okja Keller, author of COMFORT WOMAN, expressed her gratitude for having been "one of the fledgling writers that Ian Macmillan fostered during his four-decade teaching career. In his seminars, he engenders a feeling of community, a sense that

decade teaching career. In his seminars, he engenders a feeling of community, a sense that every student is a worthy participant."

Mark Panek and Robert Barclay have gone on from our programs to teach at UH-Hilo and Windward (respectively) and to publish book-length biography and fiction. "I remember him commenting on a descriptive passage as vivid and precise," Robert recalled of his first course with Ian, "and that was all the encouragement I needed to write another story." As I plan to teach my first creative writing courses," Mark wrote, "I find myself thinking back to Ian's unassuming way of demanding the highest levels of seriousness from rooms full of college students who came in thinking that 'creative' meant 'easy.' If I someday become such a teacher, it will be due largely to the example Ian set."

The guy makes me feel guilty," Chris McKinney wrote, "because he pumps out book after book. It's the good kind of guilt, though, the kind that pushes me to write."

Our nomination letter, whose contributors represented twenty years of Ian's teaching career, attempted to express the gratitude of all of Ian's students and protégé: "While he continues to publish an unbroken stream of short fiction and novels, he provides guidance to an astonishing number of students who benefit from his artistic discernment, conscientious instruction, and strong advocacy. Each of us feels privileged to study with a prolific, award-winning author who liberally shares his time and expertise. In short, he actively helps each student fulfill his potential as a writer by devoting countless hours to reading manuscripts, offering insightful advice, writing letters of recommendation, and encouraging students toward publication." Perhaps all of Ian's students would say what Samrat Upadhyay said: "My success is his success."

This change from full-time to part-time teaching means that we may see a little less of Ian around Kuykendall. But as he has already demonstrated for many years, his generosity and commitment to nurturing and guiding student writers hasn't diminished in the least. I'm sure I speak for everyone as I wish him some well-earned rest, but I have no doubt that he'll spend his "free" hours doing what he has always done. Writing.