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October 22, 2003

### Susquehanna University professor wins award for fiction

By John Finnerty  
*The Daily Item*



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SELINGROVE — Gary Fincke, an English professor at Susquehanna University, was in Georgia this past weekend to be honored as one of two winners of the prestigious Flannery O'Connor Prize for fiction writing.

The honor, given by the University of Georgia Press, includes a \$1,000 prize and publication of Fincke's collection of short stories, "Sorry I Worried You."

A statement provided by Susquehanna University quoted one contest judge's reaction to Fincke's work: "His stories stayed with me. I found I could remember almost every one when I returned for the second read."

Another judge described the manuscript as "a quiet collection, but one full of true sentiment and sharp observations."

Fincke is a versatile writer who has explored a variety of different styles of literary expression and tasted critical success in most of them. He has published numerous books of poetry and had his poetry printed in many literary publications.

He has also explored prose, short fiction, creative nonfiction and journalism. A column written by Fincke appears in *The Daily Item* and is distributed to newspapers nationwide. He is now in the final stages of writing a novel.

The award is Fincke's second book-manuscript prize in eight months. His

collection "Writing Letters for the Blind" won the 2003 Ohio State University Press/The Journal Poetry Prize and has just been published. His third collection of short stories, "The Stone Child," was published in September by the University of Missouri Press.

"Kicking Ass," Fincke's nonfiction account of his son's rock 'n' roll life with two signed bands, will be published by Michigan State University Press in May.

"Sorry I Worried You" competed against nearly 900 other manuscripts to win the Flannery O'Connor Prize. Since 1983, this literary prize has been awarded to only two collections of short stories per year. Other recent winners include Antonya Nelson, Nancy Zafris, Bill Roorbach and Ha Jin, who went on to win the National Book Award.

Saturday night, Fincke and the other winner of this year's O'Connor prize were honored at a black-tie banquet.

The real prize is getting the work published in a manner that will certainly attract the attention of reviewers, he said.

"The reward for me is the publication and whatever literary muscle being attached to this award brings," Fincke said.

While his most recent success has been with short fiction, Fincke began to enjoy success with poetry first.

"I arrived at my own voice in poetry first," Fincke said. Looking back at the work he did two decades ago, "Some of the poems hold up, none of my stories do."

When he first began writing, he realized that he wasn't very familiar with any truly contemporary authors or poets.

"I hadn't ready anyone within 20 years of my age," he said. When he began to explore the works of contemporary writers, he found that there were artists — poets like Phillip Levine and James Wright — tackling subjects and settings "populated by people's voices I recognized," he said.

The lesson is one he has passed on to his students: "They've got to read."

Though he's lived in Central Pennsylvania for 23 years, Fincke only occasionally writes fiction or poetry set in the region. When he does, the place isn't typically as important as it is in many of his other works, set in locales like western Pennsylvania, where he grew up, or upstate New York, where he lived and worked prior to moving to the Valley.

"Some stories are set locally, but the setting isn't as important" as it is in the locales. In many of his western Pennsylvania stories, "The setting is a character" described in such detail that the reader would probably easily

identify parts of the landscape if he or she were to actually visit the actual location.

Typically when he writes about Central Pennsylvania, it's in more of a generic fashion as a nondescript location "one-hour north of Harrisburg," Fincke said.

He said that he suspects the Valley might play a more prominent role in his writing if he no longer lived in the region.

"Distance is important," he said.

Containing 12 stories previously published in national literary magazines such as The Seattle Review, Cimarron Review, Other Voices and Santa Monica Review, "Sorry I Worried You," is Fincke's fourth collection of short stories.

Fincke was one of two winners; the other was Barbara Sutton, a short-story writer who lives in Somerville, Mass.

"Writing Letters for the Blind" won the 2003 Ohio State University Press/The Journal Book Award, one of the most competitive poetry competitions in the United States.

In addition, Fincke has received the Bess Hokin Prize from Poetry Magazine, the Rose Lefcowitz Prize from Poet Lore, a PEN Syndicated Fiction Prize, as well as seven fellowships for creative writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, including one this year for creative nonfiction.

At Susquehanna, Fincke teaches introductory and advanced classes in poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. In addition to his teaching duties, he is also head of Susquehanna's Writers' Institute.

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