



# THE Write Stuff

By Margo Nash

The Queens College Evening Readings program marked its 31st anniversary this past season. What makes America's greatest writers return again and again? Some say it is Joe Cuomo '75, founder and director of the series.

"I'm always honored when he asks me," said Jamaica Kincaid, the Antiguan-born novelist and short-story writer. She read for the first time in 1986 at an Evening Reading. She fainted. But Joe Cuomo, she said, picked her up and helped her get through it. "He is so caring. He has such good literary judgment. I could never say no to him."

In fact, you could say your A.B.C.'s with all the literary lions who have not said no to Joe: Albee, Bellow, Cheever, Doctorow, Ellison, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Heller, Irving, James (P.D.), Kesey, Lessing, and Miller, for starters.

Nobelists, Booker Prize winners, magical realists, post-colonialists, post-modernists, freedom fighters, Beats, New Journalists, old journalists, reclusive writers and dueling writers have all answered his siren song.

What is that song? "I feel a personal connection with each of those writers," said Cuomo, 54, a tall man with silvery hair, ruddy cheeks, and a soft voice. "They feel I understand their work, and they respond."

In 1976 Cuomo—Queens College graduate, fiction writer, WBAI radio host, and professor—wanted to build a community of writers for his students. The first person he invited was QC professor and poet Marie Ponsot. Their first venue was a classroom. After the readings, the growing audience would repair to Cuomo's apartment. For several years, Cuomo brought his readers to the college in his old Dodge Dart with the leaky windows. People like Ralph Ellison

Above left to right: Norman Manea, 2006 Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk, Salman Rushdie, Evening Readings Director Joseph Cuomo, and moderator Leonard Lopate, backstage just after the November 7 roundtable on *The Art of Writing*.



Clockwise from top left: Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow, Norman Rush, Joyce Carol Oates

and Edward Albee rode in that old car, and seemed to be having a good time en route, Cuomo said.

It has been a long road to lovely oak-paneled LeFrak Hall, with many writers along the way.

Among the ones Cuomo felt especially close to was the late German novelist W. G. Sebald, whom he interviewed in 2001, ten months before Sebald was killed in a car crash. The interview was "intense," Cuomo recalls.

"I felt in sync with him. We locked eyes. Afterwards, he wrote me a postcard saying, 'The best part about being in New York was talking to you.'"

This past year's season kicked off with a roundtable discussion featuring 2006 Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, Booker Prize winner Salman Rushdie, and New York Public Library Literary Lion Medal winner Norman Manea. Tom Stoppard and E.L. Doctorow came on other occasions, and there was a roundtable with Cynthia Ozick, Norman Rush, and James Wood titled *The Life and Death of the Novel*. Mary Gordon, winner of the 2006 Story Prize in February, also spoke. All the talks were moderated by WNYC radio host Leonard Lopate.

For years, Cuomo did all the interviews. However, in recent years he has shared those duties with Lopate. This was the first season Cuomo did not do any of the interviews. But

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he still introduced, directed, and prepared each event.

"Nobody could conceive and run this kind of program without, himself, being part and parcel of the writing process," said novelist and story writer Cynthia Ozick. "He is deeply, deeply literarily minded." It was his suggestion to have the roundtable discussion about the novel, she said.

Last July the *New York Times* reviewed *The Din in the Head* (Houghton Mifflin), a collection of essays in which Ozick discusses the centrality of the novel. But she was not happy with the *Times* reviewer. He wrote "a horrendously hostile, nasty, mean-spirited, trivializing review," she says. The review seemed to suggest that the novel had declined in importance, she thought. "So Joe saw this and got the idea [for the roundtable discussion]."

Leonard Lopate expressed admiration for all that his friend has accomplished. "Joe is really the founder, the spirit, and everything else. The whole thing really has to do with the people that Joe has established relations with over the years, and, then, his reputation. Writers who will go out to Queens College will not go to a lot of places. Maybe the 92nd Street Y."

Lopate also expressed his regard for the Readings program audiences. "It is an engaged audience that cares about literature, otherwise they would not be coming to these things. It isn't like we are bringing out J-Lo and Madonna. We're bringing out people who are dealing with ideas and, sometimes, really complex ideas."

Working with the Queens College Evening Readings program is "very demanding," Lopate said. Like so many who have been a part of it, he said he does it because "the series is amazing," and "I really love Joe."

For more information on the Evening Readings series, visit [www.qc.cuny.edu/readings](http://www.qc.cuny.edu/readings)

Clockwise from top right: Susan Sontag, Frank McCourt, Tom Wolfe, Derek Walcott, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Jamaica Kincaid

