

On Becoming a Writer: Collected Stories

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education.

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This thesis is dedicated to all aspiring writers.

Abstract

This project considers the role of the creative writing teacher in the development of the writer's identity. Drawing from autoethnography and fiction-based research, this thesis is written in the form of a novel and presented as an exemplar of arts-based qualitative inquiry in educational research. The novel is organized in a series of stories that follow the life of a young woman named Mona and are about the people she meets, the stories she writes, the places she ends up, and who she becomes along the way. This project is informed by its pilot study, which drew from a narrative approach and included semi-structured interviews where participants were asked to share stories on their becoming a writer. The emergent themes from the pilot study fell within one of two opposing categories: The first being factors that prevented one's sense of becoming and; the second describing factors that facilitated one's sense of becoming. The findings from the pilot study were then synthesized into literary themes and are presented in the stories, *On Becoming a Writer*. This project adds to the growing number of fictional texts as educational research and is presented as an alternative to the standard graduate thesis. This approach seeks to engage its readers to participate in the lives of writers and their stories, and may serve as a resource for teachers of aspiring writers.

Table of Contents

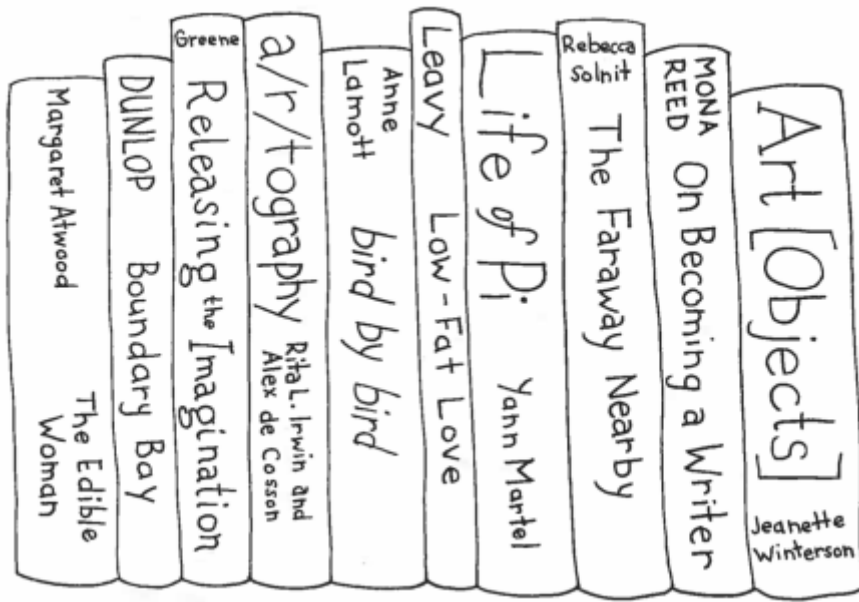
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Note to the Reader.....	vii
On Becoming a Writer: Collected Stories.....	viii
Table of Contents.....	ix
Prologue.....	1
Exposition.....	2
<i>The Collected Stories on Becoming a Writer: A Pilot Project</i>	3
<i>On Becoming a Writer: Collected Stories</i>	5
Crisis.....	6
<i>Understanding the Role of the Teacher of Creative Writing: Research Questions</i>	6
Rising Action: Literature Review.....	7
<i>The Identity of the Writer</i>	8
<i>Empathy and Imagination</i>	11
<i>Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Reality</i>	14
Climax.....	17
<i>The Self as Text</i>	17
<i>The Reality of the Fictional Universe</i>	18
<i>Fiction-based Research and the Identity of the Creative Writing Teacher</i>	18
<i>Viewing the Writer/Teacher Identity Through an A/r/tographic Lens</i>	20
<i>From Exposition to Resolution: Narrating a Methodological Framework Weaving the Researcher's Narrative</i>	23
Falling Action.....	23
<i>Pilot Study: Analysis</i>	24
<i>Discussion: Emergent Themes on Preventing One's Sense of Becoming</i>	24
<i>Discussion: Emergent Themes on Facilitating One's Sense of Becoming</i>	26
<i>Collected Stories: Narrative Structure</i>	30
<i>Limitations/Delimitations</i>	30

Resolution

<i>Engaging in the Lives of Writers and their Stories:</i>	
<i>Significance of the Study</i>	30
What It’s Like to Interview a Protagonist.....	31
The Workshop.....	37
The Worst Draft Yet.....	59
Where Stories Come From.....	90
Making Room for Things.....	105
Headless the Bird.....	113
References	118
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Outline (Pilot Project)	121
Appendix B: Defining “Internalized” Identity.....	123

Note to the Reader

The content and characters in these stories are fictional. Any reference to historical events; to real people, living or dead; or to real locales are intended only to give the fiction a setting in historic reality. Other names, places, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously, and their resemblance, if any, to real-life counterparts is entirely coincidental.



ON BECOMING A WRITER: COLLECTED STORIES

Writing Stories as Educational Research

by Chelsea Larock

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>What It's Like to Interview a Protagonist</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>The Workshop</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>The Worst Draft Yet</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Where Stories Come From</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>Making Room for Things</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Headless the Bird</i>	<i>113</i>

PROLOGUE

Her bookcase was the only thing left to pack. It contained novels, mostly, and poetry from her university classes. There were books by Eugenides and Morrison, Murakami and Moore that she'd read in her class on contemporary literature. *Forget everything anyone has ever told you about how to write an essay*, the professor told her class on their first day. *A boring essay that's right will always be boring, he continued, but an interesting essay that's wrong can be tweaked and made right. So write an interesting essay.* She'd claimed after taking this class that her writing had never been the same and would encourage others in the program to enroll in it whenever any of them would ask her for suggestions.

On her shelves there were Canadian authors too, and Montreal writers in particular, people like Cohen, O'Neill, Richler, and Klein. She remembers going to the St. Lawrence River in the spring of her second year to sit by the water and take notes for her paper on A.M. Klein's poem, *The Break Up*. Even though she knew that the St. Lawrence stretched very far and that the section that she happened to be watching did not freeze over like the section being described in the poem, she knew that just by being there, where she was, would be enough.

But mostly, her shelves were filled with classics, books by Dickens and Homer, Tolstoy and Joyce. Although, Mona soon realized that she found greater influence from female writers, women like Austen and the Brontës, Burney and Shelley and whose novels inspired her to pursue a minor in women's studies two years in to her degree.

On the bottom shelf were the used copies of the novels and plays she'd loved from high school, books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Death of a Salesman*, and, most importantly, *The Edible Woman*, which she'd underlined and dog-eared almost every page.

She debated whether to pack the books she'd bought as a child from garage sales and the Value Village, which mostly consisted of pulpy romance novels and Stephen King thrillers. She used to be embarrassed of her book collection and had wished she'd been the type of kid who'd read all the classics by the age of twelve. But she took pride in knowing that she displayed an honest bookshelf, so she packed them too. And although she was sad knowing that once she reached Toronto it would mean that she'd be trading in Richler for Atwood, O'Neill for Engel, and Cohen for Brand, she decided to think of it as an opportunity, rather than a betrayal, because she appreciated the influence of local writers and wanted to be considered one as quickly as she could.

***Exposition*¹**

noun* | ex·po·si·tion | \, ek-spə- 'zi-shən\ *The reader is often told where and when the story occurs; introduces the character(s)

The passage sighted above is an excerpt from one of the stories found in the collection *On Becoming a Writer: Collected Stories*, my master's thesis, written in the form of a novel and presented as an exemplar of arts-based qualitative inquiry in educational research. The novel is organized in a series of stories that follow the life of a young woman named Mona and are about the people she meets, the stories she writes, the places she ends up, and who she becomes along the way. The stories are based on interviews that I conducted with emerging and established writers, and teachers of creative writing, as well as my own narrative as a writer/researcher/teacher.

My master's thesis began as a project I was assigned for a course that I enrolled in at the university, Qualitative Research: Part 1. At the time, I was in the first year of my master's degree and, having studied creative writing as an undergraduate, I had never conducted a research project before. Our professor was holding office hours for those who needed help determining a

¹ I have structured the introduction to mimic the narrative arc of a story, beginning with the story's exposition, followed by the crisis, rising action, climax, falling action, and concluding with the story's resolution.

topic for the project and I decided to stop by for some advice. When I arrived at her office, other students were already there, waiting. She would invite students in, often 3 or 4 at a time, so that we might benefit from the discussions in other student meetings. When my turn came, I sat down and told her my ideas. I wanted to do something about the identity of a writer, I explained. A project that had to do with the process of becoming a writer and about the influences that create such an identity. Instead of giving advice or feedback, though, she began to ask me questions. She asked me if I was a writer. I remember saying “sort of.” She asked me what “sort of” meant. She asked if I had teachers who’d influenced my identity as a writer. She asked who they were and what kind of influence they’d had. So I told her stories about these teachers, from high school and university. She asked these questions quickly and didn’t give me much room to respond. By the time we reached the end of our conversation, a lightbulb had gone off. She had just interviewed me on my process of becoming a writer. And not only that, but she was also, in a way, giving me permission to form an identity as a researcher in the same way that the teachers in my stories had given me permission to form an identity as a writer. This moment marked the beginning of this story and my first step in becoming a researcher.

The Collected Stories on Becoming a Writer: A Pilot Project

In order to introduce my current research, I must first go back to the beginning and explain where it all started. As I mentioned, this project was piloted in the fall of 2014 and the narratives that were shared with me then directly inform the research and analysis put forth in this thesis.

During the pilot study, I guided semi-structured interviews² where participants were asked to share stories on their becoming a writer. My goal at the time was to understand how one might attempt to co-construct students’ identities as writers in the classroom. The participants represented a sample of individuals who identify within various stages of becoming a writer, which I outlined in the study as being the following: those who are becoming (for example, a student of creative writing), those who have become (a writer), and those who are facilitators of becoming (someone who teaches writing to others).

The following table (*Table 1*) situates the participants within the different stages of becoming a writer and provides background information on each participant. Readers should

² See **Appendix A** for a detailed outline of interview questions used in the pilot project.

note that pseudonyms were used to maintain participant confidentiality. As part of the interview process, each participant was asked the question, “If you were a character in a story, what would your character’s name be?” and this became the name that I then used when identifying them throughout my research. Additionally, these character names (or pseudonyms) will sometimes appear twice in this research: once to identify the participant throughout the analysis found later in the prologue, and then again in, *On Becoming a Writer*, the stories as educational research. While the fictionalizing of findings was intended to uphold my craft as a writer, this process has also created an additional layer of anonymity for the participants in this study. It is important that readers are aware that all discussions within the prologue relate to the participants themselves, while the characters discussed within the stories are fictional representations based on the findings of this research project; they not only represent aspects of the participants and their lives but are also representations of the concepts and themes that emerged from this research.

Stage	Identification	Description
Becoming	Molly Fitzgerald <i>Recent graduate</i>	Recent graduate of a Canadian Creative Writing program; former editor of university literary journal; currently working and renting a studio space to work on writing projects
Become	Caleb <i>Writer</i>	Canadian novelist and playwright; professor of Creative Writing at a Canadian university.
Facilitator of Becoming	Alan Smithee <i>Teacher</i>	High school English and Creative Writing teacher, among other subjects; published writer and poet; graduate of a Canadian Creative Writing program.
Researcher	Chelsea Larock <i>Teacher/Graduate student</i>	High school English and Creative Writing teacher; Graduate student in an M.A.Ed. program; recent graduate of a B.Ed. program; graduate of a Canadian Creative Writing program.

Table 1 - Participant descriptions and background information

Once the stories were collected, the interviews were transcribed and recordings were listened to numerous times to identify recurring themes. Throughout the analysis, it became clear that the emergent themes were described by participants in two opposing categories: the first being factors that prevented one's sense of becoming, which included the impracticality of being a writer and claiming one's identity, and; the second describing factors that facilitated one's sense of becoming, which included mentorship and the influence of local writers. However, of the themes highlighted in the report, the theme of dedication was the most complex. It was the only theme to include sub-themes (including commitment, rejection/failure, and longevity) and it straddled the two guiding thematic categories. This is because, while maintaining dedication can be challenging (which could prevent one's sense of becoming), it is also considered one of the most crucial components required in becoming a writer (therefore, facilitating, in a way, one's sense of becoming).

While a deeper analysis of the pilot will be provided in a later section of the prologue, I thought it necessary to provide readers with enough background on the initial research in order to demonstrate how the project has evolved.

On Becoming a Writer: Collected Stories

Since preliminary results supported the practicability and value of this study, I decided to continue to build on the research³ for my master's thesis by weaving my own narrative with the stories collected in the pilot, since, as Creswell (2013) notes, "within the participant's story may also be an interwoven story of the researcher gaining insight into her or his own life (see Huber & Whelan, 1999)" (p. 75). In the spring of 2015, just as I was finishing the coursework for my master's degree, I was unexpectedly offered a full-time position teaching high school English and Creative Writing. Once I started teaching that fall, I found myself constantly reflecting on the stories that I'd collected throughout the pilot and I realized that I kept asking myself the same questions: where was I in my sense of becoming a writer, particularly in relation to the participants from the pilot project; and how was I to teach creative writing when I don't yet consider myself a "writer"?

In order to answer these questions, I began to record my narratives and continued to work with the data from the pilot project to weave my stories with those previously collected. This

³ Certificate of ethics approval was granted for secondary use of data.

additional narrative layer is the new data collected for my master's thesis and includes the following items:

1. I made attempts to implement the findings from the pilot project in my classroom in order to put my research in action;
2. I kept a journal to record any and all insights that related back to my guiding research questions as I actively reflected on my role as a writer, a researcher, and a teacher to uncover the various stages of becoming both a writer and a teacher of creative writing that I encountered, and;
3. Within my research journal, I answered the same questions posed to my participants in the pilot project in relation to my new role as a creative writing teacher.⁴

The data collected in this research journal was analyzed against the emergent themes that were identified in the pilot study and new, emergent themes were also sought.

Crisis

noun | *cri-sis* | \ 'krī-səs\ *A conflict is usually established between characters*

In storytelling, conflict is established in order to create narrative drive. Conflict can be internal or external, meaning within a character or between a character and exterior forces, and its purpose is to create tension in a story. In the pilot project, the conflict most present was undoubtedly the concept of dedication; person versus the writing. However, in my current research, the greatest conflict has to do with identity; person versus self.

Understanding the Role of the Teacher of Creative Writing: Research Questions

The crisis presented above required a close reading of my character's development from student to writer to teacher and led me to consider the following questions:

1. How does my process of becoming a writer influence my teaching of creative writing?
2. What does it mean to teach creative writing as someone who is still in the process of becoming a writer themselves?

However, in order to answer these questions, I must first ask myself the following:

- a. What does it mean to become a writer?

⁴ See **Appendix A** for a detailed outline of interview questions used in the pilot project.

- b. What is my role as a teacher of creative writing?
- c. How does my role as a teacher of creative writing influence my writing?
- d. How does becoming a writer influence my teaching of creative writing?

Rising Action

adjective | *ris-ing* | \ 'rī-zīŋ\ | ***noun*** | *ac-tion* | \ 'ak-shən\ ***The conflict between characters develops and becomes more pronounced***

In storytelling, the rising action consists of a series of incidents that create suspense, intrigue, and increase the conflict or tension. In other words, this is often the section in the plot where background is provided and circumstances are revealed that create twists and turns leading up to the climax. In the sections that follow, I will be providing additional background and context to my research that will both situate and challenge the reader, much like the rising action in a narrative.

Morawski (2010) once stated that “thoughtful teaching requires the mapping of one’s own life” and I have found that research often requires a similar exercise (p. 125). Over the past two years, I have been given the opportunity to read, interpret, and discuss various social contexts of education—how they are connected or disconnected, represented or misrepresented—and through this dialogue I have co-constructed a map of my journey, with the help of classmates and professors, of the various routes that we have explored in lectures and discussions and of the paths that we have each taken individually. Throughout my thesis, I wish to highlight some of the writers and researchers that I’ve encountered that continue to inspire this research and share stories from my life that have guided this inquiry.

This section will open with a brief background on the writer’s identity, particularly students and teachers of creative writing. I will then discuss the relationship between empathy and the imagination, and examine how they are present in fiction and allow fictional works to function as a form of inquiry and representation. Finally, I will introduce the concept of metafiction and highlight writers who have blurred the line between fiction and reality, creating space for new genres.

Literature Review

The Identity of the Writer

This fall, a colleague of mine approached me about collaborating with the student film club at our school. I was eager to help assist with the co-curricular despite knowing very little about film and screenwriting. The club's goal was to submit a five-minute short to a local film contest and I was asked to assign the scriptwriting to my creative writing students. Since I felt I lacked the knowledge I needed to properly introduce my students to the genre, I decided to seek help from someone who knew a thing or two. I had a few friends from university who had studied film but the skills that they had developed were more technical than literary. Then I remembered that a classmate of mine from the creative writing program had posted links on Facebook over the years of short films that she had written, some of which had even garnered attention at film festivals and won awards. I decided to send her a message one evening asking if she would mind if I screened a couple of her films in my classes and if she would be willing to set up a Skype call to talk to my students about her writing process. She got back to me right away and enthusiastically agreed. The students loved the films and had lots of questions for my classmate but the reason I share the story is this: during one of our Skype sessions, my classmate made the remark that she wasn't "a real writer or anything." This got me thinking. If this classmate of mine, who has written several short films that won awards and appeared at film festivals, had difficulty claiming her identity, what does it take to be able to call oneself a writer?

I will admit, I also struggle to confidently call myself writer. Atwood (2002) argues that "being a writer seems to be a socially acknowledged role, and one that carries some sort of weight or impressive significance - we hear a capital W on Writer" (p. 4). What this means is that too often one's identification as a writer is not acquired internally but rather acknowledged externally. Atwood goes on to describe writing as simply "the setting down of words" but when describing her first thoughts on becoming a writer (p. 4), recounts, "it was like finding yourself in a great library ... and gazing around at the thousands of books in it, and wondering if you really have anything of value to add" (p. xvi). There is a question of worth and legitimacy when thinking about adding the term writer to one's identity; a questioning of the difference between someone who is a writer and simply someone who writes. I discovered that there seems to exist a myth about the identity of the writer.

Stuart McLean (2011) has often attempted, in his own way, to dispel this myth. The writer's identity, he argues in an article on the CBC books website, is simply a question of belief. "The biggest difference between me and you, if you are someone who isn't a writer and would like to be, is a question of belief. I believe that I am a writer and you don't" (McLean, 2011). On another occasion, narrated in an article by Gouthro (2014), McLean hosted a workshop where he asked, "Who says when you can be a writer? ... I give you permission to say 'I am a writer'" (p. 173). While McLean's approach is well intentioned, I wonder whether giving students permission to view themselves as writers would be significant enough for them to acquire it as part of their identity.

The Writer's Workshop

When teaching students about writing and the writing process, teachers of creative writing must ask how they might dispel some of the myths that exist about the capital W, Writer. In his article on challenging such myths, Graham (2000) argues that one reason for the increase in popularity of the writing workshop "lies precisely in the way this approach begins to offer students an alternative sense of themselves as writers" in the way that it challenges and perhaps realigns some of the assumptions they carry (p. 361). Graham concludes, however, that as much as we want our students to be confident, passionate writers, teachers must be prepared to accept that not all of their students will develop a strong sense of themselves as writers, and instead "we might well be satisfied if they can begin to conceive of a variety of roles for themselves as writers and how each role is connected to different aspects of their personal and social identities" (p. 362). This very idea was highlighted in the pilot project where Caleb, a writer teaching within a Canadian university, comments on his feelings towards his students' identities as writers. He explains how he tries to emphasize to his students how writing is different from other professions. He offered the following example, comparing the writing program to medical school:

If you go through med school you can be a doctor. Here you graduate, are you a writer? Well, most won't be. So it's hard to convey the very extensive demands of a profession...I try to convey that and have people appreciate those who go on and appreciate those who aren't going on because everyone finds their way.⁵

⁵ This interview was conducted in October 2014.

Here, Caleb highlights that creative writing teachers must be willing to accept that not all of their students will find fulfillment in writing and that simply an appreciation for the craft and profession, rather than its mastery, is enough to ask for.

Another aspect of the writing workshop that influences identity formation is the use of imitation as a teaching strategy. Imitation, Brooke (1988) explains, is more concerned with the identity of the writer than the form of the text. “Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to act like writers they respect,” he observes. “The forms, the processes, the texts are in themselves less important as models to be imitated than the personalities, or identities, of the writers who produce them” (p. 23). In this way, students might begin their process of becoming writers by picking and choosing aspects of the identities of writers they admire, in order to discover which qualities, personalities, or writing styles might “look best”⁶ on themselves.

In *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* Anne Lamott (1994) elaborates on the concept of imitation in relation to the moment when an individual reaches a sense of having become a writer. Lamott suggests that students often want to emulate the writing of their favourite writers. She conceptualizes imitation as a prop that students borrow from other writers and use until they have to give it back. “And it [the prop] just might take you [the student] to the thing that is not on loan, the thing that is real and true: your own voice” (p. 195). Finding one’s voice, after all, is at the heart of creative writing, of becoming a creative writer.

The Identity of the Teacher of Creative Writing

Throughout my review of the literature, I came to understand (with great relief) that it is natural for the teacher of creative writing to encounter the same kind of scrutiny and self-doubt as students of creative writing. In a recent article, Manery (2015) looked at creative writing pedagogy teachers’ conceptions of pedagogic identity using a phenomenographic approach. Manery calls our attention to the following two assumptions that underlie the various characteristics that describe creative writing teachers: “First,” she argues, “is the assumption that the sole qualification for being a creative writing teacher is to be possessed of – or perhaps by – a rare, God-given talent” (p. 206). Second, “the primary aim of the creative writing teacher is to

⁶ Heti considers this issue when she writes: “You can admire anyone for being themselves. It’s hard not to when everyone’s so good at it. But when you think of them all together like that, how can you choose? How can you say, *I’d rather be responsible like Misha than irresponsible like Margaux?* Responsibility looks so good on Misha, and irresponsibility looks so good on Margaux. How could I know which would look best on me?” (Heti, 2012, p. 1).

recognise and develop ‘true’ talent, a task that only another ‘truly’ talented writer can perform” (p. 206). These assumptions about the writing teacher reiterate my earlier points on being (or becoming) a writer; namely, how it is a socially acknowledged role and carries a certain amount of significance; where the writing teacher, like the writer, is somehow, as Atwood (2004) puts it, a mysterious figure.

In the way that the creative writing teacher’s identity is challenged, the teaching of writing garners similar scrutiny. For years, critics have argued against creative writing instruction. Thomson (2013) points out that we don’t often hear whether or not visual art, theatre, or dance can be taught. To this pedagogical end, she wonders why we have such “different expectations – or low expectations – for students who undertake creative writing courses” (p.45)? The writing teacher requires, as Thomson makes clear, “knowledge of effective teaching approaches” in addition to experience as a published writer (p. 45). Reflecting on her journey as a new teacher, Thomson discusses how the reflective process enabled her to share her lived experiences as a writer with students. “This is a parallel journey,” as Thomson notes, where the students are “learning to write” and she is “learning to be a teacher” (pp. 45-46). Thomson, like Manery, defines herself as both a writer and a teacher. However, as Manery points out, the “interest in exploring creative writing teachers’ conceptions of teacher identity is not new” (p. 207). In 1999, other scholars like Bishop stated, “Some days I am a writer-who-teaches (WT) and on others I am a teacher-who-writes (TW) but inevitably, always, I am one or the other” (Bishop, p. 14 cited in Manery, p. 207). This understanding of the teacher/writer identity is comparable to that of the artist-researcher-teacher in that one identity might at times be more significant than another but that, regardless of significance, it is always a balancing act.

Empathy and Imagination

I teach Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi* (2001) to Grade 10 English classes. Every year I stress the fact that the novel is a work of fiction. *Yann Martel will try to trick you into thinking this is a real story*, I tell them. *But don’t be fooled!* Despite this, a few weeks and many chapters later, most of my students think that they’re reading a work of nonfiction, a story based on real events. I tell them that fiction has a way of suspending our disbelief, even a story about a sixteen-year-old boy who survives for 227 days on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with an adult Bengal tiger. *Yann Martel’s writing is so captivating and his narrator so convincing*, I

explain, *that despite how unrealistic it may seem, our imagination creates a story that we can't help but believe is true*. I tell them that the novel isn't "a story that will make you believe in God" but rather a story that will make them believe in the power of storytelling (p. viii).

The Imagination

Maxine Greene (1995) recognizes the imagination "as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world" (p. 3). By using our imagination, we can create new meaning in our visions of 'alternative realities' that are different from the realities that we live in and know. Our imagination, as she maintains, "allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (p. 3). Canadian scholars like Northrop Frye have also stressed the importance of the imagination. In his 1962 Massey Lecture *The Educated Imagination* "the world of literature is a world," he tells us, "where there is no reality except that of the human imagination" (p. 57). Literature thus provokes us to see the world differently. "In literature," at least for Frye, "we always seem to be looking either up or down. It's the vertical perspective that's important, not the horizontal one that looks out to life" (p. 58). In this pedagogical way, literature provides a creative sight where we can reimagine the world as it could be, for better or for worse, but never as it is.⁷

Frye (1993) goes on to inform the reader, however, that conflicting visions of the world can also co-exist in great works of literature. Such envisioning often occurs when creative writing works to portray different aspects of the same event. "There are two halves to literary experience, then," Frye clarifies. "Imagination gives us both a better and a worse world than the one we usually live with, and demands that we keep looking steadily at them both" (p. 58). Creating and presenting alternative worlds for audiences, whether they are for better or for worse, creates a literary space for readers to imagine a world of their making.

Here Greene observes that "oftentimes, the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination" (p. 4). Engaging with the arts calls us to become "a participant in artists' worlds" and, in turn, open to the alternative possibilities they present (p. 4). Put another way, the arts afford us opportunities to imagine a world that is different from the one that we know by participating in the artist's imagined world.

⁷ I have made it a point to reflect on this notion of the vertical perspective throughout the writing of my thesis in order to ensure that my writing is "literature-like" (p. 53) but since it is a representation of the lives of my participants, as well as myself, I intend to maintain a certain lifelikeness to the writing as well.

In doing so, audiences are able to engage with worlds that perhaps resemble their own, legitimizing experiences and ways of being, or with worlds that may seem so far from what they know to be true, opening them up to others and perhaps to a new way of being in the world. By participating in the artist's world, our audience is able to grasp the limitless quality of the imagination and come to realize their own ability to re-imagine the world the way they think it should be.

Empathy

Imagination, Greene (1995) writes, "above all, makes empathy possible" (p. 3). In fact, it has been argued that "as readers engage with fiction and develop highly personal relationships with the characters, they are in fact constructing intimate relationships with 'the imagined other'" (Leavy, 2013, p. 49). One aspect of the reading of literature that is so unique is that often the reader is not made aware of the differences between the protagonist and themselves until after they have made a significant connection with the character. Here Leavy (2013) tells us:

Fictional narratives are incomplete and leave space for the readers' interpretations and imagination. In other words, there are interpretive gaps in fiction, often intentionally included by the authors. Readers fill in these gaps, and in doing so they may actively develop empathetic connections to the characters (and the kinds of people they represent). (p. 49)

But there is often more to these gaps than the possible connections that they might generate. What I mean is that a certain amount of awareness must exist on the part of the reader in order to recognize that the gaps are there in the first place.

As Greene (2000) points out, encounters with the arts "make possible an education of feeling; an education in critical awareness, in noticing what there is to be noticed" (p. 277). So, in the end, what these gaps demonstrate is that we must be actively engaged with the text, listening for the silences in order to hear them, and seeking out the gaps in order to fill them. Otherwise, we may run the risk of having them go unnoticed.

Rebecca Solnit (2013) in her memoir, *The Faraway Nearby*, suggests that, Kindness, compassion, generosity are often talked about as though they're purely emotional virtues, but they are also and maybe first of all imaginative ones. You see someone get hurt - maybe they get insulted or they're just very tired - and you feel for them. You take the information your senses deliver and interpret it, often

in terms of your own experience, until it becomes vivid to you. Or you work harder and study them to imagine the events you don't witness, the suffering that is not on the surface. (p. 194)

Solnit put forth a unique take on the concept of empathy. For her “empathy means that you travel out of yourself a little or expand. It's really recognizing the reality of another's existence that constitutes the imaginative leap that is the birth of empathy” (p. 194). This image of the person who experiences empathy as a person ‘expanding’ alludes to a form of personal growth. Solnit goes on to explain that empathy, however, is an experience that must be “learned and then imagined” by perceiving the feeling of the other and then experiencing the feeling with them (p. 106).

And yet, Solnit also describes what a lack of empathy might look like. “Empathy can be a story you tell yourself about what it must be like to be that other person; but its lack can also arise from narrative, about why the sufferer deserved it, or why that person or those people have nothing to do with you” (p. 106). In this way, empathy can also be a way of forming one's identity in relation to others through the telling of stories.

Blurring the Line Between Fiction and Reality

Metafiction

Metafiction is a literary device used when a text “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984, p. 2). In other words, metafiction can be seen as writing that exposes the writing process. The ‘metafictional’ characters within these texts “explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction” (p. 2). The writers of these texts, along with their ‘metafictional’ narrators, blur the line between fiction and reality and, in doing so, they “not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (p. 2). I chose to use metafiction in the stories that I present as educational research for multiple reasons. The first is practical. While, on the surface, I am narrating the story of Mona, a young woman who is in the process of becoming a writer, below the surface, I am also revealing, through the use of point of view, artefacts, and interviews, my own writing process. By exposing the creation of the text to its readers, I am able to remind them that, despite being a work of fiction, my writing is still

grounded in the research and analysis put forth in this thesis, as well as an autoethnographic exploration of my becoming a teacher and writer.

The second reason is ontological. Waugh (1984) writes:

Metafictional texts thus reveal the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and worlds. They may exaggerate the consequence of the creation/description paradox: that language in fiction has to be carefully organized in order to construct contexts which are more fully 'given' or assumed in the real world. Such texts, however, emphasize that the ability to manipulate and construct hypothetical, alternative or ontologically distinct 'worlds' is also a condition of social existence, of life outside of novels. (p. 101)

I will provide a closer reading of this stance when taking up my conceptual framework.

The third reason is personal, which I will discuss in the following section on genre refuting texts.

A Bookcase of Blurred Fiction

Throughout my life as a reader, texts that attempt to blur the line between fiction and reality have always fascinated me. These stories have gotten me through the uncertainty of high school, the stresses of university, and continue to influence my life as a teacher.

I remember picking out Zoe Trope's (2003) novel, *Please Don't Kill the Freshman*, one day when my mom and I visited the local bookstore and realizing for the first time how a text's structure can be just as creative as the story it tells. The memoir, which reads more like a young adult novel, chronicles Trope's high school experience. "So I wrote a book about my freshman year of high school," Trope writes, "and that's when everything changed and I split in two" (p. 206). I loved how Trope explains that the manuscript for the memoir that she's writing has been accepted by HarperCollins. "When I go to Powell's and visit my book," she tells us, "I always open it up and peek inside and expect it to have changed somehow" (p. 207). I remember thinking, *How could she be writing about 'visiting' her book in the bookstore when she's talking about the book that I'm reading and I haven't even reached the end of it yet?* I can recall being so impressed by the story's structure and spending hours mulling over how the realness of the text was possible. Since this initial experience, I have come across a number of books that continue to make me question how they work both structurally and conceptually.

I also remember reading Margaret Atwood's (1969) novel, *The Edible Woman*, the summer before I moved away to university. While the novel doesn't blur the reader's sense of reality, the way that the story is structured demonstrates the narrator's blurred sense of themselves and their reality. The novel opens with its protagonist, Marian, who is informing the reader of her recent engagement. Part one of the novel is told in first person, from Marian's point of view. When the reader reaches part two, they notice that the point of view shifts to third person. At first, this seems like a decision on the part of the author to simply refocus the narrative. However, it isn't until the reader reaches the third and final part of the text that the reason for the shift in point of view is revealed. Part three of the novel shifts back to first person and the protagonist explains, "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his" (p. 290). In this moment, the reader realizes that the shift in point of view was the choice of the protagonist, not the writer, and this, I thought, was brilliant.

Once I reached university, I noticed that I would often opt to write my assigned essays on texts that could be classified as meta-narratives. I wrote an essay that focused on the preface of Daniel Defoe's novel, *Moll Flanders* (1722), which is supposedly written by the editor of the text, explaining the author's context and reasons for writing their story. The preface, however, is actually part of the fiction. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I continued to be fascinated with meta-fiction, particularly Calvino's novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), Eggers' memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), and Heti's genre-refuting, *How Should a Person Be?* (2010).

Since my undergraduate degree, I continue to be fascinated by the genre. As I mentioned already, one of the texts on the course syllabus of my Grade 10 English classes is Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi* (2001). Martel has written an Author's Note that appears at the beginning of the book and, just as the preface in *Moll Flanders*, the Author's Note is part of the fiction. Martel seamlessly blurs the line between fiction and reality throughout the story and sharing this experience with my students and seeing them react to its life-likeness has been a wonderful experience to be a part of.

Climax

noun | *cli-max* | \ 'klī-, maks\ ***The moment of greatest suspense***

I completed my undergraduate degree at Concordia University in the creative writing program. There, I specialized in fiction and playwriting and enrolled in workshops in other areas, such as publishing, editing, and the writing of children's literature. These workshops played a significant role in my becoming a writer. The professors and classmates, stories and critiques have all influenced who I have become and am becoming, as both a person and a writer. In the same way that I produce multiple drafts of my stories, I believe that our identity is always being written and re-written. In the same way that my classmates interpreted and re-wrote the stories that I shared with them, I also believe that our identities are always being interpreted and re-written by others. In this section, I will establish a framework and methodology for this research, and position myself within the study.

The Self as Text

I maintain that, as human beings, we are always in a process of becoming; that we are simply drafts of our future selves. In her book, *Art Objects* (1995), Winterson asks her readers to think about whether real people are fictions and goes on to explain that, "we mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others. The so-called facts of our individual worlds are highly coloured and arbitrary, facts that fit whatever fiction we have chosen to believe in" (p. 59). Winterson understands that our identities are always shifting and suggests that maybe "to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can" (p. 60).

Leggo (2007) echoes Winterson when he says, "I write my stories, my living stories, but I am also written by others" (p. 33). In fact, many authors have made this very statement, only through words of their own. For example, in his CBC Massey Lecture, *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King (2003) said, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 153). Similar to Didion's (1979) famous first line that, as human beings, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (p. 11). Stories, therefore, remind us of who we were, who we are, and who we are going to be. As Didion (2006) describes, "the way I write is who I am, or have become" (p. 7). While

stories are how we present ourselves to others and how we negotiate our shifting identities, writing can be a way for us to identify ourselves or figure out who it is that we are.

The Reality of the Fictional Universe

We do not live in one reality but in multiple realities. Waugh (1984) argues that fiction demonstrates the existence of multiple realities (p. 89). “Fictions are not the unreal side of reality or the opposite of reality: they are conditions that enable the production of possible worlds” (Dunlop, 1999, p. 3). Dunlop goes on to argue that the creative act of writing becomes an act of inquiry and that the act of writing fiction, therefore, “becomes phenomenological in the reconstructions and reimaginings of worlds” (p. 5).

Metafiction, on the other hand, explores the “notion of ‘alternative worlds’ by accepting and flaunting the creation/description paradox, and thus expose how the construction of contexts is also the construction of different universes of discourse” (p. 90). Here Waugh elaborates:

Fictional statements exist and have their ‘truth’ within the context of an ‘alternative world’ which they also create. Statements in the real world have their ‘truth’ in the context of a world which *they* help to construct. Fiction is merely a different set of ‘frames’, a different set of conventions and constructions. In this view, a fictional character is ‘unreal’ in one sense, but characters who are not persons are still ‘real’, still exist, within their particular worlds. (p. 100)

Fiction is not the opposite of reality; fiction is a truth, an ‘alternative world,’ that conveys meaning to its reader rather than fact.

Fiction-based Research and the Identity of the Creative Writing Teacher

A number of researchers are using autoethnography to better understand various teacher identities (Irwin, 2004; Springgay, 2004, 2005; Leggo, 2012). Therefore, my goal with this project was to add to this body of work as I begin my career as a creative writing teacher. As such, I have written a collection of stories as educational research in the place of a standard thesis. The first time a fictional thesis appeared in Canadian academic education literature was in 1999 when Rishma Dunlop submitted, *Boundary Bay: A novel as educational research*. The novel explored several research areas in the field of education, including literary study and the

teaching of literature, and investigated various institutional, societal, and social issues relating to education and academia. The novel is grounded in the research that Dunlop conducted on the narratives of beginning secondary school teachers as well as the narratives of Ph.D. candidates and university educators. Dunlop also, in the prolepsis provided at the beginning of her dissertation, describes to her reader the methodology used in conducting the research, some considerations and challenges, any ambiguities or unintended interpretations, and addresses questions of audience and quality.

Since Dunlop's dissertation, scholars have continued to produce imaginative work and present their research through creative means. In 2001, Peter Grein Renner submitted a dissertation on his experience becoming an adult educator by layering "autobiographical memories, critical incidents, narrative poetry, photographs, collages, and fictional dialogues into a multi-voiced narrative" (p. ii). In 2006, Pauline Sameshima submitted a dissertation, titled *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax*, written in the form of an epistolary novel. More recently, Abbey MacDonald (2014) wrote a dissertation, titled *Intertwined: An investigation into becoming an artist and teacher*, which examines becoming an artist from different perspectives, including that of the researcher herself, as well as two participants. In this study, a "hybridised methodology is adopted," similar to what I have done here, "where methods integral to autoethnography, narrative inquiry and a/r/tography are drawn together to generate a series of intricately layered insights into becoming an artist and a teacher" (p. viii). And finally, Mary Sylvia Land (2016) submitted a thesis titled *Writer's work/place: The non/fictional pedagogical possibilities of the Canadian landscape*. It considers the role of place in the writing process of a Canadian writer. And, it concludes with a short story written by Land herself. The story is about a young girl named Lauren who finds an advertisement in her local newspaper for a short story contest and submissions must tell the experience of Manitoulin, the story's setting. Land's story not only upholds the craft of the fiction as research, in that she shares her creative writing with readers, but also demonstrates the writing process itself through the use of a writer protagonist. With the inclusion of *Crossing the Bridge*, a story written by a fictional protagonist named Lauren, Land sets up a story-within-a-story that works to expose aspects of the writing process to the reader.

While writers continue to add to the growing number of fictional works presented as educational research, many are also being published, such as Douglas Gosse, with his novel

Jackytar (2005), which was the first educational novel published in Canada. More recently, Patricia Leavy (2013) published a novel titled *American Circumstance*. Leavy provokes readers to contemplate complex subjects such as wealth, power, and privilege. These subjects are then underscored by narratives about gender, social class, and race, told through the life of Paige Michaels, the novel's protagonist. Whereas Carl Leggo's (2012) *Sailing in a Concrete Boat: A Teacher's Journey*, is an exploration of education, transformation, and language. In this text, Leggo combines essay, prose, and poetry, weaving together issues about education including, teacher identity, curriculum and pedagogy, and the politics of transformation, to form a novel that follows the life of Caleb Robinson.

In 2011, Leavy also published *Low-Fat Love*, a novel comprised of three parts. The book looks at various subjects such as female identity and self-acceptance and “offers a critical commentary about popular culture and the social construction of femininity” (p. xii) through the lives of several ‘offbeat’ characters. *Low-Fat Love* was grounded in a decade of research conducted by Leavy on gender, relationships, and popular culture based on numerous interviews with young women about their relationships, body image, and sexual and gender identities (p. xii). Leavy also explains that her personal experiences, although fictionalized, are interwoven into the narrative of the text and describes the book as “an a/r/tographical rendering—a work in which I have merged my artist-researcher-teacher identities” (p. xiii).

In the section that follows, I will outline my proposed research design in more detail, based on my review of the literature on fiction-based research and on the novels of Dunlop, Gosse, Leavy, and Leggo.

Viewing the Writer/Teacher Identity Through an A/r/tographic Lens

To frame my research around the stages of becoming a writer outlined in the pilot I applied theory as a/r/tography. Irwin and Springgay (2008) explain that a/r/tography is a “methodology of embodiment, of continuous engagement with the world: one that interrogates yet celebrates meaning” (p. 117). Artist-researcher-teachers, according to Irwin (2004), “yearn for enhanced meaning...they long for their own self-expressions of certainty *and* ambiguity” (p. 29, italics in text). In this way, the stories that appear in this thesis are a form of self-expression of my experiences as a teacher and a writer. They seek to fictionally represent the lived experiences of my participants. I attempt to achieve this embodiment and continuous

engagement with my research, as Irwin and Springgay suggest, particularly through the use of point of view and metafiction (see pages 17-20 for a discussion on how these literary devices are used within the stories). Irwin (2004) says that “to live the life of an artist who is also a researcher and a teacher is to live a life of awareness, a life that permits openness to the complexity around us, a life that intentionally sets out to perceive things differently” (p. 33). However, writer-researcher-teachers acknowledge that interpretive gaps (Leavy, 2013) exist in their writing and it is expected that readers will also *perceive things differently* and interpret their work in vastly different ways.

The role of the artist-researcher-teacher, when broken down by Irwin (2004) into individual tasks, helped me map out how my writing, research, and teaching were intertwined throughout this project. Irwin first explains that art “is the visual reorganization of experience that renders complex the apparently simple or simplifies the inherently complex” (p. 31). In my English classes, I sometimes ask my students why we study literature and they will often say that it’s to better understand ideas, relationships, or experiences. For example, in fiction, characters can often evoke empathy in a reader which in turn may complicate the reader’s relationship with the text and with who or what that character might represent; what was once a simple story may become increasingly complex depending on the nature of the relationship between the reader and the story’s characters. Similarly, a complex idea can often be simplified when retold in narrative form through the use of metaphors or analogies. Irwin continues to explain that research “is the enhancement of meaning revealed through ongoing interpretations continually created, recreated, and transformed” (p. 31). Throughout the writing process, writers are continuously revising character sketches, researching and developing their setting, and discarding draft after draft of their work. Most of what they write won’t make it into the final manuscript but it’s the process that gets them there. Finally, Irwin suggests that teaching “is performative knowing in meaningful relationships with learners” (p. 31). This last stage is where everything comes together; it’s my classroom of aspiring writers that first inspired me to explore the process of becoming a writer so that I could share or *perform* this “knowing” with them.

This theory, however, can only go so far. According to Springgay (2004) “theory, for the researcher/teacher/artist...is located in the classroom/studio” (p. 98). She reminds us that in the classroom, there is no hesitation when it comes to practicing theory simply because of the busy nature of the situation. “During the class a teacher is immersed in activity and does not theorize.

Theories about education are part of teacher practice: theories-in-action can go unnoticed in the bustle of the day. Therefore, reflection is key” (p. 98). Accordingly, personal reflection has made up a large part of my research data and includes the following scenarios: I reflected on the quality of my research by keeping a journal to record any and all insights and recorded my day-to-day teaching and learning activities; and, as I worked on the drafts of my stories (fiction-as-research), I reflected on the quality of my writing, whether my characters were reliable storytellers, and whether they told the stories of my research. Irwin and Springgay (2008) note that the rigor in a/r/tography, if not already apparent, “comes from its continuous reflective and reflexive stance to engagement, analysis and learning” (p. 117).

Porter (2004), a participant of a/r/tography, decided to bring her own studio work to school to see how it would change the undesirable atmosphere of her current classroom and to investigate how making art at school would differ from making it in the comfort of her home. What she concluded was that students were more likely to see themselves as artists once the space had changed. “It is no longer just a classroom but a studio,” as she makes clear. “This is no longer just a school space but their space. And as such I am no longer just a teacher, but a teacher-artist” (pp. 109-110). In the same way, I have turned my classroom into a writing studio; a space where I share my writing with my students and where they share their writing with me and one in which we can all identify as writers.

Greene (1995) describes a/r/tographers as those who are “living their work, representing their understandings, and performing their pedagogical positions as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts” (as cited by Irwin, p. 34). Since it is not my intention for my research to produce quantifiable results, by presenting fiction as research, I open up possibilities for meaning and interpretation through devices such as imagery, metaphor, point of view, character development, and it is my goal as writer/researcher/teacher to represent the findings of this project in the form of a collection of stories as educational research.

***From Exposition to Resolution: Narrating a Methodological Framework
Weaving the Researcher's Narrative***

While the research process for qualitative researchers is often emergent (Creswell, 2013), I did determine a basic design for the project in order to establish an approximate timeline. As part of this design, I took on the role of writer/researcher/teacher throughout the 2015-2016 academic school year, in order to draft a narrative of my becoming a writer and contribute an additional narrative layer to the research that was previously collected in the pilot study.

The primary data collected includes both my own personal responses to the original questions posed in the pilot, as well as the journal that I kept throughout the academic year, as I reflected on my role as a writer/researcher/teacher. Recent research on journaling by Morawski, Rottmann, Afrakomah, Balatti, & Christens (2016) highlights how this practice allowed their participants to develop a “deeper sense of their own voice” (p. 167). My journaling consisted of entries that I completed at the end of each school day where I would reflect on my becoming a teacher and a writer and these entries were considered complete once six weeks of teaching had been recorded. I performed a close reading of the journal entries in order to compare its contents to the themes highlighted from the preliminary findings of the pilot project and new, emergent themes were sought.

Once the close reading was performed, I continued to work with the texts using fiction-based research as a secondary method in order to refine the themes so that they may lend themselves to more suitable literary themes so that I could represent, or restory (Creswell, 2013), the findings in a way that would uphold the craft of the researcher, as well as the participants, and engage the reader in the lives of writers.

Falling Action

verb | fall-ing | \ 'fò-ling | The action leads to the resolution or final outcome

While my project has been interpreted and represented in the series of stories that follow this prologue, I thought it important to share the analysis that resulted from the pilot study as the findings were synthesized into literary themes and are present in the stories, *On Becoming a Writer*.

Pilot Study: Analysis

Throughout my analysis of the pilot study, it became clear that the emergent themes were described by participants in two opposing categories: The first being factors that prevented one's sense of becoming and; the second describing factors that facilitated one's sense of becoming. Therefore, I will explore the themes within their corresponding category. The themes that will be discussed in this section are organized in *Table 2*, below.

Emergent Themes on Preventing One's Sense of Becoming		Emergent Themes on Facilitating One's Sense of Becoming
The Impracticality of Being a Writer	Dedication	Mentorship
Claiming Identity	Commitment; Rejection/Failure; Longevity	The Influence of Local Writers

Table 2: Emergent Themes

Discussion: Emergent Themes on Preventing One's Sense of Becoming

The Impracticality of Being a Writer

Of the emergent themes, the impracticality of being a writer was expressed the most often by all participants. Impracticality was described in many ways and inhabited many different forms, but its significance as a factor preventing all of the participants in their sense of becoming a writer was evidently clear.

Molly explained that her parents, who were not very artistic and who worked very practical jobs, did not understand how to translate her love of writing and reading into a practical job that they could understand. This lack of understanding and support led her to entertain the idea of pursuing journalism, however, after enrolling in courses in college, she realized that it was not the way to fulfill her passion for writing.

Caleb reflected on some of the challenges he faced in his pursuit of becoming a writer, listing commitment and failure, and highlighting its impracticality. He explains that, "You have to keep writing and yet you have to eat and put a roof over your head, or something over your head, so that was always hard to combine, work and writing."

Alan also describes his choice toward becoming a teacher in the following pragmatic terms: “I went down Education because I wanted a paycheck, I needed a job.” He continues by highlighting the influence that his family had on this decision, explaining, “My parents instilled in me very early on the grow up, have a job, have a career, go to university, those things and I always saw the idea of being a writer as a job as wholly unattainable.” He later explains, however, that in choosing teaching he was still able to fulfill his passion for writing since he always knew that he would be an English teacher and, as soon as the opportunity arose to teach *Writer’s Craft*, he quickly jumped on it.

Claiming Identity

Participants reflected on their identities throughout the interviews, particularly as they moved from one stage to the next in their retelling of their becoming a writer. One major theme that emerged from these reflections were the participants’ inability to claim their identity as writers. This inability would manifest itself in different ways for each participant but it was significantly clear that it was a difficulty experienced by all.

While pursuing an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing, Molly explained that she found it difficult balancing the social life she thought was required of a writer and the actual hard, lonely hours she needed to put into her writing in order to produce work she was satisfied with, leaving her often feeling envious of classmates who seemed to be able to pull off the “whole package”, as she put it. Molly also admitted to feeling guilty claiming to be a writer as part of her identity. She explained that, since graduating from university, she has begun to develop issues asserting her identity to others since she can no longer lean on her identity as a student, which, she explains, is often easier for others to understand.

Caleb, too, admitted to not asserting his identity as a writer to others throughout his becoming, explaining that it was something that he did in private and that it wasn’t until his first book was published where he felt like he could finally announce himself as a writer. However, he goes on to explain further that, despite being published, he still didn’t possess a strong sense of having “become.” He explained that the novel that followed his first success failed and that it wasn’t until his second book was published and he received public acknowledgement of his success as a writer for him to really feel like a writer himself.

Alan took a different approach to expressing his reluctance to claim his identity as a writer by compromising his identity, explaining, “I will always be that slash, I will always have to be something ‘and who writes.’”

Discussion: Emergent Themes on Facilitating One’s Sense of Becoming

Dedication

Of the themes highlighted in this report, the theme of dedication was the most complex. It is the only theme to include sub-themes (including commitment, rejection/failure, and longevity) and straddles the two guiding thematic categories. This is because, while maintaining dedication can be a challenge (which could prevent one’s sense of becoming), it is also considered one of the most crucial components required in becoming a writer (therefore, facilitating, in a way, one’s sense of becoming).

Commitment

In her struggle to remain committed to her writing in her life after graduation, Molly explains how the classroom setting helped to facilitate a writer’s dedication and how it differs from the real world. She says,

“I do think it’s important to learn how to write outside of a workshop without that constant feedback and that constant reinforcement from other people...you’re not always going to have a classroom of fifteen people interested in what you’re doing so I thought it’s important to learn how to function outside of an academic space, especially if you want to be a writer.”

Having had the opportunity to work within the workshop’s structure, Molly is now attempting to replicate these structures by building new structures of her own to maintain productivity. She explained that she is trying to treat her writing more like a job and, to ensure productivity, she has rented out a desk space in an artist studio where she will be required to “clock her hours.” In making these choices, Molly is attempting to relearn and internalize the shared activities that she engaged in with her peers and writing instructors, in order to continue on her path to becoming a writer.

Caleb’s commitment to writing manifested itself in a very different way. Not having finished high school or attend post-secondary education, the structure required to maintain

commitment was built entirely by himself. In addition, his telling of this commitment is quite compelling. He recounts the following story of his decision to become a writer:

“Then I was on my own, living on my own at an early age as well, at sixteen I was living on my own and it was not an easy time and there was a moment when I wondered what my life was going to be and what I was going to do and I realized, really out of the blue, that I wanted to write. Period. End of sentence. And it came after a traumatic event but that was part of it and it was certainly youthful naiveté but also, I was fortunate enough to really connect with something that was deep inside me and I just said, and in fact I wrote it down, I’m going to be a writer, nothing will stop me. Since the only paper I had to write on was this Gideon bible in a motel I wrote it down and signed it and it was a vow to myself and I even said that I would never take a job I like until I become a writer. Make that part of it. So it was a solemn kind of commitment early on to do it no matter what. And then I started doing it.”

The commitment to writing here is unique in that it rejects all of the impracticality involved in becoming a writer and instead embraces the passion and dedication in its pursuit.

Alan’s commitment is interesting because it transfers from his first chosen path to his second. Initially, Alan’s commitment to his writing was demonstrated in his ability to realize his strengths as a writer. He explained that each time he would sit down to write, he always had to finish whatever it was he was writing before he stopped, which is why, he explains, he was drawn to poetry, since he knew that he could write a poem in one sitting and feel accomplished. However, in his current role as a teacher, his dedication is now to his students. He explained that now when he comes up with new writing ideas, he tries to figure out how he can put them into lessons rather than use them for his own writing.

Failure/Rejection

The sub-theme of failure/rejection relates to the overall theme of dedication in the sense that the participants describe the importance of maintaining dedication to the writing despite rejection or in moments of failure.

In my interview with Caleb, when asked if there was ever anything that prevented his sense of becoming a writer, he explained, “The task at hand. The task itself is enormous.

Certainly, I wrote many novels that were never published. So having to deal with failure was a big thing you have to overcome, just dealing with failure.” However, while failure and rejection are described here relating to a writer’s sense of becoming, it was also discussed as a classroom tool to facilitate the formation of student identity.

Longevity

Lastly, the concept of longevity concludes the theme of dedication. Caleb, when responding to a question on what defining moments of his career stand out for him, replies that, “longevity means as much as anything” rather than pin-pointing any one moment. While this is the weakest of the sub-themes, having only been discussed by one of the participants, I believe that the way in which it represents dedication for someone who has had a long and dedicated career is worth including.

Mentorship

The second emergent theme on facilitating one’s sense of becoming is that of mentorship. While mentors were described in different ways and having different influences, their significance in shaping the participants’ sense of themselves as writers was clear throughout the stories they told.

Molly reflected mostly on her time studying and working with a professor who taught in the creative writing program at her university. She explains,

“I really appreciated her feedback and criticism for its honesty and that kind of translated into a certain amount of respect that she would have for you and your work, as if she like, valued it enough to be very straightforward about how you can make it better.”

She elaborated on this by explaining that other classes that she’d been enrolled in would often avoid providing constructive feedback if it was negative and she felt that this translated into a lack of respect for the student as a writer.

Caleb recounted stories of several editors who provided him with various forms of mentorship throughout his career, telling of one in particular whom he describes as having “corralled all my wildness and my exuberance” and who “worked very hard to reform my bad habits and make the best of my good ones.” While these stories provided insights into the

mentorship Caleb received relating to publishing, he told another story from when he was very young, about when he submitted a short story to an American magazine for potential publication. He explained that, while they didn't accept his story, they wrote him a long, handwritten letter complimenting on the work and asking for more. Caleb described receiving this letter as a "psychological boost" and that it was something that he would often refer back to whenever he found himself struggling or disconnected from his writing.

Similar to Molly, Alan also worked with a mentor during his studies who was already an established poet. Alan explained that his mentor allowed him to go from "a guy who liked to write to actually identifying...as someone who might be comfortable saying, at least in some semblance, slash whatever, is a writer."

These influences, while diverse in that they serve different purposes and meet different needs, are examples highlighting the importance of mentorship to one's sense of becoming a writer.

Influence of Local Writers

While the influence of local writers on one's sense of becoming is the weakest of the five themes, since it was only discussed by two of the three participants, I believe that it is an important finding with significant implications for teachers and mentors of emerging writers, and therefore, should be included in this analysis.

Caleb describes his experience reading local texts as one that was influential, "...simply because, it's not a Montreal book although it was Montreal in the setting and it's a Montreal person and it's a Montreal novel so that was, you know, gee whiz, people right here do this sort of thing, you know. So, it actually became an influence that Hugh MacLennan was a Montreal writer who wrote novels, not short stories. Mordecai Richler is a Montreal novelist who wrote novels, not short stories. And it kind of tinged on me that this was something I might like to do."

The possibility of becoming a writer described here seems more tangible and attainable when compared to other local writers' accomplishments.

Molly also discusses the influence of local texts by describing their ability to inform her place as a writer within whichever environments (new or old) she finds herself in. At the time of

the interview, Molly was currently reading Montreal writer Heather O'Neill's new novel, *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*, and then talked about her plan to read Dionne Brand, who writes novels set in Toronto, since she had recently moved from Montreal to Toronto.

Collected Stories: Narrative Structure

Once all of the entries were collected and close readings performed, I began to develop a plot that would represent, in some sense, the stories told by the participants from the pilot project, along with my own narrative on becoming both a writer and a teacher of creative writing. The thesis that follows is presented as a collection of stories and includes different narrators and points of view. The reader is reminded that, while the stories are fictitious (Leavy, 2011; 2013), they are grounded in my research and analysis on becoming a writer and a teacher of creative writing.

Limitations/Delimitations

Due to the timeframe of the assignment that my pilot project was originally based on, the participants of the pilot are people that I know. That being said, I made sure to recruit writers with whom I was unfamiliar, so that I wouldn't be able to anticipate their answers to any of the questions. Additionally, the participants were specifically chosen to represent a sample of individuals who fit within the stages of becoming outlined in this research.

Resolution

noun | *res·o·lu·tion* | \, re-zə- 'lū-shən\ | *The writer wraps up and ties up any loose end*

Engaging in the Lives of Writers and their Stories: Significance of the Study

Several implications emerged from the findings of the pilot that I believe could be looked at in more detail. Of these, the most interesting was the influence of local writers on the participants' sense of becoming, which I believe would benefit greatly from further research on the use of local texts in classrooms, looking at its effects on fostering connection, engagement, and encouraging identity exploration. Additionally, this project adds to the growing number of fictional texts as educational research, presented as an alternative to the standard graduate thesis, allowing its readers to participate in the lives of writers and their stories.



WHAT IT'S LIKE TO INTERVIEW A PROTAGONIST

Two years ago, on a snowy January day, I met the protagonist of these stories at local café in downtown Toronto. We sat down with coffees while she told me a bit about who she was, how her character developed over time, and where her story has taken her. I recorded our conversation, to refer to throughout the writing of these stories, and also to share it with you here to serve as an introduction to the collection and to the writing process.

Writer: Ok, we're recording. First of all, I'd like to say how thrilled I am to finally be sitting down with you.

Protagonist: So am I, obviously. I mean, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you.

Writer: (laughs) I guess you're right. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?

Protagonist: Of course, I'm happy to share anything. I'll try to answer them as best I can but I'm sure there might be things that I don't quite know how to answer yet.

Writer: Yes, I understand. It's likely that some of the answers will come through in the writing of these stories and not necessarily in your character.

Protagonist: Right.

Writer: So, I thought that the setting of this story might be a good place to start. Where does your story take place?

Protagonist: My story is set in present-day Canada. I grew up in Montreal but I decided to move to Toronto to try to make it as a writer. That's not to say that Montreal doesn't have its own literary scene, I just needed a change and Toronto was the perfect setting for me to end up in this story.

Writer: How did you feel about the move?

Protagonist: Honestly, I was devastated at first. Montreal has such a distinct literary scene, and I have been influenced by so many of the writers that have come out of Montreal. I was sad that I wasn't going to be a part of it.

Writer: Then what was it that convinced you to leave?

Protagonist: It was a combination of things. I wanted a new start. I saw a lot of my peers accomplishing things, even if it was just that they were living on their own in a new city. I wanted to accomplish something and I thought a fresh start would help.

Writer: Did you accomplish something?

Protagonist: I think I did. It might not be obvious to the reader but my character has developed and become someone that I don't think she could have been in Montreal. She pushes herself in Toronto in ways that would have seemed pointless at home.

Writer: What do you mean when you say "pointless"?

Protagonist: I guess I mean that everything was already established for me in Montreal. I could lean on my parents if I had to. I already had a group of friends there. I guess I just got to a point where I realized that if I wanted to really *do* something, I was going to have to leave.

Writer: What makes this *your* story?

Protagonist: I don't see this as my story necessarily but rather a representation of multiple identities that exist or are presented through the creation of my character. It's my understanding that my character has been created by weaving together the experiences of multiple writers and fictional imaginings. My character was created to represent research in a way that connects the audience to the life of a writer in an authentic way.

Writer: You're absolutely right. I'm sorry about that, that you can't just be you.

Protagonist: Don't be. We're all made up of stories, whether our own or others', and these just happen to be the stories that I'm made up of.⁸

Writer: Do you think you're a likable protagonist?

⁸ "We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others" (Winterson, 1995, p. 59).

Protagonist: (laughs) That's a good question. I guess it would depend. I would say that my overall goal is to do good and be good but I know that sometimes when characters try to be too good they can be unlikeable.

Writer: Do you think protagonists have to be likeable?

Protagonist: Yes, I think they do but a likeable protagonist doesn't have to be good. A story can have a good protagonist who does bad things but their inherent goodness makes them likeable. A story can also have a bad protagonist who does good things and it's these things that redeem the protagonist in the eyes of the reader. A story can even have a bad protagonist who does bad things and yet still be more likeable than the story's antagonist. Likeability has nothing to do with whether a story's protagonist is good or bad, it's whether or not the reader roots for them that matters.

Writer: Why do readers root for you?

Protagonist: I always see my readers as the people who have the power to make my story come alive through their use of imagination. Without them, I would exist only on the page. They're the ones who are rooting for me when I've lost the courage to root for myself.

Writer: So then, who is your story's antagonist?

Protagonist: I don't know that I'm necessarily aware of that. I understand that the reader will be able to identify my antagonist, as will you, but I don't necessarily know that I will always be aware of it. I might make a prediction that the antagonist of this story will be me, the part of myself that is preventing me from acknowledging my writer identity. That being said, the story's antagonist could also be the writing process itself or a lack of confidence or the criticism of advisors or peers; the antagonist is likely

something or someone preventing me from acknowledging my identity as a writer.

Writer: Who are the secondary characters in your story?

Protagonist: There are a few of them. My classmates in the writing program will be highlighted throughout to demonstrate the process of the writing workshop. My teachers and professors who guided me along the way. My friends and parents who, at times, supported me and at other times questioned the path I'd chosen. Employers, coworkers, and everyone else along the way, I guess.

Writer: Who is your audience?

Protagonist: I would hope that this would be a resource for aspiring writers and teachers of aspiring writers. I hope that my story might highlight the process of becoming a writer and help others learn to acknowledge their writer identity. And if they don't become writers, to be happy with who or what they do become⁹.

Writer: What is the overall theme of your story?

Protagonist: I think that will come in the writing of the piece rather than be inherent in my character.

Writer: Why is your story important to tell?

⁹ "Here you graduate, are you a writer? Well, most won't be. I try to...have people appreciate those who go on and appreciate those who aren't going on because everyone finds their way" (Caleb, 2014).

Protagonist: Well, it's likely a relatable experience. I hope that, in reading my story, readers will understand that their sense of becoming is a process, not an end goal.

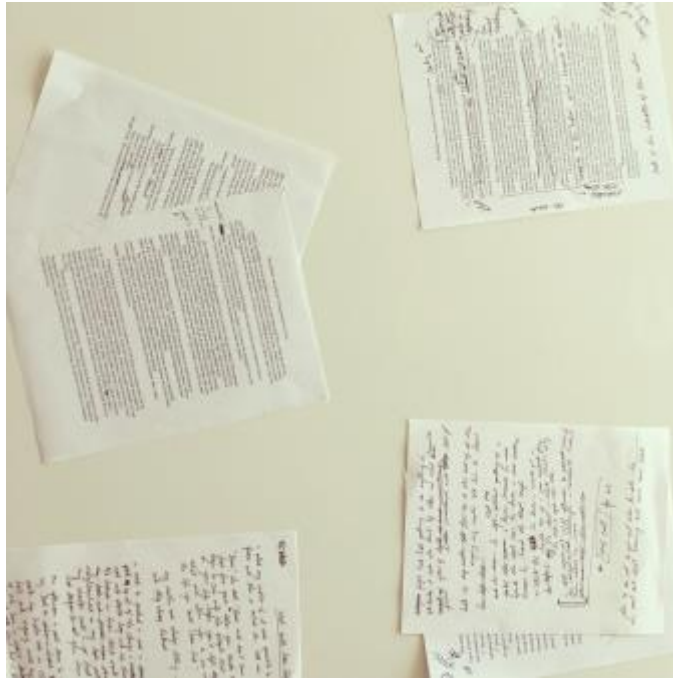
Writer: So, I guess one of my final questions is, do I have your permission to tell your story?

Protagonist: Absolutely.

Writer: Thank you so much. My final question, though, is a fun one: as the protagonist in this story, what would you like your character's name to be?

Protagonist: Oh, this is a fun question. I've always liked the name Mona and thought that it would suit me.

Writer: That does suit you. So, from now on we will refer to you as Mona.



THE WORKSHOP

All nine of them sat around a long, white table waiting for Caleb to arrive. The table was unusual, especially for the discussion of literature, with its sleek tabletop, secret openings, and handles to which no one could figure out the use. Oddly enough, it had been designed by the university's Department of Engineering and somehow it ended up in the English department and was now used to host creative writing workshops. Mona sat quietly, staring at the table, thinking about the people who had come up with its design and wondering what purpose it was originally supposed to serve.

Mona sat at the far end of the table, to the right of where Caleb, their professor, would sit. She was very quiet and because of this was often mistaken for being naïve, but she worked hard and was able to keep up with the others who'd been in the program for a while. Sitting beside her was Janie, a young, bohemian girl with long frizzy hair and thrifty clothes. She was often very

loud, but was always kind, and the kind of person that you could consider yourself being close with, without having to know her for very long or spend much time together. Beside Janie was Lau, who had a greater background in theatre than prose, but was equally talented at both. The three girls had all joined the program right out of high school and immediately formed an alliance that first year while they tried to figure out the ins and outs of the program together. At the end of the table was Peter. Or, 'Pete' as everyone called him. Some would describe him as *hipster*, although he would never admit to it, and was best known on campus for having cried during a critique of one of his paintings. He'd begun his degree in the Visual Arts Department after being rejected from the creative writing program, but re-applied the following year, with success. Mona had heard this rumour from her friend, Tash, who was in the Studio Arts program. Pete sat beside Andrew, a quiet student who liked science fiction and fantasy novels and whom his classmates resented but only for making them workshop stories in these genres. Beside Andrew was Claire, who was one of the older students, this being her fifth year in the program. She sat beside Jonah, who was also an older student, relatively speaking, and he often intimidated some of the younger writers. This wasn't because of his physical appearance or his demeanour, but for the simple fact that his talent for writing was undeniable and the content often quite mature. Beside Jonah was Marc-André, a young man who fulfilled many stereotypes that students from out of town might assume they would encounter in a Montreal arts program; he had dark hair, a full-beard, and a thick, French accent. And at the end of the table sat Henrik, an international student who was into graphic novels and often included illustrations in his story submissions to the workshop.

While they waited, the students shared with each other events from the weekend. Mona had always been amazed, and a bit envious even, of her classmates who lived social lives in the program.¹⁰ The ones like Janie and Marc-André, who would party all weekend, wakeup hungover on a Sunday afternoon to write their submission for the week's workshop, and still produce such great writing. In order for her to write *anything* she was proud of, or at least thought was decent enough to be critiqued by her peers, she'd needed so much quiet, alone time where she would have to disconnect her Internet, not answer any phone calls, and avoid leaving

¹⁰ "There would be other people in the workshop with me that seemed like they had an incredibly vivacious social life like they would be out partying all the time and they would have a lot of stuff like cool hipster-y stuff happening...and they could still come to class and produce such great writing...and I was always so in awe...I'm like a twenty-one-year-old recluse because I just can't manage to produce any work unless I really set aside a lot of alone time to do it" (Molly, 2014).

her apartment unless it was absolutely necessary. She hoped that this dedication would be useful once she was faced with the life of a writer beyond the classroom, but when she was in the program she couldn't help but feel as though this somehow made her un-writerly.¹¹

“Good morning class,” said Caleb, interrupting the conversations. “So, who’s up?”

Henrik raised his hand and replied, “I am, sir.”

“Great,” said Caleb. “And then?”

“Then me!” yelled Janie.

“Good. And why don’t we do some housekeeping. Who do we have submitting for next week?”

“I’ve got a story,” said Marc-André.

“Good! And who else?”

“I’ve got one too,” said Lau.

“Perfect! And who’s working on a piece for next week’s submissions?”

“I’ll be submitting next week,” said Mona.

“Me too,” said Claire.

“Okay! Looks like we’re on track! So, let’s take out our notes on Henrik’s story, *Pick a Fight*, and let’s discuss. Henrik, start us off by reading the first page.”

Henrik cleared his throat and began to read:

¹¹ “I used to feel lacking in that respect – why couldn’t I smoke without choking or drink without puking? Why couldn’t I be a real writer, and get TB or something, or at the very least, commit suicide? Readers used to ask me that. But as Margaret Laurence used to say, you have to be who you are” (Atwood, 2007).

Pick a Fight
↳ do i care to "pick a fight"?

The string on the bottom button on her blouse had been unravelling for days. She would wrap it around to hold it in place but each time the thread would loosen more and more, the button barely hanging on.

She sat at the edge of their bed, wrapping the thread around her index finger, the skin tightening underneath and turning white as the tip began to inflate like a red balloon. *interesting structure*

She sat at the edge of their bed, her legs hanging over the side, her feet touching the ground only when she would point her toes down towards the hardwood floor. *+ use of repetition*

She sat at the edge of their bed and listened to the sounds outside. The swinging chair on the front porch creaked back and forth and the wind sent curls of smoke seeping in through the screen, as it blew the curtain into the room and back out. When the creaking stopped, footsteps traveled down the gravel drive. The strings around her heart began to tighten as she listened to the car door slam and the engine start. There was a pause and then she heard the sound of rocks crunch under the truck tires. Her body froze as headlights circled the walls, every inch of the room gained a moment of spotlight before it went dark again.

The string of the bottom button on her blouse had been unravelling for days. She pointed her toes down towards the hardwood floor as she stood up to get a spool of thread from the medicine cabinet. She began to sew the button back on her blouse, knowing that although the string had come undone, she would be able to sew it on tighter, and stronger than before. *i really like female protagonist*

“Thank you, Henrik. And a perfect place to stop. Mona, why don’t you start us off today.”

Caleb often chose Mona to *start things off* but she didn’t mind because it let her get her ideas in before anyone else had a chance to say them first.

“Okay. Well, first I’d like to say that I really enjoyed reading this story. I thought that the characters were interesting, especially the female protagonist. I loved how we were able to get a sense of what she was going through and how she was feeling without any of the characters telling us what exactly was going on. I also thought that the structure was interesting – I like how you used repetition to demonstrate what could happen or how what happened could have been interpreted or what things would look like with different outcomes. There were some parts where I felt like I didn’t care about the different outcomes – I didn’t care to “pick a fight” – but I

thought that if you tightened the different stories within your story it would be more compelling.”

“Good,” said Caleb. “Claire, what did you think?”

“I really enjoyed it too. I like that you approached this piece from multiple perspectives, giving your characters different lives and allowing your reader to experience different outcomes. While what you’ve done is risky, I thought you pulled it off. I agree that it still needs some work, but overall it was well done. Watch out for point of view – later on in the story you switch to first person randomly. I’m not sure if that was intentional. I don’t think it was so I would suggest going back and fixing that. I’ve marked the areas in my copy, which I’ll give to you at the end of the workshop. I also really liked the setting described throughout the story and how it ends up playing such a big role in these characters’ lives. Well done.”

“Thanks Claire,” said Caleb. “Pete, you’re up. What feedback do you have for Henrik?”

“Hey man, I really liked this. I thought that Karl was terrifying but like, in a good way, you know? I also thought that the sensitivity of the piece was beautiful. I loved how softly you wrote it. I don’t really get the repetition though. I wondered if the story would work better without it, with one story and one outcome. I don’t know, maybe that’s just me.”

“Thank you, Pete.”

The discussion went on. When they first arrive to the program, the workshop setting is quite intimidating for students, but it’s interesting to note how comfortable most of them become when it comes to giving feedback. The students all develop their own voices as critics and have certain things that they look for, and rank, in terms of importance in a piece. Some will focus mostly on tone, while others often refer to setting, and most will make a comment about voice, whether a character’s, the narrator’s, or regarding the author. And when a student doesn’t know what to say (or doesn’t have anything good to say) there are some vague, fallback-on phrases that work for almost anything that most of them keep in their back pocket. Mona tried to use hers as rarely as possible.

Up next was Janie’s piece, a story about a girl who spends an entire afternoon in bed with a boy, but rather than talking about the girl and the boy, the narrator instead spends most of the time commenting on the bed linens and the way that the light would shine in through the window, but then it had this way of all coming together in the end and the reader realizes that they weren’t just descriptions of bed linens and sunlight, but metaphors for the girl’s relationship

with the boy and the boy's relationship with the girl. Mona was jealous that Janie had written this story. Not because it was particularly well-written, she thought that some of the lines of dialogue spoken by Janie's characters were cheesy, but because she kept thinking of the phrase, *write what you know*. Whenever she read a story, she always wondered how much of it was true. Had this happened to Janie? Were all of her classmates able to make up these stories to be completely fictional? Or did some of them contain truth? And if they did, how much? But mostly Janie's story just made her feel lonely.

"Okay, thank you to Henrik and Janie for the stories today, that was a good discussion. Why don't we pass around the copies for our next workshop and I'll see you next class!"

That night, Mona had to work on an assignment that was due in her class on Quebec literature. Her professor had given students the option of either writing a paper on one of the texts they'd studied that term or writing a creative assignment he'd come up with which was to visit a landmark found in one of the texts that they'd studied and write a creative piece comparing the landmark to the text in which it was found. She decided to take the riskier of the two and chose the creative option. On the weekend, she had visited the St. Lawrence River because she wanted to write her assignment on A.M. Klein's poem, *The Break-Up*.

Mona was trying to weave the idea of surviving the winter to her own survival living in a new city and making it through a challenging school year. She was a bit stuck and didn't know where to take it but she re-read the poem a few times and underlined passages that she thought she might be able to use. She'd managed to finish the assignment by 2 a.m. and then tried to get some sleep before her 8:30 class.

The next morning, she arrived to class five minutes late because there was a lineup at the library printer but, to her surprise, their professor was also late to arrive. She handed in her assignment at the front of the class and went and took a seat beside Janie.

"Did you do the creative assignment?" Mona asked.

"Yeah. I went to Grumpy's."

"You would," Mona replied.

"What! Where did you go?"

"The St. Lawrence River. I wrote about one of Klein's poems."

"Cool," she said.

Grumpy's was a bar on Bishop's from Mordecai Richler's novel, *Barney's Version*. Barney, the novel's protagonist, frequents the bar throughout the story and some of the best scenes take place there. It was a good choice, but not the kind of thing Mona would have wanted to write about.

Students started to leave. The university had a policy that if a professor didn't show up to class within 20 minutes, students were permitted to leave without being marked absent. Mona and Janie decided to wait another 10 minutes before joining the others. Eventually they left too, taking their assignments with them. Since they ended up with some unexpected free-time, they decided to grab a coffee together before going their separate ways. Janie was telling Mona more about the party she'd gone to on the weekend, the gossip she knew about some of the other students in the program, and about her latest fling with a guy from their publishing and editing course.

"Have you read the stories for the workshop yet?" Mona asked in an attempt to change the subject.

"I haven't read Lau's yet, but I read Marc-André's," she said.

"What did you think?"

"It was rough. He was at the party, you know."

"I know. I heard him talking about it in class. I really didn't like his story. It was uncomfortable to read," Mona admitted, hesitantly.

"It *would* make you uncomfortable."

"Hey, that's not fair."

"What? It's true! You never *do* anything. Come out with us sometime. It's fun to have fun every once in a while. Just say you'll come out with me," she pleaded.

"Alright," said Mona, again, hesitantly.

"Ok, how about this weekend?"

"I can't."

"What!"

"My submission is due next week! I have to work on it! If I go out, I'll end up submitting something like what Marc-André just submitted."

"That's fair," said Janie. "Then the next weekend. You have to."

Mona was worried about her next submission. It wasn't due for another week but she had already started working on it. It was a story about a young woman, who was married with one child, who looks back on her own childhood, specifically her relationship with her mother. Even though she was worried about it, she also knew that she was proud of this story, or at least what she'd written of it so far, because it was the first thing she'd managed to write all year that didn't resemble her own life in any way. She'd gotten the idea when she went home for Christmas break and ran into a classmate from high school at the bookstore in her parents' neighbourhood. She hated the feeling of running into old friends that she'd had a falling out with and decided to write a story that conveyed this feeling rather than her actual life.

For homework, she'd read Marc-André's submission, a story about a young man and young woman who meet at a party on a beach and go on to develop a week-long, romantic relationship. Even though the story made her uncomfortable, she enjoyed reading it *because* it made her feel that way. She didn't have much to say about it, though, and hoped that she would be one of the first to be chosen to give him feedback.

She was in the middle of reading Lau's story, which was set in Ottawa. Lau was from Gatineau, on the other side of the Ottawa River and grew up in a bilingual family, her father being Quebecois and her mother an Anglophone from Nova Scotia. Despite being perfectly bilingual, she preferred writing in English and had mostly Anglophone friends. Mona noticed that Lau often tried to capture both of these languages in her stories, and would sometimes include lines of dialogue in French that her classmates would often have to search in Google translate, her current piece being no exception.

She had just enough time to finish marking up Lau's story before her break was over. Mona worked at a local bookstore affiliated with the university where she completed, on average, 30 hours a week. On her breaks, she would try and get work done for school and, when the store was quiet she loved to browse the different titles and read the dust jackets. Her favourite thing, though, was to go to the literature section and identify which authors she would be between if her book were up on the shelf.

"Did you see the news?" Jonah asked Claire as soon as he took his seat beside her the next class.

“I know. It doesn’t surprise me, to be honest. A friend of mine goes there and took one of his classes last semester and she’d been telling me about the favouritism she noticed in her workshop.”

“Really,” Jonah replied, stunned. “And the allegations?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” said Claire. “It’s not right, but that’s the way that a lot of these programs are.”

Mona knew what they were talking about. A professor at another university was facing allegations of harassment and favouritism in his workshops. She agreed with Claire, although had never experienced this in her own program.

“I think I’m going to apply to be a tree planter this summer,” said Janie.

“Really?” said Lau. “But it seems like so much work.”

“I know but I’m so broke and the money is really good. It would put me in a good position financially for next year.”

“It is good money. My brother goes every summer and he usually has enough cash to last him at least the first half of the year,” said Mona.

“So that you can maintain your *extravagant* lifestyle,” added Lau.

“Hey!” said Janie.

Lau said she was just kidding but Mona actually agreed. It was tough keeping up with rent, groceries, books, cover charges, drinks, concert tickets, and everything else undergrads tend to spend their money on. Most of her friends didn’t keep jobs during the school year. Instead, they would tell their parents that they needed *every free moment* to work on stuff for school and would assure them that they would make up the costs in the summer. Mona didn’t have the same luxuries as some of her peers though, or maybe it was just that she didn’t accept them because she couldn’t justify it. She knew that asking her parents for money that she didn’t have meant that they would be giving her money that *they* didn’t have. It just wouldn’t make sense.

“How are we doing today?” Caleb asked. The students shifted in their seats and began to get their notes in order. “So today we have stories by Marc-André and Laurence to discuss. I’d like us to start with Marc-André’s story today, if you don’t mind, but I have a couple of words to say first,” Caleb explained. He then expressed his disappointment.

“What happened?” he asked Marc-André.

Marc-André explained that he understood Caleb's disappointment. He himself was not satisfied with the work he'd presented. He didn't want to waste the class's time with a piece that he clearly did not put much time, effort, or thought into. It wasn't the story he initially wanted to write but he got stuck with his original idea and wrote this second story at the last minute. Caleb asked Marc-André to stay after class so that they could schedule a meeting in his office hours to discuss his re-write. Mona had heard rumours that Caleb would sometimes refuse to let a student have certain pieces workshopped if he deemed them unworthy of the workshop's time. This had terrified her when she first enrolled but once the course started, she realized that this fear only made her a better writer.

"Okay," Caleb continued. "Now that that's settled, let's move on to Laurence's piece, *Lacking Colour*. Laurence, would you mind reading us your first page?"

"Of course," said Lau, and she began to read.

Lacking Colour

i love how you've taken everyday stories of different characters and made us care

It is Thursday afternoon and the market is beginning to crowd with its regular passers-by. It's only the beginning of October but it feels more like December. The wind is blowing from the North. The wind is blowing leaves off the few trees found along the walkway. The wind is blowing leaves that have already fallen off the trees and are covering the brick walkway with oranges and browns and yellows and reds. What used to be a bundle of green is now a sea of colours. Such vibrant shades for something so dead. Dried up leaves. The kind that crunch under your feet and crumble into little bits and pieces.

A little girl waits by the lamppost with her mother as cars and busses whiz past. The streetlight turns red and the girl lifts her arm to grab hold of her mother's hand and together they cross the street.

"Why do leaves change colour?" the girl asks her mother.

"It's just what they do. They become more beautiful, like how a caterpillar changes into a butterfly and how you become more and more beautiful every day!" her mother replies.

What a stupid answer, a man waiting for the bus thinks as he pulls his lighter out of his pocket and lights his cigarette. "I really need to quit smoking," he says to himself for the eighth time this week. He knows his body is no longer what people would call 'mint condition'.

"This shouldn't be too far of a walk," a woman whispers to her womb, coughing as she passes through a cloud of smoke hanging around the bus shelter. This will be her first child. Her baby is due in four weeks and she's decided not to know the sex.

A man with an enormous laugh is heard out on the patio of the Irish pub on the corner of the walkway. He is overheard telling a group of friends stories about his vacation and how he managed to break his foot rock-climbing with his wife.

There is a man playing guitar on the side of the walkway. His body is unclean, his skin pale, and his eyes tired.

interesting structure

i love how everything is woven together

seamless

considers re-working the ending. give us a bit more.

“Thank you, Laurence,” said Caleb. “We’ve got an interestingly structured story here. Janie, why don’t you start us off today?”

“Of course! Lau, thank you so much for submitting this piece. I loved reading it and thought that the structure was so clever. It reminded me of those movies, like *Love Actually* and *Valentine’s Day*, where there are tons of different characters with different stories but then all of the stories sort of come together in the end. I think the pregnant lady was my favourite character. She was so sweet and I loved her relationship with the homeless man. I also loved the way that you used the repetition of scenes and words throughout the piece but especially the way that the end connects so much with the beginning. Well done!”

“Thanks Janie. Jonah, what are your thoughts?”

“I thought it was great. I agree, the structure is interesting. The characters are fresh. My one criticism is that I thought that the different stories could have come together a little more seamlessly. The outcomes felt a bit forced and, perhaps if you made the story longer, you’d have more time to develop the characters and their stories, and have more time then to get things to fit together. I will admit, however, that this is a challenging structure and I think that you’ve made an excellent first attempt. Well done.”

“Thank you, Jonah, great points. Mona, what do you think?”

“I would have to agree with a lot of what Janie and Jonah have both already said. The structure is different and it presents a story that we don’t see too often. Laurence has taken the everyday stories of several characters and made us care, which isn’t an easy thing to do. Despite the simplicity of their stories, I was so captivated by the way that one leads to another and how they were all woven together by their reactions to small details like cigarette smoke and overheard conversations. I would have to agree with Jonah regarding the ending, however. I thought that the stories wrapped up quite quickly and I wanted to know more about the individual stories before they all came together. I would love for you to consider this for one of your end of year re-writes. I think it has so much potential.”

“Thank you, Mona.”

The discussion went on. Mona was glad to be able to piggyback on Jonah’s comments. She did this every once in a while, especially when someone like Jonah spoke ahead of her in the workshop. She always tried to agree with something they’d said to give the impression of a

similar point made in her own notes and to enhance her participation in the discussion. She knew she wasn't the only one to do this as it was common for students to agree with comments already made.

Since they had only workshopped the one story that class, Caleb used the remaining class time to talk a bit about his life as a writer. He told them about sending stories out to magazines and getting piles of rejection letters back. He told them about his first big break, that he didn't realize *was* his big break, when an editor from a magazine sent him a handwritten letter with feedback on one of the stories he'd sent in, which was something that was totally unheard of nowadays. At the time, he told the class, he didn't realize how valuable that was and he explained to them that their experience in the workshop, learning to give and take feedback, was a tremendously important skill to have, whether they ended up making it as writers or not.

Once Caleb was finished his lecture, Mona was asked to distribute the copies of her story, which would be workshopped the following week, along with the story submitted by Claire. Mona was nervous to be going the same day as Claire. She didn't want to be judged against such a strong writer but there was nothing she could do so she tried not to think about it.

Later that day Mona went to her lecture on 18th and 19th century writing by women. She was enjoying the course more than she thought she would, and her professor was pretty cool, but the lecture didn't start until 8:30 at night. A lot of classmates from her workshops would overlap in her lit courses, since a number of them were required for the creative writing program, but there weren't many in this class. She almost always read the novels for her lectures but her professor had assigned *Middlemarch* and it was so long that Mona didn't even bother attempting to read it in the required time: a week and a half. She'd just write her paper on one of the other options. She took notes:

notes eng 323

* final paper extended to April 14*

notes: Chapter 15

- represents social mobility
- Lydgate: outsider, man of science
"yearning and desire to alter the world"
he is an orphan, earns his own living
- Dorothea also outsider
- Middlemarch = "marching forward"
- the irrational comes out (is revealed)
- are the characters capable of change?
- or is it rather an unfolding?
- p. 144 arrogant → his flaws make him real
- does Dorothea have a similar weakness
- looking at characters
 - ↳ web of relations
 - ↳ all characters somehow linked
 - ↳ a complexity of human relations
- in having her lesson undone she reassesses her priorities and they become more humanized.
- she eventually becomes aware of her passionate side.
- p. 234 Rosamond "certainly her thought..."
- what we learn about Rosamond and Lydgate in relation to each other.
 - ↳ she's attracted to his status
 - ↳ all superficial attributes
 - ↳ Lydgate's naivety excites him
 - ↳ self-admiration of each other
 - ↳ but they don't read each other
- p. 235 Rosamond's education

Mona had been enjoying the course, despite not having read *Middlemarch*, and it made her consider applying for a minor in Women's Studies. Lau had been in the program since she first enrolled and, at first, Mona didn't really think it was for her. But as she continued to read literature by women and attend lectures about the history of women writers, learning about their triumphs and setbacks, she soon realized how present women were in so much of the literature she was drawn to.

She went home that night and looked up the different courses offered in the Institute for Women's Studies to see if there was anything that interested her. She would have to take a minimum of 30 credits, which was equivalent to 10 courses. There were some compulsory courses she would have to take, like *Intro to Women's Studies* and *Intro to Feminist Thought*. There were other required courses that she had a choice between on subjects like Health Issues, Peace, Ethics, and Culture. Once she got to the optional courses, however, that's where she found the classes that interested her the most. Courses like *Reading Women Writing, 20th Century Writing by Women, Media and Gender, Fem. Theory & Pop Culture*. She decided to apply and see what happened; if she didn't get in, the decision would be made for her.

Institute for Women's Studies
1455, de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.
Montreal QC H3G 1M8

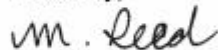
March 26, 2008

Dear Coordinator of Women's Studies,

I am applying for the Minor in Women's Studies and with me I bring a background as both a reader and a writer. I am currently an undergraduate student at the university and this is my second year in the Creative Writing program. Within this program, I have been able to attend and participate in lectures and workshops where I have been given opportunities to read and analyze the literature of writers, both published and not, and to tell my own stories and share them with others. Having been given these opportunities, I feel inspired and motivated to continue learning. In my many literature courses, I have been able to read writing by women, whether past or present, local or international, fiction or nonfiction, and so many of these texts have had a profound influence on me, as a person and as a writer.

I believe I have the potential and passion to become a great writer and am motivated, if given the chance, to learn and to grow. I hope to be inspired and to inspire and to one day teach others the importance of communication and to think to oneself. I will devote myself to my studies in order to accomplish these goals, polish my craft as a writer, and just maybe influence the way others look at the world. I believe that the more you experience, the better writer you will be and I wish to experience my time here, studying within your department, in order to gain a greater understanding of the female writer.

Yours truly,



Mona Reed

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Student ID # 10258331

April 9, 2008

Mona Reed
3578 rue Clark, Apt. 2
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Dear Ms. Reed:

I am pleased to advise that you have been approved to add a Minor in Women's Studies to your current program effective September 2008.

The enclosed program guide shows the placement of your courses in the program.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Sheryl Stern
Academic Counsellor
Office of Student Affairs
Faculty of Fine Arts

cc. Institute of Women's Studies
student file
transfer file

Mona couldn't sleep the night before her critique. She'd re-read her story that afternoon, pretending to be critiquing it for the workshop, and picked out so many lines that now made her cringe. She didn't understand it, but whenever she'd submit a new piece, once she knew that there were others reading her story it always gave her this amazing sense of clarity. She would read it over and the dialogue would fall flat, the characters were annoying and one-dimensional, and the ending never felt right. Whenever she had trouble sleeping she would practice a certain pattern of inhales and exhales and, if that didn't work, she would turn her reading lamp back on and read until she fell asleep. It usually only took a couple of pages before her eyes would begin to feel the weight of her fatigue.

The next morning, she woke up ready for the workshop. She was nervous to hear her feedback but was looking forward to the feeling when class would be over and everyone would move on to the next story. When she arrived to class, she took a seat beside Lau.

"Great story," Lau said.

"Thanks, you liked it? I'm really nervous for today. I feel like I haven't really written anything like this before," said Mona.

"I agree, but I think that's a good thing."

"What did you think of Claire's story?" Mona asked.

"Oh my god, amazing."

"I know, right?"

Claire's story *was* amazing. She wrote it so that it would cut in and out from present to past and she would often write long conversations of dialogue in her pieces. Her stories were always quick to read because the dialogue was often very brief. It was strange, though. She had this way of creating a certain tone with her short, blunt lines between characters.

"Hey!" yelled Janie, waving from the doorway. "How's it going?"

"Good morning," Caleb said as he walked in behind her. "So, we've got Claire and Mona up today. Anyone care to go first?"

"I can," Claire offered.

Great, thought Mona. She was hoping she would go first. She got out her notes on Claire's story.

"Thank you, Claire. Please start us off and read the first page," Caleb instructed.

Claire cleared her throat and began to read:

The House Smelled Like Toast

I can feel you watching me, she said.

I'm reading.

But I can tell. Your eyes are looking at me over the page.

I was thinking, he said. He continued reading. Someone called for you today, he said a few minutes later.

What were you doing home?

I left my wallet on the dresser.

You were driving without your license?

I was.

Did anyone stop you?

I wasn't speeding.

Sometimes you run the stop sign in front of the post office.

I didn't today.

You should stop, she said. You could kill somebody.

It would be an accident.

Would it?

It would, he said. There was a pause.

I was wondering why the house smelled like toast.

I know, he said. I burnt the first piece. You left the setting on high.

Sorry.

It's alright.

Who called?

Maybe you should just listen to the message.

They left a message?

He didn't say anything. She thought about who it could be.

great back and forth

*great protagonist
boyfriend is not
likeable
↳ intentional?*

*↓
why does she like
him?*

*↓
shouldn't the
reader know
this?*

“Thank you, Claire. Great dialogue. Andrew, why don't you start us off today.”

“Uh, ok... Claire. This was great. I enjoyed your story's protagonist, the young woman, who has this past that her boyfriend sort of knows about, but not really, and yet we, the reader, know even less. So we only get to know the vague clues that her boyfriend sort of hints at. And I

thought that you did an excellent job creating tension between the two characters and the hints built up so slowly but at such a perfect pace until we understand exactly what had gone on. It was cleverly written and, again, great dialogue.”

“Thanks, Andrew. Lau, what do you think?”

“Honestly, I was blown away. I *devoured* this story. Once I started reading it, I couldn’t stop. Like Andrew, I also loved Kat, your protagonist, but there was one thing that I thought might make it stronger. Leo, her boyfriend, isn’t really likeable at all and since I loved Kat’s character so much, I kind of wanted to believe more that she would be with someone like Leo but I just couldn’t wrap my head around why they would be together. You give us great back story about her past, what if you included a bit about how they first met? How did he woo her? *Did* he woo her? What happened for them to end up together?”

“Thanks, Lau. Some interesting things to consider. Pete, what kind of feedback do you have for us today?”

“Claire, amazing. Your dialogue is always so on point and your characters are dark and moody. I love that we slowly discover things from Kat’s past and she’s such a wicked awesome character, I loved hearing about what a wild life she’d had. But why don’t we get more of a sense of who Leo is? Was that, like, intentional? Cause if it was, I don’t know that that works. At least it didn’t for me. Like Lau said, I needed to understand him more to understand how Kat got here. Does this make, like, any sense?”

“I think we get where you’re going. Thanks, Pete.”

The discussion continued. Mona gave her feedback and her nerves started to settle. All she had to do for the remainder of the class was to sit back and take notes on the feedback for her story.

“Mona, you’re up! Read us your first page.”

“Sure,” said Mona, and she began to read:

Feedback from: Jonah

Strongest
piece so
far

My Mother Was Always Telling People to Leave

I asked my mother if it was possible to see into the future and this is what she told me.

"Leave," she said. "Leave and don't come back for at least five years. When you return, you'll begin to run into the people that had had some sort of influence on you before you'd left. The time that passes between then and now will allow you to see into your future, into a life you could have had."

Sometimes I found it hard to tell if she meant what she said, or even realized what it was she was saying. But my conversations with her were often so uncharacteristically wise that I couldn't help but wonder where they'd come from and whether or not anything she said would turn out to be true.

"You may see dull routine if you run into coworkers. You may see marriage if you run into exes. You may see success if you run into classmates; you may see failure."

Vague?

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened. The mailman would skip our house when he delivered the mail in the morning. My brother's friend Tony stopped coming over ever since they'd dried up the well during a water fight. And our cat, Whiskers, went missing after he ate my mother's flowers the same summer my grandfather died.

I used to pretend I was a traveler. I would pack up all of the things I thought I would need into plastic bags and tie them to the ends of sticks I'd get from the backyard, the way the characters in cartoons would do. I would parade around the neighbourhood with the stick over my shoulder, the bag swinging back and forth in the air, until I got bored or once the sun had gone down.

I remember one afternoon going into the front hall with my travelling bag to put on my boots and hearing my mom fighting with my brother in the kitchen. At the time I didn't understand what the argument was about. I know now that it wasn't really about anything at all but rather the kind of blow up that builds over years of disagreement.

Why is it that
she turned out
that way?

I like the
protagonist
need to
know more
about
her

incident →

“Thanks Mona. Jonah, why don’t you start us off.”

“Sure. First off, I really enjoyed this. I think that it’s the strongest piece that you’ve submitted this year and very different from your previous pieces. I liked your protagonist, although we don’t really know that much about her. I would have liked to have known more, so maybe think about adding greater detail about her life and her past. Other than her mother, why is it that she turned out this way? I also thought that, while I get that you’re going for a certain voice, some of your ideas were too big and the vagueness of the lines just made me confused. There is a fine line between mysterious and not understanding and I just didn’t understand what your narrator meant sometimes. Overall, I thought that this was a strong submission and you should consider it for your end of year re-write.”

“Thanks, Jonah. Janie, what feedback do you have for Mona today?”

“This was great. I agree with Jonah that some things I just didn’t understand but I think that that will be an easy fix if you do decide to re-write it. I just needed *more*. More information, more emotion, more explanation on her part. Your protagonist is awesome and I love how we get to see her grow up but I want to see more of that in-between time. We mostly just see her when she’s a kid and then again once she’s grown up but what about all of that time in between? That’s what I was wanting to know more about.”

“Thanks, Janie. Marc-André, feedback?”

“Yeah, sure. It was great. I loved your characters. I think the thing that stood out for me the most was how your characters will often have these great one-liners. These, like, really insightful moments where everything is just so clear. But I think that’s the problem some of the others are having. We don’t get how they get this clarity because we’re missing too much information about what makes them who they are. Just give us more.”

Mona was pretty happy with the feedback she received, especially what Jonah had said about this being her best piece so far. She knew that this would be the piece that she would re-write and couldn’t wait to start working on it some more. Getting feedback from her peers always motivated her to work hard, to think about sending her work out for potential publication, and to really commit to *being* a writer. But then reality would sink in, she’d have to go to work or write another paper or pay her next tuition installment and her motivation would disappear under all the other stuff.



THE WORST DRAFT YET

Her bookcase was the only thing left to pack. It contained novels, mostly, and poetry from her university classes. There were books by Eugenides and Morrison, Murakami and Moore that she'd read in her class on contemporary literature. *Forget everything anyone has ever told you about how to write an essay*, the professor told her class on their first day. *A boring essay that's right will always be boring*, he continued, *but an interesting essay that's wrong can be tweaked and made right. So write an interesting essay*. She'd claimed after taking this class that her writing had never been the same and would encourage others in the program to enroll in it whenever any of them would ask her for suggestions.

On her shelves there were Canadian authors too, and Montreal writers in particular, people like Cohen, O'Neill, Richler, and Klein. She remembers going to the St. Lawrence River in the spring of her second year to sit by the water and take notes for her paper on A.M. Klein's poem, *The Break Up*. Even though she knew that the St. Lawrence stretched very far and that the

section that she happened to be watching did not freeze over like the section being described in the poem, she knew that just by being there, where she was, would be enough.

But mostly, her shelves were filled with classics, books by Dickens and Homer, Tolstoy and Joyce. Although, Mona soon realized that she found greater influence from female writers, women like Austen and the Brontës, Burney and Shelley and whose novels inspired her to pursue a minor in women's studies two years in to her degree.

On the bottom shelf were the used copies of the novels and plays she'd loved from high school, books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Death of a Salesman*, and, most importantly, *The Edible Woman*, which she'd underlined and dog-eared almost every page.

She debated whether to pack the books she'd bought as a child from garage sales and the Value Village, which mostly consisted of pulpy romance novels and Stephen King thrillers. She used to be embarrassed of her book collection and had wished she'd been the type of kid who'd read all the classics by the age of twelve. But she took pride in knowing that she displayed an honest bookshelf, so she packed them too. And although she was sad knowing that once she reached Toronto it would mean that she'd be trading in Richler for Atwood, O'Neill for Engel, and Cohen for Brand, she decided to think of it as an opportunity, rather than a betrayal, because she appreciated the influence of local writers and wanted to be considered one as quickly as she could.

Mona's decision to move to Toronto surprised everyone, but mostly herself.¹² She had always lived in Montreal and she had always been a student and here she was, declining her offers of admissions to schools across the country and moving to a city where she didn't know anyone to figure things out on her own.¹³ To her surprise, her mother had supported her decision to move.

¹² "I knew there were people like Leo and my childhood friend, Mimi, who seemed to know what their future would be and then shaped themselves to fit the plan. But when I looked into my own future I could see nothing ahead but space" (Itani, 1998, p. 140).

¹³ "At that point I was just like, ok, well, I could stay in Montreal for another little while but I really felt that I wanted to change cities and get a different perspective so I'm just taking a bit of - some time off - and I'm planning on reapplying to grad school but just, for now, I'm trying to pursue writing outside of a classroom dynamic or setting" (Molly, 2014).

“A change will be good for you, I think,” her mother had said, even though Mona knew that she still didn’t really “get” what she did.¹⁴

“Why don’t you apply to *The Gazette*?” her mother asked her one afternoon. “The paper said they’re hiring interns and junior writers.”

“That’s not what I do, Mom,” said Mona.

“I thought you were a writer.”

“I am a writer,” Mona argued, “but I’m not a journalist.”

“But you know how to write,” her mother continued. “Maybe they’re looking for someone creative.”

She knew her mother was only trying to help but sometimes Mona wished she had gone into something like law or medicine or business. Sometimes her wanting to be recognized and understood was greater than her wanting to be a writer.

Mona had applied to MFA and MA programs that year and U of T had been her first choice but she didn’t get in. She decided to move to Toronto anyway, to experience its literary scene, to participate in it, maybe make some connections, and reapply to the writing programs again the next year.

¹⁴ “People around me, like my parents, who are not really artistic people and work very practical jobs, didn’t really... understand how that would be able to translate a love of writing and reading into a practical job that they would understand” (Molly, 2014).

Mona Reed
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e. mona.reed@hotmail.com

February 10, 2011

Dear Coordinator of Creative Writing:

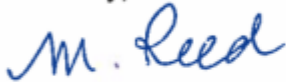
I am applying to the MFA program in Creative Writing, with a specialization in fiction, and with me I bring a background in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction writing. I hold a BA with Honours in English and Creative Writing, and a Minor in Women's Studies. Within the Department of English, I specialized in both fiction and poetry, with special interests in publishing, editing, and writing for children and young adults. While I completed my undergraduate degree, I maintained a position as fiction editor for the university's literary journal and was also an active member of the local creative arts scene, where I taught informal courses on the art of self-publishing and continue to make zines in my spare time.

As a reader, I have taken an interest in writing by women authors, both past and present. I was inspired to take courses in Women's Studies after enrolling in a course on 18th and 19th century writing by women, having been influenced by authors such as Astell and Wollstonecraft. That being said, I am also inspired by contemporary writers, like Moore, Smith, and Paley, as well as Canadian writers, like O'Neill, Atwood, Munro, and Brand.

I have held many jobs in my young life, and at present I am currently employed as a sales associate at a bookstore affiliated with the university that I currently attend. It is by far the best job I've had to-date. When the store is quiet and I've restocked all of the shelves, one of my favourite pastimes is to read the dustjackets of the books that look interesting, or the titles that catch my attention, and, when nobody's looking, I like to go to the fiction section and identify which authors I would be between if my book were up on the shelf.

I believe that I have the potential and passion to become a great writer and am motivated, if given the chance, to learn and to grow. I hope to be inspired and to inspire and to one day teach others the importance of communication and to think for oneself. I will devote myself to my studies in order to accomplish these goals, polish my craft as a writer, and just maybe influence the way others look at the world. I believe that the more you experience, the better writer you will be, and I wish to experience life studying at your school, to become the best person I can be.

Sincerely,



Mona Reed

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e. mona.reed@hotmail.com

April 30, 2011

Dear Ms. Reed,

Thank you for your continued interest in the MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Toronto. Your patience during this admissions process has been greatly appreciated.

The Admissions Committee has had a chance to revisit your application and portfolio from the wait list and has reviewed the availability of positions in the program. Unfortunately, we are unable to accept you from the wait list.

We realize this comes as a disappointment and we are sincerely sorry that we are not able to offer you a space in the entering class. This year we had an exceptionally strong pool of candidates with a very limited number of positions to offer. Unfortunately, because of the volume of applications we receive and school policy, we are not permitted to provide individualized feedback on your application.

Please accept our best wishes as you pursue your academic and creative endeavors.

Sincerely,



Carl Peterson
Director of Enrollment
Office of Graduate Admissions
University of Toronto

Toronto wasn't what she thought it would be. There were opportunities, as people had told her there would be, but they weren't easy to get. Mona's roommate, Janie, had taken the Smart Serve course over the summer and was now working at a bar in their neighbourhood. Mona was working at the Indigo on Bay and Bloor, which wasn't that much of a change from her previous job, except that there was now a wider range of clientele and much busier shifts. She'd also managed to score a gig doing publicity for a Toronto-based literary journal¹⁵ called *Ficetry*, but it didn't pay, and there were so many days where she felt like she was destined to work in retail forever.¹⁶ The more she looked for jobs, the more she realized that her degree wasn't even recognized by most employers and, instead, it often fell under the following description: communications, journalism, *or related field*. Most of the postings looked something like this:

Position Title: Communications Writer

Position Length: 1-year contract with option to renew

About Us

We are an organization that works to promote *[insert anything]*.

About the Role

As a member of the *[insert anything related to marketing, communications, public relations]* team, you will be responsible for the development of compelling narratives in all forms of print, video and digital communications in order to meet key stakeholder needs and build our brand profile.

You will work with the internal team and external partners to develop a variety of content for internal channels and earned/paid media. In addition, you will be responsible

¹⁵ "I've like edited people's poetry before, worked for the literary journal at the university, right now I solicit for the [literary journal], I solicit work from different authors that I feel like would be a good fit for the journal, so I do really like reading people's work and editing with them and like providing feedback and receiving feedback and the whole collaborative thing I really, really enjoy" (Molly, 2014).

¹⁶ "I usually work during the - I usually do like a nine to five or a nine to six or sometimes like I don't know a twelve to eight it's like a retail schedule so, but a lot of the times I won't be working late at night it'll be more during the day so then I can come home and then just in the evenings write (Molly, 2014).

for coordinating, delivering and filing content using a systematic approach that ensures time and resource efficiency.

More specifically, you will be responsible for:

- Writing and editing engaging short- and long-form copy for resources such as the annual report, speaking notes, presentations, print/digital advertising, social media content, brochures and e-newsletters;
- Organizing content development from various contributors including other departments, contractors, and external partners;
- Ensuring consistent and compelling tone and execution of the brand guidelines in all materials;
- Providing strategic, professional, and innovative communications advice;
- Working closely with all members of the *[insert anything related to marketing, communications, public relations]* team to ensure a fully integrated approach that maximizes impact in the most resource-efficient manner.

About You

As the successful candidate, you will have a university degree or community college diploma in marketing, communications, journalism, or a related area, and 3-5 years of experience in a communications copywriting role (or the equivalent acceptable combination of education and experience).

Additionally, you demonstrate the following:

- Ability to think and act strategically, thrive in a high-demand team and communicate sensitive information;
- Experience copywriting in long-copy formats including printed reports/blogs as well as short-copy formats including social media posts/advertising;
- Strong writing, editing skills and proofreading skills with an ability to convey compelling stories for a variety of audiences;
- Ability to translate complex and technical information into layperson's terms;
- Solid oral and written communication skills;
- Detail-oriented with a keen eye for accuracy;

- Advanced knowledge of Microsoft Office applications including Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Outlook;

How to Apply

If you are interested in applying for this position, please visit our website to upload your resume and cover letter by **Monday, August 31st, 2011**. *We thank all applicants for their interest.*

The worst thing about applying to all of these jobs was that often she never heard back from the employers and, when she did, it was usually a generic, computer-generated response. She did hear back from one organization, twelve weeks after she'd applied, with an email that went something like this:

Dear Mona,

Thank you for submitting your resume for the "Communications Writer" position. We appreciate your interest in supporting our movement and in promoting the value and benefit of mentoring across the country.

I have to admit that I was overwhelmed by the response to our ad, with over 270 applicants, most of which met all of the qualifications and represent several years of content management experience. I especially appreciate the creative and compelling cover letters many candidates sent along with their resumes. There is a lot of talent in Canada and I wish I could work with all of you.

Unfortunately, we will not be contacting you regarding this position, but we will be keeping your resume on file for any future openings we may have. We hope that you continue to demonstrate your passion for communication and for contributing to your community.

Best Wishes,

Diane Long

Marketing Director

This never-ending cycle of bad news, or no news, was having a profound effect on Mona's sense of self. Not only was she unable to figure out who she was becoming, she hadn't considered how she would feel losing pieces of who she *was* only a few months earlier. When she was still in school, if someone ever asked her *what do you do?* she'd say that she was a student and that she was studying creative writing. It was that easy. At the time, she hadn't realized this but it added a sort of legitimacy to the practice. The fact that she'd gotten into the program led people to believe that her writing must be good since she was taking workshops, she knew other writers, she was working towards *something* and this, in a way, gave her a free pass to just leave it at that. People were able to acknowledge that writing, as a form of study, was something that people *do*, but out in the real-world people were less accommodating.¹⁷

Now, she's a bunch of different things depending on who she's talking to.¹⁸ Sometimes she'll introduce herself as a writer, although those moments are rare. Other times she'll say she's figuring things out, or working retail until she finds a job in her field, or until she can support herself doing what she loves.¹⁹ Today, she played the role of the intern.

Ficetry was hosting a launch party for their next issue, a collection of articles, stories, and poetry related to the theme, *The Nature of Things*. The pieces could either relate to the outdoors, human nature, or both. There were stories depicting nature's abundance and its scarcity, its importance and neglect. Mona had been working at the journal for a few weeks, mostly doing promotional work like writing blurbs about the authors they'd recently published on the journal's website and updating their various social media pages. Today, she was working with a group of editors, writers, and interns that the editor-in-chief had put together to plan the launch party. Over the next few weeks, this group would be responsible for determining when the event would take place, where it would be held, who would be performing, how the venue would be

¹⁷ "Well I almost feel like when you're in the program you have an identity as a student almost, like so when people are just like, oh what do you do, oh I'm in school I'm studying creative writing, it almost adds some sort of legitimacy because it's like oh wow, so you've gotten into this program, your writing must be good... now that I've moved to Toronto and I'm out of school, people can't comprehend what I'm doing with myself - they'll be like why did you move to Toronto? Well I'm a writer and I finished school and I just wanted to get a taste for a new city there's a lot more opportunities here for writers and things like that and people will be like, oh so you moved here for a like a job and I'm like, well, no like not really a paying job but more like you know be part of like the literary community here and people are like oh ok what do you write then?" (Molly, 2014).

¹⁸ "...ultimately, a writer is someone who writes. And a writer who writes is one who finds a way to give herself permission" (Shapiro, 2013, p. 31).

¹⁹ "...[I] thought that I was mere inches away from being the person I wanted to be" (Daum, 2014, p. 88).

decorated, what would be served, and making sure that this was all possible within their very limited budget.

Mona sat with Steph, an English major in her last year at York and, while they got along and enjoyed spending time together, like in most new friendships among aspiring writers, there was always a feeling of being in competition with the other person. Also in the group was Don, a man in his mid-thirties, who worked night shifts stocking shelves in a grocery store and spent his days writing poetry. He'd had quite a bit published and was probably the most successful writer in the group. Mona thought there was something creepy about him though, in the way he would look at a person just a bit too long or say something that was just a bit off. Then there was Shanti, who had just started working as a high school English and Geography teacher. She was the nicest person Mona had met since moving to Toronto. And then there was James, the most unlikely literary intern. James was in the middle of completing a Masters in Mathematics at the University of Toronto, although, he had minored in English in undergrad and he liked to write stories that involved numbered puzzles in his spare time. Mona also noted that he was very good looking.

By the end of their first meeting, they had decided that the event would be in six weeks. They made a list of cafés and bars to contact about hosting the event, they decided that they would decorate the venue with potted plants and twinkle lights, and they'd be serving a small variety of beer and soda. Don was in charge of contacting the venues, Shanti would call the writers who'd been published to see if any of them would be interested in performing, Steph would get the plants, James the beer, and Mona was in charge of creating the Facebook event page and posting links on the different social media platforms.

"That is so rad!" said Janie. She and Mona had been working opposite schedules for the last two weeks and decided to spend the evening catching up over Chinese take-out and a bottle of wine. Mona was showing her the Facebook event page she created for the launch party before she made it live. "I'm coming to this for sure. Will you read one of your stories?"

"Oh god, no."

"Why not?"

"I don't have anything!" Mona argued. "What would I read?"

"Oh don't give me that. You've written so much!"

The truth was, Mona had thought about performing but decided against it when she'd been put on the event committee. She'd gone home the night she first met everyone and looked them up on the internet. She'd found articles, stories, and poetry by Don and Shanti, and Steph had published a poem in *Ficetry* the year before. There was nothing by James online, but she had browsed what was visible on his Facebook page and couldn't help developing a crush on him. She decided she wasn't ready.

"Well maybe I'll read something," said Janie and grabbed the last spring roll.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"What would you read?"

"Maybe *The Linens*. You know, that piece I wrote in Caleb's class. But I've been working on this other piece that's sort of about the bar. I could maybe read that if it's ready."

Mona had been in awe of Janie's confidence since she first met her in undergrad and was doubting now more than ever that any of it would rub off on her. She didn't want Janie to come to the party. She was worried she'd feel invisible at her own event.

Despite this most recent identity crisis, and to her surprise, Mona had remained dedicated to her writing for a time after arriving in Toronto. She continued to send out manuscripts to literary journals of short stories that she'd been working on that she felt might be ready for publication. In particular, she was working on a collection that she called, *Imagined Fictions*. She came up with the concept one afternoon when she was remembering some of the stories that she used to tell herself as a child. Separately, she worked on individual pieces, but together, they were bound by this main concept. She didn't think any of the pieces were ready yet so she decided to send a story she'd written in undergrad called, *My Mother Was Always Telling People to Leave*. She asked Janie to read it and give her some feedback so that she could edit it some more. She drafted a letter of intent and spent a couple of weeks editing her story, re-reading it and going over each word and line of dialogue. She did this until she reached the point where she could put the story away and take it out again a few days later, read it over, and not cringe. That was her method. That was when she knew it was ready.

She did her research, sent the story to a few Canadian literary journals, a couple of contests, and waited to hear back. She knew that when she sent a story out for publication, the most important thing was to send it to the right place. The piece could always be edited if it

wasn't perfect, but if the writer doesn't take the time to research the journal first, it wouldn't matter how well-written the piece was, if it wasn't the right journal, you'd never get it published.

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Bonnie McIsaac, Office Manager
The Antigonish Review
P.O. Box 5000, St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, NS B2G 2W5

October 6, 2011

Dear Ms. McIsaac,

I am submitting "My Mother Was Always Telling People to Leave," a 1,000-word short story for your consideration. This is a simultaneous submission. I will notify you immediately if it is accepted elsewhere.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

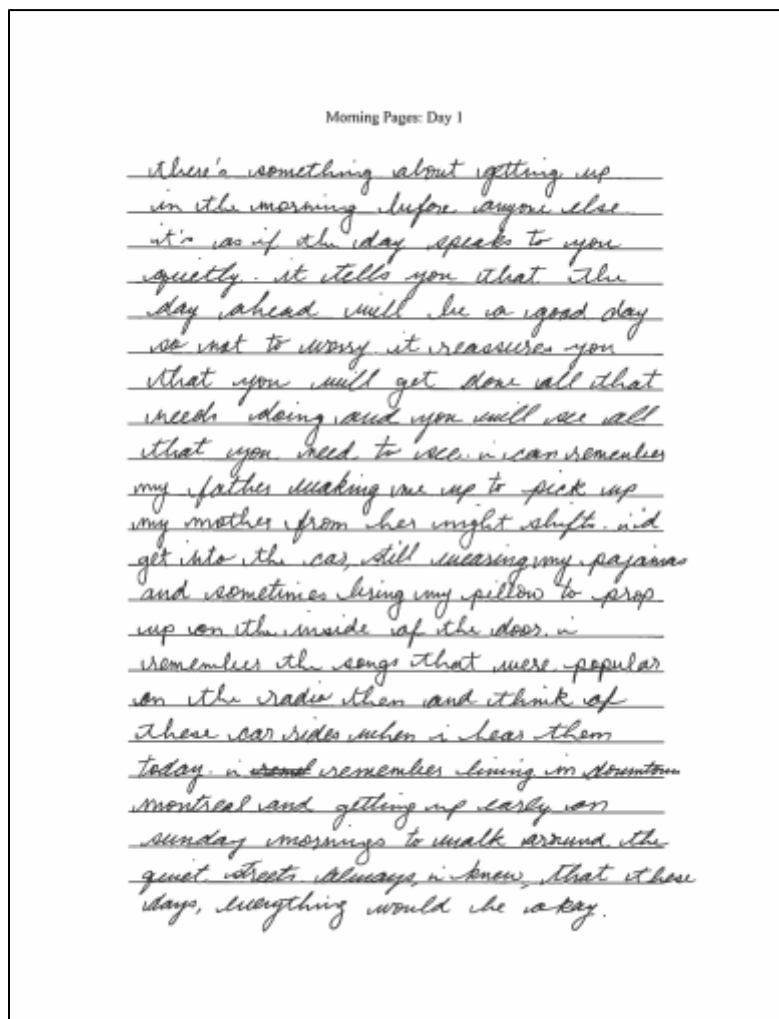


Mona Reed

Mona Reed is a writer from Montreal, Quebec, who has recently moved to Toronto where she lives with her roommate and their cat, Frank. She is a graduate of the Concordia Creative Writing program.

It wasn't long before Mona realized how much the program had helped her maintain a writing routine. It was difficult to keep up with the writing she wanted to do. She would often pick up an extra shift at work, or unexpectedly go out for drinks with coworkers, or meet up with Janie at the bar, or fall asleep on the couch watching Netflix. She'd made many attempts to "trick herself" into writing.²⁰ First she tried keeping track of the number of pages she wrote each day in her agenda. This worked for about three days, until she and Janie decided to binge watch *Portlandia* and fall asleep in front of the TV every day for two weeks.

The next "trick" she tried was writing Morning Pages, something she'd read about in Julia Cameron's self-help workbook, *The Artist's Way*. This is what she wrote the first morning:



²⁰ "I am still currently in the process of finding ways to like trick myself into writing more like I tried to, in my agenda to actually go, every two weeks, and write in like, hours spent writing, with like a line so I could fill in the hours every day so like if I could visually see how many hours that I'm writing a day in my agenda and if I take the time to sit down and, even if I write zero every day I'll feel like wow, I'm acknowledging it and I'm like yeah, that'll get me to write more. That didn't work" (Molly, 2014).

When Mona finally realized that none of her “tricks” were ever going to work, she decided to make more lasting commitments. The first thing she did was rent out a shared workspace in an artist studio with twelve other artists, writers, and academics. She needed a separate space where she could clock her hours and keep track of the time that she knew she needed to dedicate to her writing. This space forced her to get dressed, arrive at a destination, and work within a more structured timeframe.²¹ Before this space, she’d done most of her writing in her pajamas on the couch at three in the morning.²² The studio was above a café on Bloor near Dufferin. It was between the bookstore and her apartment and she could go there anytime, day or night, to work on her writing.

The second thing she did was enroll in a fiction workshop at York University through their Centre for Continuing Education. The instructor, Danial, was a professor at the university who had published several novels, a collection of short stories, and countless articles. He was softer than most of her professors had been but perhaps that was simply because of the nature of the course. She didn’t feel the same pressure to submit her best work, but the course allowed her to try on some different styles and test out new characters, and the best part about it was the deadlines.

For the first class, Danial started off by introducing himself and then asked the students to go around and share their name, their writing style, and what they hoped to get out of the course. This class was not at all like the workshops Mona had taken in university. Instead of a room full of aspiring writers, it included a social worker, a public servant, a shrink, an engineer, and a stay-at-home mom.²³ The only student who had any sort of writing related experience was the social worker, who had been long-listed for the CBC Literary Arts Contest three years earlier for a short story she’d submitted. These writers also didn’t have the usual literary influences that those in the program had had. These writers enjoyed reading a lot of genre-fiction, like mystery, romance, science-fiction and fantasy. Others only read books on the bestseller lists or ones that

²¹ “I just recently in December I’m going to be renting out a desk space in an artist studio, so it’s like a studio. Yeah, I think that that’s going to be really helpful. It’s like a studio where there are twelve like different artists that work in either painting or there’s some people who do like sculpture, different kinds of arts and they’re like residents in the studio and then there’s a couple of desk spaces they’re rented out by like freelance writers and like academics and stuff like that so I’m going to be sharing a desk space” (Molly, 2014).

²² “We writers shape our own days. We sit at our desks in our pajamas. We putter around empty houses, watering plants, making stews in the slow cooker, staring out the window, and we call it ‘working’.” (Shapiro, 2013, p. 53)

²³ Similar to Alan’s compromised writer identity, “I will always be that slash, I will always have to be something ‘and who writes.’”

had been reviewed in the local newspapers. It was interesting to see what people outside of academia were reading and how their own writing was influenced by this as a result.

At the end of the first class, Danial passed around a sign-up sheet to determine the order of workshops. Each student would have opportunities to have their writing workshopped and Mona would be presenting her first piece during the second class. Since they didn't have much time in the course, Danial decided that the students would write two to three pieces and complete one re-write, but instead of writing full-length stories, students worked on flash-fiction instead. Mona hadn't written much flash-fiction before but she knew that the story had to start in the middle and that it had to be roughly 1,000 words in length.

On her way home, Mona decided to get off the subway at Dufferin station and walk down Bloor to explore the neighbourhood around her new office space. She stopped at a store to pick up some supplies for her desk and noticed a café across the street that advertised as a storyteller's coffee shop. She was curious, so she went in and ordered a tea. Looking around, she noticed an office-space at the back of the café.

"What happens back there?" Mona asked the barista.

"Oh, the space actually doubles as a not-for-profit writing program for kids and teachers and stuff," the barista replied.

"You're kidding," said Mona. "That's fantastic."

"It's closed right now but you can check it out online if you want," the barista said.

Mona picked up a business card from the counter and thanked her. She stopped by the office to drop off her supplies and set up her desk and then she took out her laptop and looked up the café's website. She found out that it was a not-for-profit organization that ran children's creative writing workshops and collaborated with local schools. She noticed that they were looking for volunteers. She printed the application form before leaving the office and then headed home.

The next morning, Mona decided to get started on her first flash-fiction story. She wasn't entirely sure what she wanted to write about yet, but she had an idea about a young woman who loses each one of her senses, one sense at a time. It would sort of be like *The Edible Woman* except, instead of losing her appetite the protagonist would lose each of her senses. The idea of

losing one's sense of self would be at the heart of the story. Another idea she'd had for a while was a really simple story about a woman who is sitting in a restaurant, slowly flipping through the newspaper. She would be waiting for someone. And the narrator would be a young man in the restaurant observing her. He would also be waiting for someone and the reader would never know if the person that one of them is waiting for ever showed up. She wasn't sure yet who would be the one to show up, the person the woman was waiting for or the man.

When she was out of ideas, she took a break and filled out the application for the children's writing program. She would need two references for the program and decided to get in touch with Marianne from the library program she volunteered with in Montreal and with Caleb, her professor from undergrad.

From: mona.reed@gmail.com

To: caleb.johns@concordia.ca

Subject: Reference Request

Hi Caleb,

I hope you've had a good year and that your semester is going well - I noticed you're teaching intro and advanced this fall/winter!

I moved to Toronto a few months ago and have come across an opportunity that I am excited to be a part of and I was wondering if it would be possible to put your name down as a reference. It's for a volunteer position at a children's creative writing program and, while I have one contact who can attest to my skills and abilities working with children, I am hoping that you might be able to speak to my dedication to, and experience with, creative writing.

Many thanks,

Mona Reed

Mona decided to drop off the application on her way to the bookstore. She packed up her stuff and walked down Bloor to the café. The barista from the day before was behind the counter.

“You’re back!” she said.

Mona explained that she had gone online and filled in an application to volunteer. The barista told her that the program manager was in and that Mona could go to the back office to drop off her application.

Jess, the program manager, was amazing. She interviewed Mona on the spot and offered her a volunteer position. She had to get a police records check for the vulnerable sector before she could start, and Jess would have to check her references, but those were her only obstacles. Once she got her records check back in the mail, she was told to bring it in and Jess would be able to put her on the schedule.

Mona heard back from Caleb the next day.

From: caleb.johns@concordia.ca

To: mona.reed@gmail.com

Subject: Re: Reference Request

Mona!

Funny, I was just wondering about you the other day and made a note to myself to get in touch, to see what's up. Yep, let me know exactly what you require, and when, and it will be done. Sounds like a neat opportunity, so I hope you get it!

Caleb

Mona had the day off and decided to go to the police station to wait in line for her records check. She brought a book to read while she waited, which was a good thing, since it ended up

taking almost two and a half hours. There was a man at the counter reporting a stolen vehicle. A woman just walked through the door, went over to the ticket taker, and took a seat. Mona looked around the waiting area at everyone on their phones. A girl sitting across from her was talking to someone about her trip to Taiwan. The man sitting next to her was playing Candy Crush. She continued reading.

247. Her number was finally called. Mona dog-eared page 39 and walked up to the counter. She handed the gentleman her form and three pieces of ID. She said that it was for a volunteer position and gave him the confirmation letter Jess had given her so that the fee would be waived. The man took her ID and made photocopies of each piece, kept the letter, and told her that the form would be mailed back to her within 14 days.

Mona took the subway to Dufferin station and went to the office. She was hoping that she could finish a draft of her story this week so that she'd have next week to edit it. She decided to go with the piece about the young woman who loses her senses but wasn't sure how to fit the entire story in 1,000 words or less. First, she had to figure out logistically which sense the woman to lose first and in what order she would lose each subsequent sense. She decided to start with touch because she thought that it would be important to demonstrate to the reader how isolated the protagonist felt when the story opened. The next to go would be taste followed by smell. These sections would be necessary for the structure but not as revealing in terms of character development. After smell would be sound, a way of demonstrating how she can't hear what others are telling her. And finally, sight would be the last to go only, instead of going blind, the protagonist will have lost the ability to recognize her(self). This is how Mona was thinking of ending the piece:

Sight

She opened the front door and sat down at her desk. She tried to catch her breath. She leaned over, rested her elbows on her knees and put her head in her hands. The apartment was empty. Bianca lifted her head and looked at the letter on her desk. She'd decided to write to John the night before. It was an apology letter. She looked at the bottom of the page and noticed that it was signed, Julia. Beside her laptop, sitting on the corner of the desk was a frame holding a picture of her family that her mother had given her as a gift when she moved out. She looked at the picture and noticed that something about it wasn't right. She couldn't find herself in it. She turned to the pile of bills and bank statements sitting on the opposite side of the desk. They were addressed to someone else.

Julia Young
1923 Woodbark Ave. Unit B
Montreal QC H3X 2R4

That can't be right, Bianca thought. Her hands began to shake. She walked to the bathroom, stood in front of the sink, and ran the tap. She cupped her hands to fill them with water and splashed her face; an attempt to stay calm. She opened her eyes and looked into the water that filled the dark, faux-marble sink but she saw no reflection. She looked up into the mirror and saw that there was no one looking back at her.

Mona thought she would end it there. There were certain parts throughout the story that she knew still needed a lot of work but the ending she liked. She decided to put the story away for a couple of days so that when she went to work on it next it would be fresh. Before she put it away though, she would show it to Janie to get some feedback. That way, when she went to look at it a few days later, she'd have somewhere to start. She printed a copy before leaving the studio and walked home. Janie was closing the bar that night and Mona had an opening shift the next day so she wrote Janie a note: *Was working on this today for my workshop. Would love your feedback! xoxo Mona.* She stuck the post-it on the story and left it on the kitchen table. She

reheated a plate of leftover Pad-Thai on the stove, watched an episode of her latest tv series, and called it a night.

The next morning, as Mona read her book on the subway on her way to work, she began to realize that there was something lonely about this busy city. It was as if the presence of strangers was a constant reminder of how lonely she was.²⁴ She returned to her book. The chapter she was reading reminded Mona of the story that her friend Lau had written in their prose workshop about all of the passersby and made a mental note to text her to set up a Skype date. She dog-eared her book at page 65 when she arrived at Bloor station and exited the train.

They were short staffed at work that day. Sheryl, who typically worked in the Children's Department had called in sick and Jeremy, who was scheduled to work in Music had gone to Michigan to visit some family and his flight back had been delayed. Mona was exhausted and was dreading having to go to her workshop later. After her shift, Mona walked over to the food court and bought a sandwich and a coffee. As she ate, she wondered what kind of stories her peers would submit to the workshop. She was nervous and excited to be back in school. She read her book while she ate.

It felt like *déjà-vu*. Mona sat around a long, grey table waiting for Danial to arrive. Sitting to her right was Kim, the social worker, to her left was Calvin, the engineer and across the table was Roger, the shrink.

"So, what do you think so far?" Roger asked.

"I think it seems interesting," said Kim.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm a bit nervous to share what I've written but I think once it's out there it'll feel good," Calvin added.

"For sure," Roger said. "What about you," he asked, looking at Mona.

"I'm here for the deadlines," she said. The others laughed. Danial came into the room and took a seat at the end of the table.

"Good evening, class. Looks like we're still missing a couple of people," he said. He opened his briefcase and took out a notebook and a pen. Then he got up and wrote the following

²⁴ "What I miss is the feeling that nothing has started yet, that the future towers over the past, that the present is merely a planning phase for the gleaming architecture that will make up the skyline of the rest of my life. But what I forget is the loneliness of all that. If everything is ahead then nothing is behind." (Daum, 2014, p. 88)

note on the whiteboard: *She was always quick to laugh and quick to cry.* As he took his seat, the two remaining students entered.

“Sorry I’m late, I was printing off copies of my story,” said Janine, the stay-at-home mom. “And I ran into this one at the elevator.”

“Stuck looking for parking,” Eleanor, the public servant, said with a shrug.

“Not to worry,” Danial said. “Now that we’re all here, why don’t we pass around the stories for today’s class.”

Janine, Calvin, and Eleanor all passed around copies of the stories they’d written and Janine offered to go first. Her story was part travel writing and part romance. It was about a middle-aged woman who travels to Tuscany and meets a young Italian man. The two of them have a sexual relationship, but not necessarily a romantic one. There were a lot of metaphors that compared their relationship to fruit. And while Mona realized that she would have to readjust her standards for this course, she couldn’t help but cringe the entire way through Janine’s reading and did not consider her a very good writer. But despite this, she could see how much Janine enjoyed writing and was clearly fulfilled by the process. Most of the feedback that Janine received from her peers was that she had a lot of great descriptive passages in the piece. There were some comments about the characters and their motives, but everyone avoided the conversation about sex. Her peers may have said more but it was hard for them to get their feedback in since Janine took up most of the time explaining where her inspiration for the story had come from than listening to the feedback that others were willing to offer. This, Mona thought, was the real reason Janine would never be a writer.

Calvin, the engineer, was the next to share. He prefaced his reading by telling the class that he was very interested in science fiction and then went on to read them a story about robots. Mona enjoyed the piece and believed Calvin to be a talented writer. He didn’t over-do things and he maintained a good balance of plot, character development, and description. Overall, he received positive feedback from the group.

Last to share was Eleanor, who read them her story about a dysfunctional family. Of the pieces presented that night, this was Mona’s favourite.

“I really enjoyed this piece,” Mona said. “The characters are very interesting, especially Darlene, who is such a strong protagonist. I also like how the conflict you present is so real, I like how this dysfunction is so relatable, yet you’re able to make it different enough for us to

care about the characters and want to know more about their situation. I also thought that the pacing of the story was well executed and we're given what we need, when we need it. One thing you should watch out for, though, is point of view. Your story starts off in third person, with an omniscient narrator, but then later on you switch to first person, from Darlene's point of view. While I like getting inside Darlene's head, you have to pick one or the other. Otherwise, it's too confusing for the reader. They're left asking themselves, *who's talking here?*"

"Great observation, Mona, and an excellent point to make," Danial said.

"Sorry, but can you explain what you mean by third person and first person?" Eleanor asked.

"Yeah, how did you even notice that?" asked Janine.

"Well, you start off your story with an omniscient narrator, think of it as a God-like figure who's outside of the story looking in and observing everything that's going on. There's third person limited, which is when it's an outside narrator who only observes, but then there's also third person omniscient, who observes but who can also get into the heads of the characters and know what they're thinking. I think your story would work best if you stuck with this. But where it gets confusing is here, at the top of page two when Darlene narrates the part about calling her brother. It should be "Darlene called..." not "I called...". The "I" changes the point of view to first person and, unless you're making some kind of experimental statement, your story's point of view should be consistent throughout."

"That's incredible. How did you even see that?" Janine asked again.

"I studied writing. It's something you learn along the way," Mona said.

"Well this is great," Eleanor said. "I'll be sure to work on this in my next draft."

"Well put, Mona, and an excellent explanation for the class. This was a great first workshop! I would like to thank our three brave writers for volunteering to go first, and now I would like to give you some homework. I have a prompt written on the board that I would like you to write down and I want everyone to use this sentence in a story and bring it with them two weeks from now. You may change the *she* to *he* if you like, but the sentence must appear somewhere in your piece. Any questions?"

"How long does it need to be?" Janine asked.

"500 - 1,000 words. Anything else?" No one answered. "Great! So next class we have stories from Kim, Mona, and Roger. Have a great week!"

Everyone packed up their things and headed towards the elevator, except for Janine who stayed behind to talk to Danial.

“That was impressive,” Roger said turning to Mona as they waited for the elevator.

“Thank you,” she said. “It wasn’t really anything though.” She found these conversations hard to navigate. She didn’t want to come across as a know-it-all but she also didn’t want to hold back information that would be helpful to her peers. What she had stated in class had been basic knowledge in the creative writing program, but to people in the working world, she could see how it would be unfamiliar.

“I’m looking forward to reading what you submit next week,” he said.

This was her other fear. She worried that because others knew she’d studied writing that they would hold higher expectations for her and this was pressure she didn’t want. Not only that, but she worried that Roger would assess her story as a shrink. Would he be able to know things about her through her writing? Was she revealing things about herself on a subconscious level through her female protagonists? The elevator opened. She tried not to think about these questions until she stepped back in that elevator the next week.

The next day Mona had gone from feeling like she wasn’t doing anything to doing everything. Her records check had come in the mail so, if she could fit it in, she was going to try and stop by the café to drop it off and set up a schedule with Jess. She also had a shift at the bookstore and had a meeting at *Ficetry* to make sure everything was on track for the event. She decided to postpone her time scheduled that morning to work on her story and head to the café instead. When she got there, Jess invited her to join a workshop they were hosting with a local writer who was teaching a group of kids about character development. It was a young group of 10 to 12 year olds and they were very lively. It was a funny thing to think but, after spending the last four and a half years surrounded mostly by twenty and thirty somethings, Mona almost felt like she had forgotten what it was like to be around kids. They were so confident, untroubled, and carefree. When the workshop was over, Jess had already set up a schedule for Mona for the following week and instructions for the training session she’d have to attend that weekend.

Mona rushed to her shift when the workshop was over and, when she arrived, the store was packed and her customers seemed needier than usual. One woman wanted a recommendation for her niece, who she said devoured every novel she’d given her, but

everything Mona recommended from the young adult novels the woman had either already purchased or would quickly reject. Finally, Mona decided to bring the woman to the adult literature and recommended *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews, which Mona described to the woman as a female, Canadian Holden Caulfield. *This*, the woman said, *was perfect*. Another customer said that the computer was telling her that the store had a certain book in stock, yet she couldn't find it anywhere on the shelf. Mona went to the computer to confirm and, yes, the woman was right. They were supposed to have twelve copies. She checked the delivery date. They had received a new shipment that morning. She asked the woman to wait in the fiction section while she went and looked for it in the back. What customers didn't realize, however, was that when Mona got to "the back," she was presented with a stack of about 15 boxes and would have to open, rifle through, shift, and lift until whatever she was looking for appeared. The worst was when she would find the book, return to the section where the customer was waiting, only to find that they had taken off. But in this case, the woman had remained, despite it taking 15 minutes for Mona to find her a copy of *The Best of Me*, the latest novel by Nicholas Sparks, and likely soon to be a movie with Zac Efron or Josh Duhamel.

They were a full staff that day. Carl was working in nonfiction where he was often visited by a group of loyal customers. He was a yoga instructor and a self-appointed spiritual guru who wore linen pants and crystal necklaces. Not only was he respected in the studio but he had practically developed a cult following of customers at the bookstore who were constantly asking him for book recommendations and spiritual guidance. In the music department was Devon who was in a band and studied animation at York. Beth, a political science major at Ryerson, was in the children's department. She was usually at cash and knew very little about children's literature so she often came to bug Mona whenever a customer would come by with questions.

"Hey, are you doing anything later?" Beth asked.

"I have a meeting at this journal that I'm interning at. Why, what's up?"

"Kat's performing some of her music tonight at this café in Roncesvalles. I don't think it's until 9 or something if you want to come after your meeting. A bunch of us are gonna head over after our shifts."

"That sounds like fun. Text me the details and I'll try to make it."

Kat worked in the café. She was funny and loud and, apparently, a musician.

After her shift Mona grabbed a coffee from the café and headed to *Ficetry*. The meeting was productive and it seemed like everyone was on the right track. Shanti had been able to recruit enough writers to perform at the event while still leaving room for open-mic sessions between the scheduled performers. Don booked a bar in Kensington to host the event. Steph had organized to rent some plants from a landscaping company. James would pick up the beer but that didn't need to be organized until closer to the date. And everyone was pleased with how many people had confirmed their attendance so far on the Facebook event page. Mona reported that, since she'd last checked, 68 people said they'd be coming. They were all on track.

"Hey what are you up to now?" James asked Mona as they were leaving the office.

"One of my coworkers is playing a show in Roncesvalles. Did you want to come check it out?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll check it out," he said.

"Oh, that sounds like fun!" Steph added.

"Great! Why don't I tell the others and see if anyone else might want to join," Mona said heading back to the boardroom. Shanti was the only addition to the group and the four of them took the subway together to Dundas West and walked down Roncesvalles Avenue to the bar. Her coworkers were already there when they arrived. James ended up running into friends of his own, Steph spent the majority of the night flirting with Devon, and Mona spent the evening hanging out with Shanti.

That weekend Mona went to the training session at the storybook café. Jess was leading the training and Mona was able to meet some of the other volunteers that she'd be working with. The day was broken up into sessions where they learned about different reading and writing strategies, Math and Science tutoring tips, and working with English Language Learners. They also learned about the different programs offered, like book clubs, game nights, and a reading series. Mona spent the rest of the weekend at the studio, working on her flash-fiction submission for the workshop. Janie had given her feedback and she worked on the areas that needed tweaking. As she had predicted, most of Janie's comments were in the second and third sections, about taste and smell, but she also wasn't sure about the beginning of the story. She thought that it didn't start "in the middle" the way flash fiction was supposed to. She thought that Mona was

setting too much up rather than just jumping in. Mona tried to fix this and she was pretty happy with the draft she had by the end of the day.

On Monday, Mona went to her first volunteer shift at the café. The workshop was hosted by a local writer, where the students spent the first half of the afternoon writing a story together as a group and then the rest of the afternoon writing their own endings. Mona went around and helped the children work on their stories, illustrate their book covers, and bind their own storybooks with binding tape.

The next day she went to work and then headed back to the café for another shift, this time at the after-school tutoring program. It was a high-school program that students attended through their schools. Students had to be referred by their teacher, parent, or guardian and were required to commit to a certain number of sessions per week or month, depending on their needs. That afternoon, Mona was working with a young girl, Ines, whose first language was French and who needed help with her English homework. Her teacher had given their class an assignment to write a passage that made use of the author's five senses and Ines had chosen to write about the beach. Mona told her that the beach was a perfect setting to write about since it was so rich in its sounds, textures, sights, and smells. When Ines finished her homework, her and Mona got to talking. Mona learned that Ines had just moved to Toronto in the fall with her family from the Laurentians and that this was her first time living in an Anglophone city. She attended school in English now and was struggling to keep up with her peers. She enjoyed playing music in her spare time and was learning to play the electric guitar. At the end of the session, Ines asked Mona if she would be back to volunteer and when Mona told her that she would, Ines said she wanted to work with her next time. Mona told her that she would like that too. She was surprised at how positive her first session had been. She felt validated for the first time in a long time.

That evening she headed to the workshop. She thought she'd be preoccupied all day thinking about what her peers might say about her story, whether they would ask themselves how she could have graduated from a creative writing program, but instead, she hadn't thought about it at all. She was the first to arrive to class and began to feel anxious while she waited. Danial showed up next.

"Hello Mona," he said.

"Hi, Danial."

“How are you this evening?”

“I’m fine. Just trying to psych myself up for this workshop. I’d managed to get used to it in the program but now that I’m out I’ve lost some of my comfort, and maybe some confidence too.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” he said. “We’re just here to try things out and give each other ideas for next steps, not to judge.”

“That’s the thing. I know all of that. I guess sometimes you just can’t help how you feel.”

“That’s normal. It’ll come back sooner than you know.”

Calvin came in and took a seat across from Mona.

“Hello Calvin,” Danial said. “How are you this evening?”

“Good thank you.”

Once the rest of the class arrived, they decided the order for the evening’s workshops: Roger, then Kim, then Mona. Roger’s story was about an abandoned house in the Maritimes that a young man buys and fixes up in an attempt to repair his marriage; the house being a metaphor for their relationship. It was really good and despite how clever the links were between the house and the marriage, Mona thought it lacked the depth that it needed.

“I think it might be interesting,” Mona said, “if you do decide to keep working on this piece, if you added an additional layer to the story. I love that you make connections between the house and the marriage, but I think there is a potential depth to the piece that you just haven’t tapped into yet. One idea I had, which you can discard if it’s not at all where you wanted to take the story, would be if you added another couple to the piece, tell a story within a story. The couple could be the people who lived in the house before it was abandoned. This couple could be used to compare, contrast, and foreshadow with the present couple. That’s not to say I don’t love what you’ve created here so far, this was just an idea if you wanted to keep working on the piece.”

Kim’s story was great. It was about a young boy and a young girl who were living in and out of shelters and foster homes. They struggled with drugs, relationships, mental illness, but mostly, they struggled with being teenagers. Their voices were young, fresh, and so authentic. Mona thought it was the best story submitted to the workshop so far, way better than her own. No wonder she’d been long-listed. Despite her own opinion, Mona still received excellent feedback from her peers, but she didn’t find the feedback as helpful as the kind she used to

receive in the program. Roger had made a comment that made her suspicious of what she'd feared all along. The comment had something to do with the story *being insightful for someone her age*. She didn't know what he meant by that, since it was a story about someone who *was* her age, but she decided to not care what it might mean and just be happy she'd received good feedback. Not only that but when class was over, Danial asked her to hang back for a minute. She expected the conversation to be about additional feedback on her story but she was surprised to find out it was something else.

"You have a knack for providing feedback to your peers, constructive feedback and often harsh criticism," he said. "But you mask this feedback in these soft, non-threatening compliments that I doubt your peers ever realize you were criticizing them to begin with. This is a great skill to have, since it allows your peers to feel comfortable enough to listen to your feedback and take it into serious consideration without putting them on the defensive."

"Wow. I hadn't even realized I was doing this," Mona admitted. "I always just try to be nice."

Danial smiled. "What do you do?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Your day job. What do you do?"

"Nothing really. I work at the Indigo on Bay and Bloor, I'm interning with the journal *Ficetry* doing promotional work, and I recently started volunteering at a not-for-profit."

"Have you ever considered teaching?" he asked.

She hadn't. The thought crossed her mind every once in a while, but it wasn't something she'd ever seriously considered.

When Mona left the classroom, the others were just getting in to the elevator.

"Hold the door!" she called to them. She ran ahead to catch up and saw Calvin holding the door. "Thanks," she said. Janine and Eleanor were discussing Roger's story, thinking up different backstories for the new characters he was going to add. Calvin and Kim stood quietly. Before she left, Mona invited them all to the launch party. She thought it might be fun to see what they were like outside the classroom and they might even enjoy some of the writing.

The party turned out to be a success. Don found a great bar to host the event, Shanti had been able to get a number of writers to perform, the place looked great with plants everywhere and beer for everyone. Mona was hanging out with Janie mostly, who'd asked to be introduced to James and Steph.

"He's *cute!*" Janie said when James went to go get them more beers.

"I know, right?" said Steph.

Mona was watching the performance on stage. A young woman was reading a poem about having her heart broken. Janie decided to read *The Linens* after all. She got up during the open mic portion of the evening and Mona stood with James to watch her performance.

"She's great," said James.

"The best," Mona replied. After Janie's performance, Mona headed outside for some air. On her way out, she ran into Kim and Calvin.

"Hey! You came!"

"Yeah! We thought we'd come check it out," said Kim.

Mona took them inside, got some beers from the bar, and watched the rest of the performances. The way the night worked was that they would schedule performers at certain times throughout the night so that mingling could happen in between performances. And in-between certain scheduled performers were open-mic slots. Don performed one of his poems. Shanti would be performing later, too, and Mona was looking forward to her reading.

"Hey, that's one of my old classmates," Kim said, pointing across the room. "I'm gonna go say hi. I'll be right back."

Calvin and Mona continued to watch the performances.

"You should get up there," he said.

"No way."

"Why not? Your stuff is great!"

"Thanks. But I didn't prepare anything. I couldn't just wing-it."

"You could read your story from earlier today."

"It needs to be re-written first. That's what the workshop is for, right?"

"Whatever you say," he said.

Janie came by with James and said she was leaving.

"You're heading out already?" Mona asked.

“Yeah, are you gonna stay?”

“I have friends here from my workshop. Calvin, this is Janie, my roommate.”

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you,” he said and shook her hand.

“You too!”

“Good job on the reading,” Mona said.

“Thanks! I was nervous. Could you tell?”

“You fooled me,” said Mona.

“Good. Ok, well I’m going to head out. See you!”

Kim came back to their table with her friend Molly. They chatted over beer, watched some more performances, and Mona and Molly got to talking.

“I heard you studied creative writing,” said Molly.

“I did, fiction and poetry at Concordia.”

“Undergrad?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“That’s a good program.”

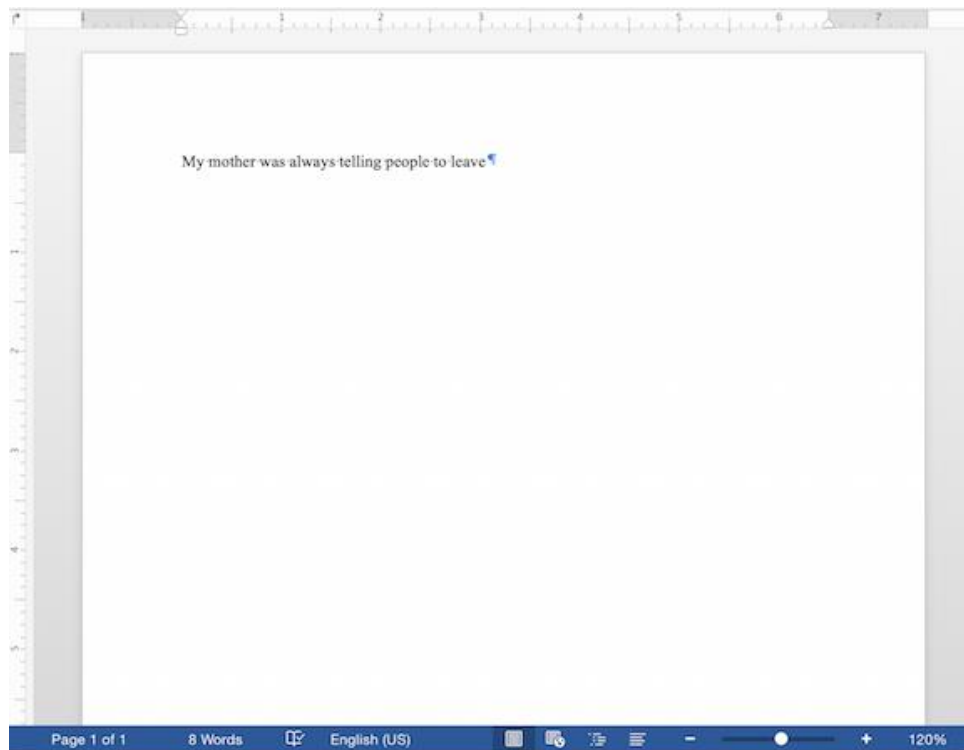
“I enjoyed it. I applied to a bunch of MFAs last year and I got into a few places but I had my heart set on U of T so I decided to wait and reapply.”

“Great idea. The same thing happened to me. Except when I reapplied, I sent out a few applications to dream programs for fun and I ended up getting into NYU on a full scholarship. I started in the fall.”

“Wow, congrats!”

“Yeah. But what I mean to say is, don’t worry. Things’ll work out. Are you going to apply again this year?”

“No,” said Mona. “I’m going to be a teacher instead.”



WHERE STORIES COME FROM

You have to write a story for the workshop and so far, you've come up with one line: *My mother was always telling people to leave*. You don't know where the line came from but you like the way it sounds. *My mother was always telling people to leave*. Yes. That's it. That's where your story begins. You have notes in your idea book about running in to an old classmate at the bookstore in your old neighbourhood when you were home visiting your parents over the holidays. You could write about that. That might work, actually. This is what you have written in your notes:

Someone who sees into the future by leaving hometown for years and coming back to see how everyone ended up. That end potentially could have happened to her. That could be a way of seeing into a future she never had.

You think that maybe it could be her mother who tells her to leave. You think: maybe she is realizing that she was one of her mother's targets. *I asked my mother if it was possible to see into the future.* That's a good place to start. As a child, your protagonist asks her mother if it's possible to know her future. Instead of telling her about fortune tellers or magic eight balls, she says this instead.

"Leave," she said.

But what else does she say? What kind of person is her mother? You decide that the daughter shouldn't know her mother well. You think that her mother should be a mystery to her. What does her mother look like? You imagine her with short, brown hair, a round, plump face and, for some reason, always in nightgowns. Her mother should explain why she's telling her daughter to leave.

"Leave and don't come back for at least..."

You were about to put a number here, indicating how many years the daughter should leave for, but you have to establish first who the daughter is. Why is she asking her mother about seeing into the future? What does she want to know? What is she looking to find? You decide that the daughter should be just heading to university when she leaves but you think she should be remembering what her mother told her from when she asked her this question as a child. As a child, what would she be looking for in her future?

You'll come back to this question later. First you need to figure out how many years the mother should tell the daughter to leave for. If she leaves her home at 18 then she would likely graduate from university at 22. That's 4 years. But nothing really *happens* by the time you're 22, at least nothing too dramatic. More time should pass, you think. By 24 some things would have

definitely started happening and by 26 things would start falling in to place for many of your protagonist's peers. So 24 would be 6 years and 26 would be 8 years.

"Leave and don't come back for 8 years."

But you think it feels weird that the number is so specific. 8 years. Why 8 years? What if she didn't leave until she was 22 and then she added 8 years? That would make her 30. You figure that that still works. But then you consider this:

"Leave and don't come back for at least five years."

You like this better. You think it's because it's less specific. It's more believable that her mother wouldn't be so accurate. If she's too accurate, how would anyone take her seriously? She needs to continue explaining her theory. What will happen in five years?

"When you come home, you'll run into the people you'd left behind."

Ok, this is a start. Obviously she'll be leaving people behind. But who in particular? Classmates, colleagues, family, friends, exes, etc. You think of anyone who would have had some sort of influence on your protagonist before she left. Maybe that's it. Maybe that's the line.

"When you come home, you will begin to run in to the people that had some sort of influence on you before you left."

Does this sound like the mother? You're not sure, but it's good enough for now. Maybe she should wrap things up. It will be important for her daughter to comment on what she thinks of what her mother has just said.

"The time that passes between now and then will allow you to see into your future."

Is that it? It feels like something's missing. You can't think of anything right now. If you do come up with something, you'll add it in later.

Now to get at what her daughter thinks of all of this. Is she buying this? Or does she think her mother sounds phony?

Sometimes I found it hard to believe anything my mother said.

No, she wouldn't think this. You try to understand their relationship. Even though her daughter has never had a strong relationship with her mother, she still looks up to and admires her.

Sometimes I found it hard to tell if she meant what she said.

This, you think, might be better. It's not what the daughter thinks but what the daughter thinks her mother thinks. It's about the daughter figuring the mother out, something she likely does continuously.

Sometimes I found it hard to tell if she meant what she said, or even realized what it was she was saying.

Why is it so hard to tell for her daughter? How well does she know her mother? What does she know about her? You're thinking not much.

Conversations with her were always so cryptic.

You don't think *cryptic* is the word you're looking for here. She obviously understands what it is her mother is telling her if she ends up taking her advice. But wait, is this advice? You suppose it's more of an answer to a question. Her mother isn't telling her to leave because she wants her to leave. Her mother is telling her to leave because it's her answer to her daughter's question about seeing into the future.

But my conversations with her were always so uncharacteristically wise

That's better, you think. Her mother is sometimes wise when you don't expect her to be. This seems more accurate.

But my conversations with her were often so uncharacteristically wise that I couldn't help but wonder where they'd come from

Should she ever find out where they come from? Does she know any intimate details about her mother's life that pre-date her birth? If not, does she ever find out?

But my conversations with her were often so uncharacteristically wise that I couldn't help but wonder where they'd come from and whether or not anything she said would turn out to be true.

You think this will be a good way of foreshadowing what's to come. The daughter is obviously curious about what her mother has told her and is thinking about the possible outcomes should she decide to go along with what she's said. You wonder what these outcomes might look like. Work. Marriage. Kids. Success.

"You may see dull routine if you run into coworkers. You may see marriage if you run into exes. You may see success if you run into classmates; you may see failure."

This is perfect, you think. She comes home and runs in to all of these people from her past and they tell her what their lives are like, which would give her a glimpse into the life she might have had had she decided not to leave.

You're stuck. What's next? What if there were other people who also left? Who would they be and why would they leave? Family? The mailman?

The mailman would skip our house when he delivered the mail in the morning.

This works, you think. But what else? And what do you use to transition? You're not sure you know how to introduce the idea.

You realize that the idea is already there, though. You just have to remind the reader of it.

My mother was always telling people to leave

That's it. You realize all you have to do is remind the reader of what's already there. But you don't think it's quite right yet. Something is still missing.

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened.

This is it. You decide that this is where you will introduce the absent mailman and others. But what others? You have the idea of family already but you think that it might be interesting to simply not mention the father and have the reader wonder if the mother told him to leave or not; let them fill the gap. It might be more interesting if it was a wider range of characters. The mailman. Maybe the protagonist has a sibling.

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened. The mailman would skip our house when he delivered the mail in the morning. My brother's friend Tony stopped coming over ever since they'd dried up the well during a water fight.

This works, you think. But what else? Maybe a family pet?

And our cat, Whiskers, went missing after he ate my mother's flowers

You like that you've come up with different ways for people (or pets) to leave. They skip or stop coming over or go missing. You wonder how else people can leave. They pass, you think.

The mailman would skip our house when he delivered the mail in the morning. My brother's friend Tony stopped coming over ever since they'd dried up the well during a

water fight. And our cat, Whiskers, went missing after he ate my mother's flowers the same summer my grandfather died.

This is the passage. These are the people who have left. You realize that you have to decide whether your protagonist wants to join them. But, you wonder, how does she go about deciding?

Maybe she could tell herself a story. But is she telling herself the story, you wonder, or is she telling it to the reader so that they understand why she made the choice that she did. What story does she tell? You think back to your childhood. To stories that make up the life that you have. This is the story you remember. You let your protagonist use it for her story.

I used to pretend I was a traveler. I would pack up all of the things I thought I would need into plastic bags and tie them to the ends of sticks I'd get from the backyard, the way the characters in cartoons would do. I would parade around the neighbourhood with the stick over my shoulder, the bag swinging back and forth in the air, until I got bored or once the sun had gone down.

You remember doing this as a child. You remember the plastic bags, the sticks, and, most importantly, the disagreements that made you want to leave in the first place. Wait. This idea about disagreements just might work for something. You might be able to use this too.

Sometimes I would pack the bags because of a disagreement.

You don't think this seems right. Your protagonist doesn't seem like the kind of character to be bothered by much or get into many disagreements, even with her mother. You try to think of something else.

Maybe this disagreement thing can still work, you think, just with someone else. Maybe her sibling. The mother is arguing with the protagonist's brother but the protagonist doesn't understand what it's about.

At the time I didn't understand what the argument was about.

You're getting somewhere. This disagreement with the brother makes sense. But how does it start? You understand though that that doesn't matter. The protagonist doesn't have to know how it starts or even why it's happening. She just needs to know that it's what caused her brother to leave.

I remember one afternoon going into the front hall with my travelling bag to put on my boots and hearing my mom fighting with my brother in the kitchen. At the time I didn't understand what the argument was about. I know now that it wasn't really about anything at all but rather the kind of blow up that builds over years of disagreement.

You like that you're able to take something from your life and put it into your work but you also liked that this story didn't really remind you of your own life. You decide to keep it in anyway because it helps move the story in the direction that you want. You wonder where to take it next. Maybe wrap it up? Maybe that's it? What if you brought it full circle?

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened.

You like that. The full circle idea. But something is missing. It needs to be extended. It needs to still be moving things forward. You decide to add this:

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened. But I often wonder if she ever expected them to.

That's it. Full circle while still moving the story forward. You wonder where the protagonist is at this point. You decide that you should bring things back to her. This is her story, even though it's about her mother, it's still her story, you remind yourself. Bring it back to her. What is her story though? You think about this for a minute. Her story is her future, can she see into her future?

I wanted to know what kind of future I would see if I left home.

That's it, you think. That's her story. She wants to know what her future holds so she decides to leave for the sole purpose of being able to eventually come back. That's your protagonist's story. You have some things to figure out for this, though. You ask yourself, where does she go? For how long? What has happened to her in the meantime? Is she happy with her life by the time she decides to come home, or is she disappointed?

Don't complicate things, you think. Don't make the details too specific. Maybe she goes "out west". You like that. But how long does she go for? Her mother tells her "at least five years". So she should obviously be gone for five years. But wouldn't her life get a bit carried away? You think it shouldn't be exactly what her mother told her.

So I went West and five years turned into nine.

You like this. It's believable, yet not too long that she would have forgotten why she left in the first place. But what happens while she away? How does the protagonist change? In what ways does she grow? Who does she become? You think it would make sense that, for part of the time that she's away, she goes to school. She's still young, and she seems like she'd enjoy university, or at least be the kind of person who'd want to go. But what else?

You get stuck. You wonder where to take the story from here. If you add too much detail, this becomes the story. Her life away from home. When that's not your goal. This story is about coming home. This story is about possible futures. You decide to go back and read what you've written so far.

You've got it. You'll mimic this line: "*You may see dull routine if you run into coworkers. You may see marriage if you run into exes. You may see success if you run into classmates; you may see failure.*" She'll get into school and get a job. She'll meet someone. She'll be successful. This is it.

I got into a good school and succeeded in my courses. I worked different jobs and made new coworkers. I met a man and eventually moved in with him.

You wonder if that's enough. You've checked off each of the things the mother said she might find in her future. She's reached each one. Should she do something her mother didn't warn her about? You like this idea. Maybe she begins to mimic the mother in a way. Maybe she has a daughter of her own.

I got into a good school and succeeded in my courses. I worked different jobs and made new coworkers. I met a man and eventually moved in with him. And now, I too have a daughter.

You like this. This is the story. Your protagonist is not only going to see her future but perhaps her mother will be reminded of her past. This is when they should go home.

We're driving back home - back to my home since it is no home that they have ever known - as I recall what my mother told me.

You wonder if it makes sense that something like this would have such a big impact on your protagonist's life. You decide that it's ok for her to obsess about it because it's a story and it's her story.

You start to get bored of the story. Maybe bored is the wrong word. You become distracted. You're tired. You just want the story to wrap up. This happens sometimes when you write. Instead of writing the longer story, you go with the shorter version. The long version of this story is that she does go home and she is able to glimpse into a series of possible futures for herself. But the biggest future that she sees perhaps has something to do with her mother. Maybe realizing for the first time how much they are alike. The short version of this story is that maybe she decides not to return home. You wonder if this would make your character too unlikeable. You don't think it would if it was justified. Maybe she can remember something else her mother

told her that the reader hasn't been told yet. A reason not to go home. You decide to try and work this out.

I realize I no longer want to know what kind of future I will see.

It's not a perfect line, you think. But it'll do. What next? They're already on their way. Do they turn around?

Now when I leave I pack suitcases and I choose to travel by car instead of plane or train; it allows you the option of changing your mind, turning around, and going back the way you came.

You decide to connect their traveling with the travels that she used to do as a child, with the plastic bags tied to the ends of sticks. You like this connection. It's not perfect, you admit, but it'll do. At this point, you just want to finish the story. You wonder about what her mother could have told her that would make her not want to go back. She'll run into old friends. It will inevitably be awkward but that doesn't seem bad enough for her to avoid finding out. Maybe it has less to do with what she'll find there and more to do with herself. You like this. You decide to keep going with it. You think maybe she doesn't like her life. No. That wouldn't work because you've set it up so that we don't get enough information but she seems content. I don't think the reader would buy this and, in order for them to believe it, you'd have to go back and re-write the section above. You decide to go in another direction. Maybe it has less to do with what she thinks and more to do with what others will think. This is it. It's the flip of her reason for coming home. Maybe she comes home and runs in to people and they think about how glad they are that they didn't turn out like your protagonist. This is what your protagonist fears. She decides not to go out of fear. Her fear is greater than her wanting to know her future.

"Whatever you see," my mother warned me, "Remember that there are always two sides. Be prepared to ask yourself what they will see when it is them running into you. Think about how the answers make you feel about the life you are living, not just the one that you imagine could have been."

You hit the save button. You crack your fingers. You stretch. *That's it*, you say. *That's the story*.

You were transported back to this moment, back to the birth of this story, after receiving this email in your inbox.

From: Antigonish Review <antigonish.review@gmail.com>

Date: January 31, 2016 at 3:37:32 PM EST

To: undisclosed-recipients;

Subject: Regarding the status of your submission to The Antogonish Review

Dear Contributor,

Thank you once again for your submission to *The Antigonish Review*. Unfortunately, your piece has not been accepted for publication. We encourage you to submit to our upcoming issues, and wish you the very best in your future literary endeavours.

Best regards,

Janet Webber

Fiction Editor

You wonder if there's more to the story than that. Is it just the story of your protagonist or is it also, in some ways, your story? You think back to the time you visited your parents over the holidays. How you saw a chapbook that Lau had published at *Drawn and Quarterly* and then seeing it pop up again later on your Facebook newsfeed in an article listing the top local summer reads of 2015 on *The Gazette's* website. You think back to the last time you were on a plane and how you read an article that Claire published in *enRoute Magazine*. You think back to the housewarming party that Tash had with her boyfriend when they first bought their condo in a

trendy, up-and-coming neighbourhood of Montreal. You remember looking at all of the local art she had hanging on the walls and wondered why you never hung anything up at your place. A few weeks ago, Claire commented on a photo of Jonah that had been posted on Facebook by one of his coworkers. “Big shot,” she’d written. He was a junior editor at major publishing house. He’d landed the job after completing his MFA at Iowa the year before.

You wonder what they see when they run in to you. You work at a literary journal that doesn’t pay you anything. You work in retail making close to minimum wage. You live with a roommate. You volunteer. You have student loans to pay and rent you sometimes can’t afford. You decide that there are still changes you’d like to make. You think back to the moment when you met Kim’s friend Molly and told her that you were going to be a teacher.

You decide to take your own advice and look into it. You apply to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. You ask Caleb for another reference. This time, you also ask Jess. You get in. You go home after your first day and call Tash and say, “It was like being in a room full of people who were just like me.” You spend the year writing lesson plans instead of stories and thinking up activities instead of plot lines. You spend your weekends marking essays and your evenings at meetings and parent teacher interviews. You spend the winter months with a never-ending cold and the summer months on vacation. September becomes your new year instead of January. Your students bring you equal doses of grief and joy. You realize, now that you’re here, that you couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

My Mother Was Always Telling People to Leave

I asked my mother if it was possible to see into the future and this is what she told me.

“Leave,” she said. “Leave and don’t come back for at least five years. When you return, you’ll begin to run into the people that had had some sort of influence on you before you’d left. The time that passes between then and now will allow you to see into your future, into a life you could have had.”

Sometimes I found it hard to tell if she meant what she said, or even realized what it was she was saying. But my conversations with her were often so uncharacteristically wise that I couldn’t help but wonder where they’d come from and whether or not anything she said would turn out to be true.

“You may see dull routine if you run into coworkers. You may see marriage if you run into exes. You may see success if you run into classmates; you may see failure.”

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened. The mailman would skip our house when he delivered the mail in the morning. My brother’s friend Tony stopped coming over ever since they’d dried up the well during a water fight. And our cat, Whiskers, went missing after he ate my mother’s flowers the same summer my grandfather died.

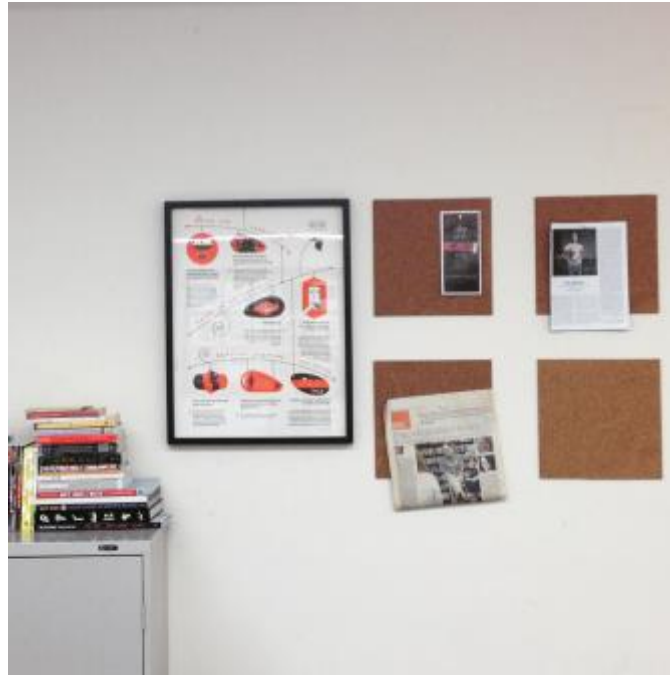
I used to pretend I was a traveler. I would pack up all of the things I thought I would need into plastic bags and tie them to the ends of sticks I’d get from the backyard, the way the characters in cartoons would do. I would parade around the neighbourhood with the stick over my shoulder, the bag swinging back and forth in the air, until I got bored or once the sun had gone down.

I remember one afternoon going into the front hall with my travelling bag to put on my boots and hearing my mom fighting with my brother in the kitchen. At the time I didn’t understand what the argument was about. I know now that it wasn’t really about anything at all but rather the kind of blow up that builds over years of disagreement.

My mother was always telling people to leave and they always listened. But I often wonder if she ever expected them to.

I wanted to know what kind of future I would see if I left home. So I went West and five years turned into nine. I got into a good school and succeeded in my courses. I worked different jobs and made new coworkers. I met a man and eventually moved in with him. And now, I too have a daughter. We're driving back home - back to my home since it is no home that they have ever known - as I recall what my mother told me. I realize I no longer want to know what kind of future I will see. Now when I leave I pack suitcases and I choose to travel by car instead of plane or train; it allows you the option of changing your mind, turning around, and going back the way you came.

"Whatever you see," my mother warned me, "Remember that there are always two sides. Be prepared to ask yourself what they will see when it is them running into you. Think about how the answers make you feel about the life you are living, not just the one that you imagine could have been."



MAKING ROOM FOR THINGS

Everyone once in a while I have moments like these. I describe them to friends as *out-of-body experiences*. I'll be up in front of a room full of students when one of them raises their hand to ask a question.

"Miss Reed!" they shout. "But how do we know that it was actually a man? How do we know that Pi's not just imagining this, or talking to himself?"

"Well," I say, "what do *you* think is happening?"

Whenever I have these moments, I stop listening to the students for a split second (since that's all I can spare) to look around the classroom and soak it all in. In this moment, I realize that I'm really here. This is the moment that I've been working towards even though I could never have predicted what this moment would look like. That didn't matter, though, because I recognized it now that it had arrived.

When I applied to the position I had no intention of even making it to the interview stage, let alone actually getting the job. The posting had stated that teaching experience was required and all I had accumulated at that point were a couple months of practicum placements and a year's worth of supply teaching. I decided to apply anyway. *For fun*, I told my friends. Not that any of it was fun. I was back to where I'd started, writing cover letters and tweaking resumes. The only the difference now was that I felt recognized.²⁵ My qualification was no longer listed as *or related field*; I am a teacher. I even have a certificate to prove it.

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Wednesday, February 11, 2015

Thomas Gregory
Head of School
Bellwoods Academy
923 Dundas Street West
Toronto, Ontario, M6J 2P8

Dear Mr. Gregory,

I am applying to the English Teacher – Senior School position currently available at Bellwoods Academy and with me I bring a background in Education and Creative Writing. Your website indicates that the Academy produces a student publication, The Bellwood Blog, and I am excited about the possibility of being involved in this type of creative project.

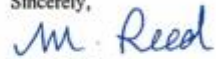
My recent work in the B.Ed. program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education focused on examining the effects of transformative teaching on student identity formation through the implementation of a series of collaborative creative writing projects in an intermediate writing program. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how creative approaches to critical inquiry can support transformative teaching and engage students in meaningful ways. Prior to my studies in Education, I earned a BA in English and Creative Writing at Concordia University specializing in fiction and poetry, with special interests in publishing, editing, and writing for children and young adults. My experience in the workshop environment has greatly influenced my teaching style, promoting creativity, collaboration, and cooperative learning. My teaching style has also been informed by my experience in the classroom, accommodating individual

²⁵ “I was kind of pragmatic and I said I will always be that slash, I will always have to be something ‘and who writes’” (Alan, 2014).

learning styles in lesson plans, offering a range of local, national, and international texts, and encouraging students to become highly critical readers and thoughtfully creative writers.

Despite my being new to the profession, I am confident that my experience and enthusiasm, together with my background in writing and publishing, will be of interest and value to you as a candidate. Thank you in advance for your consideration and I welcome any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Mona Reed

MONA REED

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 PHONE (416) 856-9173 – EMAIL MONA.REED@GMAIL.COM

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario 05/2012

- Completed the Intermediate/Senior program, with teachable subjects in English and Sociology.
- Member of the *Creativity, Social Justice, and the Arts* cohort which focused on incorporating global, peace, social justice, and environmental education in the classroom and curriculum through arts-based instruction.

Bachelor of Arts, English and Creative Writing, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec 05/2010

- Specialized in fiction and poetry, with special interest workshops in publishing and editing, as well as writing texts for children and young adults.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Transformative Teaching; Project Based Learning; Fiction-based Research; Creative Writing; Social Action Research

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP AND ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Writing Specialist, Part 1, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario 04/2013

Certified Teacher, Ontario College of Teachers 08/2012

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Occasional Teacher

Toronto District School Board, Toronto, Ontario 09/2013 - present

- Currently employed as an Occasional Teacher with the Toronto District School Board at both the Intermediate and Senior level.

Student Teacher

Northern Secondary School, Toronto, Ontario 03/2012 - 04/2012

- Designed a short story unit and implemented it in a grade 10 classroom.
- All lessons involved SmartBoard Technology to provide background on texts and authors, to critique videos in line with Media Literacy expectations, or to edit text together as a class.
- Provided support as a co-teacher in a grade 12 Writer's Craft class.

Participant

OISE Research, Toronto, Ontario 11/2011 - 03/2012

- Collaborated with a professional learning community to develop a literacy project that was then implemented within the classroom of our partnership school.

Student Teacher

Runnymede Senior Public School, Toronto, Ontario 10/2011 - 11/2011

- Designed and taught lessons in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Geography in a grade 7/8 classroom of gifted learners as well as math lessons in a differentiated grade 8 classroom.
- Designed lessons according to student needs and interests and learned to adapt and prioritize lessons to ensure student engagement and understanding.

Volunteer Tutor

Storybook Café, Toronto, Ontario 10/2010 - present

- Act as a tutor and mentor to high school students, grades 9-12, in a community organization setting.

Reader for Children's Creative Writing Competition

Storybook Writing Competition, Storybook Café, Toronto, Ontario 04/2011-04/2014

- Critical reading and comments provided for stories submitted for grades 3 and 4.
- Provided justification and reasoning for my chosen stories to submit for next round of readers.
- Participated in a group discussion to determine stories to move on to the next round of review.

Writer (previously Intern - Publicity)

Ficetry Literary Journal, Toronto, Ontario 09/2010 - 08/2011

- Worked at *Ficetry Literary Journal* after having completed my internship where I was given the opportunity to promote the journal on various social media platforms, pitch ideas, conduct interviews, as well as write and research articles and stories for print.

Customer Experience Representative

Indigo Books, Music, and Café, Toronto, Ontario 09/2010 - 08/2013

- Employed at Indigo Books, Music, and Café where I provided readers' advisory services in the Fiction and Children's departments.

Fiction Editor (previously Junior Fiction Editor)

09/2008 – 06/2010

Soliloquies Anthology, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec

- Worked at *Soliloquies Anthology* as their Fiction Editor after having been a junior editor in 2008.
- I worked alongside the fiction team and oversaw the selection process of submitted fiction for the fall 2009 and spring 2010 issues.

Sales Associate

Campus Books, Montreal, Quebec 10/2006 - 08/2010

- Worked at *Campus Books*, a student-run bookstore located on the Concordia University campus, where I provided readers' advisory services.

PUBLISHED WORK

Reed, M. (2012). "Losing Her(Self)." *Ficetry*, 2012 Winter Issue, Toronto, Ontario

Reed, M. (2011). "My Mother was Always Telling People to Leave." *Cosmonauts Avenue*, 2011 Spring Edition, Montreal, QC

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Fall and Winter Institute

OISE, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

10/2011 and 02/2012

- Attended three days of workshops, run by the federation, students, and many local NGOs, covering a range of topics such as breaking the poverty cycle, emotional intelligence, arts-based instruction, collaborative learning, learning disabilities, addictions, HIV/AIDS education, and global perspectives.

Advanced Creative Writing Workshop

Centre for Continuing Education, York University, Ottawa, Ontario

10/2010 - 11/2010

- Enrolled in an advanced creative writing workshop with writer and York University professor Danial Said where I wrote and workshoped a number of short stories.

REFERENCES

Carol Sinclair, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, W: (416) 792-2398,
csinclair@oise.ca

Jess Warner, Program Manager, Storybook Café, Toronto, C: (416) 795-3398,
jwarner@storybook.ca

Caleb Johns, Department of English, Concordia University, C: (514) 238-3545,
caleb.johns@concordia.ca

Danial Said, Department of English, York University, H: (416) 859-7308, M: (416) 239-0607,
danial.said@yorku.ca

I've found that life often has a funny way of surprising you. I learned that I'd gotten the job one afternoon when I was on my way home from supply teaching. I'd had a challenging day with the class that I was supervising and I was looking forward to going home and vegging out on the couch before Cal finished work. He and I had moved in together that spring. We started dating after Danial's workshop had come to an end. About a year later, Janie decided to move to Vancouver to do a post-bac in publishing and I had to either find another roommate or move out. I talked it over with Cal and that's when we decided to get our own place together.

We found a great 2-bedroom near Trinity-Bellwoods and use the second room as an office. We both still write stories every once in a while, and share with each other what we we're working on, except now my becoming a writer and my becoming a teacher are occurring

simultaneously, even though teaching obviously takes up much more of my time. Plus, whenever I find myself with great ideas, more often than not they're for lessons than for stories.²⁶

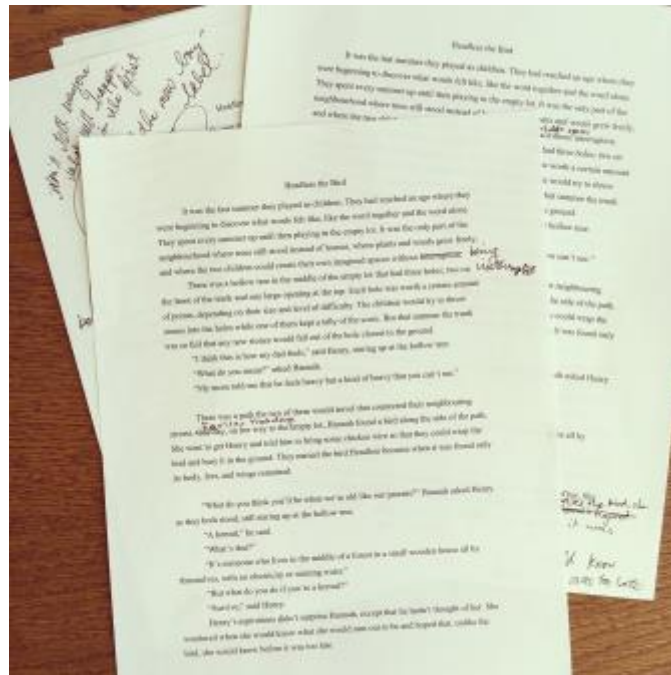
But I made it a point to work on this collection in my first couple of years as a teacher; this series *On Becoming a Writer*. I needed to figure out how I would teach writing when I hadn't published the way that Claire or Lau had done, or worked in the publishing world like Janie or Jonah. I needed to understand *my* process to becoming a writer if I was ever going to figure out how to teach others. I wanted to track how far I've come and where this identity has taken me.

When I first began working on the collection, I had chosen to write it in third person. I needed some distance from the version of myself that was to become the protagonist in these stories. But then I realized that, as the stories continued, my identity was shifting into something I was starting to recognize. That's why, when I received that rejection letter and decided to apply to teacher's college, the point of view shifts to second person. I realized that I was taking a step closer to knowing my protagonist and, in a way, knowing myself. I've realized that sometimes you have to stop becoming one thing so that you can start becoming something else. And that's not to say that you will never become what it was you were originally becoming; it just means that you have to make room for the things you never thought you would be.

I don't think it feels finished, this collection I've written, and I don't think it ever will. Its purpose, a collection on becoming, at least provides a bit of foreshadowing to this lack of a resolution. I will never stop becoming and therefore this story will never feel complete. I have written so many versions of Mona that you, the reader, will never see. So many drafts of who she could have been that didn't make it to this final version that you are currently reading. All of those drafts are still a part of who I am, as the collection's protagonist and creator, even if I am the only one to ever know all of the drafts it took to get me here. In this way, I am always becoming. I am always in the process of re-writing a new draft.

²⁶ "I use most of my writing ideas and figure how can I put them in to lessons in class rather than how can I use them for my own writing" (Alan, 2014).

I would like to leave you with one final story. It's a story that I shared with my creative writing students at the beginning of the semester. I told them that, if I was going to be critiquing their work this year, they should be given the opportunity to critique mine. Their feedback was thoughtful and kind but they didn't hold back their criticisms. They saw things in my story that I, the writer, hadn't even realized were there. They understood my protagonist in ways that I never would had they not brought these aspects of her personality or character to my attention. We think we know our characters when we go to present them to the world but they are people of their own, just like us. They are multidimensional and their personality extends beyond that which is created by their author. I believe that I act as a representation of this type of character; a character that comes to take on a life of her own, a character that becomes the writer of her own story.



HEADLESS THE BIRD

It was the last summer they played as children. They'd reached an age where they were beginning to discover what words felt like, like the word together and the word alone. They were learning to deconstruct the things around them in order to figure out their place in the world. They'd spent every summer playing in the empty lot across from Ben's house. It was the only part of the neighbourhood where trees still stood instead of houses, where plants and weeds grew freely, and where they could create their own imagined spaces without being interrupted.

There was a hollow tree in the middle of the empty lot. It had begun to rot and from the rotting emerged several holes. Two were on the front of the trunk and there was one large opening at the top. There was a cliff at the back of the lot that they would climb from the side where it sloped. Ben had shown Mari how to make a basket by wrapping the bottom edge of her t-shirt around her elbows. They would do this to collect stones and pinecones and make piles of

them at the top of the slope. Once the piles were big enough, they took turns throwing the stones into the hollows of the tree. Each hole was worth a certain amount of points, depending on their size and level of difficulty, and they always kept a tally of the score. But that summer the hollows were so full that each successful aim would fall out of the hole closest to the top of the trunk.

“I think this is how my dad feels,” said Ben, staring up at the hollow tree.

“What do you mean?” asked Mari.

“My mom told me that he feels heavy but a kind of heavy that you can’t see.”

There was a path that they would take that connected their neighbouring streets. Earlier that day, on her way to the empty lot, Mari found a dead bird along the side of the path. She had gone to get Ben to tell him to bring some chicken wire so that they could wrap it up and bury it in the ground. They’d named the bird Headless because when it was found only its body, feet, and wings remained.

“What do you think you’ll be when we’re old like our parents?” Mari asked Ben as they both stood, still staring up at the hollows of the tree.

“A hermit,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s someone who lives in the middle of the forest in a small house all by themselves, with no taps or lamps.”

“But what do you do if you’re a hermit?” Mari insisted.

“Survive,” said Ben.

For Sara, that last summer was, in many ways, also her first. As Ben’s younger sister, Sara had had to wait until she was old enough to wander the neighbourhood with Mari and her brother, but once she was finally allowed to tag along she realized that the others were already growing out of what she had just grown in to. It was that summer that she realized she would always be one step behind. But she wasn’t sad about it. She just wanted to be a part of their world even if she knew it wouldn’t be for very long. Sara had spent most of her life up until that point observing Ben and Mari from afar. She would watch them play in the empty lot from their living room window and try to decipher the rules of their games. She would take notes in her

diary and at night, before she went to bed, she would try to organize what she'd observed into something that made sense. Lately, though, she'd moved on from tallies and scores toward decoding their bodily language and the way that they interacted with each other which she'd noticed had changed at some point that spring.

Sometimes when Mari was invited over to their house she played with Sara instead of Ben. Most of the time they would collect grasshoppers in Sara's backyard. They filled mason jars with twigs and leaves, hammered holes into their lids with nails from the garage, and observed the insects for a while before letting them free again. Other times they would sneak handfuls of gummy bears from the snack cupboard and eat them behind the maple tree. The maple was their favourite spot whenever the fall season arrived. Its leaves turned rich shades of yellow, orange, and red and the children spent hours raking the fallen leaves into piles around the yard so that they could jump in them at full speed.

Once Sara's mother asked the girls to help her collect seeds from the Datura plant in their back garden. It was a large plant with dark green leaves that would bloom beautiful white flowers at night. The plant emitted an unpleasant odor but the girls didn't mind; they had been told that the plant was very poisonous and the danger in handling its seeds dared them to want to complete their task successfully. They were given gardening gloves to wear and mason jars to collect the seeds in, only the seeds were found in what Sara's mother called a 'capsule'. The capsule was a round pod the size of a golf ball and was covered in thorns. She explained to them that many flowering plants produced capsules and that, in botany, they are a type of simple, dry fruit. As they collected the pods, the girls wondered how something so beautiful could be dangerous too.

Sometimes Ben and Sara played at Mari's house. In the summer, they climbed the tall pine tree in the corner of her yard to see how far they could see and their hands would get sticky and covered in sap. In the winter, Mari's father shoveled a path on the hill in their backyard and the children spent afternoons tobogganing while Mari's mother prepared cinnamon buns for them to eat when they got cold and came inside. One time, Ben ate nine cinnamon buns. In the spring, they played soccer in the park beside Mari's house and swing on the swings when they got tired.

“I think my brother likes you,” Sara said to Mari one day as she pumped her feet back and forth, back and forth, to create momentum.

“No he doesn’t,” said Mari from the next swing over. “I heard that he likes Victoria.”

“He doesn’t,” said Sara, preparing to jump. “Trust me.”

When it was Sara’s turn to play in the empty lot, Mari taught her how to wrap her t-shirt around her elbows to make a basket, showed her how to climb the cliff from the side where it sloped, and where to pile the rocks and start the tally. That summer, Sara started to keep lots tallies. How many stones stayed in the trunk. How many fell out of the hole at the top. How often Ben teased Mari. How many times Mari looked over at Ben when he wasn’t looking. How many times Ben talked about Mari when she wasn’t around. What kinds of questions Mari asked about Ben. She often wondered if she would ever meet someone that she would want to think about that much and if anyone out there ever thought about her.

Whenever Sara didn’t understand something she would always approach it as if it were a problem that needed to be solved. Sometimes, the problem was Ben. She understood that her and Ben were different kinds of people. But, she didn’t know why they were different or what made them different or how much they were different. He liked to be alone a lot but never seemed lonely. He would do things but then do something else that was completely the opposite. He got angry more than she did. He felt pain that she didn’t feel. But no matter how long her list grew and how much time she spent organizing her notes, she could never turn it into something that made sense. It was one tally that would never add up.

One morning at breakfast, Ben read an article from the newspaper about a young girl who didn’t feel pain. The article said that the girl had been run over by a car in a parking lot. It turned out she’d been in a number of terrible accidents and survived them all. Her doctors called her ‘The Bionic Girl’. Their mother told them that the reason she’d been in so many accidents was likely because she couldn’t feel the pain, as if the lack of it naturally made her reckless. Ben became obsessed with the idea of escaping fate. He cut out the newspaper clipping and taped it to the wall above his desk. Sara couldn’t help but think that we feel pain for a reason. She just wasn’t sure what that reason was yet.

“Do you dare me to jump?” Ben asked Mari one day, standing at the top of the cliff.

“No way,” she said. “You’ll get hurt.”

Sometimes Ben tried to show off in front of Mari to get her attention. To Sara, it was so obvious that that’s what he was doing. She could see it every time and was confused at how oblivious Mari could be sometimes. She also didn’t understand why Ben thought he had to try so hard. He already had Mari’s attention. He’d always had it.

One day he jumped. His parents took him to the hospital where they discovered he had a broken arm. The doctor put his arm in a cast. Back at home he got Sara and Mari to sign it.

Sara wrote: *Way to go, doofus.*

Mari wrote: *This is why I didn’t dare you. Get well soon* and drew a heart beside her name.

All of the kids at school flocked to Ben on the first day to sign his cast. At the end of the day, when the three of them walked home together, Sara could tell that Mari was trying to see who had signed Ben’s cast. Sara thought that maybe Mari was trying to tally up the number of hearts drawn that weren’t hers.

That summer, Ben decided that he was going to grow up to be a hermit. Mari liked being outside but she didn’t like being alone. She decided that she could never be a hermit. Sara wanted to be a lot of things. Aware of their differences, gradually the three children started to spend less time together. Ben hung out with different people and spent more and more time alone. Mari came over less often and made a new group of friends at school. And Sara stopped keeping score.

The day the children found Headless it had been Sara’s idea to have a burial ceremony. They took the bird, wrapped him in chicken wire, and placed him in a box. They buried the box in the empty lot in front of the hollow tree. Sara thought a lot about Headless that summer and the more she thought about him the more she began to wonder about the difference between *what* a person is and *who* a person is. Headless was not only what the bird was but once they’d named him it also became who he was. *Does what we are always define who we are?* And if it did, she wondered who she would turn out to be.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Outline (Pilot Project)

Name of Participant: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Location and Time: _____

I. “Becoming” a Writer

1. Can you tell me a brief story about your life so far, particularly how you ended up on the path to “becoming” a writer.
2. Tell me a bit about your writing style.
3. Who are your current literary influences? Who were your first literary influences?
4. Did ever attempt to mimic the writing style of favourite literary influences?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. What impact, if any, did it have on your writing style or voice?
 - ii. Was it always only about style? Did writers’ personalities or identities ever come into play?
5. Tell me a bit about your writing habits.
 - a. How often do you write?
 - b. Where do you write?
 - c. Do you associate with other writers? What kinds of relationships do you have with one another?
 - d. Do you think these things play a role in your sense of “becoming” a writer? In what ways?
6. Have your habits changed from when you first started writing? In what way?
7. Did anyone ever played a role in your sense of “becoming” and throughout which stages were they influential?
8. Was there anyone (or any thing) that you felt was ever preventing you in your “becoming” and what effect did that have on the process?

II. Having “Become” a Writer

9. When did you first feel a sense of having “become” a writer?
10. How has that feeling changed since it first appeared? Does it change often?

11. What shape did it take as part of your identity?
12. Are there moments where you feel as though you are “un-becoming”?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Do you have to have reached a sense of having “become” before you can feel that you are “un-becoming”?

I. Facilitator of “Becoming”

13. What kinds of meaningful assignments have you given your students?
14. Do you have a favourite assignment submitted to you?
15. How do you foster student engagement and empowerment in your classroom?
16. Do you think it’s important for your students to view themselves as writers?
17. How do your own personal experiences as a writer influence your writing instruction?

Appendix B: Defining “Internalized” Identity

Throughout the analysis, a focus was placed on the experiences told by participants where identity was internalized. What I mean by “internalized” identity is that the participant has acknowledged himself or herself as being closer to becoming a writer rather than describing an external factor which labels them as such. An example from the analysis that best exemplifies this is from my interview with Caleb, the writer, where he describes the moment in his career where he felt that he had finally become a writer. He explains,

“It’s hard looking back, I mean, the first book is out, I certainly felt like a writer because I had something, I can now announce myself as a writer. The shock for me was that the book written after that, whatever it was, failed again so right back to square one again, not the case but it felt like that anyway, so it really the second published book that’s the one that convinced me I was a writer, in part because people were saying so. The reviews for the first book were complimentary but for the second book were absolute raves. It took that. It took sort of public acknowledgement of what I was doing for me to feel like I was really doing it.”

While a common assumption may be to assume that a person automatically becomes a writer once they are published, this quote highlights the possibility of that being a false assumption since, as Caleb points out, it was not until the second publication, and public acknowledgement of his success as a writer, when he felt that he could finally acknowledge it himself.