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Teacher's Pedagogy

'Here I Am a Writer' will inspire the most jaded educator

by [Jarret Keene](#)



Here I Am a Writer, by Christopher McIlroy

Here I Am a Writer

By Christopher McIlroy

Kitsune

250 pages, \$15

Tucson Weekly readers never encounter reviews of amateur writing in these pages. Tucson possesses so many "pro" writers who regularly publish that there's little need to discuss collections of juvenilia.

This book of juvenilia is so inspirational, however, it demands serious consideration.

Twenty-five years ago, Tucson writer Christopher "Kit" McIlroy co-founded ArtsReach, a creative-writing program designed for Native American students in schools in the Yaqui and

Tohono O'odham communities of Southern Arizona. The nonprofit was born during the Reagan years, when programs that smacked of minorities or the arts seemed destined to be axed. Feeling that something should be done to meet the needs of young Native minds and voices, McIlroy and two other whites—his wife, Karen, and the poet Mick Fedullo—charged ahead despite having absolutely no experience in nonprofit management and launched ArtsReach.

McIlroy acknowledges the presumption of and the paradox in encouraging young Native Americans to write, as theirs is a culture, McIlroy explains in the introduction, "where written language is the tongue of the conqueror, where heritage just beyond memory is the oral tradition." But he believes "that people are at their best when writing, whatever the subject matter, because each poem or story honestly written is a focus of perception, imagination, memory, emotion, intellect, spirit, all in one. Nothing else so completely captures the flux of being."

McIlroy certainly makes such a case with *Here I Am a Writer*. Although loosely framed as a memoir, the book focuses on the lives and writings of his students, none of whom, McIlroy notes, went on to become a professional author. Instead, he spotlights the work—poetry, fiction, nonfiction—of 10 students, each in turn, and each demonstrating a wisdom beyond their years. Each selection is then followed by a biography of the writer, a kind of "where are they now?" Making the book even more moving, McIlroy catches up with his students years, often decades, later and asks them to each write a new piece. The results are powerful, heartrending.

Take, for instance, Martín Acuña, a member of the Yaqui tribe, who wrote this tiny jewel of a poem, "Cold Breeze," when he was in the fifth grade.

I feel the cold

breeze blowing in

my face as I am

sitting on a rock

way up in the sky,

as I see God.

After years of gangs, construction jobs and tattoos, Acuña seems ready to make positive changes in his life upon being visited by McIlroy. But the visit doesn't result in new written work—until years later when a letter from the Buckeye prison unit arrives. With the letter is a beautiful, handwritten poem,

"2 People in One Body":

As I look in this mirror I see one person,

*a person with a good heart that could
be loving, trusted, even looked up to.
Only family knows this person that is loving,
caring, and trusted. Most of his friends don't
know this person. They see the other person.
As I look again in the mirror I see the other
person, the one who has no heart, that
doesn't care about others, the person that only cares
for himself. The one they look up to for the wrong
reasons. The person that will hurt you in any way.*

Here I Am a Writer is not always so grim. There are the gorgeous, haunting poems of Stanford graduate Patrick Lewis-Jose. There are the deeply spiritual odes of Yolanda Darrell, who works in an elder-care facility. Indeed, many of the young writers taught by McIlroy have gone on to lead varied lives, full of darkness and light, just like our own. All of these individuals recall the ArtsReach experience and how they were touched by the light of possibility and how they, as McIlroy says earlier in the book, "found the artist within them," even if it was only for a moment.

An educator myself, I found it impossible to put down this book. McIlroy includes a remarkable concluding essay, "You Are the Writing Teacher," which offers five principles for being an effective instructor, along with prompts and exercises for young writers. In a time when test scores are everything and educators are disparaged as tax-feeding parasites by the lunatic right, this book shows us a path toward creativity and imagination.