Have you read Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*?” asks Clark Knowles spiritedly as we settle down to talk. “It is awesome—the best book. Her first book blew me away and I was worried because how often does that lightning strike twice? But it did.”

A passion for reading and writing is key to what makes Knowles so effective as a composition and fiction writing teacher. He wants literature to knock his socks off. When it does, he’s driven to share that experience with others.

Of his teaching philosophy, Knowles says, “I’m pretty sure it’s all about encouragement,” helping students pay attention to what is working in their writing. Aspiring writers should also write constantly and read voraciously, practicing techniques and learning how to read like a writer. What is harder to instill, according to Knowles, is the stick-to-it-iveness that is required of writers, “the part that allows people to come back to it again and again, even when they can’t find their way to the stories they want to tell.”


Knowles’ work in the creative trenches is fodder for both modeling and mentoring in the classroom. “He understands that to write is to discover—and to discover is to become,” says Andrew Merton, chair of the Department of English. “Writers learn about themselves during the creative process. As people, they change and grow. But not all creative artists are willing or able to convey this sense of transformation to their students. Clark Knowles is one of those who can.”

His students agree. Several attest to being not just better writers after a course with Knowles but also changed people.

Knowles balances teaching and writing with another passion: family—daughter Grace, wife Gail, and a trio of four-leggers—a passion he’s not willing to sacrifice to the muse. “The people whom you think of as classic American writers weren’t particularly great parents,” he notes. “That’s something that might keep me from moving beyond publishing short stories, but I’m OK with that because family is more important.”

—Susan Dumais