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Final Report: Writing on Writing a Novel

About a year ago I pitched the idea to write a novel for my Experiential Learning requirement. My reasoning behind this was that if the goal of the EL credit is to gain experience that would benefit me in my future career than as an aspiring author no experience could be more beneficial than writing. I am doing a double major in SASAH and the Honours Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature. For my writing specialization I have taken a number of writing courses in my university career and while they have all helped me grow as a writer and allowed me to sharpen my talents none of these courses focused on a long term novel length project. The opportunity to start a big project in my university career was invaluable to me, and it is this experience which I will reflect on now.

This project started with a question of theme. I needed to decide what I wanted to focus on not in terms of plot, but ideals. What did I want this story to mean and where did I see it fitting into the world? I wanted my EL project to in some way be a reflection of my four years at Western within the Arts and Humanities department. I wanted this novel to reflect the current zeitgeist in which I am learning about and now creating art. For me the defining theme in my classrooms and my life in these past four years has been the concept of truth. Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in the Winter term of my first year and the blatant lies of his campaign being met with zero consequences marked a shifting paradigm of the value of fact and truth in the world. In the adolescence of our internet age the Trump election exposed the Bubble of internet communities, and the subjective nature of

truth. The aftermath of the election left the questions: does truth, objective truth, matter? Does it even exist? One of the main themes of my novel is exploring how increasingly opaque our world looks through the lens of the internet. I am also deeply interested in storytelling as a human act and so there tends to be an aspect of meta-storytelling to all my writing. In my first year of SASH we learned about Postmodernism. My novel is definitely influenced by the frame narratives, and self-referential style of postmodern fiction.

In terms of plot, the idea for this novel is one that I initially had for a third-year writing course I was in called “TV or Not to TV: Writing for the Television Industry.” The final project for that class was to come up with a television show pitch and flesh out a pitch bible. When the course ended, I found that I wasn’t quite ready yet to give up on the characters and setting I had created for this TV show. I decided to take this idea I originally had for a television show and adapt it into a novel project. I already had the characters, setting, and a good idea of the plot because of the pitch bible I had created for my previous class. What ended up being the first challenge of turning a television show idea into a novel was the problem of a narrator. Most film and television narratives have a “neutral” perspective of the camera. The camera can follow multiple characters and gives no judgement on the events of the story; it just follows the actors. While this is not always true and film and television have experimented with ideas of the unreliable narrator (*Roshmon*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*) the question of perspective is not as immediate in film as it is in novels. In novels the narrators can be first or third person. The narrator of a novel could be omniscient, or semi-omniscient, or limited. These are choices that affect the mechanics of telling your story and determine how much your characters know, how much the narrator knows, and how much the author/audience knows. (These are all very different modes of knowing in novels). For this project, with its themes of truth and fiction, the questions of what the narrator knows and whether we can trust them are thematically and structurally

intertwined. In the end I made the biggest choice that separates this novel project from the original television pitch: I created a new character with the narrator. Instead of being one of the original protagonists of the show (or all of them alternatively) the narrator is a person investigating the actions of protagonists, following the clues and events of the past to try and find some kind of truth.

Once I had decided on the themes and the story and chosen a narrator to tell them I needed to get into the plotting. The initial pitch for my television show, *The Hoax Club*, was “There are thousands of people who believe in the supernatural: in aliens, and ghosts and cryptids. For all those believers there are people photoshopping photos of UFOs, tricking out their haunted house and dressing up as Bigfoot. *The Hoax Club* follows the misadventures of five teenagers in the fictional town of Hope, Ontario as their small trick spirals into an urban legend. Faced with the expectations of their dying town, which is now facing a boom in tourism, the excitement of tourists looking to believe them, and the wrath of tourists looking to disprove them, the teenagers work to create a gripping legend all while not getting caught. To make things more complicated some members of the club aren’t so certain that the forest really is empty, and they are convinced that something dangerous– and mystical–lies in those woods.” Similar to this television show idea my novel follows five teenagers in a small Ontario town who, for reasons of their own, fake a monster sighting in their local woods.

Before I go into the structure of the novel, I’ll address the question: why did I want to write about cryptids, monsters and the people who make/find them? I have always been fascinated with ghost stories and urban legends. The effect of these stories lies in whether or not the person who hears them believes or not. They are stories whose truth are found to be subjective. There are people out there who are firm believers in the paranormal, and people out there who are sceptics. Urban legends are stories unlike most stories in that they can’t easily be categorized into fiction or nonfiction. The truth is left up to the person who hears

the story. For this reason, I think urban legends are the perfect scope to explore the blurred lines between fact and fiction. My story is meant to focus on a group of people who decide to engage in a hoax. It is meant to dismantle the possible reason why anyone would want to deceive at such a level and if there is good, evil, or something neutral in such deceptions. I hope to explore the functions of the unreliable narrator as a literary device and in a meta function hope to examine the trust we put in our storytellers.

The novel takes the events outlined in the pitch: the five teenagers faking a monster sighting and the effects this has on the town and explores them through the perspective of the outsider narrator trying to piece things together. I divided the novel into five parts: Then, Facts, Legends, Now, and Later. “Then” covers the events of Hope in 2008 when the protagonists first filmed the Dread and the video went viral. “Facts” is a section where the narrator breaks down three subsequent Dread sightings and goes over what can’t be explained about them including a string of missing women in the Hope woods. “Legends” is a section where the narrator goes over the original video and some other famous evidence of the Dread and explains how it all could have been faked. “Now” takes place in the present with the narrator going to Hope and interviewing the protagonists about what has happened to their lives after they filmed the monster and everything that happened to Hope after. Finally, “Later” takes place still in the present in the middle of the narrator's investigation into modern Hope when another woman goes missing in the woods. Throughout these five sections are teased out plot points about a secret society in Hope, the lives of the Hoax club, and the motivations/trustworthiness of the narrator.

I found one of the biggest challenges for me in writing this novel was organizing my ideas. Instead of a standard linear narrator following the points of view of one or alternating characters my novel has taken a form I can best describe as a kind of “found-footage” book. The general concept of the novel is that it reads like a conspiracy theorist board. In my past

writing practise, I have generally put some thought into characters and worldbuilding, and just let myself write following my instincts until the story ended up where it was trying to go. For this novel I had to take a different approach. The nature of this story meant that as the author I had to know where this story was going. I didn't just have to know how it all ended I had to know how we got there because the entire story is built on the narrator following those strings. The process of writing this story is more forensic investigation than committing the murder. It wasn't a process of "if this happens then this will happen and then maybe this could happen" it was "this happened, now I have to figure out what evidence of this happening would leave, and how I can use that to figure out what happened next." In this process I discovered a website called "noteboardapp" that allowed me to create digital corkboards with sticky notes and even connect these notes with arrows (my own version of a red string conspiracy board). While I struggled for a few months trying to find a way to organize my thoughts the use of this site finally gave me a way to organize the story in a way that was not only useful to me, but allowed me to almost act out the role of my narrator trying to piece the story together. I was able to create boards for each of the five parts of the story and within those boards I laid out an almost beat by beat plan for the novel. Next to the plot points I was able to add more notes giving details such as how this information was conveyed in universe (social media, an interview, video, etc), which characters know what, and make connections to other plot points.

For my deliverable I have written the first part of the novel "Then" and a prologue. As a large portion of this novel was planning and figuring out structure by the time I got to the actual writing of prose I was mostly following my beat by beat plan on noteboardapp to figure out plot, while I worked on fine tuning the voice and tone of the novel. In writing part one I have managed to grab hold of the slippery voice of the narrator and start to set up the untrustworthy and paranoid tone of the story. I have learned a lot in my experience planning

and writing this novel most notably I have gained experience in planning and plotting an intricate mystery/unreliable novel. Next steps for me will be writing first-draft prose for the remaining parts of the novel and then onto the process of editing. This has also been a learning experience for me. I'm more used to writing either essays or short stories. In these mediums the scale is small enough to finish a project within a couple of weeks and then start editing. With this project if I start editing line by line and get caught up in every detail I'll never finish. A big part of my learning experience for this project is learning that I won't write the masterpiece on the first try. I'll write the thing that will eventually become the masterpiece, but I can't expect those to be my first words. There is still a lot of work to be done on the way to a finished novel: more first draft writing, and then a lot of editing. That being said this experience has given me an incredibly valuable opportunity: the chance to start. Just because there is a lot further to go, the progress I have been able to make and the head start this project has allowed me to take in my literary career is fantastic. But that is enough writing about writing, as I've said, I have a lot more writing to experience in the future!