

## International Writing Program Video Transcript

**Christopher Merrill** (sitting on a couch speaking to somebody off camera): I remember an Irish playwright saying to me once, we were at a picnic out in the country, and he looked at me and he said, “You know, I know this scene. I’ve seen it so many times in American movies. And it... it’s familiar. But it’s so different.”

*Jazzy music begins*

(Graphic) State Department logo on black screen

(Graphic) The University of Iowa logo on black screen

(Text with typing sound effects) Present

(Text with typing sound effects)The International Writing Program IWP

(Text) An exchange program of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs U.S. Department of State

**Christopher Merrill:** You can visualize it from a book, you can see it on a movie or a TV series, but when you’re there and you can smell something different; when the corn is ripening in Iowa in the summer (photo of Iowa cornfield fades up), or when you can catch a whiff of the Quaker Oats factory in Cedar Rapids (photo of Quaker Oats factory next to water with rainbow over it fades up), not so great, but it’s part of that life. When you get the textures of a place, you begin to get the details that writers depend on.

*Jazzy music returns*

(Text on black screen with typing sound effects and male writer reading):

Broken is the shape of everything

like yesterday

like memory

Now is so large

The present is everywhere:

we break them into pieces

and they’re all we have

They are all we carry

into tomorrow:

broken bits

it is the shape

of everything

- Kei Miller (Jamaica)

(Fade back to Christopher Merrill sitting on couch)

**Christopher Merrill:** My name is Christopher Merrill (Text fades in and out: Christopher Merrill IWP Director), I direct the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, which since 1967 has been bringing the writers of the world to the University for a unique residency. (Photos of writers speaking and smiling fade in and out) We look for early to mid-career writers, but what we're really thinking about is where their minds are: the openness to experience is what we're looking for, and what we find year after year is that there's much more common ground among writers than one would even imagine.

*Jazzy music returns*

(Text on black screen with typing sound effects and male writer reading):

I remember it well,  
running away from home  
in pajamas and in the twice  
bigger shoes of my father.  
This urge I still retain  
except that the shoes are too small for me now.

- Nikola Madzirov (Macedonia)

(Fade back to Christopher Merrill sitting on couch)

**Christopher Merrill:** They come to Iowa to write, to translate their works, to do research, to interact with other writers. We call the program the "United Nations of Writers." (Photos of writers fade in and out) I remember meeting in Jerusalem, a wonderful Israeli poet who said to me the great thing about being in the IWP was, coming from a small country like I do, I would never have the chance to meet writers from as many places as I met in Iowa City, so the world just became bigger.

*Jazzy music returns*

(Photos of Iowa City fade in and out)

**Christopher Merrill:** Iowa City, as you know, was just named a UNESCO City of Literature – the third in the world after Edinburgh and Melbourne – and I like to say that Iowa City is the one place in America where you can say that you're a poet and nobody will laugh. And so it's a place where the word is honored: we have a great library, we have a wonderful reading series at the bookstore... Our feeling is if it will help the writer get their work done, help them in any possible way. So that means anecdotes, that means stories, that means contacts with different kinds of people, different kinds of audiences.

(Text on black background with typing sound effects and female writer reading):

...the air is so clean here,  
above the clouds,  
you can breathe deep,  
so deep,  
you don't have to be afraid  
but it's important that you breathe correctly.  
Until you feel you become light,  
very light,  
and the air is like  
the seawater,  
keeps you on the surface  
and there is nothing left for you  
but to softly move your wings.

Alina Nelega (Romania)

(Fade back to Christopher Merrill sitting on couch)

**Christopher Merrill:** IWP, as I said, the chief priority is writing, but we also take them on hikes in the area, we take them to farms, we take them to a harvest dinner year after year (photo of baskets of vegetables), we take them to a rodeo (photo of rodeo performer). And as you can imagine, to have 20 or 30 writers from abroad at a rodeo in Fort Mason, Iowa, I think that's a kind of cultural exchange on both sides.

*Jazzy music returns*

(Photo of hand turning a page)

**Christopher Merrill:** I think that in many ways the writers go back, they write books about Iowa, about the IWP, about America, and I think at the end of the day if you add all of those writings up, and newspaper columns, and magazine articles, and interviews that they do when they come back, and the general good will that they tend to feel toward the United States after the fact, that it begins to present a different picture of the United States; a picture that is more nuanced than it might have been.

*Music returns*

(Text on black background)

For more about IWP visit:

(Fade up): [iwp.uiowa.edu](http://iwp.uiowa.edu)

(Fade up): [exchanges.state.gov](http://exchanges.state.gov)

Photo Credits:

University of Iowa

International Writing Program

“Corn field”

Flickr user PlanMyGreen

“Rainbow over Quaker Oats”

Flickr user matthewjhale

“post vacation harvest (and dinner)”

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“DSC\_0039”

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The International Writing Program is conducted in partnership between the U.S. Department of State and the University of Iowa