

Jane Maher

WRITING THE LIFE OF MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY

In a day filled with thought-provoking and insightful sessions, Jane Maher's stands out because in her talk on her new biography, Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work, she introduced us not simply to the elegant, successful Mina P. Shaughnessy, but more movingly to the struggling, determined, and yet frequently thwarted Shaughnessy. Foregrounding her own working class background, Maher told us about how she had attended college as an adult and just missed being one of Shaughnessy's students. Shaughnessy herself was from a working class family who, as many of our students and their families do, believed in the power of education to change lives. Jane Maher is an associate professor in the Basic Education Program at Nassau Community College where she teaches basic writing. She has written several biographies; still the story of Mina P. Shaughnessy's life was special to her because it revealed the early days of our field and of open admissions, and the story of motivated and courageous students and teachers, and of one woman who believed in them.

I am often asked how I became interested in writing a biography of Mina Shaughnessy. I never met Mina; however, I could have been one of her Open Admissions students. After I got married in 1968, I enrolled at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, part time, in the evenings. I attended classes from 1969 until I finally graduated in 1976; during these same years, Mina was working very hard, and meeting much resistance, as she tried to implement an open admissions program at City College that would offer students at City and in the other CUNY divisions the opportunity to develop the skills they would need to succeed in college.

After I graduated from the College of Staten Island, I enrolled in a master's program at Columbia University where I earned a degree in American and British literature. In 1979, during my last semester at Columbia, I was accepted into an intern program being run at Kingsborough Community College. This program was designed to enable those of us who had the "credentials" to teach at the college level—credentials based on a graduate degree in literature—to get some actual experience teaching basic writing. People like Mina had begun to realize that there was simply no training available in composition for those of us completing masters and doctoral degrees, and so this intern program was inaugurated.

After less than a week in my classroom at Kingsborough, I went to Jack Wolkenfeld, the man who had hired me, and begged him for help: my students wanted to learn, it was clear that they could learn, the only problem was I didn't know how to teach them. Jack told me

about a book that had been published the year before, Mina's book, *Errors and Expectations*. He told me it was essential that I read this book—it was the only work of its kind. And he also told me that everyone in our profession who had heard of Mina Shaughnessy was mourning her death—she had died a few months before. That was the first time I heard Mina's name. I got the book of course. I've been teaching basic writing ever since—and what's interesting about Mina's book is that the more I teach, the better the book gets.

And so I always admired Mina Shaughnessy's work and understood how deserving she was of the reputation she had as a leader, the leader in our field. And of course, I came across her name scores and scores of times—in my reading, in my conversations with colleagues, at conferences, and in my graduate work as I completed a Ph.D. in English Education at New York University. Although she was always larger than life to me—one of the "big names"—I knew very little about her personal life.

In the meanwhile, I had become interested in the genre of biography. I had completed my first biography in 1983; it was about Robertson and Garth Wilkinson James, the younger brothers of Henry and William, particularly their valiant service as officers in the first all-black regiments during the Civil War. I wrote my next biography to complete my dissertation requirements at New York University: the story of the life of William C. Stokoe, a professor at Gallaudet University who simply would not be deterred in his fight to have American Sign Language recognized as a language despite enormous resistance and ignorance. So I had written two biographies by this time, and I began to think that maybe I knew what I was doing.

In 1992 I drove to Maryland to attend the Basic Writing Conference, and something happened there that eventually led me to think about writing the biography of Mina Shaughnessy, this "figure" who was always larger than life to me. There's an award given every two years called the Mina P. Shaughnessy Award in recognition of an article judged the best to have been published in the *Journal of Basic Writing* in the past two years.

When the winner was announced, I remember thinking that there must be some mistake: the article, if it was the one I thought it was, had—in my opinion—misrepresented Mina's work. I didn't say very much at the time, but when I got home, I reread the article, and I began to realize that the person who had written the article did not seem to understand the conditions under which Mina was working in the late 60s and early 70s, nor did she seem to understand what Mina was trying to accomplish. I thought about writing a response to the article, and I even spent many hours rereading *Errors and Expectations* in preparation. But I find that kind of writing enervating—you're spending all

your energy subverting or resisting someone else's ideas — it's the least satisfying kind of intellectual work, I believe. So I abandoned that idea.

I began instead to think about writing Mina's biography. I had written two biographies, I had attended CUNY, I had taught at Kingsborough, also part of the CUNY system. And maybe most important, as a result of my experience as the first coordinator of the Basic Education Program at Nassau Community College, I understood all too well the politics of academia.

I conducted more than 40 interviews in preparation for writing Mina's biography, and these interviews were quite something, because Mina, in addition to being an absolutely brilliant scholar and dedicated teacher, knew — and was loved and admired by — some of the most interesting people in the United States: Adrienne Rich; Irving Howe; Patricia Neal; Judge Lottie Wilkins, the first female African-American Supreme Court Justice in the City of New York; Marilyn French; Calvin and Alice Trillin; Alison Bernstein, a vice president at the Ford Foundation; Benjamin DeMott; Janet Emig; Ed Corbett; E.D. Hirsch; Timothy Healy, president of Georgetown University and later of the New York Public Library.

In addition, I interviewed four college presidents, along with many of the leaders in the field of basic writing — most of whom were younger than Mina, and all of whom started their careers working with Mina. In fact, several of them were hired by Mina to teach at City College, and their detractors, those who did not wish Open Admissions well, called them "Mina's minions."

I also traveled to Spearfish, South Dakota, to meet Mina's brother, George Pendo. Spearfish is about ten miles away from Deadwood — that's where Wild Bill Hickock was shot in 1876. Mina did not grow up in Spearfish; her parents moved there after she left for college. She grew up not far from Spearfish in Lead, a classic mining town — very dusty, and very ugly. But the town is surrounded by the Black Hills of South Dakota — those hills were Mina's skyscrapers — and although Mina came to love New York and vowed never to leave it, she also loved those hills. She always kept a picture of the Black Hills on her desk, and seeing those hills during my visit enabled me to understand immediately why she loved them.

Mina's brother, who died soon after I completed the first draft of my book, was a very gentle man, very quiet, very proud of his sister, although he always claimed that he didn't really know much about Mina's work in New York. He was very pleased that I was writing Mina's biography, and he gave me every letter that Mina's mother had saved, along with so many other valuable papers — photographs, notebooks, even copies of *The Golden Magazine* in which Mina had published children's stories. On my way home to Connecticut from South Dakota, I was grounded for hours because of a snow storm in Den-

ver—it could have snowed for days for all I cared. I sat in the airport reading the letters Mina had written after she left home to go to college and later when she moved to New York. During the time I spent in the airport reading Mina's letters, intimate details began to emerge, along with those more banal details that comprise a life.

It is at times like these when a biographer begins to feel the burden, the responsibility of the task. There I sat with Mina's papers in my lap. Mina's brother had entrusted them to me—I was about to try to tell a life. Imagine trying to get someone else's life right. Many months later, I would mention this to Adrienne Rich, who had been hired by Mina in the late 1960s to teach basic writing at City College. "Of course you can't get it right," she told me, "but you can get it righter."

Knowing that Mina's father was a miner who had only completed the eighth grade suggested to me the possible origins of Mina's devotion to open admissions students. (And I am not using that word lightly: Mina was absolutely devoted to her students—she put them above all else, especially politics.) Mina's father worked in the Homestake Mine for almost thirty years, first below ground "mucking," and much later as a foreman. But as long as he was a miner, he worked for someone else, he worked very hard, and he never got paid enough. Albert Pendo was determined to get out of the mine—and he did—when he was almost 65 he bought a ranch and he and Mina's mother Ruby became ranchers, again working brutally hard, but this time for themselves. When Mina first met those Open Admissions students who were causing so many other professors to wring their hands in dismay—even disgust—claiming that these students couldn't read or write properly, therefore they didn't belong in college, it's easy for me to imagine Mina thinking of her own father: with his eighth grade education, he couldn't read or write "properly" either, but that wasn't his fault any more than it was the students' fault. Mina never confused a lack of training with a lack of ability.

Mina herself was an excellent student, earning A's and B's throughout her entire educational career, except for a few C's in physical education. Mina majored in speech and theater at Northwestern University, and she was a talented actress. However, after a year in Manhattan working part-time and auditioning for parts, she decided to return to school. First, she enrolled in theology courses at Wheaton College in Chicago, then she enrolled in Columbia University's master's program in literature. Mina loved her graduate courses and developed a life-long passion for the work of Henry James and Chaucer. It was during this period that Mina held her first teaching job—at The National Bible Institute, a small college that was affiliated with the Bible Presbyterian Church. Mina was exhausted juggling her own graduate course load with the demands of teaching two literature courses: she had so little money at the time that she told her brother that she some-

times ate Jello three times a day.

Soon after Mina earned her master's degree, she was offered a job as a research assistant to Raymond Fosdick, a prominent New York lawyer who worked for the Rockefeller family and who had been asked to write a biography of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (Raymond Fosdick was the brother of Harry Emerson Fosdick, for whom the Rockefeller family had built Riverside Church). Mina told her brother George that she had to learn, very quickly, to stop making "rich as Rockefeller" jokes. Mina worked with Fosdick for almost three years and wound up writing half of the book. She actually met John D. Rockefeller, Jr. while she was doing research at Williamsburg in Virginia. Adrienne Rich once pointed out the irony of this situation: the miner's daughter meets the richest man in the world. Mina was an astute observer of the human character, however, and she did not hold Rockefeller in awe. Although she admired him, she once wrote to a friend, Priscilla Brandt, that "somehow he missed some of the major human wrenches – one knows that Shakespeare would not have put him in a play."

While Mina was conducting research for the Rockefeller biography, she met Donald Shaughnessy at the New York Public Library. He was completing the requirements for a Ph.D. in history at Columbia University at the time. On their very first date, they discovered that they had been born on the same day and that they were both left handed. They got married less than three months later, and six months after that, soon after Mina completed her work on the Rockefeller biography, she and her new husband went to Italy for a year where he taught in a school for the children of American diplomats, and where they were so short of funds that Mina had to find a part-time job. Raymond Fosdick got her an assignment rewriting the recollections of an assistant pastor of the Riverside Church – she described the memoir in one of her letters to Priscilla as "badly written and permeated with that sort of limp and pallid good will which one associates with assistant ministers in Protestant churches."

Priscilla Brandt has saved the fifteen letters that Mina wrote to her from Italy – and they are extraordinary letters – because of their literary style, of course, but also because they reflect Mina's desire to "do something beyond what we are doing." At this time, she wrote to Priscilla of her frustration:

Certainly it has been a persistent ghost with us both, this conviction within us that we ought to be doing something beyond what we are doing, that there should be more unity to our efforts, and more direction. Instead our energies are splattered over innumerable projects and responsibilities – almost all of them important and rewarding, but none of them ever quite satisfying that deep desire for "a place in the sun," per-

haps, or more accurately, for some modest little channel through which one can communicate, with skill and form, her own impression of reality.

When Mina and her husband returned to New York from Italy, they rented an apartment in Manhattan, and Mina tried unsuccessfully to find a college-level teaching job, sending out hundreds of resumes. She finally accepted a full-time job at McGraw Hill as a senior editor, and she remained there for five years.

Mina still wanted to teach, however, and she finally was offered a part-time job at Hunter College in their evening continuing education program. This was the mid sixties, pre-Open Admissions, and many of the students in Mina's evening classes at Hunter were those who were required to attend at night because they did not meet the academic requirements to attend full-time during the day. Some of Mina's colleagues at Hunter had begun to complain about the quality of these students, many of whom were the sons and daughters of Irish or Italian laborers and civil service employees, almost always the first generation in their family to attend college. Mina's teaching experiences at Hunter prepared her for the resistance and racism she would soon encounter as Open Admissions expanded: her students were overwhelmingly white, and they exhibited writing problems that led many of the faculty members at Hunter to bemoan their fate and the fate of Hunter. (One of Mina's colleagues at Hunter refused to talk to me because he doesn't believe that a biography should have been written; it's people like Mina, he claims, who "ruined" the City University of New York.) When Mina began to encounter the same writing problems at City, where there were far larger numbers of minority students, she did not make the same mistake some of her colleagues were making, thinking that these students write this way because they are members of minority groups. Mina knew better: the students wrote that way because, as she said in the Preface to *Errors and Expectations*, CUNY was opening its doors not only to a larger population of students than it ever had before, but to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting to its campus:

the children of the lettered and the illiterate, the blue-collared, the white collared, and the unemployed, some who could barely afford the subway fare to school and a few who came in the new cars their parents had given them as a reward for staying in New York to go to college; in short, the sons and daughters of New Yorkers, reflecting that city's intense, troubled version of America.

Mina also knew from her experience at Hunter College, "that the students were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents', that their children's lives might be better than theirs so far had been."

Mina knew better than to criticize the writing skills of these students or to use these skills to determine their intelligence or their "right" to attend college: she had spent several years at McGraw Hill editing some very badly written books – if professional authors couldn't write well after having attended some of the best universities in the nation, why should these recent high school graduates be expected to write proficiently?

About a year later, Mina was offered a full-time job at Hofstra University on Long Island. At Hofstra, Mina met Alice Trillin – the beginning of a life-long friendship. Alice recalls that she would often drive Mina back to Manhattan after classes, and they would discuss their students' writing. Alice remembers that she and Mina began to notice "patterns" of errors – the same patterns that Mina would identify and describe several years later in *Errors and Expectations*.

Mina also met Marilyn French during the years she taught at Hofstra – and more than twenty-five years later, Marilyn French still remembers "wonderful rides to and from school on the Long Island railroad with Mina, talking about teaching and literature and life." Mina's poetry at the time reflects the fact that she was still, to some degree, a "traditional" teacher, concerned with her students' response to literature, to the canon.

Although Mina's position at Hofstra was a full-time one, she continued to work at Hunter part time for two more years, hoping that she would be offered a full-time position – but she knew that without a Ph.D., her chances were terribly slim. The lack of a Ph.D. would haunt Mina for the rest of her career: her enemies – the enemies of Open Admissions – used it as an excuse to fight every one of her applications for promotion.

Even before the advent of Open Admissions in 1970, several of the faculty members at City College had decided to work toward establishing a program for minority youth. They named it the pre-baccalaureate program; it later became the SEEK program and soon after that, Open Admissions was implemented in all of the divisions of CUNY. Faculty members were needed who knew how to teach writing to underprepared students; suddenly a Ph.D. in literature became far less important than some sort of practical experience. Mina and Alice Trillin were hired to teach these new students at City, but the summer before Mina was to begin teaching, the director of the Pre-Bac program suffered a heart attack, and the chair of the English department asked Mina if she would be willing to take over as director of the

new, experimental program for about 300 students. No one realized that the number of students would grow precipitously within the next few years as the changing political climate in the city and the country began to force this society into recognizing the discrimination that minorities had faced in every aspect of society – including education – where the student population in the CUNY system was still overwhelmingly white.

Mina said yes to the offer to direct the program. Today, there are people who like to take credit for having the “foresight” to place Mina in charge of what would quickly become the largest basic writing program in the United States. (It was Mina who coined the word “basic” – until then it was called “remedial.”) However, none of the full-time, tenured faculty members wanted such a job. Most of them were more concerned with their “true” mission – teaching literature and literary criticism and getting published. Writing was a mere skill: “teaching verb endings to illiterates” was the way that one of City College’s professors described it.

I don’t think Mina realized initially the nature or the seriousness of the resistance she would encounter at City, but she learned fast. Many faculty members ignored her, insulted her, accused her of destroying City College. On one occasion, someone placed pornographic pictures in her school mail box with the word “whore” scrawled across them. Mina was able to hold her own, however. Les Berger, the dean who had originally hired Mina said of her demeanor and countenance:

She would hold her head up high, look people in the eye. She would never get into a struggle or an argument. Even the elitists on campus didn’t struggle with Mina directly – she somehow managed, with her appearance and her demeanor, to rise about the petty behavior that so many people were engaging in at the time. And there was that theatrical training. Mina may have been depressed, disgusted, overwhelmed – who knows what emotions she felt during those tumultuous years – but she never showed them in the arena. She “performed” for one of the toughest academic audiences in the country at that time, and the performance was always flawless.

That’s not to say it was easy for Mina. She rarely complained, but in a letter to Marilyn French, she described the profound change her position at City was having on her life:

I am writing from under water – way down deep in a churning, murky, frenzied world full of sentence fragments, and sweet, betrayed students, and memos and suspicious colleagues. . . .

Well, as you can see, I am going mad. I cannot imagine keeping up with the many demands this job makes and I am too busy to contemplate the outcome. Strange, but I simply cannot imagine what it would be like now to *not* think every day about black and white

There were protests on the City College campus during this period, and Jean Campbell, one of Mina's students, remembers the way that Mina reacted to the riots and shutdowns:

As long as we could get on campus, [Mina] refused to cancel her classes. Mina had decided that she would practice her "politics" in the classroom, not on a soapbox. She told us she was providing the SEEK students with the tools to think, to write, and to read; that was the greatest contribution she could make. From anyone else, perhaps, this would have been hard to take, maybe even impossible, but there wasn't a black or Puerto Rican student on that campus who didn't know that it was Mina Shaughnessy who fought hardest for the SEEK students. In fact, when some of the buildings were occupied, the students did a lot of damage in some offices—but not Mina's. She was the best thing that ever happened to us, and everyone of us knew it.

Mina had many rich and satisfying relationships, but her work was her life. Mina's husband had taken a job with the state department, so he was often out of the country for months, even years at a time. While Mina was still at Hunter, it had been determined that she couldn't have children. Mina remained absolutely devoted to her parents, especially her mother, but they were in South Dakota. Mina and Donald Shaughnessy would remain married until Mina's death in 1978, but clearly Mina realized that she needed to find a direction and a career that would satisfy her.

She found it at CUNY. One thinks of the letter Mina wrote to Priscilla while she was in Italy in 1956 when she talked about that "conviction that we ought to be doing something beyond what we are doing" — "some modest little channel." That modest little channel turned out to be one of the greatest revolutions in the history of education in this country — perhaps the world.

The late sixties were heady times in New York and in the United States — the civil rights movement had inspired many people to use their talents to help underprivileged minorities, and quite a few of those people found their way to City College where Mina hired them to teach basic writing. One of them was Adrienne Rich, who had already achieved great recognition as a poet. Rich recalled what it was like

working with Mina during those years:

Mina was effective in the classroom because she met each human being as such; there were no stereotypes in her head and this was evident in how she responded to questions, gave instructions, met students outside of class. She also had a wonderfully lucid and structured mind, a passionate love for literature, and a genius for ordering material so that it could be readily absorbed by someone coming newly to it. Her whole stance was reassuring. She never seemed to “wing” it or glide along on charm or personality. She *was* grounded, and I think students felt and trusted that.

Mina began work on *Errors and Expectations* soon after she started teaching at City College and completed it about six years later. During this time, Mina kept a chapbook in which she saved clippings, made notes and observations, raised questions. This chapbook, actually a blue three-ring binder, reflects, perhaps even better than the final product, the fact that basic writing was, as Mina often said, a “frontier.” Mina drew on many sources; she never believed that she had the one theory or the one answer or the one method. She knew the value of, the need for, cooperation and collaboration. Mina respected her colleagues and her students – and she learned from them – the chapbook shows Mina’s “process” as *Errors and Expectations* began to take shape and form. Mina struggled with ideas just as her students did.

Mina spent several years writing *Errors and Expectations*, but when the book was published by Oxford University Press in 1977, the response was immediate and overwhelmingly enthusiastic, just as Mina’s editor, John Wright, had known it would be. Mina was truly surprised by the favorable response to the book. Wright remembers that Mina was still not convinced that people understood her intentions in writing the book – and maybe she was right. In one of the last sentences in *Errors and Expectations*, Mina noted that unless we improve the quality of college education for all students we could not move deeper into the realizations of a democracy – one wonders how far we’ve come in the past 20 years in achieving that goal.

Mina was ebullient over the extraordinarily favorable reviews – and good sales – of the book, but at about the same time, Mina began to suffer health problems, and she could not get an accurate diagnosis for many months. Len Kriegel, one of Mina’s closest friends and supporters, remembers sitting and talking with Mina one day when suddenly she reached into her purse, pulled out a bottle of Pepto Bismol, and “took a swig.” Mina’s doctor had told her she had an ulcer. “We laughed about it at the time,” Len recalled, “little did we realize that Mina had cancer.” Mina would wage a two-year battle against her dis-

ease, and like everything else she did, she never gave up.

Mina was never fully appreciated either at City or CUNY—in fact, she moved to the CUNY Instructional Resource Center only after she was denied a promotion that she clearly deserved. And when she arrived at the CUNY Instructional Resource Center, she not only encountered a wave of budget cuts that literally closed CUNY for two weeks, she encountered petty jealousies that caused her much consternation. This, coupled with the devastation Mina felt over her mother's death in 1975, took a large toll on her. Despite these problems, however, Mina began to earn extraordinary recognition on a national level—between 1973 and 1977, she delivered eight addresses at major conferences, and in every address, as in every memo, every article, every letter Mina wrote, it was the students she supported and defended—against colleagues, against administrators, against politicians, against a society that viewed these students as deficient, as unworthy, as usurpers.

In the last address that Mina delivered, entitled “Basic Writing” and delivered at the 1977 MLA, Mina concluded by saying:

To prepare only some people to flourish in a democracy and then to argue that they are the only people with the native ability to do so is to consent to the existence, within the boundaries of what we call public education, of the most exclusive country club of all. Open admissions has been *one* way of exposing this inequity and of trying to do something about it. My examination of student writing has not only, I hope, documented the extent of the inequity in one American city but has suggested that the damage is not irreparable, that even the flaws and errors in the writing of ill-prepared students can lead us to more enlightened teaching that respects both the problems and the remarkable possibilities of basic writing students.

Mina had become so consumed with her work at City, and later at the CUNY Instructional Resource Center, that she never had enough time for her own reading and writing. However, Mina continued to write poetry: about her students, about her friends, about those issues that caused her pain. Mina wrote the following poem for Alice Trillin, on the occasion of Alice's 40th birthday. Alice had survived lung cancer, and at the time, Mina was waging her own battle against cancer.

Having been through rough territory
where thistles really pierce
and cliffs loom insurmountable at times,
shading whole days,

You know the journey into forty is just a fiction,
a line chalked across our lives because the digits change,
even though we are still stalking adventure,
still longing for our mothers,
still believing that the world is only as old as we are.
So please beautiful girl, become forty as if
you have just skipped over a hopscotch line
and all the fun is just beginning
and ornery Time has not yet even thought yet
about calling you home to supper.

Mina did extraordinary work under extraordinary circumstances during an extraordinary time in New York City's history – but in actuality, the period of time in which Mina accomplished so much was incredibly brief – within ten years Mina went from being an adjunct instructor at Hunter College to being the foremost scholar and researcher in the country in the field of basic writing – one can only imagine where her career would have gone, what she would have accomplished, had she not died so early. Toward the end, Mina knew that she was dying, and ironically, her illness and the long stretches of time when she was forced to remain in the hospital recovering from surgery and enduring radiation treatments, afforded her the time to write poetry again. One of the last poems she wrote, entitled “The Invalid,” records her realization that she was dying – Mina wrote it from her hospital room on the 12th floor of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center:

I watch from my window
The people doing the work of the world
Floor upon floor of them
Too busy to note that the
winter afternoon has lit
them up like film strips.
They are busy in the world
I lately lived in.

Mina died on November 16, 1978. Her work forms a legacy that will remain with us as long as we care about the quality of education we offer to all of our students. For Mina, it was always the students: she put up with the politics, the personal attacks, the setbacks, all for the students, and she did it with a composure that inspired and comforted those who were fighting the good fight with her. Mina explained why she did this at the end of a speech she delivered entitled “The Miserable Truth,” in which she tried to inspire her fellow teachers who were feeling demoralized not only by severe budget cuts but by the

belief that no one in power cared very much about them or their students—a belief that many of us are feeling today, almost thirty years later:

So the lion got out of the cage before the gates were shut. But we had better keep learning how to teach writing because the brothers and sisters and cousins of our students will be back. If we can transcend for a moment the personal disappointments and uncertainties that surround us now, we can perhaps agree that that is a fairly strong truth for a miserable time. And it is a truth we helped to make.

Note

The information and quotations contained in this essay were obtained through interviews and correspondence with the family, friends, and colleagues of Mina P. Shaughnessy, and they are being used with their consent.