Early last year, New York Times book review editor Sam Tanenhaus sent out a short letter to a couple of hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary stalwarts, politely asking them to identify “the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years.”

Twenty-two works were selected by the experts, and results were published in the Times. Two of the 22 were written by Texas State’s Roy F. and Joann Cole Mitte Endowed Chair holders in the Creative Writing program—Denis Johnson, for Jesus’ Son, and Tim O’Brien, for The Things They Carried—a fact that no doubt further elevated the national reputation of the Texas State program. The same publication had already hailed the program housed in Flowers Hall as “a program that might rival the famed Iowa Writers Workshop.”

Johnson holds the Mitte Chair in Creative Writing this academic year. O’Brien has held it in past years and teaches writing workshops for the program in other years.

Both were drawn to the Texas State program’s focus on student and faculty support of one another that has been fostered by director Tom Grimes. Grimes, former business executive turned author, has tried to nurture a support system for what is often a tumultuous journey for writers.

“You’ll get rejected over and over and over,” he says. “Writing is a test of character, not just talent.” He believes that the ultimate benefit a writing program can give its students is a few friends who will be the best readers, editors and companions they will have for the rest of their writing career.
Therefore, much emphasis is placed on student interaction with one another and with creative writing faculty. Almost every week after a writing workshop, students gather on the deck of the River Pub and Grill overlooking the newly remodeled play waves on the San Marcos River. One night in October, I joined them. Here in this tranquil place, I saw young writers relax with Johnson and Grimes and listened to them discuss their ambitions, their stresses and fears, their self doubts. Johnson told stories about his experiences teaching at Iowa and Columbia.

I asked Johnson if a writing program can really teach people how to be creative. “Believe it or not, I think you can teach creativity,” he said. “You give students permission to take more risks and make more mistakes. A child can make a story up on the spot, then as we get older we’re just as creative, but more reserved inside. It’s not a question of teaching creativity, it’s helping people remember that they are naturally creative and allowing them to be.”

A good program must also teach discipline and craft, but in the end success depends on the individual. “To succeed as a writer requires discipline, tenacity, love of language, love of story, attention to writerly issues such as pace and rhythm and drama,” O’Brien says. “Some of this we soak up as we live our lives. Some of it we soak up through our reading.

“In a writing program, we address these things very specifically, raising them above the intuitive, raising them to the level of formal consciousness. In other words, we endeavor to talk about matters that would probably not get addressed if a student were working alone. I can say from experience that I would’ve saved myself a great deal of grief, and countless rewrites, if I’d gone through a program like ours early on in my life.”

Marc Speir is a graduate assistant in the University News Service.

**Writing faculty**

Denis Johnson and Tim O’Brien are only two of the outstanding faculty teaching in the Creative Writing Program. Take a look at some of the others:

**Cyrus Cassells**

*The Mud Actor*

National Poetry Series Prize

*Souls Make a Path Through Shouting*

One of Publisher’s Weekly’s Best Books of 1994, William Carlos Williams Award

*Beautiful Signor*

Lambda Literary Award

Peter I.B. Lavan Younger Poet Award from American Academy of Poets

**Dagoberto Gilb**

*Gritos*

National Book Critics Circle Award nominee

*The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuña*

*New York Times Notable Book*

*The Magic of Blood*

Texas Institute of Letters’ Jesse Jones Award for best book of fiction 1994

**Tom Grimes**

*A Stone of the Heart*

*New York Times Notable Book*

Barnes & Noble Discover Award 1999

*City of God*

WILL@epicqqwest.com BookSense “Pick” for July 2003

**Roger Jones**

Academy of American Poets Prize 1984

*Are We There Yet? Strata*

**Holders of Mitte Chair in Creative Writing**

**Denis Johnson** (2006-07)

*Jesus’ Son*

*Train Dreams*

*The Name of the World*

*Fiskadoro*

*Already Dead: A California Gothic*

*Soul of a Whore*

*The Incognito Lounge*

**Tim O’Brien** (every other year since 1999)

*The Things They Carried*

Pulitzer Prize finalist

*Going After Cacciato*

National Book Award

*In the Lake of the Woods*

Best Novel, *Time* magazine 1994

*If I Die in a Combat Zone Tomcat in Love*

**Barry Hannah** (2004-05)

*High Lonesome*

Pulitzer Prize nominee

Poems in various journals, including *Texas Review, Poet Lore, Southern Poetry Review and Hawaii Review*

**Debra Monroe**

*The Source of Trouble*

Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction 1990

*Newfangled*

Borders Bookstores’ New Frontiers selection 1998

*A Wild, Cold State*

Best 10 Books selection in Elle 1995

**Kathleen Peirce**

*Mercy*

Associated Writing Programs Award in Poetry

*The Oval Hour*

Iowa Poetry Prize 1998, Finalist for 1999

*Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, Williams Carlos Williams Award

*The Ardors*

Divided Touch, Divided Color

**Steve Wilson**

*The Singapore Express or Faith in the Knowing Hand of the Scientist*

Works in *American Diaspora: Poetry of Displacement, Like Thunder: Poets Respond to Violence in America* and *Sierra Songs and Descants*

Fullbright Fellowship 1994, 2002

**Leslie Marmon Silko** (2000-01)

*Ceremony*

In *The Garden of the Dunes*

*The Man To Send Rain Clouds*

*Almanac of the Dead*

*Laguna Woman: Poems*