

Elliot Ackerman: Post-Visit

By Kianna Dieudonné

In the final week of the 2018 Winter with the Writers Festival Season, the Rollins community had the honor of welcoming two National Book Award finalists, Lisa Ko for *The Leavers* and Elliot Ackerman for *Dark at the Crossing*. The latter, whose list of distinctions is nearing exhaustive, including both a Purple Heart for his service as a Marine and for numerous “Best Book of the Year” acclamations, began his visit to Winter Park with a reception hosted by President Grant Cornwell and his wife Peggy at the Baker House. President Cornwell welcomed both guests warmly and remarked on the importance of the liberal arts in sustaining a strong literary tradition, especially the one being upheld and celebrated here on campus through the WWW Festival.

The next day, Ackerman taught a master class on fiction writing in the SunTrust Auditorium. He began the class by remarking on the incredible variety of style and voice by reading passages from Joan Didion’s *Play it as It Lays* and Ernest Hemingway’s *Soldier’s Home* for comparison. On the matter of craft, Ackerman remarked on the importance of clean, clear prose that maintains a consistency of details. On the topic of plot development, where many writers often differ in their approach, Ackerman believes that plot can often come second in the writing process. He described his approach to starting new projects as “walking through a dark room.” He then went on to acknowledge that with all great writing comes the possibility of failure. Just as walking through a dark room can present many threats and challenges, so can writing. It is here that he left the audience with one of his most sincere and deeply passionate messages: you cannot be afraid of failure. He beseeched the WWW Interns and all the aspiring writers of the audience to develop a “discipline of strapping yourself to the desk,” regardless of the quality of the end result. As many now successful authors proclaim, simply having the courage to start is the most important quality of any writer.

After a break for dinner, Ackerman and his fellow National Book Award finalist Lisa Ko were back on campus for their joint reading in the Bush Auditorium where they were introduced by Associate Dean Jennifer Cavanaugh. In her remarks, she noted the importance of reading and remaining political and socially engaged – the hallmark of a liberal arts education. Ackerman’s work as a novelist and journalist have done just that, by bringing literary flare to often unreachable topical issues such as the wars in the Middle East. Ackerman began his segment of the joint reading with the opening from *Dark at the Crossing*, following it up with selected passages that revealed the depth and complexity of the world as experienced through his protagonist Haris. With intensely clear and open prose, Ackerman brought the audience into a landscape of war, a world inhabited by real people that we are too often invited to ignore in our daily lives.

In the lively Question and Answer segment of the evening, Ackerman revealed to the audience his journey as a novelist after he served four tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. With his soft and well-timed humor, Ackerman approached each question with a comforting levity even if some of his answers were sparse. Yet, in Hemingway style, even his sparseness spoke to the deeply observant and thoughtfully aware nature of his character. As one of the last writers of the 2018 Festival season, Elliot Ackerman seemed to anchor us all in the notion and importance of being truly and irrevocably present. In his final piece of advice, he declared what all fans of the WWW Festival already know, but still love to hear: “You need to read!”