

More Than Zero: MFA Critical Introduction

When he was eighteen, my father was in the skies above Vietnam, a door gunner on a Bell 205 Huey. Before his nineteenth birthday he'd been shot down three times, and twice had been the only survivor. Beyond these few facts, I know little about his time in the war. It's not a story he has shared with me. Though I do know that no matter what he saw there, what horror he's carried with him, he never turned from the military, his chosen pursuit. After his tour, he left the Army and joined the Air Force. For the next twenty-five years, he logged over ten thousand hours in the cockpit of various aircraft and embarked on missions so far removed from the world than I—that most of us—can imagine. He spent Christmases in the theater of Desert Storm and Thanksgivings in Panama. After he retired, he worked with Boeing as a flight instructor contracted by the Air Force. My father, like his before him, his grandfather and great-grandfather, is a military man. The same goes for the men on my mother's side. They've all served. These men knew, really knew, what they wanted to do with their lives. Today, as I near the completion of earning my MFA in writing—my own sort of mission—I am struck not only by those who have the nerve to answer the call to action, but by the very act of hearing it in the first place.

The only times I've fired a weapon the target was a soda can in the deep woods of Oregon or the flat plains of the California desert. But when my first semester at community college wasn't working out as I'd hoped, I met with a military recruiter. We talked enough that the details were hammered out. I knew where I'd be going to basic and when the plane was leaving. All I had to do was sign on the dotted line. I never showed up. If I had, I wouldn't have been doing it for myself. I would have because I thought that's what my father wanted: A son who followed his path, who put down the video game controllers, and served his country.

The thing was, I had no idea what to do with myself. I was eighteen, stocking appliances at Lowe's during the week and getting arrested in Tijuana on the weekends. In the eleven years since, I still haven't finished much. I've worked upwards of twenty jobs. From sitting in a cubicle designing multi-million dollars homes for aging rock stars to selling tacky polo shirts at a golf store in a strip mall. For a time I even assembled the timing boxes for sprinkler systems. I've started classes at community colleges all up and down the West Coast. In Sacramento, I fancied myself an aspiring Philosophy major until I discovered how much Philosophy I'd have to actually read. In San Diego, I spent two weeks in classes to get my "GPS Technology" certificate. I still don't know what that is. Nothing stuck. Restlessness kept me always on the move.

The only thing I've ever felt real passion for, the one title I wanted to follow my name in newspapers, was *Writer*. But two obstacles have stood in the way of that dream. The first was that, without fail, I've been told it's not a real job, seeing as there is no money, and therefore no future in writing. Pursue this life, and I was bound to end up being a bartender or worse. The other issue was that I was approaching the writing life from the wrong direction. I wanted to be a writer, just be one. I never considered that I actually needed to learn *how* to write.

Back when playing the guitar wasn't giving me the success I craved, I came across a paperback in a thrift store. The cover was polychromatic, a pair of Wayfarer sunglasses lay in the center with the grainy patterns of MTV logos on the lens and beneath was the title: *Less Than Zero*. I didn't know the author at the time, Bret Easton Ellis, but I sure as shit knew who Elvis Costello was and anyone who would name their novel after one of his songs was fucking right on in my book. It was the first thing I read cover to cover without stopping. I was enveloped in the world he created, as well as the life he was leading. I wanted to be a writer like him. I wanted the sequel to *Less than Zero* to have *my* name on the cover and to live his Hollywood life style. Releasing titillating best sellers, snorting drugs. Sleeping around simply because my words made knees weak.

My head was in the wrong place. But the basic tenet was there, so during my first stint at community college I signed up for a Intro to Writing course. There was nothing glamorous about Creative Writing 101. There were "prompts" and "dangling participles" and that little concept my high school teachers had kept droning on about when I had bothered to show up to class: grammar. I didn't even make it through my first semester. Instead, I went in search of the life in Ellis's book.

I found the bad crowd. The drugs, the streets. I found the death in his version of Los Angeles. And to spare you, I'll say that I found more than Ellis let on and it came very close to destroying me. Something had to change. Restless still and this time more than a little scared, I took flight. Eight years after that first attempt, I took another Intro to Writing class, this time in Portland, Oregon. And all those pesky writing concepts, the grammar, the punctuation, the dialogue tags, they had followed me a thousand miles north. Flash forward again to my semester with Mike Magnuson and will have I discovered the I still hadn't learned shit about them. But more on my time with Mag later.

The syllabus in this course hadn't changed, free writing on Mondays and workshop on Wednesdays. And the prompts, the "write about your earliest memory" and the obligatory "craft a two page story with the following ten words placed in the prose," were the same. The difference was in my

instructor, Susan Reese, a graduate of this very MFA program. She saw, and helped me to see, that maybe, just maybe, I wanted more than the image of being a writer. Maybe I wanted to write.

Susan became my mentor even when I wasn't in her classes. I changed my major from botany or pottery or whatever the fuck I was fooling myself into thinking I'd be happy doing with my life to English, with a minor in creative writing. I became passionate about creating worlds, fabricating characters, recording my imagination. And a funny thing happened. I actually started showing up to class. I joined clubs and writing groups. I became the president of the English honors society. I've never been president of anything, nor had I wanted to before that point. My GPA inched its way up from negligible, from being less than zero. Like my father, I had discovered what I wanted to be.

So, this time two years ago I hopped on a bus with a suitcase, a few short stories that had garnered some recognition and an inflated ego that was just begging to be stomped into dust. I figured, I did so well in my undergrad, this program would just confirm that I was the shit and send me out into the glittering world of upscale literary hit-makers with a meal ticket made out to cash.

Holy fuck was I deluded.

My first semester with Claire Davis I refer to as my semester of missed opportunities. This isn't to say the semester was a wash. No. Quite the opposite. I couldn't now imagine having started this program with anyone else. During our first meeting, I ran the idea for a novel I had by Claire and she encouraged me to go with it. I didn't waste any time. By the first packet I had fifty pages written, and by the second I was pushing close to one hundred fifty. And that, I soon learned was not a superpower, but a big problem. I was going too damn fast. I wasn't taking the time to explore the worlds I was creating. Everything was stock, cardboard set pieces. My characters would walk down a "dark alley." That's it: an alley, and it was dark. With her urging, I began to see these superficial descriptions as missed opportunities. I missed the slickness of the rainwater on the bricks, the pungent scent of mildew, the audible squish of vomit beneath the narrator's sneaker.

I was missing the ability to explore the world of the my story on a basic level, which in turn would have made the place a character in and of itself. This isn't anywhere, U.S.A. This is Portland, Oregon. This is Los Angeles. And this is the filthy underbelly you never get to see, but your characters do and become, to the reader, so much more rounded as a result. But this only comes from revision, from reworking and pulling out the innards of a specific passage seven, eight, twenty times and there in that pile of worked over intestines lies the beauty. Claire said it better than I can: "That's the best part of this whole business. Not the publishing (though, yeah that's pretty cool as well) but the discovery of

how much you are capable of discovery. And each work pushes you to be smarter, to be more observant, to think more deeply on what it means to be human, and forces you to face how complicated that task is—being human.” What Claire gave me and will be forever in the back on my mind was the drive to explore, to dig in and engage my reader, by engaging myself.

I spent my second semester with Mike Magnuson. A name we are all familiar with. You’ve heard the stories about Mag. And if you’re new and haven’t, just wait, you will. And if you’re crazy, nay, brave enough to work with him: You’ll find out first hand. I’m here telling you today that every single thing you have or ever will hear about Mike Magnuson is absolutely true. He’s harsh, he doesn’t pull punches. He loathes the abuse of language. He’ll bring you to the verge of tears again and again. He will, I say without a doubt, make you dread opening emails from him after the second packet. Mike Magnuson will make your wife seriously consider booking a flight to Wisconsin just so she can fight him.

But why? Why is he so harsh? It isn’t because he is a mean person. He’s a saint, really. It isn’t because he wants to force aspiring writers to tears. He doesn’t have a thing for getting into fisticuffs with 110 pound significant others. No, it’s because every damn word he writes is dead on. During our time together, I had to face numerous problems with my work on a nuts and bolts level, with my grammar in every single packet. I saw the words “clunky” and “comma” in my sleep. He wrote once that the particular words I had chosen were, “Good enough, but perhaps not the most original use of English in the history of English.” He hammered me so hard about these issues that even today when I put down a sentence, I think “What would Mag do?. But really what Mag taught me was the importance of life in my writing. About caring for, and loving my characters.

This is what he wrote after I decided it was a swell idea to submit to him a brand new story about vampires, and keep in mind, I’ve paraphrased: “I think this story is bullshit vampire garbage devoid of human emotion and humanity. The problem you have with your writing is difficulty with characterization, with creating round characters with complex backgrounds and complex emotional contours - In other words, you are in general having trouble writing human beings. So the WORST thing you can do is write stuff like this - where human life means nothing and where the only intellectual foundation for it is some crap you've read in comic books or seen on TV. Next time: real world, real people, and by God be an artist who values human life.”

Remember, my template for what good writing was when I came into this program was *Less Than Zero*, a book where true compassion for human life is equivalent to the novel’s title. If it wasn’t

for the full on assault of Mag's approach, the constant wax-on, wax-off of who I have dubbed, Mr. Mag-ogi, I might still be crafting throw-away characters. I might still be embracing death, rather than life.

Over the last two terms, I had the pleasure of working with John McNally. After a few short stories, John encouraged me to get back to the novel. Our exchanges became primarily about the scope, direction and thrust of my novel. Most of the ideas, the concepts of that original draft I worked on with Claire and Mag found their way into the trash, but the bones remained. John helped me to discover where the prose was falling short, where my voice lacked strength and believability, where the plot and characters came apart. Even though the novel isn't fully finished, the first ten chapters are, without a doubt, eighty plus pages of material I could not have more pride in. John encouraged me to keep digging until the pages were the absolute best they could be. And deeper than the page level, John insisted on another type of believability, the sort where I believe in myself. Not the ego I came into this program with, but with the same humble and passionate conviction that everyone in this room has. We are writers, and will continue to hone and practice our craft not for the fame or the money but because it, like my mother has always said, makes our hearts sing.

And here is my shout out to the entire faculty, those I've workshopped with or those with whom I've shared a meal. They could be spending the time, the effort and care they do on our shitty first drafts on a revision of their own work. They care. They want you to succeed, to find your voice, as they continue to shape theirs. That's the beauty of this program: nothing that is shared, exchanged or recommended has, at least in my experience, been said in a fashion that is intended to make you *feel* inferior. Everything is said to push you harder and further than you'd thought possible. To make you believe in yourself, in your work. We are all in the same boat. And the reason Pacific is such a beautiful beast, is that everyone, the students and faculty have all grabbed an oar and are sweating against the current of an unforgiving industry. And one more special thank you to the angels—Tenley, Colleen and Shelly—without whom none of this would be possible.

With that, here are ten of the quotes that have stuck with me and will stick with me for some time:

10. "We say first lines all the time." Bonnie Jo Campbell, on beginnings.

9. “The first three pages to cut were easy. The next three pages were like pulling teeth. The last page to be cut seemed impossible, but I'd finally whittle it down...And here's the kicker: those are the tightest chapters in the book, the best written.” - John McNally, on revision.
8. “Ask more of yourself than this.” - Mike Magnuson, on vampires.
7. “And of course you know I'm not really yelling. But I am deadly serious, pal.” John McNally, on having to tell me more than once about dialogue tag errors.
6. “Because it's written, doesn't mean it will stay written.” - Claire Davis, on revision.
5. “Grr.” - Mike Magnuson, in response to me spelling “creepy” as “creppy.”
4. “I used to have an apple orchard, and I liken [writing] to pruning. Take off the crap limbs, open its crown to the light, and the tree bears three-fold. Same with prose.” - Claire Davis, on revision.
3. “I don't think, based on these first two packets, that you have sufficient skill with narrative to embark on a novel.” - Mike Magnuson, on the disastrous opening chapters of my novel.
2. “Put 'em in a bad place.” - Pete Fromm, on the Swirling Vortex and the concept of making your characters believable.
1. “Touch it everyday.” - Frank Gaspar, on what it means to be a writer (though this can be good advice in other ways as well).

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When he was twenty-nine, my father flew with three other C-141s to assist the evacuation of the 918 bodies from the Jonestown settlement. He had advanced far enough in his career, in his passion to be trusted with a mission so sensitive, and I am proud to know that about him.

I turned twenty-nine this year and turns out, I did become a bartender. But when I'm not working on new cocktails, I'm working on new stories, on new chapters for my novel. I'm writing not for the money, but because I want to write. I recently was wed to a beautiful woman who supports me, who rests easy at night knowing I'm both a writer and a bartender. She supports my passion. And I'm going to finish something, finally. I might not have the designation of Writer following my name in the papers, but I will have the MFA tag from one of the best programs in the country and to me, that means so much more. It shows that I've begun the work. It means that I have the true desire to continue learning about this craft.

I've finished *Less Than Zero* a dozen or more times since that first read. It's hasn't changed. What's changed is me. I don't want to be Ellis or Richard Yates or Flannery O'Connor. I don't want their lifestyle or to write exactly like them. I want to be Drew. I want to write like Drew, and most of all I want more for my characters than that book taught me. I want to celebrate them, their lives. However vile they might be.

I still have guilt or maybe just the capacity to imagine what could have been. Some days I do regret missing that appointment with a recruiter where I would've signed my life off to the Air Force. How different would I be today? Would I still be writing? Would it have been fiction? Or Journaling my own experiences? Or, would I have buried my passion?

It isn't that I don't have the upmost respect for these men. For my father, my grandfathers. I did. I still do. I thank whatever might be up above me in the cosmos everyday for theirs and for the countless others who have served. Who have lost limbs or their lives for my freedom. I just couldn't imagine myself picking up a gun. But what I can do is pick up a pen. Or open my laptop. And write down his story, if he ever decided he wanted to share it with me.