

FEATURED

MFA writer Barry Maxwell takes literature to the street

[Susan Elizabeth Shepard](#) Jul 26, 2018 [0](#)

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Barry Maxwell was just getting started teaching writing workshops at a homeless shelter in Austin, where he got his undergrad degree at the University of Texas. During one of his first classes, a man who came in to check out the class became argumentative and antagonistic. “Who are you to come in here? What sort of do-gooder motherfucker are you?” he asked Maxwell.

He was the sort of do-gooder who could be found under number 113119 in the shelter’s resident database, Maxwell matter-of-factly told him. The sort of do-gooder who’d been an accomplished drinker and spent a few years in and out of the shelter himself before he became a fifty-something English major who taught writing workshops and distributed books at the shelter. Satisfied with Maxwell’s bona fides, the guy said, “Well, all right then,” and settled in for the two-hour Street Lit Authors Club, then a new concern and now in its fifth year in Austin.

In May, Maxwell started the Missoula version of the workshop after moving here for UM’s creative writing program. He can be found in the Poverello Center’s basement computer room every Friday from 2 to 4 p.m., and he’s easy to recognize. He’s well over 6 feet tall with a cloud of dark blond hair, pulling a wheeled suitcase through the dining room and carrying grocery bags full of paperbacks. The suitcase contains the coffee pot and cookies he sets out along with notebooks and pencils for anyone who wants to come in and write, read or just talk. Once everything’s unpacked and set out on a table, it’s time to hang out and wait. Anyone who shows up gets a photocopied packet for that week’s class. The contents are different every week, but they always contain the class’ Two Commandments: Be Cool and Don’t Be An Asshole.

MATT OLSON'S BALLROOM SESSIONS PUT MISSOULA MUSIC ON THE AIR | BROOKS: WHY KATHLEEN WILLIAMS SHOULD STEER CLEAR OF CENTRIST



cover photo by Amy Donovan

Maxwell, who will be 58 in August, has a gentle drawl that testifies to his near-lifelong residence in and around Austin, where, in his youth, the drinking age was still 18 (it's been 21 since 1986) and the city was a haven for musicians and creative proto-slackers. He played drums in bands called Crystal Image and Mother of Pearl in the 6th Street bars and clubs that predated the tourist bureau naming Austin the "Live Music Capital of the

World.” When drumming failed to produce a consistent living, he went to work for a property management company, then convinced his bosses to hire him as a painter and started his own painting company.

By the early '90s, Austin had a booming cable access television community that most notoriously served as the launching pad for what would become InfoWars, the Sandy Hook-denying, nutritional-supplement-selling empire of Alex Jones. It also broadcast a show by a man who was bootstrapping a church, and Maxwell happened to be watching one night when he came on.

“I saw this guy, the reverend, on there,” Maxwell says, “and he had a lot of really great ideas, and I had always been kind of intrigued by mysticism and spirituality.” The first of the reverend’s services that Maxwell attended turned out to be just the two of them, which was a little awkward, but Maxwell stuck around.

“It did me a lot of good at the time. One of the first meetings I went to, I was drinking, I was in ripped jeans and leather jackets and long hair and all this wonderful hippie stuff and drinking a six-pack on the way over to the Sunday service,” he says. “The guy said, ‘Look, none of this is going to do any good if you keep drinking,’ and I said, ‘all right,’ and stopped for two years.”

During this time he also met a woman who he would later marry, who also joined the church, and built his painting business.

The church (which Maxwell doesn’t want to name, saying it’s lawsuit-happy) wanted a substantial financial commitment from its members, who were expected to pay for personal and business counseling. After a few years, during a seasonal break from services, he asked his wife-to-be if she wanted to maybe stop going, and they both agreed to leave.

He eventually started drinking again, which led to a DUI arrest and the slow process of his life coming apart. His marriage, business and friendships dissolved, and he spent time couchsurfing, including one summer with “some meth-heads out on Lake Travis,” until he turned to a homeless shelter in 2009, facing his 50s “officially” homeless.

“It’s really kind of a soul crusher when you have to go in and get logged into the system,” he says.

Maxwell checked in to the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH), that city's equivalent of the Pov, only much larger, and situated just blocks from 6th Street, where Austin's bars and clubs are concentrated. Imagine if the Pov were at Front and Orange.

Soul crushing as it was, registering as number 113119 marked the beginning of Maxwell's new life in literature. After about a year there, he says, pulling out a notebook to check the date, he went to rehab. Once sober, he got an opportunity to move into housing that required residents to work or volunteer in lieu of paying rent. He suggested that he'd go through a GED prep course instead, and the housing nonprofit agreed. Soon he was the valedictorian of his GED class and was offered a scholarship to pay for classes at Austin Community College.

He initially wanted to pursue a web design certificate, but got distracted by creative writing. "At ACC they have a badass creative writing program," he says. "It's like, well, I may not have another chance at anything like this, and I could get hit by a meteorite tomorrow."

One of his early ACC professors asked if he'd written before, because of the high quality of his work. Maxwell said "Not really," though later, he says, he remembered early attempts.

He'd always read a lot, and found a common interest in books a good way to connect with other guys on the street who might have an interesting paperback in their pocket — guys like him, he says, who were "smart people in a really stupid situation."

For a class project, Maxwell started a mobile library for ARCH to ensure those guys had access to books, and that became the first version of Street Lit. After he finished his certificate at ACC, he applied to and was accepted at the University of Texas. During a scholarship interview, he talked about how much he wanted to be able to launch a writing workshop in addition to the library.

"I had thought about something like a writing workshop or a reading group or something like, here we are at the smart kids' table, let's talk about cool stuff," he says. "And I started talking about the writing workshop and just started crying." He'd been overcome thinking about how much it meant to

him to be able to start the project and walked out thinking he'd blown the interview. He'd nailed it, of course, and started the workshop at ARCH the summer after his first year at UT.

Maxwell had by then accumulated a number of friends in the Austin literary community, including Charlotte Gullick, who directed ACC's program, and his UT professor (and 2018 Guggenheim Fellow) Deb Olin Unferth, who encouraged him. They would attend his workshops as guest instructors or visitors.

Unferth says Maxwell's classroom presence as a student was impressive from the start. "He's so funny and dynamic and smart, and he reads all the time, and he's so independent-minded and has such a great attitude," she says. "He's also really generous with his comments, toward the other students, and he just created a camaraderie in the class that created an intimacy between all of us."

Unferth also runs a class in a nontraditional setting, the Pen-City Writers prison writing program in the John B. Connally Unit, a maximum security prison in Kenedy, Texas, southeast of San Antonio. Inmates can get college credit through the program, which pairs them with writers and teachers on the outside as literary pen pals with whom they exchange correspondence about the books they're reading, an approach Unferth found much more popular than assigning book reports. Maxwell was one of the first to volunteer to help with the class, Unferth says.

There was much mourning when Maxwell left Austin for Missoula last summer. "He's a pretty special guy. We miss him. We really miss him!" she says.

Maxwell had tasted success in school, and decided to stay on and go for an MFA. UM accepted Maxwell in both its fiction and nonfiction creative writing graduate programs, so the scales were tipped in favor of Missoula, where he had no existing connections. He spent his first nine months here pretty "holed up," he says, adjusting to Missoula life, the transition smoothed a bit by his Austin roommate, who'd decided to come along for the ride and to keep him company. In March, Maxwell put together a proposal to bring Street Lit to the Pov. He started teaching there in early May.



Barry Maxwell is a full-time grad student at UM in addition to his volunteer work running the Street Lit workshop.

photo by Amy Donovan

He worries before every class that no one will show up. Unlike in Austin, where he had become well known to ARCH residents, he's a new face at the Pov. And there just aren't as many people here. On some of the first nice Fridays of summer, attendance was sparse, with just one or two people showing up. By mid-July, the average was closer to a half-dozen.

"I get discouraged before every Friday, pretty much. It's like, 'Oh, if it's just two people, am I doing any good?'" he says. "And then I get there, and even if it's just one guy coming in, the conversation is always good and it lifts me back up again."

Maxwell waits until a little after 2 p.m. before he asks his class what they'd like to do that day. Did anyone bring something to read? Do they have anything they want to talk about? Maybe he'll read something from the packets he brings to class and introduce attendees to writing prompts or exercises, like jotting down memories and following wherever they lead.

Since any class might be someone's first (or last), Maxwell makes sure that it's accessible at any point, and that even someone who's there for just half an hour can take away a new concept or complete a short piece of writing. His course packets include examples of short-form fiction and nonfiction and essays about writing that show students the impact that just a single paragraph can have. One packet contains two excerpts from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, "Short Assignments" and "Shitty First Drafts," which Maxwell relates to his own writing habits to impress on his students that their initial efforts don't have to be perfect or even good to be worthwhile.

Sometimes what looks like a quiet day will end with five or six students around the table in the computer center, and the readings and discussion will be lively, with everyone engaged and giving each other feedback. Or almost everyone. During one class in mid-July, when a couple of repeat students and some new participants were going around the table responding to another workshopper's piece, Maxwell got to the last guy in the circle and asked what he thought. The guy looked up and said, "Oh, my bad. I was just totally lost in my phone there."

"I thank you for your honesty," Maxwell said, and moved on.

Sometimes students bring their own work to read, and some will have notebooks already filled with their writing. At a class in July, one woman brought and read from a notebook filled with journaling and poems, and in June a man read a moving excerpt from a health history he'd written in preparation for a Social Security disability appointment. Maxwell asks if they want critique or "cheerleading" and goes around the room, workshop style, letting everyone comment. If someone starts dominating the conversation with tangents, he has a knack for gently redirecting them back on topic.

At one class, an attendee started telling a story about the near-misses that have saved his life, like the time he didn't go see the Great White show where pyrotechnics set the club on fire, killing 100. Another writes exclusively from divine inspiration, which Maxwell says is critique-proof. "How can I talk about, you know, using good images?" he says. "How do you tell Jesus that he needs to up his game? That's a hard one."

But he makes the space for that writer to speak nonetheless, making sure he feels heard.



Maxwell unpacks workshop supplies and snacks, which he provides at his own expense, and paperbacks for students to take. Any books remaining after class are left upstairs for Pov residents.
photo by Amy Donovan

Despite his ability to charm students, Maxwell found himself slightly uneasy about fitting in when he first began classes at UM, but he says that wasn't a matter of being a "nontraditional" student. He doesn't see the age difference as a big deal, and says it's a little funny when he's mistaken for a professor.

He sees no reason to be coy about his life experience. Last semester, when he was shooting the breeze with his fellow UM students at the Union Club, he shared a story about a bedbug infestation he'd encountered during a stint in temporary housing. One student responded with, "This homeless thing, you're kind of open about that, aren't you?"

Maxwell said yeah, he was, and moved on, but later he started thinking about the implications in that question. Was there some reason he shouldn't be open about it? Some reason not to tell stories about bedbugs?

“Like, what am I going to do, initiate some huge cover-up of my own sad, weird history? It’s mostly what I write about anyway, so if I weren’t open about it, I wouldn’t have much to work with,” Maxwell says.

Going through some kind of hell and then telling your story is pretty much the foundation of memoir, and much of Maxwell’s work, both fiction and non-, is autobiographical, ranging from reflections on childhood visits to his grandparents’ rural Texas home to his experiences squatting in a vacant apartment in Austin. His work has been published in online creative writing outlets including Tin House and Split Lip. Maxwell’s telling of his “sad, weird history” is full of black humor and forthright recountings of absurd circumstances, and he’s always willing to share pieces of it in Street Lit.

This summer, Maxwell has been getting by on the last of his student loans from his first year at UM, so he’s had time to focus on the workshop. He’ll spend hours choosing what to put in his class packets, and he reads constantly. He says he hopes to get outside and enjoy the Montana summer at some point instead of just staying indoors. When classes start in late August, his schedule will be packed with workshops in fiction and nonfiction and a screenwriting class.

Like his fellow students, he’s worried about what budget cuts could do to his program, which has seen enrollment decline in part because it can’t fund more students, and where professors worry that they won’t be replaced if they leave. During a Street Lit workshop, he likens the changes to a reverse Christmas present: Students who thought they were getting a great gift unwrap a lump of coal. News of UM’s troubles are known to the Pov students already, of course. One student asks Maxwell if there’s a chance he could get some writing in front of a professor. “Good luck with that. There’s so few of them,” Maxwell says. “Yeah, because of the budget cuts? I heard about that,” says the student.

But worries are banished for the couple of hours of the Pov workshop each week, he says, since he’s totally focused on the work at hand. It’s the kind of opportunity he wishes had been available to him when he was homeless: a regular place to go and engage in conversation during a time when he wasn’t even able to sit down on the sidewalk without being told to move on, without being reminded of all the places he didn’t belong.

“I think that’s what made it so important to me. That whole feeling of being disconnected from everybody, even the people that you hang with, it’s really like the loneliest sort of thing,” he says.

He hopes Street Lit can create the same space of belonging in Missoula that it established in Austin.

“It’s a place to retreat, it’s a place to build community, and I feel it’s done that for a lot of folks,” says Anthony Nunez, a former UT classmate of Maxwell’s who currently helps run the Austin program. “This workshop means something to people. It’s a way for people to tell their story.”

Back in March, when the Indy started emailing Maxwell to set up an interview, he wanted to know, “Why me?” The obvious answer is that a university student who’s gone from homelessness to MFA candidate and volunteerism makes for a great story with an appealing redemption arc: Man beats booze and homelessness and gives back to his former fellows.



Maxwell talks with a student before the July 13 Street Lit workshop.
photo by Amy Donovan

The less obvious answer is that Missoula's homeless people are usually discussed as a problem that needs solving instead of as community members who need material help. Even well-meaning civic leaders tend to draw a line between the responsible homeless — members of the working class who've suffered one crisis too many, or succumbed to mental illness — and undeserving “transients.”

They have our stories foisted on them. But each one of them already has a story. Maxwell's work is to help them tell it.

“Nutshit”

by Stephen Hayhurst, Street Lit workshopper

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“My name is Stephen Hayhurst,” I tell the fella doing my intake at Pathways Addiction Center in Kalispell, Montana. He has lots of questions to ask me as he fills out my intake portfolio. All he knows is I was just transferred (via ambulance) from the emergency room (where I threatened to shoot myself in the head over my uncontrollable drug addiction). Blah, blah, blah, I answer away!

When he gets to this section that asks “In case of emergency, who do I notify?” I honestly had no one to place in this space. Meaning there is no one who really cares about me right now, unless you consider the woman I recently broke up with. She used to be the one. Clearly I don't want to contact her or I would've stayed in California.

Then the questions get to my family history. My mom died of AIDS, my father died of a drug overdose, my little brother committed suicide, my oldest sister never had a chance. When I was 12 she was 14. She began turning tricks off Dexter Street in Central Falls, Rhode Island. I was happy when she ran away from home.

The intake counselor puts down his pen and stack of forms, looks me in the eye, and says “No wonder you do drugs.” Yeah, no shit!

To understand me you must first understand the definition of **NUTSHIT**. I spent my entire childhood trying to make sense of it.

Nutshit is taking your children to a babysitter (so you can go party) who your 10-year-old daughter just told you had been repeatedly molesting her and her eight-year-old brother. “You” being the parent. You make the babysitter apologize for his bad behavior, only to continue leaving us with this monster. For days on end!

Nutshit is stabbing your boyfriend in front of your children (burying a steak knife to the hilt in his belly). I remember pulling a knife out and throwing it on a neighbor’s roof. I was 9.

Nutshit is always under the influence of something. Oblivious blackout aggressive behavior turns confrontational in a form of pigheaded ignorant tunnel vision landing on whatever to justify aggression.

Nutshit is two brain cells fighting over another, ranting and raving, blunt force trauma, meaningless sobbing promising change for the better only to behave otherwise.

Nutshit is the police always at our house on a domestic violence call I always had a front seat to. Usually the ambulance or the paddy wagon hauls the boyfriends away. The men change, the bullshit remains.

Nutshit is random acts of psychotic behavior, abandoned in a car for hours on end while you sit on a barstool.



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Susan Elizabeth Shepard lived in Missoula from 2008 to 2011 before returning in 2017 to work at the Independent. She is also a two-time resident of Austin, TX, and Portland, OR, with an interest in labor, music and sports. @susanelizabeth on Twitter.