

Life in LAMORINDA

SMC Spring Authors Series—a Literary Gem Next Up: Sue Miller and Adam Haslett

By Andrea A. Firth



Sue Miller



Adam Haslett

Photos submitted

Saint Mary's College will kick off their Spring Creative Writing Reading Series with two award-winning, best-selling fiction writers: Sue Miller and Adam Haslett. "These authors are two great examples of writers who are accessible but not easy," notes Graham Foust, the Director of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program at the college. "Their books are approachable, but they are also difficult. These authors deal with difficult issues—and people are difficult; so literature should be up to talking about that sort of thing."

Sue Miller is the author of the novels *The Good Mother*, an

international bestseller, and *While I was Gone*—an Oprah Book Club selection—among several other works of fiction. She frequently writes about the vicissitudes of family life and delves deep into her characters' personal lives as they deal with parenthood and marriage in the face of forbidden love, infidelity, and divorce. Her latest novel, *The Senator's Wife*, chronicles the lives of neighbors in adjacent townhomes—two women who face the trials of unstable marriages side by side. Miller will serve as fiction writer-in-residence at Saint Mary's during the spring semester.

Adam Haslett's collection

of short stories entitled *You Are Not a Stranger Here* was a Book Club selection for NBC's *The Today Show* and was short listed for both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. Haslett, both an author and a Yale-trained lawyer, tells his somber tales with characters who deal with isolation and psychiatric problems. An elderly inventor with mental illness, a schizophrenic woman who forgoes her medication, and an orphaned boy who escapes in physical pain, are among the diverse cast that Haslett uses to convey the sadness of estrangement and the human need for love and friendship.

A literary opportunity not to

be missed, SMC's Creative Writing Reading Series presents four to six authors in the genres of fiction, poetry and nonfiction each Spring and Fall. The evening programs last about an hour and consist of a 30 to 45-minute reading by the author followed by a question and answer session. Three of the writers each year are also writers-in-residence on campus. "[The Reading Series] is a way for the writer, who is interacting with people at St. Mary's every day, to also interact with the public," explains Foust. "Although not everyone in Lamorinda has the opportunity to be in Sue Miller's fiction workshop, they do have the chance to come hear her read and to ask her questions."

Sue Miller will be reading on February 13th at 7:30 pm in the Soda Activity Center; Adam Haslett follows on February 27th at the same time and location. Subsequent readers will be poet Jane Miller on April 2nd and novelist Sandra Lim on April 23rd. A "literary homecoming" of sorts will end the season on May 7th with a combination reading by faculty member Marilyn Abildskov and recent graduate Michael Gardner. Graduate students in the MFA in Creative Writing program will read on March 12th and April 16th. The Series is open to the public; a donation of \$3.00 is appreciated.

Working with Words: Advice to Teens on Careers in Writing

By Jennifer Wake



Authors Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff and Sarah Wilson discuss comedy writing tips at the Young Writers Workshop at the Hungry Hunter in Lafayette

Photo Jennifer Wake

They say the best jobs incorporate something you love to do. For young writers (or those just young at heart), a career working with words could be the right fit. But how do you get started? And how do you build the tools you need to succeed?

As a child growing up in Orinda, author Jessica Barksdale Inclan was a voracious reader, and thought there was nothing more amazing than a book. "Books were magic – books were art, escape, and imagination. So I wanted to write one," she said. "Of course, I had no idea how to, so I started spinning short little tales, quite horribly, when I was about 12 and then as I grew older, wrote when I should have been doing other things (like algebra, in algebra class)."

She tried taking a writing course at the local community center, but since she was the only young student in a class of adults, she was intimidated. "I felt exposed and stupid, so I quit."

But she didn't quit writing. In 2001, Inclan published her debut novel, "Her Daughter's Eyes," and has since published nine books, as well as many short stories and poems.

She also teaches writing courses at Diablo Valley College and for the UCLA Extension.

Inclan believes taking extra curricular courses offered at a community college, or workshops offered through local writing groups, can be a great way to learn the rules of writing in different genres.

Several organizations throughout Lamorinda sponsor writing workshops and contests each year, offering teens a chance to submit poetry, essays, and short stories for review.

Last weekend, 6th, 7th, and 8th graders from throughout Contra Costa County honed their writing skills at a comedy writing workshop sponsored by the California Writers Club, Mt. Diablo Branch. During the 3-hour workshop, students learned tips from local authors and participated in writing exercises.

This spring, the Orinda Junior Women's Club (OJWC) will sponsor its annual creative writing contest, Youth Ink, for Orinda middle school students and the Mt. Diablo Branch of the California Writers Club will sponsor their Young Writers Contest where Contra Costa

County 6th, 7th and 8th grade students can submit poetry, essays and short stories.

"We believe when adolescents have a healthy outlet, such as the arts, and receive recognition and validation for their talents, they are more likely to build positive self-esteem and make healthy and constructive choices in their lives," said Maureen Brown, president of OJWC.

One of the rules of the Young Writers Contest is even if you don't win, you need to keep writing.

Inclan agrees. "What

would I say to myself at 17, to that young woman sitting in the community center class filled with adults who seemed to know what they were talking about? First, just write. Write all the time," she said. "Don't feel unnerved going to a community center or a community college, where high school students can enroll concurrently. A beginning writer is a beginning writer, no matter how old. Find a friend who likes to write and have a one-on-one writing workshop. Invite others who are so inclined. Talk to your favorite English teacher—maybe that teacher will agree to read your work (but don't ask during finals week. Not a good time). Sign up for a summer writing intensive at a local university."

It is important to find a good teacher. "You need to learn the rules about whatever it is you are writing," Inclan said. "Stories, poetry, screenplays, plays, essays have rules, conventions, structures. You need to learn these. You can be as experimental as you want, but if no one gets it and you actually do want to communicate to the world through your work, you have to—again—make it available to readers."

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