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Literary Collections

Passing the Word: Writers on Their Mentors
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In her opening remarks to a class of five Harvard students, Elizabeth Bishop warned: “I’m not a very good teacher. So to make sure you learn something in this class I am going to ask each of you to memorize at least ten lines a week from one of the poets we are reading.” The students, horrified, felt instantly transported to grammar school.

Raymond Carver, too, cut an unimpressive figure in the classroom. According to his student, Jay McInerney, he mumbled, he was shy, and “the idea of facing a class made him nervous every time.” And when a student approached John Berryman to say that she, too, was a poet, “His breath flamed. His hand clawed at [her] arm… Writing poetry was a miserable business, he said.”

These vignettes may not sound like sugary homages to beloved mentors, but that’s exactly what makes Passing the Word so much fun to read. The essays in this collection offer realistic and human portraits of eleven well-known writers who made their living as college teachers. Some mentors were remembered for their philosophical positions (James L. White believed that the poet’s role in society was to speak “against the despair”) while others made their most important contributions with pen in hand (Elizabeth Bishop would read her students’ essays three times, using a different colored pen for each revision). Despite their differences in style, all of these mentors took their students’ writings seriously and offered, very simply, words of encouragement and kindness.

The editors have also included a short story or poem by each former student—a work showing the stylistic and thematic influences of the mentor. This fine collection reinforces the fallibility and the sheer brilliance of these mentors, and provides a wonderful showcase for the talents of the next generation.

Amy Strong