

Poet Robin Becker to Give Keynote Address at 2004 MAWCA Conference

By Jess Kozma

Robin Becker, a poet and professor of eleven years at Pennsylvania State University, will be addressing conference-goers with a keynote speech at the sixteenth annual Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association (MAWCA) conference at the University of Baltimore County. Ms. Becker is an accomplished poet with several collections of poetry published including *The Horse Fair* and *All-American Girl*. She readily shares her love of poetry with Penn State students by teaching many poetry courses, including *Introduction to Poetry Writing* and *Advanced Poetry Writing*. But poetry is not the only forte of this multi-talented artist. She also developed a course called *Critiquing Culture: Writing About the Arts*, in which students are able to attend various performance events around campus at a low cost and then write critical pieces about those events.

Ms. Becker's most applauded class, however, is *The Writer as Critic: Reviewing Contemporary Poetry, Fiction, and Non-Fiction*. This course is designed for graduate students and allows for many opportunities for growth in the area of critiquing various pieces of literature. Each student receives a hardbound book of memoirs, free of cost, and other materials such as catalogs from other universities and small presses. The students study reviews published in famous journals such as *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice*, allowing them to get a vivid idea of what publishers are looking for. The culminating project is for each student to find at least three different journals willing to publish reviews that he or she has written. This has proved to be an extremely successful class, as all twelve students enrolled in the class this year achieved the publication goal.

Ms. Becker's contributions to the university do not end with her hands-on classes, however. She is also a familiar face in the Undergraduate Writing Center. Ms. Becker has sponsored tutors for trips and other projects, and she encourages her students to use the writing center's facilities. She says, "Jon Olson [Undergraduate Writing Center director] has created a wonderful community of hands-on students who are very proactive in their own learning and their own teaching." Ms. Becker notes that many of her stronger students are the ones that use the writing center regularly.

The topic of Ms. Becker's keynote address stems from her love of the writing community. "Literary Citizenship: A Teaching Writer's Perspective" challenges writing tutors to get actively involved in the writing community. But what is "literary citizenship?" Ms. Becker explains, "For me, literary citizenship involves participating in national conversations about writing. Tutors do it by attending conferences, sitting on panels, meeting other tutors, and hearing topics that are contemporary in writing center scholarship." Other ways that tutors at Penn State engage in literary citizenship is by participating in poetry readings and conducting class visits to encourage fellow students to use the writing center.

If involvement is the key to literary citizenship, then Ms. Becker is an excellent citizen. She stays involved in the writing community by judging first book contests (for the University of Nebraska and the Red Hen Press) and giving poetry readings and lectures around the country. Ms. Becker takes her citizenship a step further by occasionally giving poetry readings to benefit literary organizations like the Associated Writing Programs.

It is very important to the writing center community to have active literary citizens like Robin Becker as advocates for our writing centers. Ms. Becker states, “It’s really important that students are able to have the opportunity at the writing center and to gain skills as peer tutors and teachers of each other.”