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## Why I Teach

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# Why I teach

## Lex Runciman

B.A., English, Santa Clara University

M.F.A., Creative writing (poetry), University of Montana

Ph.D., English and creative writing, University of Utah

At Linfield since 1992

Author of five books of poems, including *Out of Town* and *One Hour That Morning & Other Poems*; four textbooks and two anthologies. His work has appeared in many publications and anthologies and he publishes the blog, Far Corner Reader. A book of new and selected poems is forthcoming next year.

**Honors and awards:** an Oregon Book Award (for *The Admirations*), the Kenneth O. Hanson Award, the Silcox Prize, the Edith Green Distinguished Professor Award (twice), and the Julie Olds and Thomas Hellie Creative Achievement Award.



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I teach because I was taught, taught by Mrs. Shea, who was not a nun; taught by the nun who wept as she told us John Kennedy had been shot; taught by the school librarian who gave permission: I could take out as many books as I wanted, as often as I chose.

Good teachers taught me to see how enthusiasm, a whole-thinking and whole-hearted and rigorous questioning and finding, could be demonstrated and transferred, transferred to the likes of me, no college in my family and few books on the shelf. I could read *Mrs. Dalloway*. I could read *Beloved* and *Moby Dick*. Good teachers showed me how new and partial knowledge could be valued. They taught me to argue, to pay attention to texts, to find good reasons. They taught me learning is what we do and who we are – we're never done.

Most especially I teach for those spontaneous moments good discussion can generate – those ongoing moments in a literature class when we're discussing Elizabeth Bishop's poems or Henry James's novel *Portrait of a Lady* – that moment when at last, Isabel Archer's choices are clear, though what she will decide is not. I teach for those class hours when many voices readily contribute, when individuals in the act of learning struggle to articulate what they've not yet fully grasped and someone else helpfully chimes in. Time condenses then: we are clearer and smarter than we were, our operational values at once intellectual, aspirational, personal and humane. In our effort to understand more, we listen to each other, knowing, especially then, we're in good company.

I teach to increase this debt – and to whittle at it a little bit.

– Lex Runciman