

## THE BENNETT FELLOWSHIP AT 40: TABLE TALK WITH CHARLES PRATT '52 AND ELIAS KULUKUNDIS '55 | By Katherine Towler

Forty years ago, the first manuscripts arrived in plain manila envelopes. They came from aspiring novelists and poets and playwrights eager to spend a year at Phillips Exeter. Applications for the Bennett Fellowship have arrived each December since (the total number of applications is around 200 annually), and former fellows have gone on to publish more than 70 books between them. What the fellowship offers is as significant in 2008 as it was in 1968, when the first Bennett Fellow came to campus: the gift of time and the permission to focus on nothing but the work of writing.

In the 40 years since the founding of the Bennett Fellowship, Charles W. Pratt '52; P'83, P'84 has participated in choosing all but four of the fellows (he missed those four due to sabbaticals and teaching abroad). He served as a member of the selection committee in the first years and in 1971 became chair of the committee, a

level, Pratt notes, he has valued getting to know 40 talented writers who are such interesting people. It is no surprise to anyone familiar with Pratt's devotion to the Bennett Fellowship that he has stayed in touch with past fellows and, like a proud father, applauded each book added to the shelves.

Elias Kulukundis founded the Bennett Fellowship in memory of an outstanding teacher. "I took a field course in creative writing with George Bennett," he recalls. "There were just three of us in the course, and we met at George's house on Friday evenings. He was the most significant influence in my becoming a writer."

Kulukundis set out to do just that—become a writer—after his graduation from Harvard, when his father agreed to fund him for a year. In that year, he came to understand the difference time free of other obligations could make to a young writer. When he

founded the fellowship, he insisted that the Bennett Fellow have no official duties on campus, and he stipulated that the recipient should be a writer of promise who has not yet published a book: "I felt that such a writer would benefit the most from having this kind of time." The fellowship provides a stipend and room and board. Selection is made by a committee of members of the English department, based on the manuscript submitted with the application.

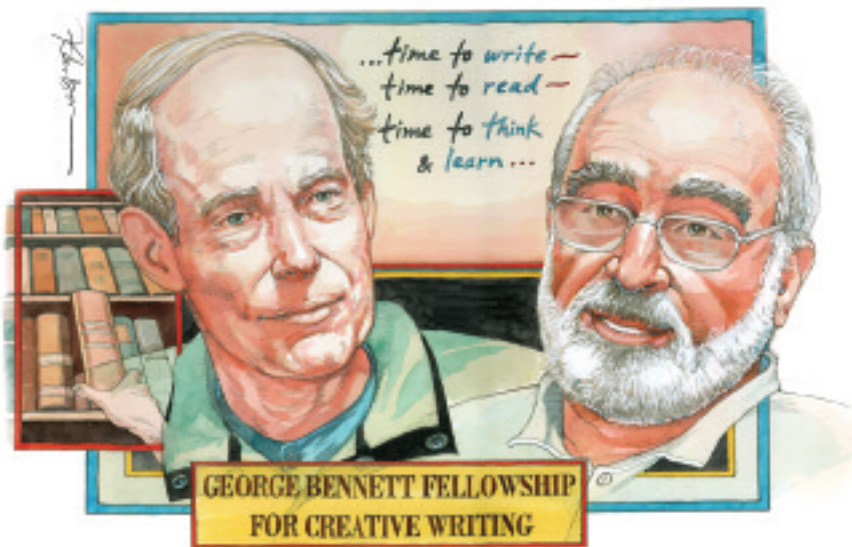
Although Kulukundis and Pratt have met only sporadically over the years, they have become friends. And while they have rarely sat down to discuss the aims of the fellowship, they had the same vision because they both knew George Bennett '23; P'60 (1905–1965), who was their teacher and colleague.

Pratt took the same creative writing field course with Bennett a couple of years before Kulukundis. Both men were hired by Bennett as teaching fellows at Exeter and taught English under his direction in the early 1960s. "George was a great teacher and teacher of writers not because of dicta he laid down or techniques he espoused, but because he had faith in students and made them sense that faith," Pratt says.

"The way George Bennett taught was not noticeable to students," Kulukundis adds. "He was the opposite of a showman. I think of him as the quintessential Harkness teacher."

George Bennett spent almost his entire life at Exeter. An Exeter native, he attended the Academy for four years, graduated as class valedictorian in 1923 and went on to Harvard. In 1929, he joined the Exeter English department and taught for 35 years, up until the time of his death in 1965. He and his wife, Violette, who died in 2005, were beloved figures on campus. Kulukundis recalls that it was rare in the 1950s to be invited into the home of a faculty member, and how Violette would join the creative writing class at the end of a session. Establishing a fellowship for a writer-in-residence in Bennett's honor seemed the most fitting tribute to a man who had encouraged so many young writers in his years at the Academy.

Clearly Kulukundis and Pratt, both writers themselves, have a



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position he has held ever since. When a finalist is notified with a phone call from New Hampshire—a call many fellows say changed their lives—Charlie Pratt is the one to deliver the news. When the writer-in-residence arrives at PEA, Pratt is the one to greet the new fellow. For many years, Pratt would receive some 500 inquiries about the Bennett Fellowship every year, and respond to them all. (Nowadays, applicants can go directly to the Academy website and download an application.) He lugs home boxes full of applications, and over the years has read thousands of pages.

This spring, after quietly administering the program for so long, Pratt announced that he is retiring from chairing the Bennett Fellowship Committee. In June, together with Elias Kulukundis '55, founder of the fellowship, he sat down to talk about what the program has meant to the Academy.

"It's been fascinating to follow the careers of the fellows," Pratt says. "Many of them have gone on to work in a different vein. Morse Hamilton [the 1973–74 Bennett Fellow] became a young adult author, and Scott Russell Sanders [1974–75] is known as an essayist, though they were both working in other forms when they were at the Academy. You don't know how the fellowship may prove significant to a writer, or to students at the Academy, whether they ever talk with the fellow or not." On a personal

unique understanding of the opportunity and the burden to produce which the fellowship places on a writer. Kulukundis, an author of plays and a memoir, will publish a second volume of his memoirs, *Bold Coasts*, next year. Pratt, a poet, is the 2007 winner of the Finishing Line Press Competition for his chapbook *Still Here*, due out in September.

“For many years, as the first reader of the manuscripts submitted, I felt duty bound to read every word of every manuscript,” Pratt says. “But it’s always been exciting. It’s not like reading an English paper. I don’t have a red pen out. There are so many good manuscripts.”

As the person responsible for identifying the most promising manuscripts and forwarding them on to the rest of the selection committee, Pratt has brought a finely honed literary sensibility to the process. The range of styles and voices represented among those awarded the fellowship are a testament to Pratt’s open and judicious approach as a reader. The distinguished publishing and teaching careers fellows have gone on to achieve are a tribute to his eye for talent. His care has extended to those who don’t make it to the final round as well. Pratt has taken the time to write a note or otherwise personalize at many as half of the notification letters that go out to applicants. A writer who knows what it means to receive a rejection letter, he understands the difference a penned line of encouragement may make.

“It’s as close to a miracle as you could hope for,” Kulukundis says of the success of the fellowship. “Charlie understood what I wanted without our ever talking about it. Charlie really created the fellowship. I don’t think I could have foreseen what would happen. I was 30 when I established the fellowship. I couldn’t see 40 years ahead or imagine so many good writers.” ●

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## ‘STILL HERE’: A NEW COLLECTION OF POETRY BY CHARLES PRATT ’52

Over the past 40 years, Exeter’s Bennett Fellows have produced dozens of books, much to the pleasure of the program’s longtime coordinator, Charlie Pratt ’52. So there’s a certain, well, poetic justice to the fact that one of the latest books to come out of the Bennett Fellow program is by Pratt himself.

*Still Here* (Finishing Line Press, 2008) is the winner of the 2007 Finishing Line Press Open Chapbook Competition, as well as Pratt’s second collection of poetry.

Many of the poems in *Still Here* grow quite literally from Pratt’s Brentwood farmstead, where he and his wife, Joan, run Apple Annie, a thriving apple orchard. “The lines of these poems are as cleanly pruned and thickly budded as the limbs of a well-tended orchard,” says Scott Russell Sanders, author of *A Private History of Awe* and the 1974–75 Bennett Fellow. “And like an orchard, Pratt’s collection reveals the beauty that’s possible when human design harmonizes with the flow of nature. Pigs and porcupines, grand vistas and grandchildren, the year’s wild cycle and the yearning heart, all receive their due attention here, caught up in a poet’s lucid and caring imagination.”

Pratt is also one of the poets featured in the new PBS documentary *Mondays at Skimmilk: 30 Years of Writers at Work*. Skimmilk Farm, an abandoned colonial-era dairy farm in southern New Hampshire, became the summer home of poet Jean Pedrick Kefferstan (1923–2006) and her family in the 1950s. *Mondays at Skimmilk* tells the story of the Skimmilk Farm Writers Workshop, and the circle of support and friendship it has provided for writers since 1974. Directed by Ken Browne, the half-hour documentary premiered on New Hampshire Public Television and is now airing on PBS stations around the country.

*Still Here* will be available on September 5, just as apple season is getting underway. To learn more about it or to order advance copies, go to [www.finishinglinepress.com](http://www.finishinglinepress.com) and click on “New Releases.” ●