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A REFLECTION ON MY WRITING PROCESS

By

MADISON ROSE HINRICHS

Undergraduate Thesis
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for the University Scholar distinction

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University of Montana
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Hinrichs, Madison, B.A., May 2017

Creative Writing and Literature

A Reflection on My Writing Process

Faculty Mentor: Debra Magpie Earling

For my honors research project, I investigated the techniques of established contemporary writers, took a specific look at their different ways of framing a story through the guise of recollected memory, and used their conventions and mechanisms to develop my own original work. I also studied the elements of noir, speculative, and realistic fiction, as those are the genres that I am primarily interested in. In the process, I examined my old workshop material, with revision in mind, and selected the pieces with the most potential for improvement. I then developed and polished these into two short works of fiction that I hope to submit to literary magazines for publication. I also planned out and began work on my first novella. Through this personal essay, I reflect back on my writing process, and what I learned from my research, and examine how I might move forward with my work.

A Reflection on My Writing Process

When I first began this project, I knew that I wanted to accomplish several things, first I wanted to complete some of the short stories that I started in my undergraduate workshops and prepare them for publication. My honors thesis gave me the opportunity to go back and re-examine my old material, with revision in mind, and select the pieces with the most potential for improvement. I then developed and polished these into two short works of fiction that I hope to submit to literary magazines for publication in the near future and I hope to use them as writing samples on my graduate school applications.

The second thing I wanted to do was plan and begin working on my first novella. Due to time restraints, creative writing, fiction workshops focus primarily on short story writing. As a consequence, students may begin dozens of stories without ever finishing any of them. This does not deplete or diminish the value of these workshops, but it does make it more difficult for those of us that would like to write longer pieces. By the time I began my project, I already knew which story I wanted to expand into a novella: during my junior year, I wrote a first-person fiction piece, originally titled “Daddy’s Girls Don’t Cry,” that was loosely based off events from my own childhood. The story centers about two sisters and everything that happens to them when their family moves to a creepy southern town. While writing the piece I realized that it would never work as a short story or in first-person, because there were far too many details and scenes I wanted to include and the age of the narrator made it impossible to write a complex narrative. Ever since I have been waiting for the opportunity to develop this piece into something greater, but before I could do that I needed to study the art of novel writing. Specifically, I needed to study how to pace a longer piece, draw the story out, create well-rounded, multi-dimensional characters and build up to the big climax. The best way to learn these things is to study the work of already successful writers.

For this particular story, I investigated the techniques of Shirley Jackson in her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), Marilynne Robinson in her novel *Housekeeping* (1980), and Ottessa Moshfegh in her novel *Eileen* (2015). I took a specific look at their writing styles, pacing, and how they frame their novels through the guise of recollected memory. With their conventions and mechanisms in mind, I then began my own novella, what I did not expect though, was that these three novels influenced how I revised my short stories as well.

With the assistance of my faculty mentor, I chose these three novels for what they all have in common: each of them center around a female narrator who has a complicated relationship with her parents/guardian and sister and lives in a small, isolated town; they are all told through recollected memory—meaning from the present looking back—and recount painful childhood trauma; and each of the narrators has something rather unsettling about their personalities. Seeing as the storyline of my novella follows a similar trajectory, Jackson, Robinson, and Moshfegh seemed like the perfect place to start.

Although these stories have almost identical structures, their content could not be more different. Jackson's *We Have Always Lived In The Castle* focuses on a young woman named Mary Katherine Blackwood as she reflects upon her young adulthood. The story moves back in time to when Mary is in her early twenties. Her family lived in a small town in Vermont, on a large and isolated estate. They are despised and harassed by the entire town, which encourages them to move far away, but Mary's troubled sister Constance and quirky Uncle Julian refuse to leave the house. Mary herself tries to protect her family and things by barricading their estate from the rest of society. Jackson's story is full of funny little anecdotes, mixed in with Mary Katherine's disturbing thoughts, such as this line, "I thought of them rotting away and curling in pain and crying out loud; I wanted them doubled up and crying on the ground in front of me" (Jackson 16). The story overall has a light-hearted tone, but the reader can always tell that something is going on between the words, as Mary Katherine seems to have an odd preoccupation with death and an overly possessive nature towards her sister and their home. Soon the reader discovers that the rest of the Blackwood family was murdered while eating dinner together one night: someone sprinkled arsenic on the blackberries. The tension continues to build, until the town—led by a distant cousin who wants the Blackwood fortune—attacks the remaining members of the family and the narrator's big secret comes to light. After this climax, the story returns to present day where Mary Katherine continues to live in the house (which is barely a house by then) with her sister. The novel is idiosyncratic and absurd at times, but also hauntingly beautiful and terrifying.

In comparison, Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* follows two sisters, Ruthie and Lucille, through their adolescent and teenage years as they bounce from guardian to guardian. No one in the world seems to want these girls, except their grandmother who unfortunately passes away. The grandmother is not the only one around these girls to die; they seem to leave a trail of bodies

in their wake wherever they go. Eventually, a crazy aunt named Sylvie arrives to care for Ruthie and Lucille. Sylvie's grasp on reality is somewhat questionable and her idea of housekeeping is to leave all the doors and windows open to let the air in—the air and whatever else happens to come with it. Pretty soon their home, which is just a shack built into a crumbling hillside, is overrun with mice, cats, dead birds and the like, as seen in the lines “She [Sylvie] considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping She brought home a yellow cat with half an ear . . . it littered twice. The first litter was old enough to prey on the swallows that had begun to nest on the second floor The cats often brought birds into the parlor, and left wings and feet and heads lying about” (Robinson 181). Sylvie also likes to collect things and lines the walls with stacks of old newspapers and tin cans but she is too lazy to wash the dishes, so she feeds the girls off cardboard plates and always keeps the lights off. At first, the girls both love Sylvie and her careless ways, as they can get away with just about anything, including skipping an entire year of school. Once they reach their teenage years though, the two grow apart. Lucille is interested in boys and clothes, a proper education, and cleanliness, while Ruthie would rather live as a free spirit with no need for friends or school or even decent hygiene. After Lucille decides to move in with one of her teachers, the town decides to intervene on Ruthie's behalf. At the threat of separation, Sylvie tries to burn down the house—that her father built and her mother loved—and flee with Ruthie. Robinson's novel is beautifully deep and decrepit and marked by images of water, death, violence, generational trauma, and the obscurity of childhood.

Moshfegh's novel *Eileen* is perhaps the most difficult of the three novels to sum up in just a few sentences. This story is told by Eileen Dunlop as she looks back at the last week she spent in her hometown, and recalls how she hated everything: including her father and sister, her deceased mother, her job, and the small town. She lived in a run-down, untidy home with her drunken father, who terrorized the neighborhood on a regular basis, worked in a prison for teenage boys, and frequently had sexual and murderous fantasies—sometimes intertwined. Her only release from hatred was her unhealthy obsession with a male coworker named Randy, who she stalks on a regular basis. She dreams of running away to live in a city, but although Eileen hated everything about her life, she never found the courage to move on until a mysterious woman appears out of nowhere. This woman, Rebecca Saint John, seems to come from a wealthy, educated, high-class background, yet she wants to be friends with Eileen. When a new inmate arrives at the prison—a boy who murdered his father and refuses to speak—Rebecca

takes Eileen on a wild ride in which they kidnap and murder another woman. The tension builds and builds until Eileen must abandon everything she knows and flee for her life. Moshfegh's novel is far from beautiful: it is dark and depressing, and all around concerning. Yet it still manages to explore important life issues and the troubles of family obligations, and capture the essence of misery and desperation.

After studying these three pieces in detail, I returned to my own work. The first short story I completed, titled "To the Boy I once Knew"¹ is one I began in my Fiction 410 workshop, under the writing prompt "Write a story with awkward sexual tension." This story follows a nameless woman in her late thirties as she tries to cope with the suicide of a childhood friend. She takes the reader back in time, to her last memory with the boy and slowly brings the story to the present, while explaining how they drifted apart once she went away to college. After their last night together, his life went downhill and hers went up. He developed a drinking problem, like his father, could never keep a job, and lived on the streets more often than not. All of this and more leads up to his suicide. She, on the other hand, has a successful career and a family of her own and rarely returns home. The story is haunted by the influence of their hometown and their families that live there, which in many ways contribute to the boy's demise. In the end, the narrator is left wondering what she could have done differently.

The second piece I finished "You Don't Believe in Superheroes"² is one I also began in my Fiction 410 workshop. Originally, I wrote this piece in the first-person, but it did not evoke the emotional response that I wanted that way, so I decided to rewrite it in second-person, and I am much more satisfied with the result. This story focuses on a child (whom I strategically do not give a gender to further the second-person element, but for the sake of this reflection I will refer to her as a she) as she reflects on her mother's final days. As a child, the narrator could not comprehend her mother's illness and frantically searched for a superhero who could save her through comics and movies. When the mother dies, she feels lost and abandoned, and casts off the love of superheroes for good.

My novella, titled *Under The Orchard*³, centers around two sisters; Adalyn and Matilda Haise and what happens to them when their family moves to an isolated, southern town. It does

¹ Thirteen pages; or 4000+ words in length.

² Five pages; or 1600+ words in length.

³ Forty pages; or 12,000+ words in length

not take long for Adalyn to realize that something is amiss in the town. The school is frightening and full of mysterious stories and rumors, the other children are standoffish and mean, and the teachers are abnormally cruel. On their first day, Matilda is locked inside a shed by two of the older boys, and Adalyn has to fight them to rescue her, these bullies grow into two of the stories primary antagonists. Over time, Adalyn starts to realize that her parents' stories do not line up and that they have clearly visited this place before. She befriends a girl named Seven and the school's librarian, learns more about the town and its dark history, and begins to gather clues about her parents' obscure past.

I presented all of this work at the University of Montana's Conference of Undergraduate Research on April 28, 2017. Going into the presentation, I was extremely nervous, because I had not given a public reading since I attended the Schwanke Honors Institute in 2013 and public speaking, in general, makes me nervous. My faculty mentor helped me to select and edit a section of my novella for the reading, which I prefaced with an introductory segment (see appendix A) and a handout that I gave to the audience (see appendix B). These documents introduced myself, my work, and the texts that I studied this semester. The judge was very kind, asked thought-provoking questions, and gave me helpful suggestions. The audience was quite small, but I found that a relief. Despite my initial dismay, the conference was an incredible and rewarding experience.

Overall I am very happy with how this project turned out. Never before have I had so much freedom to write what I want when I want and explore topics relevant to what I want to write. I feel like I have finally been given a taste of what writing will be like once I graduate and am on my own, and this project has reassured me that I will continue to write once I am placed beyond a classroom setting. My only regret is that I did not begin this project in the fall, and utilize as much time as possible to complete my work.

Works Cited

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Moshfegh, Ottessa. *Eileen*. Reprinted ed., Penguin Books, 2016.

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Appendix A

Madison Hinrichs

Presentation Introduction

Hello and good afternoon. My name is Madison Hinrichs and I am an English major here at the University, with a focus on Creative Writing and Literature. Today I am going to talk to you briefly about my honors project and then give a reading from the novella that I am working on.

Back in the fall, as I was planning this project, I decided that I wanted to accomplish two major things. First, I wanted to go back through all my old workshop material and pick out the two pieces with the most potential, that I could complete and polish to use as graduate writing samples. I am not going to talk about those pieces today, but there is a short description of each of them on the handout that I have given you.

Secondly, I wanted to begin working on my first longer piece. During my junior year, I wrote a first-person short story that was loosely based off events from my own childhood. While writing it I realized that it would never work as a short story or in the present tense; because there were far too many details and scenes I wanted to include and the age of the narrator made it impossible to write a complex narrative.

Workshops focus heavily on short-story writing, but, like many creative writing students, I want to learn how to write a novel. Specifically, I want to learn how to pace a longer piece, draw the story out, create well-rounded, multi-dimensional characters and build up to the big climax. The best way to learn these things is to study the work of already successful writers. For this particular story, I investigated Shirley Jackson's novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980), and Otessa Moshfegh's novel *Eileen* (2015).

I chose these three novels (with the assistance of my faculty mentor) for what they all have in common: each of them center around a female narrator who has a complicated relationship with her parents and sister and lives in a small town, they are all told through recollected memory and recount painful childhood trauma, and all of the narrators have something rather unsettling about their personalities. Seeing as the storyline of my novella follows a similar trajectory, Jackson, Robinson, and Moshfegh seemed like the perfect place to start.

Although these novels are all structured similarly, they have very different plots and each influenced my writing in a unique way. I won't talk too much about them, for the sake of time, but I do want to tell you a little about my novella before I read an excerpt from it.

My novella, titled *Under The Orchard*, centers around two sisters; Adalyn and Matilda Haise and what happens to them when their family moves to an isolated, southern town. While they are trying to survive their new school and all the bullies and rumors that come with it, the girls begin to uncover dark secrets about their parents and the town itself. The story is narrated by Adalyn, at an older age, as she tries to come to terms with what happened to her when she was younger. I'm only forty pages or so into writing this piece and I'm still working out the kinks, but I have most of the storyline planned.

And now, I am going to read an excerpt from the second chapter, that takes place on the girls' first day at their new school.

Appendix B

Madison Hinrichs
Honors Thesis Presentation Handout

The three books I studied

1. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) by Shirley Jackson
 2. *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson
 3. *Eileen* (2015) by Otessa Moshfegh
-

The three pieces I wrote

1. "You Don't Believe in Superheroes" 1600+ words in length.

This short, second-person narrative focuses on a narrator as she reflects back on her mother's final days. As a child, the narrator could not comprehend her mother's illness and frantically searched for a superhero that could save her, through comics and movies. When she dies, she feels lost and abandoned, and casts off the love of superheroes for good.

2. "To the Boy I once Knew" 4000+ words in length.

A nameless woman in her late thirties copes with the suicide of a childhood friend. She takes the reader back in time, to her last memory with the boy and slowly brings the story to the present, while explaining how they drifted apart. After their last night together his life went downhill and

hers went up. The story is haunted by the influence of both of their families and their hometown. In the end, the narrator is left wondering what she could have done differently.

3. *Under the Orchard* (a novella in progress) 12,000+ words in length.

This novella in progress focuses on Adalyn Haise, her sister Matilda, and their parents, when the family moves to a small, isolated southern town. Adalyn quickly realizes that something is amiss in this town. The school is frightening and full of mysterious stories and rumors, the other children are standoffish and mean, and the teachers are abnormally cruel. As the mystery unfolds, she befriends a girl named Seven and the school's librarian, learns more about the town and its dark history, and begins to gather clues about her parents' obscure past.