

*[Below is the printed text of my speech, but I quickly deviated from it, extemporizing, expanding and contracting. It does illustrate in a way the difference between literate and oral styles, which is why I am reproducing it here. W.O.]*

Welcome crowd

Introduce Valerie, David....

As John Leonard once wrote in a review of my 1981 novel *Idle Hands*, I can make the obvious more clear. It's, more or less, what I intend to do here today.

One of the first things to note is that our generation, those of us of a certain age, the first incline of the bulging baby boom to come, are having a singular generational experience. In other words, we are unique.

Most every generation claims such a thing, some purchase on singularity, but given my own history and numerous accounts by historians and writers of all sorts, this claim appears to be true.

We of course rode a demographic wave of none of our doing. We just went along, with the tripling of the number of students in higher education – it had never even doubled in the past – during the Sixties. If you triple the number of people in colleges in a decade, you'll triple the number of writers too. When I published my first novel in 1974 there were only a hundred or so of first novels published that year. It wasn't too long before that number tripled, too.

But, even though the Sixties, the 1960s educated so many, hardly no one – and I knew of only one – young writer I knew, back in 1968 when Columbia U's brand new MFA program was getting underway, was interested, eager, to get an academic job, a job at a university. That was Lee Siegel. When Lee told me of his hope one thing I thought was How was he going to do that? What would any university want with a fresh kid with an MFA? That certainly didn't qualify him to teach, of all things. What? Literature. At Columbia we didn't have to take literature classes, though some did, including me. Lee had taken a course in the medical school,

dissection. He talked his way into it and they let him sketch the corpses as the medical students took them apart.

Well, Lee did get a job after graduating. Big surprise to me. But what our generation did run into was a gathering storm of a perception that students at universities throughout the land couldn't write. I never thought they could write very well, even back in the 60s when I was being schooled. I could write, but I was the exception, as were most writers who actually happened into college in all the decades before. The fact that students didn't write well wasn't news. For young writers it just cut down on the competition.

But, during the 70s and 80s, the growth period of creative writing programs across the land occurred. At the start, one had had to have published a book or two to get hired, but that, along with the degree, was what was required. Having a graduate degree showed, in the beginning, that you were sufficiently acquainted with how the academy worked that you weren't a mad man or woman. Gelded, or somehow sufficiently sterilized.

The numbers of creative writing program went from a dozen or so at the end of the '60s to what we have today, hundreds. George Garret and others created what brings us here today, the AWP. And its growth is obvious too, though the exponential component only kicked in a couple of decades ago.

And as in academia, publishing has gone through its own forms of creative destruction over the years, beginning most forcefully in the 1980s. The re-invention of the trade paperback that took over publishing for literary novels, just as the consolidation of publishing houses as parts of large entertainment entities, corporations, independent houses disappearing or disappeared, Half of them foreign, or what back then was thought of as foreign. Now we have the spectre of a new sort of vanity publishing, which is not thought of as vanity publishing. The old saw in my youth was everyone had one book in them. Now it's everybody has one publisher in them. Coterie publishing, where friends publish friends now pick up the slack, the unsightly slack that commercial presses caused or aided and abetted, especially after the digitization of the universe

and the creation of book-scan technology that can tell you exactly how many copies of any book have been sold. Yes I know, blame Virginia Woolf for the start of coterie publishing; she and her husband had done the same thing way back when. And there was the original Fiction Collective which began also in the 70s when a number of writers who had been published by commercial presses were abandoned by them and set out to find away to publish themselves without the vanity press stain.

Another ancillary proof of this timeline I'm sketching is the establishment of Westbeth, subsidized artist housing in New York City on Bethune street down on the village right near the Hudson River. It had been a huge building last used in WWII producing war material. A railroad line ran into it. But, back then, it was empty and then re-purposed. I tried to get in it before I had published anything, back in 1970, putting my name on a list.

It is now consider by the federal government a NORC, a naturally occurring retirement community. It falls thereby under certain government regulations. In other words, it is an old folks home.

On that note I will stop this preliminary sketching and turn to Valerie Sayers who may, or more likely not, further this discussion....