

Letter from America Autumn 2016

Brexit and Donald Trump and Violence. Oh my.

The world feels unstable in new ways each day.

We may feel helpless. We may wonder if we're contributing anything worthwhile to improving the situation.

What keeps me tethered sometimes are little indicators that we (writers) are on the right track. A recent study from the New School for Social Research in New York surveyed 2000 participants and found that people who read literary fiction have an improved grasp of other people's emotions. At a time when Donald Trump has a real shot of becoming president and empathy seems to be in short supply, a study like this helps me remember why I started writing and teaching writing in the first place. As grandiose as it sounds, I thought it would make the world a better place, mainly by encouraging readers and student writers to walk in other people's shoes. I'm sure I'm not the only one who got started based on this belief. It turns out we were probably right.

There's been study after study lately about the positive effects of fiction on the brain. One in *Social Science & Medicine* analyzed more than 3500 people and found that those who read books for more than 3.5 hours per week are 23% less likely to die over a twelve-year period. It should be noted that the effect was much weaker if people read newspapers or other periodicals. The effect came from what the researchers called "deep reading," the kind we do when we pick up a novel.

Reading about these new studies on the effects of fiction has the same impact on me as reading all the new studies about the emotional intelligence of dogs. I'm looking up from the not-so-healthy-newspaper every morning and saying things like, *Aha, I knew the dog was reading my mind!* or *Aha, I knew fiction could save your life!*

Teaching is one of those jobs with a high burnout rate, though, even if we believe in what we're doing. The teaching of writing in particular is labour intensive, with all of that reading and commenting. Over the course of a long career – nearly twenty years now – I, for one, have to keep reinventing it in order to stave off boredom, listlessness, exhaustion, etc. I wonder what the studies will show one day about the effects of teaching writing on longevity.

Lately, I've found fresh energy and optimism by using teaching assistants – upper level, advanced undergraduates who co-teach the lower level undergraduate modules with me. In the US, being a TA is a big part of postgraduate study. It's considered an honor to be selected as a TA. It often comes with financial benefits that make it possible to finish a degree much more affordably, as well. As such, the undergraduates are thrilled to have such an opportunity relatively early in their academic careers.

Since teaching is new for my TAs, I'm able to experience vicariously their excitement, able to step back and think, *yes, I suppose it is amazing that this student came to your office hour*. It's easy to stop marveling at all of these little things. Moreover, as students themselves, they sometimes offer perspectives I don't have on the effectiveness of assignments. I enjoy hearing

their ideas. Another benefit is that the students in the class sometimes confide in the TAs in ways they don't in me. I learn about anxieties they're having, anxieties that they felt sheepish to reveal, which of course, offers the chance to address them and have a more successful experience overall.

The TAs offer a lot. They grade small assignments, give feedback on big assignments, and keep their own grade books. Eventually, they even lead the sessions. What they receive in return is a new sense of confidence. I've been stunned at how much a TA can transform in the course of one semester. It seems to help them believe in themselves, both as writers and as human beings.

What I get out of it, frankly, is partly companionship. Having a partner, I've found, is keeping me out of the metaphorical and spiritual darkness that sometimes comes from losing perspective on teaching and why I'm doing it. If the structure of academia allowed for it, I would team teach all the time. But my colleagues have their own modules to manage, and things are not set up for us to collaborate without taking on much heavier work loads. The TA is a person with whom to bounce ideas back and forth so that the thoughts don't get trapped in the echo chamber of my mind. It works for the same reasons that workshops work – many minds working on a problem is often better than one.

When I taught in the UK, we did double marking at the end of each term. It made for more work, but it could be sort of fun. That's probably how I got the taste for working with a partner. I loved having the opportunity to chat with a knowledgeable colleague about the writing the students had produced. Sometimes, it simply offered a chance to laugh. Here in the US, though, we work entirely alone. The autonomy is nice, but sometimes the inside of my head feels like a scene from *The Shining*. Or a Donald Trump rally. Okay, it's not that bad.

Since we do have that autonomy, though – there are no course handbooks, for example, and no one has to approve anything we do with our modules – I simply decided to try this TA thing for a while and see what happened. The TAs enroll in an Independent Study worth three credits, the same as a regular module. I have them write a reflection at the end of the semester, but otherwise the work is simply teaching, with all of the preparing and commenting that the job entails.

I would add, as a note of caution to anyone who might consider doing this, that a bad TA is worse than no TA. I had one who would show up late and then sit in class and text her friends. The tone this set was so terrible that it affected the respect that the students had for the module and, indeed, for me. I obviously spoke to her about these problems, but she simply wasn't committed, and this was evident in one way or another throughout the semester, even after she stopped texting. So I do hand pick the TAs quite carefully now, usually selecting people I've taught in the past.

So much of it is about, well, empathy. The TA has to be someone who has empathy for the students and also for me. This has to be someone who believes in fiction and its transformative power. If there are two of us leading students toward crafting a “deep reading” experience for readers, maybe that's better than one. The TA has to believe, as I do, that it's important work, worth doing.

After all, a new study published in *Political Science and Politics* reveals that readers of *Harry Potter* are more likely to dislike the Republican nominee, You-Know-Who. It surveyed 1200 people and found, in addition, that movies don't offer the same correlation as books do. "I think a lot of the identification of Trump's dominating kind of politics is something people associate with Voldemort," University of Pennsylvania Professor Diana Mutz told *TIME*. "So it makes some sense that if you have been exposed to these long series of books where he is the ultimate kind of incarnation of evil, that the characteristics that are more aggressive tactics and so forth that Trump represents are less attractive, even leaving aside how it affects your policy attitudes."

Whatever you think of the Harry Potter books, we can agree this is a win.

Thank you, fiction writers. We must keep up our wizardry.

Kathy Flann