



Redeployed to Write

National Book Award-winner and former marine Phil Klay is Fairfield's MFA writer-in-residence, a boon for the program's military veterans receiving financial aid.

BY ALAN BISBORT

Down by Seaside Chapel on Enders Island, as the waves of the Atlantic Ocean lap over the coastal rocks behind him, Phil Klay talks writing with several military veterans who are enrolled in Fairfield's MFA creative writing program.

Winner of the National Book Award for his first collection of short stories, *Redeployment* (2014), Klay stands on the glistening rocks with his back to the water while the students form a semicircle around him.

Participants in Fairfield's MFA program come each semester for a 10-day residency on the island located off the coast of Mystic, Conn., to live in the retreat's guest rooms, eat in the dining hall, and talk about their work.

At the end of their time in this idyllic setting, the students head back to their respective homes to complete the semester's curriculum under the mentorship of a writing program instructor.

On this sweltering late July afternoon, Klay is relaxed as he walks the beautiful 11-acre grounds of Enders Island and talks about writing. "I'm a Catholic writer who had a Jesuit education, and the Jesuit worldview played a big role in shaping who I am," said Klay. "Being at Fairfield is a good fit."

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LEFT: Left: National Book Award-winner Phil Klay who is serving as Fairfield's MFA writer-in-residence.

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— PHIL KLAY, author

In his long-sleeved, button-down oxford with its ruffled shirt-tail flying over his blue jeans, Klay looks every bit the charismatic young professor (he is 36). His obvious passion for teaching and, of course, the brilliance of his writing are what brought him onto the faculty of the growing writing program within the College of Arts and Sciences this year.

Klay’s Marine Corps experience infuses his writing, which resonates with the MFA students taking advantage of a program that offers up to \$10,000 in financial assistance to veterans. Many have exhausted their GI Bill benefits, so the financial help is appealing, but that’s not the only reason they’ve chosen the Fairfield program. They’ve come because of Phil Klay — what they’ve read by him and what they’ve heard about him.

Klay taught creative writing at Princeton University before coming to Fairfield this year as the program’s first-ever writer-in-residence. His responsibilities currently include running the MFA residency program as the summer’s featured writer at Enders Island. He will also host workshops throughout the academic year to mentor the University’s creative writing students, and serve as a panel member at the Open VISIONS Forum series.

Earlier in the day, in one of the cozy seminar grottos of Enders House, an early-20th-century Arts and Crafts-style mansion, Klay led a two-hour class built around excerpts from the work of Vasily Grossman, the Soviet chemical engineer who became an unlikely, but unrivaled, war correspondent, particularly for his harrowing and heartbreaking descriptions



Phil Klay (center) leads a discussion with veteran-writers in Fairfield’s low residency MFA program during their 10-day residency on Enders Island located off the coast of Mystic, Conn.

of the Nazi siege of Stalingrad (1943) — one of the turning points of World War II.

“What is the central conflict here?” Klay asked the class, after citing a passage from Grossman that involved blowing up a Wehrmacht tank. “It is not just a conflict about war and the likelihood that the narrator might die. It’s about his life back home. Do you see how it inverts the expectations of the reader? You get his backstory, even while the narrator is describing the war setting.”

Klay’s own backstory inverts some expectations. Raised in Westchester, New York, he attended Jesuit schools, including Regis High School in New York City, before going to Dartmouth, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in creative writing.

“I first tried seriously writing in high school,” said Klay, who contributes essays to *America*, *The American Scholar* and *The New York Times*. “I was fascinated with how to make

sense of the world. I never thought, then, of writing as a career. I was reading writers like Flannery O’Connor, Graham Greene, Dostoevsky — people using fiction as a vehicle for getting at larger things.”

After graduating from Dartmouth, he volunteered for the Marines, explaining to one interviewer, “I wanted to serve my country in a time of war.” As a public-affairs officer, Klay spent more than a year in Iraq’s Anbar province.

“I was not a combat soldier,” Klay is quick to point out. “I didn’t do any of those things depicted in the stories in *Redeployment* that involved combat. But there is much of me in the stories, too. It’s hard to say which ‘character’ from *Redeployment* comes closest to me. They’re all me and they’re all not me.”

After completing his commitment to the Marines, Klay enrolled in the MFA writing program at Hunter College. Currently, he has completed a novel that is in the hands of a publisher. It’s about U.S. military involvement in Colombia, post-9/11.

In one of his stories in *Redeployment* (“Psychological Operations”) Klay skewers the scenario of a combat veteran ‘mansplaining’ things to a woman and civilian back home in a way that suggests he believes he’s somehow superior, or demands the center stage, because he is a veteran of war.

“That attitude has no place in my classroom, or anywhere, really,” Klay said adamantly. “Civilians have a role in conversations about war. My classes will have vets and non-vets.”

As for the attitude cited above, Klay continued, “The veterans I knew who participated in killing tended to speak about that in a way that was very different from the casual blowhard way depicted in the stories. There’s a mode of talking that a unit has within its own members that is different than the one that is used outside of the unit.”

Teaching creative writing, Klay has discovered, is not an impediment to pursuing his own writing projects. “I find it stimulating rather than hindering to my writing to be teaching about writing,” he said. “Creative writing classes are different than other classes. They often feel like an exploration for the professors, as much as for the students.”

For more information, or to apply to Fairfield University’s Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, please visit fairfield.edu/MFA.

MEET TWO MILITARY VETERAN MFA CANDIDATES

JERRI BELL

Jerri Bell, from Calvert County, Md., is one of two women veterans in the 2019 MFA student cohort. She served in the Navy for 20 years as an intelligence officer, retiring in 2008. Her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores, sea duty, and attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia.

She learned about the MFA program through social media. “I saw that Fairfield offered money for veterans whose GI Bill benefits had run out,” she explained.

Since leaving the Navy, Bell has, she said, “stuck my toe in the pool of creative writing from time to time, until the criticism got to be too harsh. I thought I’d grown a thick skin after 20 years in the Navy, but this is different. It feels really personal.”

“There is a rich literary history of women writing about war, though it has not been recognized as such,” continued Bell, who with Tracy Crow (a former U.S. Marine) co-authored *It’s My Country Too: Women’s Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

“The assumption is that war is a man’s purview and they will write about it. But Edith Wharton wrote brilliantly about war, as did Marjorie Stoneman Douglas. Our expectations for women writers are just different.”

of the darker moments of his military experience — a common concern for combat veterans in any writing program.

“Some of us came back with PTSD,” he said. “It’s too painful and dark to write directly from those experiences. I haven’t even gotten to the point where I can write about the military, so I write about other things.”

Klay’s work “touches on the personal side of being in the military,” Cartagena noted. He particularly responded to a story in *Redeployment* about returning home after a deployment, “One of Phil’s characters says, ‘we can’t just come home,’ and that is so true. We can’t.”



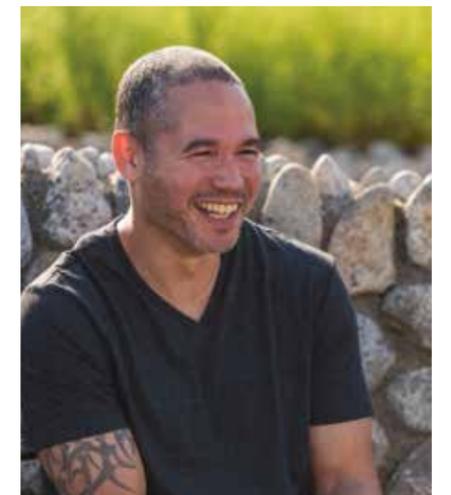
Jerri Bell

IVAN CARTAGENA

For Ivan Cartagena, the low residency MFA program at Fairfield is his first foray into creative writing instruction. A member of the Air National Guard for the past 21 years, he is now stationed in Atlantic City, having served in combat situations in Iraq.

Cartagena realizes that the ingredients of the fiction he wants to write will eventually be drawn from his military experiences, but he has run up against a quandary that he hopes Klay can help untangle.

“Where do you draw that line between ‘real’ and ‘fiction’?” he asked rhetorically. “I still haven’t found that line.” He worries about revisiting some



Ivan Cartagena