

The Immeasurable Value of an MFA in Writing

Brandon Fick - University of Saskatchewan MFA in Writing Intern

Internship Tasks

My internship with the MFA in Writing program lasted from January to April 2020. My tasks included:

- **Compiling** new student bios for the 2020 newsletter.
- **Interviewing** MFA mentor Barbara Langhorst for the newsletter.
- **Writing** articles about Writing North, Guy Vanderhaeghe's creative writing class, and the River Volta Review of Books for the newsletter.
- **Researching** North American universities to learn about creative writing certificates offered.

The annual newsletter is a key part of the program's outreach to other parts of the university, and the public.

What is the MFA in Writing?

The University of Saskatchewan's MFA in Writing was established in 2011. Like many MFAs in Canada, it is a two-year, full-time program. Considering that Saskatchewan is home to writers like Vanderhaeghe, Yann Martel, and Sharon Butala, and includes organizations like the Saskatchewan Writer's Guild and Sage Hill, the MFA was an important addition to a thriving literary community. **It is community, says Program Coordinator, Jeanette Lynes, that attracts students: "They come to this program not because they want to enter some elite ivory tower; they want to link to the writing community"** (Peters). Young or old, they have access to fantastic resources and a dedicated time to write. Core components of the program include:

- **Workshops in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.**
- **Six-month mentorship with an established writer.**
- **Seminars on the profession of writing.**
- **Producing a creative thesis over two years.**

MFA students have opportunities to gain editing experience and engage with the public. They organize Writing North and the monthly River Volta Reading Series, edit the newsletter, manage the River Volta Review of Books, and host workshops at local library branches.

43

Number of Graduates
as of October 2019

What is the "Value" of an MFA in Writing?

Expectations: MFA in Writing students come from across Canada, and the program recently received its first students from the United States. Many enter with Undergraduate Degrees in English, Creative Writing, or Education. Amanda Dawson, who has a BA in Education, "chose to become a part of the MFA in writing program in order to develop her craft and take her writing to a more serious level. She hopes to one day publish her fiction full time" (Gerbeza et al.). Some students, such as Katherine Lawrence (see Testimonials), are established writers looking for a structured environment or to experiment with different genres. Others, like Doreen Ford Stumborg, a former stay-at-home mom and U of S employee, see the MFA in Writing as an opportunity to pursue long-held but unrealized passions.

Outcomes: After graduation, students go on to editorial positions, start publications, and work as freelance writers. **Diane Peters says: "While precious few... MFA students nab a publishing deal mid-degree, most come out of these programs with almost publishable work, and contacts in the writing community and publishing industry"** (Peters).



Image used with permission of Jeanette Lynes

Quantifying the "value" of a Fine Arts program is futile, as success is not seen in a single outcome, but in an assortment of diverse outcomes:

- 2019 graduates Carolyn Gray and Jaclyn Morken accepted internships with the Brink Literacy Project, which provides instruction in editing. Gray was also named editor of *Prairie Fire*.
- 2019 graduate Allison McFarland co-founded The Anti-Languorous Project, which includes the online magazine of literary brevity, *antilang*.
- Graduates Geoff Pevlin and Nicole Haldoupis formed Applebeard Editions in 2017, a publisher of nonfiction, flash fiction, and poetry.

Testimonials

"There comes a point in most every writer's journey when a deeper commitment is required to achieve a new and richer level of craft. I'm that writer. I searched long and hard for a way to accelerate my writing. **I was searching for a way to challenge everything I thought I knew about writing. I'm an established poet but I wanted to study new genres, immerse myself in the craft of fiction, creative non-fiction, and playwriting and, in the process, re-visit my own understanding of poetry.** I wanted to write and revise and test my limits but I did not want to pursue this part of the journey alone. I knew that doing so would frustrate me. I'd fall back on old practices and habits.

"Fortunately, I heard about the MFA in Writing program at the U of S. The program has exceeded my expectations. I've found equally driven and committed students who are on the same upward climb. I've found instructors who listen, pay attention, provide critical feedback, give direction, and share their own hard-earned wisdom. I've stepped into a community where my work is understood, where breaking boundaries is celebrated. **I feel respected, supported, and encouraged to keep pushing myself. Is there anything better for a writer? I don't think so.**" - Katherine Lawrence, Class of 2017.

"**Working one-on-one with a mentor is relational and invaluable, the crux of the MFA program.** I was able to work with Sean Virgo, someone I respect immensely – a brilliant and well-read author who works in diverse genres and has extensive editorial experience. The community of writers we have in this province is an unnatural resource we would all benefit from tapping into – the MFA in Writing program is built around that wealth of talent that abides here." - Andrea Ledding (Poetry) Class of 2013.

Courtesy of the MFA in Writing website

Recent and Upcoming Publications

Publishing their thesis or another creative work is not the only way MFA graduates make an impact, but nevertheless, it is to be celebrated. Below is a list of recent and upcoming publications:

- Sarah Ens, *The World is Mostly Sky* (Turnstone Press, Forthcoming)
- Meaghan Hackinen, *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels* (NeWest Press, 2019)
- dee Hobsbawn-Smith, *Bread & Water* (Forthcoming)
- Taidgh Lynch, *First Lift Here and Other Poems* (JackPine Press, 2019)
- Shannon McConnell, *The Burden of Gravity* (Caitlin Press, Forthcoming)
- Allison McFarland, *Disappearing in Reverse* (University of Calgary Press, Forthcoming)
- Patrick O'Reilly, *A Collapsible Newfoundland* (Frog Hollow Press, 2020)



Courtesy of the MFA in Writing Website

Questions for Further Research

1. How did the modern MFA program develop in the United States and Canada? How did the University of Saskatchewan's MFA in Writing program develop?
2. Why are there so few MFA programs in Canada compared to the United States? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this?
3. How have expectations for MFA programs changed over the years?
4. Do MFA programs produce a certain "style" of writing?
5. How has Canadian literature been affected by MFA programs?

Works Cited

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