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Honors Capstone Novel Writing Reflection

Cheyenne Goetz

University of Montana, Missoula, goetzcheyenne@gmail.com

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Cheyenne Goetz

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Mentor: Erin Saldin

Honors Capstone Reflection

For my honors project, I decided there would be no better end to my university education than to take on the daunting task of writing a novel. A novel is a fitting concluding work to an education in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Additionally, this particular novel idea first arose as a result of an ethics course taken for my other major of Computer Science. Connecting my two disparate majors has been a challenge for me over the course of my university education. While they have been complementary, they have never aligned. However, writing a novel using all the lessons I have learned in my creative writing courses, with subject matter borrowed from the deep studies of Computer Science felt like an incredible way to combine my two courses of study, and to engage in a larger examination of the ways in which my diverse studies have affected the way I go about storytelling. Under the mentorship of Erin Saldin, I began the semester with the relatively lofty goal of writing 1/3 of a novel by the time I graduated. With this goal to motivate me throughout the semester, I started with a blank page.

The daunting challenge of the blank page is familiar to many university students, but perhaps none more so than those concentrating on creative writing. With that blank page comes the knowledge that whatever you put there will be read and critiqued by a room full of your peers. The pressure to produce work of highest quality and of sufficient quantity has been a constant in my classes for my English degree. Staring at the blank page at the start of chapter one of my novel was no great surprise. Thanks to the incredible lessons I have learned through my classes in the English department putting those first few words onto the paper to begin my

honors project felt natural and far less intimidating than it would have been when I began my time here at the University of Montana. Crucially however, before you can write, you must have an idea.

The idea for the novel that would become my honors project originated in conversations held in my ethics courses required for my Computer Science degree. The questions of societal changes arising from technological advancement, and the place of culture in a highly technological world, sparked the initial idea for a novel about a society that has become so advanced they are disgusted by their own primal nature. Without the cross-disciplinary thinking that arises from being a double major, these discussions would never have sparked a story meant to ignite conversations around the value of raw human nature in a highly technological world.

In addition to that education, my experiences with the Franke Global Leadership Initiative and their constant reminders to think globally shaped the way in which I thought about the scope of the story for this novel. My thinking has become globalized out of habit from the many, many conversations I had living on the GLI floor for three years. The effects of that expanded thinking show up prevalently in my novel when dealing with things like cultural past, societal values, and the politics of borders especially when those borders also have clear socio-economic demarcations in my novel. My diverse and cross-disciplinary experiences are showing up in my honors project far more than I originally anticipated.

The goal set by my mentor and I of writing 1/3 of a novel over the course of my honors project has required discipline and diligence in writing I learned by the hands-on experiences of my creative writing workshops at University of Montana. Hard deadlines of story due dates as well as the discipline to continue writing even when your first draft is not perfect have served me well in my ever-increasing productivity for this honors project. The goal of one chapter per week

rose to two chapters per week over the course of the semester and without the hands-on learning from my creative writing curriculum I would not be able to succeed in this project.

Over the course of the semester I have been able to conceive, outline, and begin writing a full-length novel. Conceiving of the initial idea took place before the start of my honors project, however, taking that idea and turning it into something long enough to fill the pages of an entire novel took a while at the beginning of the project. After the idea felt large enough to cover the scope, I began the process of outlining.

The premise of the novel follows a young woman, Cadence, who had just been accepted into the world's most prestigious research institution. However, she lives in a world of walled cities, where to go beyond the walls into the Outerland risks your life. Her new job at the research institution is to join the one team of people who journey out into the Outerland to solve the mystery of why people out there go "Primal", which is when a person permanently loses all their memories and reverts to a primal, aggressive, and dangerous state. Cadence is motivated to search for these answers because her father went Primal when she was a child. However, there is more to this phenomenon than most people know and when the Cadence finds out the real explanation she is faced with choices she never thought she would have to make.

With this basic premise developed the next step for me was to outline. In my particular writing process, developed with the help of the Writing Center, I begin with a bare bones outline and fill in the details as they come to me, fleshing out the outline organically. This process took approximately three weeks at the beginning of the semester. I color coded the outline to indicate what events and characters would be encapsulated by what particular chapters. Breaking it up this way gave me a visual way to see the flow of the novel at a glance. It also ensured that when I started writing I would know what I needed to write to hit my chapter goals.

After my outline had been discussed between me and my mentor, I started the process of writing. The rest of the semester has been dominated by writing about one chapter per week, until recently moving to writing two chapters per week.

I presented the first chapter of my novel at the DHC Senior Arts Showcase put on by Erin Saldin. At this event, the support of the UM community, including students and those community members who are supportive of the arts at the University of Montana was evident. I was able to share my first chapter with a large number of people who showed up for this event. The most frightening part of any act of creative scholarship is presenting it to others for judgement. Not knowing how your work will be received, but presenting anyway, is an act of risk taking that pays off when the community is as supportive and generous with their thoughts as the one present at the Senior Arts showcase. Presenting my first chapter made me even more motivated to write the other 2/3 of the novel after I graduate.

Looking back over my education at the University of Montana and the Davidson Honors College this project feels perfectly in line with the goals I had for my own education. Sparked by conversations about technological ethics, supported by my hands-on learning in my creative writing coursework, and fueled by an unending curiosity about the forms of communicating complex ideas, this novel brings together the disparate areas of my time here at the University of Montana. The three and a half years of learning that preceded my attempt at this project were all completely necessary to its success as I believe one must study what you hope to produce. Intense learning through the English department, deep dives into different ways of thinking and understanding the world in my honors classes, and experiments in cutting edge technology in my computer science classrooms have all been imperative to my ability to succeed at this honors project. What speaks most clearly of the value of this project to me, is that I'm excited to share

what I have produced and determined to finish the project on my own time after graduation.

These things speak about the love of learning instilled in me through my four years at the

University of Montana and the Davidson Honors College.