

The trouble with literature and science is that most people think they have nothing in common. The former is imaginative, subjective, dreamy; the latter hard-minded, objective, and dry. Except when Laura Dassow Walls, an associate professor of English at Lafayette College, in Easton, Pa., talks about them. Then literature and science seem remarkably alike. And there's a good reason for that, Ms. Walls insists: they are.

The problem, Ms. Walls adds, is at most students don't know it. Science is an adventure of the imagination," she says. But most students "have already eliminated science from their imaginative lives. It's become a heap of facts they memorize to get a passing grade." The reality, Ms. Walls says in her seminar, part of Lafayette's required values and science / technology curriculum, couldn't be more different. She uses text in all its forms—novels, poems, plays, articles, films—to make the point.

The semester begins with a hard look at two foundational literary takes on science: the scientist as hero who works in the lab to better human lives (think Bertolt Brecht's play *Galileo*) versus science run amok, manipulating biology in ways that threaten mankind (think *Brave New World*).

Next, the class analyzes the rhetoric of science writing, reading mass-media news stories and novels (the "popular" voice of science) and academic articles (science's "professional" voice). "Literature is part of the way we as a culture grasp the meaning of science," Ms. Walls notes.

The final section of the course looks at the way big metaphors color perceptions of science. How, Ms. Walls asks, does the notion of the earth as a living creature "structure certain scientific theories?"

The reading list:

In addition to the wealth of scientific articles on the syllabus, there are also six books: Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* and Stephanie Strickland's book of poetry *True North* among them.

The assignments:

Ms. Walls's course is writing-intensive, hence the four papers on the syllabus. Students write an essay about their relationship to science, take a comparative look at the genres of science writing, analyze a prevailing scientific metaphor, and write a creative paper—a poem, short story, or personal narrative—discussing what they've learned in the course.

"Many students feel they sit in science classes and are told what to memorize. They don't have a sense of the big picture, the big questions," Ms. Walls says. Literature helps explain why science is an exciting, imaginative endeavor, she insists. It "reopens a door that for too many students has been closed."

Notes From Underground: the Job Fair for Historians

In the 'Pit,' would-be professors beg for positions that they don't really want

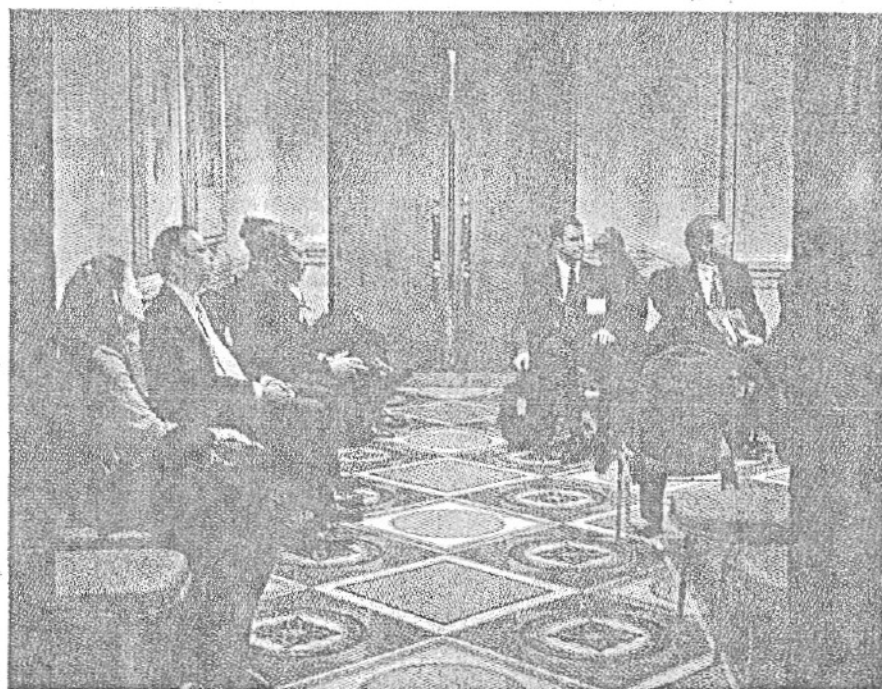
BY JEFF SHARLET

BOSTON

THE HISTORIAN has just left his third and final job interview, and now he wants to get out of the room fast. He needs to find a place where he can sit down and take off his overcoat. He'd forgotten to do so during the interview, and the room was hot.

He'd been doing these interviews for three years while he taught without tenure at a community college—but today, with his coat on and the room so hot, he got nervous, so he'd pressed his hands into his lap and leaned forward to keep them there. His interviewers had inched away. The historian, afraid that the job was slipping out of his grasp, had lifted his hands to the edge of the table.

"What do you want me to be?" he remembers wanting to ask then. "I will be it."



Scenes from the history meeting. . . . Above, job applicants hope for a morsel on the interview board. At they wait for their interview

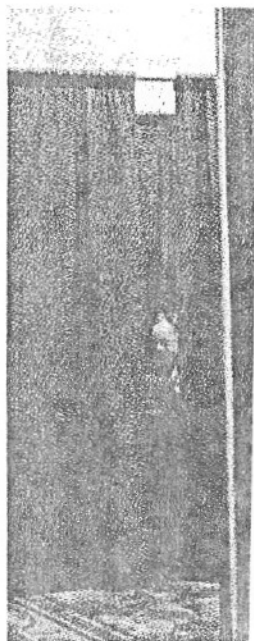
Now, just a few minutes after the ordeal, his anxiety seems to him ridiculous. "We all think such things here," he says, gesturing to the maze of curtained cubicles surrounding him.

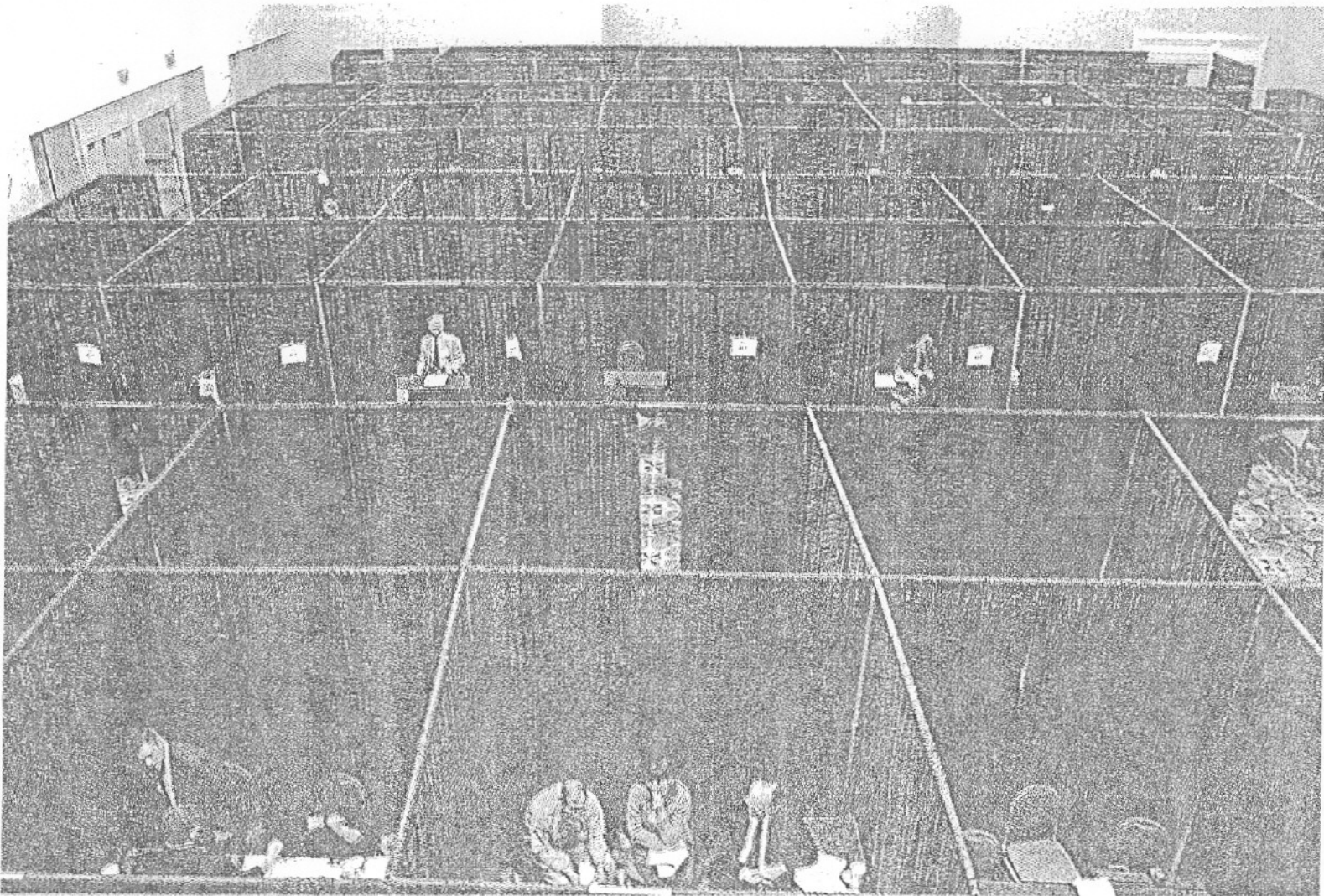
Deep in the bowels of the Sheraton Boston, amid the dust and noise of construction, 120 job candidates at a time sit at 120 tables, wearing the suits and dowdy dresses that graduate school rarely demands. Across from them sit twice as many faculty interviewers, listening to the same nervous pitches for the second, the third, the fifteenth time. Many of the applicants dream of writing books; most of the interviewers

want someone to shoulder a piece of the teaching load.

"I don't think they want to find out the real potential of the candidate's scholarship," says the historian, who can't give his name because such heresy would dash his already slim chances of landing a job. His interview smile is still twitching, but his shoulders slump so much that his briefcase nearly scrapes the carpet as he peers one way and the other for an exit. He is lost.

"You put your lifetime into pursuing a doctorate degree, and now you're sort of a beggar," he says. "Instead of standing for





an idea, I stand for an empty spot in a course catalog."

Despite his despair, the historian's chances this year are better than they've been in the past: there are only 1,000 candidates competing for spots at the fewer than 200 colleges and universities represented here at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association on the first weekend of January. According to Robert B. Townsend, an editor of the association's newsletter and an organizer of the job fair, those are some of the best odds that historians have faced in years. Although fewer candidates have attended in the past, they were always competing for even fewer jobs.

Mr. Townsend had arranged for more tables than usual on the floor of the grand ballroom, and had reserved 25 suites for institutions—the prestigious and the less well-known—willing to shell out \$100 a day to meet prize candidates in private.

For the few rising stars, the hiring process in history today is much the same as it was for everyone in the boom times of the G. I. Bill: wining and dining and on-campus interviews, with long, thoughtful conversations about the candidate's work and the caliber of student in the hiring institution's classrooms.

For everyone else, though, the decline of the old-boy network, combined with the growing pool of job applicants over the years, means that the first step to a job you

might not even want is on the floor of the Sheraton's ballroom. It is known by many as the Pit.

GIVEN the numbers of job applicants, how else could colleges screen everyone fairly? asks Pillarisetti Sudhir, another editor of *Perspectives*, the association's newsletter. He stands outside the Pit, fielding queries from anxious candidates who have traveled to Boston without any scheduled interviews but with sheaves of C.V.'s in their briefcases, just in case an empty half-hour should open up on the floor.

Despite the improving job market, there still isn't room for everyone, says Mr. Sudhir, whispering lest any nearby job seekers think that his comments were meant for them in particular. "This way," he says, gesturing toward the cubicles, "it is relatively painless."

Don Fries and David C. Wright agree. They are inside the Pit, waiting for a candidate applying for an opening at College Misericordia, in Dallas, Pa. They insist that as grim as the Pit is, it is the best way to interview—and that it has improved in the past few years. When Mr. Fries interviewed Mr. Wright a dozen years ago, they sat at a table in plain view of every other person in the room—including the next candidate in line.

"Now," says Mr. Wright, pointing:

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Amalendu Chakraborty leaves an interview conducted at the history meeting.

Photographs for *The Chronicle*
by Rick Friedman, *Black Star*

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ins." Even if you can hear
competitors, at least you no
have to look at them.
Wright and Mr. Fries boast
ey don't covet the most dis-
hed candidates. "We screen
irs," says Mr. Fries. Stars,
lains, don't want to teach.
ries recalls a candidate
interviewed at a past con-
1. "He was Yale undergrad,
d grad, or maybe the other
ound. We told him that our
s are often people who
And he said, 'I've always

wanted to educate the working
class!"

So these days it doesn't matter
how desperate the job seeker—
"no Ivy Leaguers," says Mr.
Wright. "If one slips by, we just
while away the half-hour and enjoy
the conversation. It's best to let
them leave with some hope, even if
there isn't any."

"I FEEL SORRY for these people,"
says William L. Hewitt, an ami-
able, bearded man in a brown-
suede shirt who specializes in Na-
tive American history. He is in the

Pit to talk to candidates for posi-
tions at West Chester University,
in Pennsylvania, where they will
teach four courses a semester—
two more than at many more-elite
institutions. "I haven't had time to
scrutinize who they are or think
about how they'd fit in. All I can do
is warn them how hard a four-four
course load can be."

The job descriptions suggest the
difficulty—an African-American-
ist, for example, will also be ex-
pected to teach Latin American
and women's history.

"If you come to me talking about

all the books you're going to write,
all I can say is, 'If you're smart,
you won't apply here.'"

Such awkward moments, muses
Mr. Hewitt, may be the inevitable
result of an interviewing process
that sets up young historians, eager
to publish their dissertations and
make names for themselves,
against senior faculty members at
teaching institutions, who have lit-
tle time for active research.

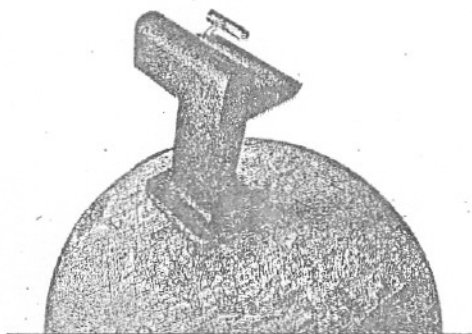
"I'M A PRETTY good student of hu-
man nature," says Sascha Au-
erbach, a graduate student who'd

flown up from Emory University
for just one interview. "But, man,
they don't really give you a lot to
go on. It's like walking into a star
chamber."

Mr. Auerbach considers himself
lucky. Although he'd had only the
one interview, it had been for one
of the most coveted positions in his
field, teaching British history at
Syracuse University; it seemed to
have gone well, and now he could
relax with a pint of Guinness.

"You come and even if you
don't get the job, everyone sees
that they were considering you,"
he says, explaining his motives in
making the rounds of the confer-
ence. "It's like being dated by the
most popular girl. It might make
you popular, too."

A popularity contest isn't a bad
model for understanding the sys-
tem, he adds, particularly one
that nevertheless is intended to
select highly-specialized humani-
ties scholars. "Something has to



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"No Ivy Leaguers. If one
slips by, we just while
away the half-hour and
enjoy the conversation.
It's best to let them leave
with some hope."

explain it. When they hire someone
who might be tenured and stay on,
they're buying a \$1-million invest-
ment. You should at least get a
room."

Instead, you usually get a red-
eyed senior faculty member who,
no matter how well-disposed to-
ward the next generation, can't
seem to avoid the little tics of aca-
demic hierarchy: arriving late for
an interview, bringing up imagi-
nary problems in a syllabus, even,
in a worst-case scenario, nodding
off.

"The masters have privileges,
not money," says Mr. Auerbach,
who adds that his interview had
been a pleasant exception to the
rule. "But there can't be too many
of those."

"I HEARD SOMEONE SAY it's like
Auschwitz," says a historian
from the University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign, who'd scored
a promising 13 interviews with re-
search universities. He giggles
nervously at his grotesque over-
statement. "There's lines to the
left and to the right, and you want
to get in the right line." His voice
edges up in volume and pitch.
"I'm a tinker! I'm a tinker! I can
work, I have skills!"

Mr. Auerbach's analogy seems
more apt. The Pit, the waiting
rooms, the corridors winding
through nonstop construction—all
of it strikes him as not just any old
maze, but a labyrinth. "You keep
wondering, Which curtain is the
Minotaur behind?"

And, more important, does he
have an opening for a scholar
who'd love a four-four course
load?