The writing group plans to go on meeting, in one or another of our dining rooms, but of course things won't be the same without Karen's regular participation. Sigmund Freud, in his classic paper "Mourning and Melancholia," first discussed the psychological phenomenon of intensified identification with an absent loved one. So our group, after Karen's departure from Davis, has even more reason to call ourselves the Karen Fowler Writing Group – much as various patches of Davis real estate are called Oak Tree Plaza, Mace Ranch, the Wildhorse Golf Course, and Cannery Park, though their eponyms are no longer with us. But that oak tree and that ranch and the tomato cannery and the wild horses are never coming back to Davis, and local memories of them are fading fast. In contrast, I'm sure our writing group will experience renewed focus and productivity every time the word goes out that Karen Joy Fowler's back in town.

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Karen's dining room has also been an important site for the expansion of my knowledge of the science fiction world, either by meeting "visiting firemen" and "visiting firewomen" who stopped by to see Karen's writing group in action, or by hearing from Karen about her rapidly expanding network of contacts with other writers and editors and so forth. I had already known that the science fiction world is much more of a community than the mainstream literary world, or even the world of mystery writers and fans. But I hadn't realized how much a writer of Karen's stature feels obligated to develop and maintain interactions with many other professionals in the field, who call and email and ask for contributions to edited volumes and send their latest manuscripts for her to read and criticize and blurb. That's not even counting the many former students from her frequent teaching of formal workshops and college courses. A few of those former students have been geographically close enough to Davis to then join our writing group, either occasionally or for an extended period of frequent participation.

Karen's wide circle of science fiction friends and colleagues has also been quite helpful to me in my scholarly work outside the group, especially with regard to James Tiptree, Jr. Karen has put me in touch with Tiptree's literary heir, Jeffrey Smith, as well as with Tiptree biographers Julie Phillips and Justine Larbalestier, when I needed their help most. Also, when Ralph Benko and I were first putting together ideas for what would become the annual Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Awards, I met with Karen to get some idea of how she and Pat Murphy had initiated the James Tiptree, Jr., Awards. Ralph and I never staged any bake sales to finance the Cordwainer Award, and it has not become nearly as influential as the Tiptree Award. But by following Karen's advice, and with the help of Bob Silverberg and others, it has attained a degree of prestige in the field and we were happy to find it a long-term home at Readercon.

Karen's recent mainstream success, especially with *The Jane Austen Book Club,* has drawn more interest in our writing group as well – to the extent that we have had to get a little more fussy about whom to admit. Her success has also made it easier for us to impress outsiders by identifying ourselves as members of "Karen Fowler's writing group," though she has never tried to pull rank within the group and would probably prefer that I not use that name for it. At the same time, her financial success with *The Jane Austen Book Club,* from sales both of the book and of the film rights, has surely made Hugh Fowler happy with his long-ago investment in Karen's writing future. Upon Hugh's retirement from his public utility job, the Fowlers were able to buy a house in Santa Cruz, an even more upscale real estate market than Davis. Hugh grew up near the ocean and wanted to retire to a place closer to open water than our dry Central Valley, and both Karen and Hugh wanted to live closer to their grandchildren, who are growing rapidly somewhere down in Southern California. The Fowlers are holding onto their Davis house, just in case – but by now they have almost entirely moved into their Santa Cruz home. Karen has promised to visit our writing group again whenever she has a good chunk of new writing for us to read, and we plan to hold her to that promise – especially regarding what we have for several years referred to as her "monkey novel," or more properly her "ape novel," two or three chapters of which we read before she put it aside to write a novel that her publishers hoped would appeal more to *Jane Austen Book Club* fans.

Karen's dining room was also the site for the development and completion of five or six other novels, none particularly Karenjoyfowleresque but all benefiting from Karen's wise counsel. Two of them were written by members who came to the group specifically to write a novel, wrote it, self-published and self-marketed it with some success, and went away again. The others were written by long-standing group members, who wrote their novels slowly and who are still holding onto their finished manuscripts until they find the right agent or editor or publisher, or perhaps until they find time to tweak the novel just a little more. Karen is a good role model for writing novels at a leisurely pace. But when she's pretty much done with a novel, she usually moves into a mode of furious rewriting, with the help of her editor or several highly skilled friends and peers, until she meets most of her expectations and her publisher's absolute deadline. The members of our group are all very good writers or they wouldn't be there, and Karen has helped them to get better. But they are, shall we say, not as motivated as Karen at getting their work into print.

That brings up the topic of Karen's husband, Hugh Fowler. They met as Berkeley undergraduates and got married soon after graduation. After graduate school Hugh eventually became a residential energy expert for the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, while Karen found herself to be the residential mother of two small children. When she decided at age 30 that she wanted to become a professional writer rather than pursue more reliable employment, Hugh agreed to let her give it a try for a year, then renewed that option for another year. Some science fiction organization should give Hugh a plaque or a medal, not only for being supportive of her writing career in that way, but for introducing Karen to science fiction in the first place. As she has often told the story, he revealed on their first date that he was a science fiction fan, and before their next date she rapidly read as many science fiction books as she could get her hands on. Her novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* does not include any members of our writing group that I could identify – we are, after all, primarily a writing group and not a reading group. But the character named Grigg, the only male in the Jane Austen Book Club, is a science fiction fan who introduces the group's women to the genre. I have assumed (without confirming or disconfirming my assumption by asking Karen) that Grigg is at least loosely a tribute to Hugh Fowler.

When the writing group moved into Karen's dining room, I began getting to know Hugh a little better – he was often nearby for a few minutes before he retreated to another room to read or watch TV. He never indicated any interest in joining the group, and I never discussed science fiction with him. But I did learn to bake a cake known as Hugh's Cake, a Bundt cake with a lot of nutmeg, from a recipe for which he won a prize in a cooking competition at his place of employment. I then combined Hugh's recipe with a recipe from a popular cake cookbook plus taste tests of a variety of whiskeys at the annual Bourbon Festival in Bardstown, KY, and came up with my own recipe for Kentucky Bourbon Cake. I've baked that cake several times for the writing group and Karen likes it a lot. If you look on page 25 of the hardcover edition of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, you'll find my Kentucky Bourbon Cake being served at the book club's first meeting.

baseball novel titled *Heir to the Sweet Abyss*, which delivered an insistent message at the end: “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home.”

And home she eventually came after each time she went away. Most important for the group, Karen and her husband moved out of their tract house in South Davis and bought a lovely older home in the very center of town. It was tucked away down a semi-private lane, just behind a sorority house and a block from the UC Davis campus. One of the deciding factors in choosing this particular house, Karen told us, was that the dining room was the ideal size for our group to meet. And there we met, most Thursday nights when Karen was in town, for well over a decade. Karen installed a dining table that sat eight writers comfortably; the group on any given Thursday evening seldom exceeded that number, and rarely dropped below six. The group was small enough not to need formal bylaws, but we did gradually develop a set of simple rules and common understandings. Among the more important rules is that anyone ready to present to the group will bring enough copies of the story or chapter or poem to distribute to everyone at the meeting, and will read his or her work aloud while everyone else reads along silently before starting to discuss it. One important common understanding is that discussions of our work will not involve personal questions directed toward the author, or indeed any questions about the “meaning” or “intent” of the work. The author may volunteer such information, but is not expected to do so. (I learned pretty quickly after I joined the group that even the most obvious Freudian or Jungian interpretations of a piece were unwelcome – especially from Alan the Analyst.)

One unwritten rule is that when a group member brings exactly the right number of copies of his or her work for the number of members in attendance, everyone applauds enthusiastically before the reading begins – most likely the only time any work gets applauded at all. As a group we are appreciative of good writing and we let the authors know our appreciation by our comments, but we are not wildly demonstrative. That goes for Karen too – in terms both of her thoughtful and usually supportive comments about the work of others, and of the group’s usually enthusiastic but sometimes picky comments about her work.

I associate Karen’s dining room with her writing and our reading of her next four novels, chapter by chapter – *The Sweetheart Season, Sister Noon, The Jane Austen Book Club,* and *Wit’s End.* None of these was marketed as science fiction or fantasy, though most of them can be read to some degree as alternate histories, and a couple of them imply elements of the fantastic. But they all share the same distinctive voice as Karen’s shorter science fiction, just as *Sarah Canary* does. I was once asked to introduce Karen at a book reading in a local bookstore, and as part of my introduction I was supposed to identify her genre or characterize her work. The best I could come up with was to say that her writing was Karenjoyfowleresque – and I’m still satisfied with that term. If you’ve read much of Karen, you know what I mean. In recent years I’ve noticed that several younger authors in the Slipstream or New Weird school of writing sound awfully Karenjoyfowleresque – and that’s not a bad way to sound. But Karen still does it better.

know how to market it." When Henry Holt finally published it in 1991, two or three years after it was essentially finished, the dust jacket made no mention of science fiction or extra-terrestrial creatures, and none of the blurbs were from science fiction writers. The same was true of Karen's second collection of short stories, *Black Glass*, several years later. The writing group, or at least those of us who had a particular interest in science fiction, were learning through Karen's example some of the difficulties of being a genre writer. But we also learned some of the advantages of being able to write science fiction so sophisticated that people who said they never read science fiction could happily read Karen's science fiction and still feel they had retained their literary purity.

For a while during my early years in the group, we continued officially as a writing workshop at the Davis Art Center. Karen was designated each term as the instructor, and she was supposed to collect fees from us to share with the Center. But she felt uncomfortable with asking us to pay her for being part of what she saw as a leaderless group. She tried to placate the Art Center by rotating the fee payments among us – collecting only from the allowable minimum of four paying students per session, as I recall, though the group was always a good deal larger. That was another reflection of her basic modesty, her feeling that we were all just friends who helped each other with our writing – though she was rapidly becoming the one expert among us at writing fiction, freely sharing her insights into the process and her suggestions for improvement of our work. The Art Center Manager began to complain about the workshop, without asking any of us whether we were happy with it. I suspect that jealousy of Karen's success was involved, as well as the Manager's desire to fully repossess the lovely Board of Directors meeting room that Karen had somehow obtained for our once-a-week three-hour meetings. At any rate, we soon left the Art Center and became a peripatetic writing group, meeting briefly at a Quaker Friends' meeting house, in a bookstore's storage basement, at a gathering place for foreign students and friends called International House, and for a somewhat longer period at the headquarters of the Cal Aggie Christian Association, a drafty and thin-walled structure that we began to call the CACA House. The Christian Association eventually kicked us out because we were too noisy – and perhaps too vulgar for some of the more prudish CACA members, since we often read aloud some pretty racy poetry and fiction.

As Karen became more visible as a writer, she <u>also</u> became more peripatetic – leaving Davis for several months to learn screenwriting in Hollywood, supported by a competitive fellowship, and on another occasion spending a full semester at Cleveland State University where she taught creative writing. She began to teach writing workshops here and there, sometimes in the Clarion system and sometimes in writing programs that had little or nothing to do with science fiction. I assume she was doing those teaching stints partly to supplement the usual meager financial rewards of a published science fiction writer. She was certainly getting no financial rewards from our group, and after the Davis Art Center contretemps she never again asked us to pay her anything for her leadership of the group. Nor did we make an offer – though I think we would have if we had thought it essential to get her to return to Davis, especially from those longer stints in Hollywood and Cleveland. Before she left for Hollywood, the core members of the group did get together to write her a going-away present – a combination bodice-ripper and

briefly on the phone, and she encouraged me to give the group a try. I went to the next meeting, and I've been in the group ever since.

By that time Karen had already won a prize in the annual Writers of the Future Contest and had published half a dozen stories. Shortly after I joined the group, she published her first collection of short stories, *The Lake Was Full of Artificial Things*, which led to her winning the Campbell Award as best new science fiction writer of the year. She was also beginning to speak to groups. One day in 1986 my daughter Laurel, who had already been a science fiction fan for several years, came home from her high school course in science fiction to report that Karen had spoken to her class. When I asked whether Karen had shared any secrets about writing, Laurel said she had told the class she always had problems with her stories' endings. In later years I've heard Karen say she always has problems with the middle of her stories, and on other occasions I've heard her say she always has problems with the beginnings of her stories. I don't see that her stories consistently suffer from any of these problems; whenever she brings a short story to the writing group in supposedly rough draft, it always appears close to perfection. So maybe she's just talking about how things feel as she's writing the stories, rather than about how they look when they're done. (You might also note that Karen's use of the word "always" is not always reliable. Her most recent Nebula-winning story is titled "Always," but we as readers are entitled to have serious doubts about that word in the story's context, though the narrator is certain it's true.)

I hope it's no great indiscretion to say that Karen has almost <u>always</u> encountered more problems in writing her novels than in writing short stories. I can attest to those problems first-hand, since she has brought nearly every chapter of nearly every novel she has written to the writing group for our reactions and suggestions. She began bringing in the *Sarah Canary* manuscript, chapter by chapter, soon after I joined the group. We saw it develop almost like a Saturday morning movie serial, with a new chapter every two or three weeks when things were going well and more widely separated when they were not. We saw one full draft of the novel and most of a second draft with at least two alternate endings, neither of which was the ending that appeared in the published novel. We all thought it was a delightful novel, though we were never sure exactly who or what Sarah Canary was supposed to be, and Karen did not explain Sarah to us. Some of us did speculate that Sarah might be an extra-terrestrial creature, so we were gratified when John Clute proclaimed that the book was "the finest first-contact novel yet written." Karen seemed to agree with that interpretation. But she places a high premium on ambiguity in most of her fiction, and as the writing group's procedures developed, we did not insist on any member explaining any aspect of his or her fiction or poetry. So with regard to Sarah Canary, we did not ask and Karen did not tell.

Unfortunately, the publishers of her short story collection did not value ambiguity as much as she or we did. They had been expecting her to follow with a more obviously science-fictional novel than *Sarah Canary*, and they refused to publish it. Over the next year or so, Karen occasionally showed our group rejection letters from other publishers – the most wonderful assortment of rejection letters I've ever seen, typically phrased in terms of "We loved this novel but it doesn't fit our needs," or "It's terrific but we don't

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Twenty-Two Years in the Karen Fowler Writing Group: An Appreciation of Its Not-Quite-Founder and Sort-of-Leader

Alan C. Elms

Pretty much every term in that title requires further explanation, and I'll gradually work through them. First, as Karen herself may be quick to tell you, the writing group in question has never actually been called "the Karen Fowler Writing Group," at least not formally and not within Karen's hearing. It has never really had a formal name – mostly its members call it "*the* writing group," or "*our* writing group," or sometimes "the *Davis* writing group," although there are actually several writing groups in Davis, California, where we have both lived for many years. Karen was indeed not quite the founder of the group – it began as a writing workshop at the Davis Art Center, and it was briefly led by two aspiring male novelists before Karen agreed to take on the job. Karen had already taken a writing course at UC Davis from Kim Stanley Robinson, and several other students from Stan's course decided to set up their own separate writing workshop, but it didn't last long. Karen's workshop, however, gradually became a self-identified writing group rather than a workshop, and it has now lasted for more than a quarter century.

I've given you this early history of the group mainly to suggest that its long-term survival owes something to Karen's distinctive role in it. I was not part of the group during its earliest years, but from what I've heard, its first two workshop leaders didn't work out well in part because they regarded themselves as superior writers to the rest of the group, and took offense when group members criticized their work. I know nothing at all about the competing workshop, the one composed of former students of Stan Robinson, except that Stan did not participate in it. He has his own ways of writing, and submitting his work frequently to workshop critiques is not part of them. Karen had learned a lot from Stan and they became good friends, but she worked differently – she was happy to participate as an active member of the workshop she continued to lead, bringing in her writing every week for group critiques and joining in the critiques of other members' work as an equal rather than as The Leader.

That was how the group was working when I joined it in the latter part of 1986. By then I had achieved tenure in the psychology department at UC Davis, had published a couple of books about social and political psychology, and was thinking again about trying to write science fiction – an ambition I had given up in my late teens. I read an article in the local newspaper about Karen Joy Fowler, described as a housewife who was beginning to have some success in publishing science fiction short stories – and who was leading a fiction workshop at the Davis Art Center. I hadn't read any of Karen's work at that point, but I pulled out an issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* that included one of her stories, and I thought it was pretty good. So I called her, we talked