

Letter from America Autumn 2010

During the first semester of my Master of Fine Arts program, our lecturer said something so damning about a fellow student's story that we dared only repeat the words later in whispers. It was tradition for the cohort to go out for beers after the workshop, parading along Spring Garden Avenue in the late afternoon, chattering about the student stories we had discussed in class. But on this day, we marched in stunned silence, our mood reflective of the trauma. It had been as if the lecturer had withdrawn a pistol and picked off one of our membership.

When we finally had cold beers in our hands, we studied the perspiring glasses, avoided one another's eyes, waiting for the moment when our wounded brother stood away from us at the bar, his back turned.

"*Adolescent literature*," someone finally hissed through clenched teeth.

We all shook our heads. "Jesus," someone else said.

What we knew, though it had never been said, though the lecturer had not impugned the work in any direct way, was that this student had been branded with the two words *adolescent literature*. He was a *genre* writer.

It didn't come as a surprise to us when he dropped out before the semester was over. And why should it? Would we have reacted any differently? What kept us awake at night was the worry that we might be *genre* writers, too. Was the work we were doing *literary* enough, *serious* enough to satisfy clever readers over the age of fourteen? So many pitfalls awaited us, the aspiring writers, and it hadn't occurred to us to worry about this one. But worry now, we did.

If I'm honest, I'm not sure I ever shook off the elitist notion I absorbed back then— that Young Adult work is commercial rather than artistic. Or the feeling in my gut that there is something wrong with being commercial in the first place. However, I do know enough to look back on that first semester in the MFA program and the (gasp) "adolescent literature" incident with real amusement. Oh, the earnestness of it all.

Enter *Harry Potter*. Enter *True Blood*.

Although that first semester of post-grad took place nearly fifteen years ago, it is worth noting that attitudes in US academia toward Young Adult or Children's Writing have not changed as much as one might imagine – especially given the enormous changes in how the genres are now perceived in the culture at large.

A quick search of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs website yields some interesting numbers. Out of 334 programs in the US, twenty-eight of them offer Young Adult or Children's Writing. The vast majority of these twenty-eight are low-residency

MFA programs (*low-residency* is akin to *distance learning* in the UK). Low-residency programs, fairly or unfairly, have the reputation of being cash cows. That is, they appeal to older students who pay higher tuition – and universities can admit more of them than they can admit to traditional programs. The stereotype is that these students may not have English degrees. The stereotype is that they might be lawyers who fancy themselves the next John Grisham. So, are low-residency programs cashing in on prospective students who want to cash in on the Young Adult craze? The cynical side of me says, *Maybe*. The other part of me hopes that the intention of these programs is to impart a new group of students with artistic aims and strategies. Perhaps both things are true.

Traditional programs still offer very little by way of Young Adult or Children's Writing. Maybe – as was the case with a friend of mine – students write “crossover” books within their workshop modules. These are books that could be considered adult literary fiction, but might also be marketed as Young Adult. However, the “Young Adult” label would likely only be applied after the person has finished his or her MFA and after the book has been accepted someplace. The MFA programs don't really want the Young Adult moniker attached to their programs or modules – though they will tout the publication of such books on their websites because they know that publication is the only real currency for luring prospective students. Cash, that bird in the hand, often trumps lofty ideals in the bush – traditional program or not.

Sometimes I wonder what happened to that guy who dropped out of our MFA. Did he ever write again? It's terrible to admit, but I never considered any of this at the time. It was as if he were an astronaut-in-training who found out he had cancer. I mean, obviously a guy can't fly if he has debilitating disease, right? He needed to stop. He needed to acknowledge his “condition” and the fact that he would never achieve the dreams I presupposed we shared. It was a simple, albeit unfortunate, case of cause and effect.

As it turns out, *I* am probably the one who needs rehabilitation.

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