

A photograph of a man standing in a modern architectural space. The man is wearing a grey button-down shirt and blue jeans, looking off to the side. He is standing next to a large, textured concrete pillar. The background features a series of arches and a railing. The scene is lit with warm, orange light. The image is framed by a dark, textured border that looks like a torn piece of paper or a rough edge.

A PLACE



AND A TIME

In his short stories and poems,
SPS creative fiction professor
and Chicago native Stuart Dybek evokes
a singular vision of the city.

Stuart Dybek remembers the moment he fell in love with writing. As a fourth-grader writing a geography composition about Africa, he'd just discovered metaphor. The technique, of course, had been used by generations of writers before him, but for a nine-year-old, writing "the trees scraped skies" was a breakthrough.

"I had this emotional reaction," Dybek says of his clever turn of words. "A bolt went through me." From that point on, his teachers encouraged his creativity and singled out his work in class, often reading aloud what he'd written.

Now on the faculty of SPS's creative writing program, the award-winning Dybek holds the title of Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern. It's a fitting honor for the Chicago native, whom the *Atlantic* called "one of America's living masters of the short story." His most recent collections, *Paper Lantern Love Stories* and *Ecstatic Cahoots* (both published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux), have earned praise from such sources as the *New York Times*, which referred to Dybek as "not only our most relevant writer but maybe our best." His poetry and fiction have appeared in publications including *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Paris Review*.

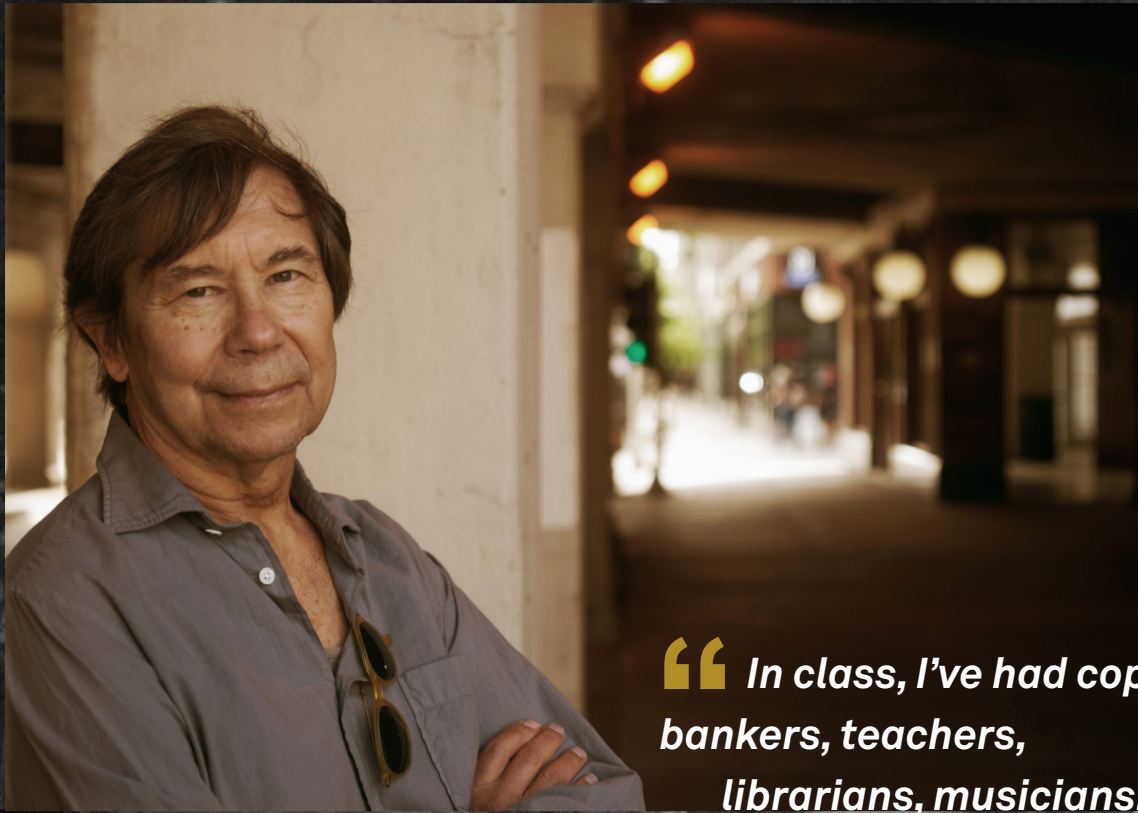
Born in 1942, Dybek received his BS in 1964 and MA in 1967 from Loyola University Chicago. After a short stint as a caseworker and a brief teaching career in the Caribbean, he earned his MFA in 1973 from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. An English professor at Western Michigan University for more than three decades, he returned to Chicago in 2006 to continue his teaching career at Northwestern—and was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2007.

"I love it here," says Dybek, who teaches writing to undergraduates and creative fiction in SPS's master's program. "Northwestern is a school that loves writing. And SPS has the exact kind of students I love: they come in with life experience."

He finds something in each student's piece—point of view, dialogue, or scene development, for example—that's pertinent not just to the writer but to the entire class. "I've had cops, bankers, teachers, librarians, musicians, and journalists," he says, "and that diversity among adults who are so passionate about writing is enormously valuable. Everyone learns something from everyone else. Couple that with the different ethnicities and races, and it makes for really vigorous classroom sessions."

Dybek himself is a product of working-class Chicago, raised by a Polish immigrant father and first-generation American mother who settled in Pilsen before later moving to Little Village. In the 1940s, when he was growing up, "Pilsen was a port-of-entry neighborhood for eastern and central European populations," says Dybek, who draws most of his material from his Chicago roots. "It was an exciting free-range childhood, and I've always been grateful for the gift of it."

In Dybek's hands, Chicago is an imagined and mysterious place, though it doesn't mean there aren't familiar locales and streets in his stories. Like all great artists, he has a distinctive, recognizable voice, and his is shaped in large part by his Chicago experience; it's through the filter of Pilsen that Dybek writes about class, the American dream, ethnicity, culture, and religion. The city "contains such a potent mix of quintessential literary material," he says.



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His writing has been described as magical realism, and that’s how he views the craft of writing itself: “Science hasn’t figured out how these abstract marks on the page make us laugh or cry. Everyone knows the power of the written word, but you can’t touch or feel it like you can painting or sculpture.”

Dybek is grateful to be included in the pantheon of Chicago authors. “A writer is fortunate growing up here,” he says. “There’s a Chicago school of writing that’s wonderfully diverse, from Nelson Algren and Saul Bellow to Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright. Chicago writers are neighborhood writers—Brooks lived in Bronzeville, James T. Farrell wrote about the South Side Irish.

“I was lucky to have my own neighborhood,” says Dybek, who now calls Evanston home. “If you look at the everyday goings-on, at what you see, hear, and smell, and bring those to life, you’ll automatically be writing about the great things of literature.”

—Anne Stein