

# Word Problems

MIT students are supposed to be studying scalable databases and satellite navigation systems. So what are they doing writing short stories?

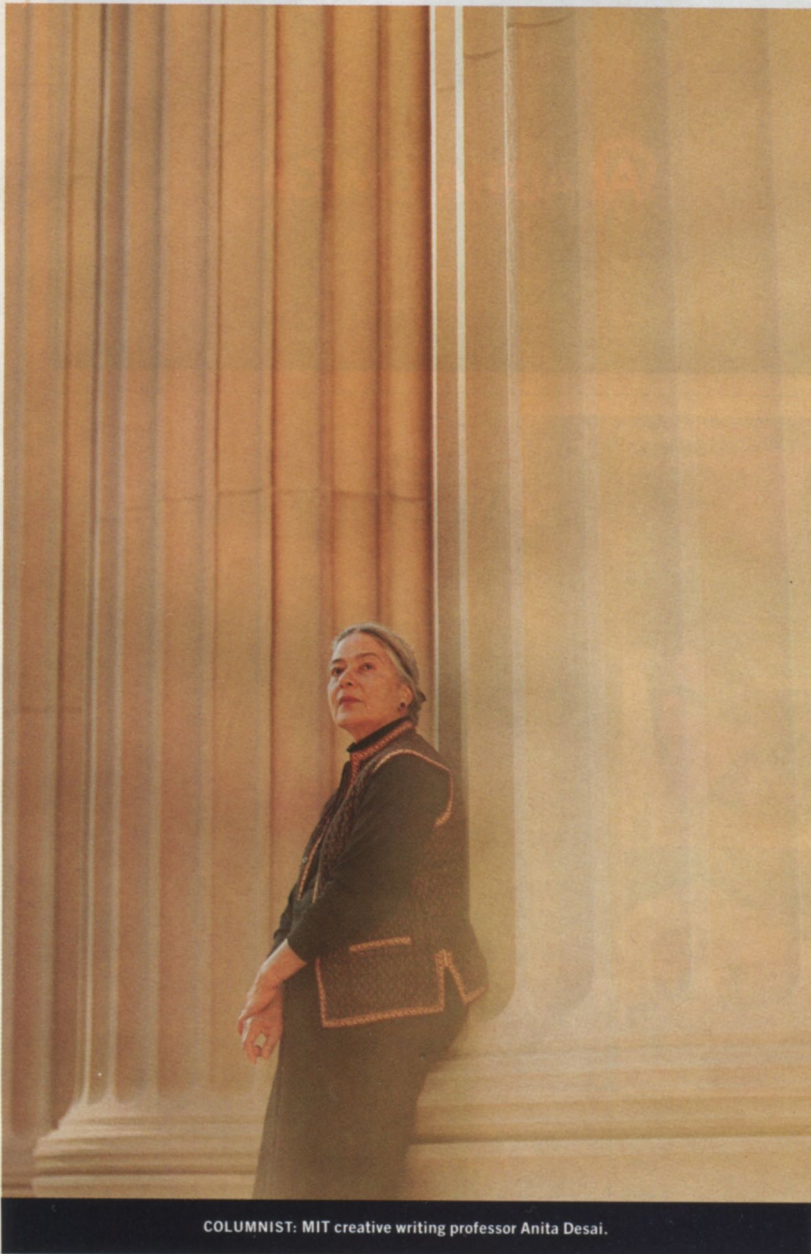
ONCE, AFTER READING a passage in which a dog licks its master's face, a student in a fiction writing

class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology speculated aloud about the enzymes in canine saliva. To her credit, she began by saying, "This may sound nerdy..." Still, the chemical makeup of a dog's bodily fluids does seem an odd digression. MIT is an odd place, though, and peculiar comments such as this are easily forgiven. The real question is: What is this budding scientist doing in a fiction writing class, anyway?

On the face of it, MIT's creative writing program appears as central to the university as its football team, which last fall lumbered obscurely through yet another losing season. After all, MIT is primarily an engineering school, where the buildings go by numbers, and there's a Pentagon-like acronym for everything. Its labyrinthine layout seems straight out of Kafka.

Then again, Kafka was a writer, wasn't he? And just as Kafka was responding to the stifling bureaucracy of early 20th-century Prague, so the MIT writing program brings color and curve to the university's gray quadrangles. "Students certainly don't come to MIT for the arts," allows Anita Desai, the Booker Prize-nominated novelist from India who has taught creative writing here for nine years. "They're here to study engineering and science. But after being immersed in this very different field of creative writing, I think it takes them by surprise that they actually need it."

With its engineering focus, MIT is the most wonkish of greater Boston's elite universities. But, when he founded the school in 1865, William Barton Rogers recognized that MIT students would need more than calculus to excel in the increasingly industrialized America of the post-Civil War era. English, history, and economics were part of the original curriculum. "It wasn't just humanities for humanities' sake," says Philip Khoury, dean of humanities. "Rogers knew that MIT graduates would face complex social issues beyond the engineering ones." *[Continued on page 52]*



COLUMNIST: MIT creative writing professor Anita Desai.



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## Ivory Tower [Continued from page 50]

More recently, this broadening impulse has been strengthened by the fear that, without a healthy background in the humanities, MIT grads would top out their corporate careers as technological advisers to their CEOs, leaving the corner-office jobs to those smart-aleck Harvardians. And, of course, teaching the humanities helps MIT stay in the top five of the all-important *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. "There's no way we'd be up there without humanities," Khoury insists. No other technological university has anything like MIT's commitment to the humanities. MIT undergrads spend 25 percent of their curricular time taking courses in the nontech areas of humanities, arts, and social sciences—HASS in MIT-speak—and all students are required to take eight HASS courses to graduate.

Still, despite all this humanizing, the nerd factor remains. Writer-in-residence Stephen Alter was once thrown by a story about some fierce rodents called "sqrats"—hybrids of squirrels and rats—that were terrorizing the campus. "It was fascinating how many students had heard one version or another of this," he says. He didn't know that the sqrat is a staple of MIT folklore, a bit like the fictitious MIT unit of measurement, the "smoot," whose most notable application involves the Massachusetts Avenue bridge.

"We're mega-nerds," admits Karen Grant, one of just six MIT students actually majoring in creative writing. (The university's undergraduate enrollment is about 4,258.) "But we embrace that as a way to be different." She dumped aerospace because she was sick of math, but she hasn't left her own nerdiness entirely behind: She ascribes the differences in writing ability in her fiction classes to "normal variance." And the story she is working on for her thesis—a 60-page piece of "speculative fiction"—isn't likely to be picked for Oprah's Book Club. It involves the interplay between an *X-Men*-like comic book and the personal life of the comic book's author. "The writer is working out some of his issues through his comic book," she says.

AS WITH THAT FICTIONAL COMIC-book writer, so with the MIT students. Professor of humanities Alan Lightman—who was a lecturer of physics and astronomy before he turned to writing novels, including *Einstein's Dreams* and *Good Benito*—thinks many students need



the emotional release that comes from writing fiction. Lightman recalls assigning one class to write about a personal issue and discovering it was the first time some of his students had ever done so. "I see the class as an occasion to help these students open up, to probe their interior life at a deep level," Lightman says. "It's almost like therapy."

Of course, at a pressure-packed school like MIT, it can be distressing to see what those therapy sessions reveal. Suicide is a common theme, not surprising considering at least six MIT students have taken their own lives since 1998. For Anita Desai, the topic has become eerily routine. "Typically, [a suicide on campus] disturbs the students and leaves them bewildered," she says. "One student expressed great anger, which shocked the others, but that seemed very natural to me."

Desai teaches her advanced creative writing class on Tuesdays and agreed to let me sit in one evening to get a sense of what goes on. Knowing I would get lost trying to find her classroom in Building 10, she meets me in Kendall Square and walks me over. A gentle, soft-spoken woman with gray hair, she seems overmatched by all the hulking monoliths we pass: the brick Health Services Center, the futuristic Media Lab, the library. The buildings are jammed together as if on a Holly-

wood back lot, none of them acknowledging another. Building 10 proves to be at the center of a cluster that includes buildings 1, 2, 3, 4, 4A, 5, 6, 6A, 7, 7A, 8, 11, and 13, and rings a piece of rare open space called Killian Court (though this is not apparent to me until later when I look at a map). The classroom itself is up a set of wide stairs and off an endless hall. Inside, a vast, rectangular table is overhung by a pair of glowing orbs. Desai

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has told me that her students occasionally come barefoot, their hair dyed pink or purple, but the 15 students who gather this night are all in sneakers and loose clothes. They might be from Anywhere U.—until, that is, they divulge their majors: mechanical engineering, computer science, astronautics ("we look at space guidance systems") . . .

Desai conducts her three-hour class as a workshop. Half a dozen students read their stories out loud, and then she leads a general discussion of each one. Usually, MIT fic-

tion writers are drawn to "close-range" topics—dorm life, romantic tangles, alcoholism, drugs. The best, though, go further to take in, for example, class struggle in Pakistan or ex-lovers who meet unexpectedly in Europe. Some students go possibly too far—into the realms of science fiction that are a perpetual fascination at MIT: time travel, aliens, end-of-the-world scenarios. Veteran sci-fi writer Joe Haldeman teaches two science fiction writing courses that fill up quickly, and occasionally the genre pops up in Desai's classes. "Travel to other planets, things like that," she says dismissively.

Tonight, however, the stories stay closer to home. Katrina, a bubbly neuroscience major, begins with a tale of two teenage girls whose friendship is altered once they discover sex. The room grows quiet when she gets to the part about a threesome: "He turned back to Ricki, and his head moved past her breasts, down to her waist. Ricki leaned over to Amy and whispered, 'Don't look.'" Later, Kelly, a physics major with a Philly accent, reads a remarkably assured piece of García Márquezian magic realism titled "Gypsy Palace," set in an unnamed Eastern European country.

But Albert's story brings down the house. The wild and incomprehensible account of a global conspiracy [Continued on page 54]



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**Ivory Tower** [Continued from page 53]

involving misspelled Internet domain names such as Gopgle and Yahoï comes complete with geeky references to “diabolical European orgies” and a “human-like assembly of lipids.” The humor isn’t quite ready for *Saturday Night Live*, but it gets some of the guys guffawing hysterically. Desai, however, merely smiles.

Until that last story, I wouldn’t have guessed I was at MIT. There is nothing robotic about these students. If anything, their responses have a vibrancy that is enthralling. Desai questions the

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authors in a delicate, Socratic style, never criticizing. “And what about that last paragraph, does it maintain the balance of the whole?” she might inquire. Or, about a plot point: “Should that moment be elaborated?” And, possibly because of Desai’s example, the students themselves never fall into the petty spite or the bland “It’s nice” supportiveness that is the bane of writing workshops.

By the time the class is over, I see why it’s so popular—and so necessary for MIT. The nerds aren’t being humanized: It’s more that their latent individuality is being revealed. Listening to them read their stories, I’m surprised by their voices, which seem, for the most part, to have an FM-radio warmth and richness. Likewise, the stories themselves evoke an inner self that is, in fact, far more secure—deeper, truer—than the writers’ often high-schoolish demeanor suggests. The raw, working-class kid proves to be almost Jamesian in her control; the brainy one, confidently sexual; the analytical one, wild.

It may be that, with the emphasis on the humanities, these students end up as well-rounded graduates, just as MIT’s founder had hoped. But that seems a superficial, résumé-padding quality. In this classroom they are engaged in something far more fundamental. Like engineers of the self, they are attending to their own underlying structures, their personal foundations. It’s an unexpected solidity I see when I look around the room. Their keen faces display the confidence that comes from being, for a few hours at least, fully who they are. **B**

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