

Intern Journal: Chris Abani

By Michael Dulman

If I told you I spent a week studying the methods of a tattooed, thrice-convicted, death-row criminal, you probably would think I was in the process of becoming a serial killer. In fact, my fellow Winter With the Writers interns and I were learning only the fundamentals of storytelling from our recent festival guest, celebrated author (and former political prisoner) Chris Abani. And though I don't plan on going to jail any time soon, I would take it as the ultimate compliment if I, like Abani, were to write so well that it was considered illegal.

Chris Abani made his visit first and foremost about the student interns of Winter With the Writers. As part of his visit to Rollins, Abani taught a tightly focused two-day writing course called "Seeing the Angles," Wednesday and Thursday, February 15 and 16. Abani's philosophy of writing values an open mind that views characters and their actions without judgment. Abani considers this quality essential to connecting with an audience, seeing the author's purpose as prompting the audience to ask themselves the big questions. For Abani, the big question he wants his audience to ponder is "How do we become who we are?" an appropriate inquiry for budding young writers.

To commemorate the current and continued success of the Winter With the Writers series, festival supporters, interns, and donors attended a reception Wednesday at the Alford Inn at 300 E New England Avenue. Festival director and Rollins professor Carol Frost welcomed guests, introduced Chris Abani, and thanked all the generous donors who make Winter With the Writers possible. Professor Frost also used the reception to announce the winner of the Van den Berg Scholarship, awarded to a Holt student and effective Winter With the Writers intern. This year, the award went to Alexandra Holt, who despite the name has no ties to the eponymous president emeritus to warrant charges of nepotism.

Abani continued to share his writing experience with the Rollins and Winter Park community all day Thursday. After finishing his two-day writing course, Abani joined the interns and Professor Frost for lunch, casually discussing writer's craft over the delicious food at Park 310. Later that afternoon, Abani led a public master class in creative writing, going over story theory and the elements that effective stories all tend to share. Abani believes that stories take their shape from their structure: that you have to lay the groundwork before you can begin building. If you have your story structure arranged well, then the details of your story will reflect that well-arranged structure.

Abani ended the night with eloquent readings from an excerpt of a poem by Jack Gilbert and selections from his own works, *Becoming Abigail*, *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, and his collection of poems *Sanctificum*, followed by a live-streamed Q&A and book signing.

Winter With the Writers would like to thank Chris Abani for his important contributions to this long and storied festival of contemporary authors and creative writing, and we wish him continued success and happiness in his career and life.