By Margo Nash

The Queens College Evening Readings program marked its 31st anniversary this past season. What makes America’s greatest writers return again and again? Some say it is Joe Cuomo ’75, founder and director of the series. “I’m always honored when he asks me,” said Jamaica Kincaid, the Antiguan-born novelist and short-story writer. She read for the first time in 1986 at an Evening Reading. She fainted. But Joe Cuomo, she said, picked her up and helped her get through it. “He is so caring. He has such good literary judgment. I could never say no to him.”

What is that song? “I feel a personal connection with each of those writers,” said Cuomo, 54, a tall man with silvery hair, ruddy cheeks, and a soft voice. “They feel I understand their work, and they respond.”

Cuomo did not do any of the interviews. But Lopate also expressed admiration for the kind of program without, himself, being part of it, he said he does it because “the centrality of the novel. But she was not happy with the Times reviewer. He wrote “a horrendously hostile, nasty, mean-spirited, trivializing review,” she says. The review seemed to suggest that the novel had declined in importance, she thought. “So Joe saw this and got the idea (for the roundtable discussion).”

Leonard Lopate expressed admiration for all that his friend has accomplished. “Joe is really the founder, the spirit, and everything else. The whole thing really has to do with the people that Joe has established relations with over the years, and, then, his reputation. Writers who will go out to Queens College will not go to a lot of places. Maybe the 92nd Street Y.”

For more information on the Evening Readings series, visit www.qc.cuny.edu/readings

Clockwise from top left: Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow, Norman Rush, Joyce Carol Oates, Marion Ettlinger, Nancy Crampton, Robert E. Woolmington, Jerry Bauer, Susan Sontag, Frank McCourt, Tom Wolfe, Derek Walcott, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Jamaica Kincaid.