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## On Being a Writer: My Experience as Student Writer-in-Residence

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CEL Final Report

Dr. Barbara Bruce

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### On Being a Writer: My Experience as Student Writer-in-Residence

Claiming the title of writer is not dependent on your number of publications or academic degrees. It is simply the act of writing. This is something that I often have to remind both myself and others. The literary community is filled with gatekeeping—that to call yourself a writer you must have reached a certain level of tangible accomplishments. As a child when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I hesitated to say a writer. Perhaps this came from an ingrained sense of inferiority towards the arts; I was always told that the sciences are a more valuable and successful field to pursue. Even as I began a degree within the arts, I sometimes resisted saying that I was in creative writing. When in conversation with a stranger, I'd share that my major is English—which was half true since I'm in both programs. Yet, I'd been writing since I could hold a pencil, and I always knew it had an important place in my life—writing often felt like the guiding force of my life. Over the last few years, my accomplishments as a writer have helped me find my way and provided a confirmation of my trajectory. Finishing my time at Western as the university's Student Writer-in-Residence taught me how to celebrate being a writer and find comfort in claiming this title.

Five years ago, I moved across the country to attend Western and begin my degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. Writing had always been a prominent aspect of my life, but I didn't know much more than I loved it. In high school, I thought writing was mostly a method of self-expression, and it rarely left my journal. Since then, my writing has evolved into something I never could've imagined. At Western, I've found a community that has changed

who I am not only as a writer but also as a person. In my statement of intent when applying to Student Writer-in-Residence, I wrote,

Growing up, I often struggled to express myself, so I turned to my love of writing as an outlet. This unexpectedly brought me closer to other people and allowed me to connect with my community in a way I never thought possible. For me, writing facilitates empathy. As Ivan Coyote recently said when they visited Western, “I didn’t get into this business to not feel anything.” Writing personal narratives has become a way of feeling closer to not only myself but also others; it has allowed me to understand my surroundings and find meaning. As the Student Writer-in-Residence, my aim would be to foster a community of empathy.

Undoubtedly, my work as Student Writer-in-Residence allowed me to foster a community of empathy by sharing my writing and hearing the work of others. However, an expected outcome of this role was having more respect for myself. I began to fully appreciate my abilities as a writer and mentor.

This past year, so much has changed in my writing journey. In March 2020, I had just five publications, mainly poetry, all in local literary magazines. Today, in March 2021, I have sixteen publications in magazines from Manchester, England to Mumbai, India. I published my first piece of creative nonfiction, then two more after that, which took a lot of confidence because it’s hard to share personal writing. I received my first pay for a publication. I was shortlisted in the top 10 of 340 submissions in the National Bridge Prize in fiction and was awarded the Arts and Humanities Student Council Award for my contribution to the arts community, due greatly to my work as Student Writer-in-Residence. Just this month, my ultimate writing dream came true: being accepted to the University of Victoria’s Master’s in

Creative Writing. The program is incredibly prestigious, accepting just one person per year per genre. In the past, sometimes my accomplishments were weighed down by imposter syndrome; I can feel like I don't deserve my success. But when I received my MFA acceptance, I was confident in my abilities. I felt deserving. I believe this is greatly due to my work as Student Writer-in-Residence, which prepared me for an opportunity like this. The events and office hours I had are applicable to being a teaching assistant. Proving my commitment to the literary community is a huge asset to a master's program. The work I was able to do as Student Writer-in-Residence, the connections I made with faculty and students, and the subsequent validation of my abilities brought me a lot of confidence as a writer.

It would seem strange to discuss my role without reflecting on the impact of COVID-19. When I applied to be Student Writer-in-Residence last March, the pandemic had just begun. I had no idea that my final year at Western would take place entirely online, including all my work as Student Writer-in-Residence. Late in the summer, when the reality hit that the whole year would be online, for a while I was overcome with disappointment. This would mean no in-person events or writing workshops, no office hours in University College to meet with students and discuss their writing. However, the best part of being Student Writer-in-Residence is that the role can be shaped into anything you want it to be. Over the next month or so, I had to quickly reformat my in-person events and figure out how to host them online. This posed a lot of challenges because I wanted to make sure my initiatives were engaging and personal, which is difficult on virtual platforms. To learn to adapt, I prepared by attending virtual literary festivals like GritLit, the Festival of Literary Diversity, the Saskatchewan Writers Festival, and the Vancouver Writers Festival. I learned about which online platforms work and which are unreliable. In September, I'd intended on going class-to-class to meet students and give a

presentation about my role on campus. Instead, I adapted this into an interactive video that I sent to all first-year writing professors who posted it on their OWL sites. Instead of in-person readings, workshops, and office hours, these occurred over Zoom. Outside of my independent events, I was invited to appear as a featured reader at virtual events—my first paid appearances—with organizations like WordsFest and Poetry London. While I, of course, would have preferred the year to be in person, I still managed to foster a strong sense of community online and am proud of what I accomplished.

With the adjustment to online school, I learned several things: first, the importance of social-media marketing, promotion, and graphics, all of which I did myself. This experience made me somewhat of a social-media expert, which will certainly be useful for a future job involving marketing or graphic design. For every event and initiative, I emailed the English and Writing Studies department as well as SASAH to send email blasts to all students. I learned that attendance is a huge barrier to successful online events, so I discovered that having a pre-registration incentive boosts attendance. For my InkWell writing workshop in February, I advertised that one participant, selected through a random draw, would receive a \$50 Indigo gift card. This was a great use of my budget and helped to promote my event.

I have never thought myself to be extremely technology-savvy, but I've become well acquainted with the ins and outs of hosting Zoom meetings and webinars, and I feel well prepared to host events on the server. I had to troubleshoot a lot of issues, including the depths of the Western Spam Trap when it swallowed every pre-registrant's Zoom ID email for one of my events. I faced issues with participant Wi-Fi connections, including one of my co-facilitators getting kicked off in the middle of our presentation, which I had to instantly take over while also monitoring the waiting room and making sure they could get in the event again without

disrupting the flow. I even took on a teaching role with technology use. There was a mature student in his mid-70s wishing to attend one of my events, but he couldn't figure out how to use Zoom, so I taught him via email how to register for the event and log on so the event could be accessible for him. On the note of accessibility, I found this to be a highlight of online events. My reading with Western's Writer-in-Residence Alicia Elliott had a massive turnout, with attendees from across Canada. It was inspiring to be able to meet people beyond Western, London, and even from outside Ontario.

At the beginning of the year, I had the opportunity to interview Alicia Elliott for an article published in *Western News*. In response to a question about the driving forces behind her writing, she shared this with me: "If I share my secrets, my fears, my hopes, my shame, then maybe the reader will feel a little more comfortable sharing their secrets, fears, hopes, and shames with the people around them." This resonated with me and my place as a writer. My confidence in sharing my work continues to grow, greatly due to the reading opportunities I've had as Student Writer-in-Residence. I cherish every time someone approaches me about how my writing resonated with them or shares a similar experience they've had. Being Student Writer-in-Residence has motivated me and confirmed my passion for this industry, which I am so grateful for. It is opportunities like this that allow me to understand that sharing my stories *can* make a difference, even that they already have. Writing is what moves me, it is what always has. I thrive when I am involved in something greater than myself. My involvement as Student Writer-in-Residence has provided a validation of my place as a writer. In this moment, I am hopeful about my future. I am excited about my future. Above all, I am proud to call myself a writer.

As my time at Western comes to an end, I am left reflecting on my experience as a student—especially as a SASAH student. Last week, the graduating SASAH class gave our

experiential learning presentations to faculty, students, and community partners. Leading up to presentation day, the preparation process required me to synthesize an entire year of work into seven minutes. This required immense concision. I asked myself, what do people want to hear about my time in the position? What words can I leave with everyone? I wanted to make sure that I balanced my explanation with reflection. Since the presentations are time-limited, I wanted to keep my slides short and visually appealing. I created four content slides that I would spend about a minute and a half on each, with a brief introduction and conclusion. I preferred this approach rather than creating too many slides that I would have to speed through, or risk getting behind and running out of time and having to skip slides. I decided my first slide would be an overview of the position of Student Writer-in-Residence, for those who were not familiar with the unique role. My next slide covered the main events and workshops that I facilitated, including How to Get Published, the InkWell Writing Workshop, and An Afternoon with Alicia Elliott. I talked about the inspiration behind each event and why they were important to me, as well as the high student response. My third slide talked about some of the major opportunities I was given as Student Writer-in-Residence, from interviewing Alicia Elliott for Western News, being featured as a local opener for Poetry London, being senior editor of the WordsFest Zine, and the judge of several writing contests. These were important to me to share in addition to the events I hosted because they show how the position allowed me to get further involved off-campus, and how many opportunities there are for students to get involved outside the classroom. My final slide, fittingly titled “looking forward,” covered my plans after graduation to complete my Master of Fine Arts at the University of Victoria, as well as the exciting opportunity that the call for applications for next year’s Student Writer-in-Residence is open. I touched on how the position prepared me for my future and encouraged students to apply,

sharing that the best part of the role is that it can become anything one wants it to be. It is a very interdisciplinary position. I mentioned that, when I applied to the position last March, the pandemic had just begun, and while there was a large learning curve to online events, I was still able to create a virtual community and make connections with students. I shared the advice to not worry if you don't have a lot of publications or experience in the writing community. All that is necessary to be Student Writer-in-Residence is a love of writing and wanting to get more involved at Western. I shared my contact information and encouraged students to meet with me over Zoom to go over their statement, talk more about the position, or read over their portfolio. Even though my role is coming to an end, I genuinely care about passing on the position to another student writer and helping them succeed.

After I finished my presentation, I received several insightful questions. Notably, Patrick Mahon asked me my thoughts on the concept of pursuing your passion for arts in academia and the possibility of losing the joy in creation. This is something I hear often, especially with visual arts, and I was glad to be asked about it. I've never felt this myself, and I think this is because I am involved in the writing community, so I don't get discouraged by uninspiring assignments. Certainly, if I wasn't as involved in off-campus opportunities or extracurriculars, my joy of writing could dissipate. I can't imagine being in university and not being more involved as a student and community member. This is something great about SASAH—it prepares students to be so much more than just a number. My SASAH education has provided me with a lot of guidance for my future. SASAH gave me opportunities to get off-campus and get involved in my community. It helped me not feel lost—instead of one of 40,000 students at Western, I was part of a SASAH cohort that became a family. I lived on the SASAH floor in Ontario Hall in my first year and my cohort became incredibly close. Going through the last five years with everyone has



been really incredible. Seeing everyone from my first-year cohort graduate and go onward to amazing success already is really inspiring and a testament to the incredible students in SASAH—and the incredible opportunities SASAH has for students. Experiential learning positions prepared me for work experience because I am ready for life outside the classroom and ready to be fully engaged in my community.

Hearing the other SASAH students' experiential learning presentations last week was inspiring. I loved especially hearing from those who had an internship or position this year during the pandemic and had to learn quickly to adapt to the changing state of learning online. Many of our roles changed unexpectedly and we had to learn a lot of new skills. As Jade Rozal said, it became about "getting into your zone of discomfort." My zone of discomfort included taking on a bigger leadership role in facilitating events and workshops, as well as giving presentations like this experiential learning SASAH presentation. I enjoyed hearing about the ways students adapted to their roles during the pandemic. I particularly found Britney Forget's presentation insightful about her job at the Timmins Public Library. She talked about how libraries are so much more than a place to check out books; they are a place of warmth in winter or air conditioning in summer for those experiencing homelessness, a community center, a social place for seniors, and a place for families to gather. But with the pandemic, a lot of this changed. In Qing Xiao Cui's presentation, she shared the advice to "Be open to try something different" and "Have compassion for yourself." Both of these are important things to keep in mind as we graduate and head into the world. We all need compassion for ourselves and others, especially in the current state of the world. This past year has proved that the arts are as crucial as ever.

It wasn't until writing this paper that I remembered how I first heard about SASAH. In Grade Twelve I flew out to Ontario from British Columbia to tour the universities I was applying

to. At Western, I went to the Arts and Humanities open house and came across a booth for SASAH. The previous director, Joel Faflak, was there and started talking to me and I was immediately convinced that I wanted to apply to the program. Five years later, I am so glad I had SASAH for the opportunities to become fully engaged with communities both locally and globally. The opportunities SASAH has given me have no doubt impacted my career path. SASAH taught me to ask questions and to really think about what and why I'm learning. Through my experiential learning position as Western's Student Writer-in-Residence, I have had the unique opportunity to reflect deeply on my work. I am confident in what I want to do—in what I am already doing. I am grateful for SASAH for giving me the opportunities for reflection like this and connecting me with people who have inspired me to keep doing what I love and, ultimately, for the confirmation that the Arts and Humanities is where I belong.

## Events Facilitated:



Fig. 1 and 2: *How to Get Published*

A workshop for students at Western to learn about how to get their creative writing published. I invited previous Student Writer-in-Residence Sydney Brooman to discuss publishing full-length collections, since their first collection of short stories *The Pump* is forthcoming to be published, and I covered submitting writing in literary magazines. I decided to host this workshop because publishing isn't typically covered in writing classes, but it's something students are very interested in. I also have relevant experience as the Editor-in-Chief of the Arts and Humanities publications Semicolon and Symposium which I shared with students.



Fig. 3: *An Afternoon with Alicia Elliott*

This reading was Alicia Elliott's inaugural reading at Western, which I was honoured to host. The event took a huge amount of preparation. I created Zoom pre-registration and spent a lot of time on promotion, since I wanted a large turnout. I put out applications for student readers, which I then selected and curated their pieces for the event. I found a moderator for the event and read my own work for twenty minutes before Alicia read from her new book-in-progress.



Fig. 4: *InkWell Writing Workshop*

The event was a partnership with InkWell workshops, an organization based out of Toronto, created by and for writers with lived experience of mental illness. I had two facilitators from InkWell who led a workshop on writing about mental health. We also focused on practicing self-care when writing—something that I think is crucial, yet overlooked, especially in the university setting. We had writing prompts and opportunities for students to share their writing with the group.

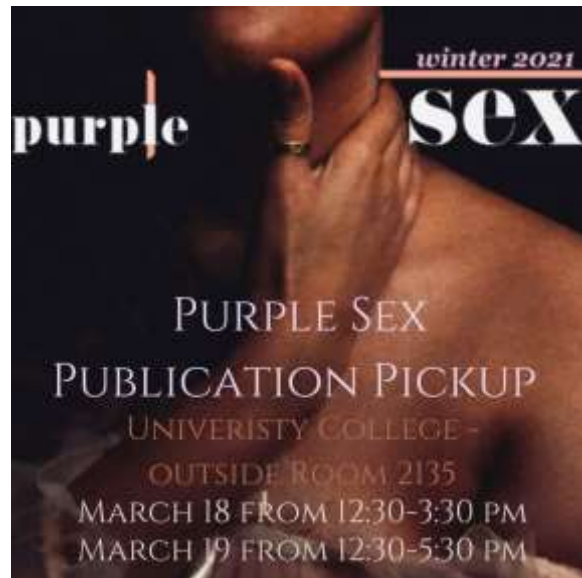


Fig. 5 and 6: *Purple Sex Publication*

In past years, Purple Sex was an in-person event featuring performances that celebrate sexuality and gender expression. It is a partnership between the Student Writer-in-Residence, the Arts and Humanities Students' Council, and the Gender Equality Network. This year, we created a publication featuring student writing and art: fiction, creative nonfiction, articles, reflections, poems, music, art, and photography. It is available both online and in print.

Opportunities:



Fig. 1:  
I created an introduction video for all first-year writing classes that was posted on their OWL sites. Since Writing 1000 is asynchronous this year, I wanted to make a personal connection with all the students and make sure they learned about the resources available to them as writers.



Fig. 2:  
I interviewed Writer-in-Residence Alicia Elliott for a published article in Western News. We talked about writing's ability to propel a shift in society, representation in literature, and practicing self-care while writing creative nonfiction.



Fig. 3:  
I was featured as the local opener in Poetry London's September reading series. I read three of my poems and this was my first paid reading. It was an incredible opportunity because I've been attending Poetry London's events since my first year at Western and then I had the chance to be a featured reader at one.

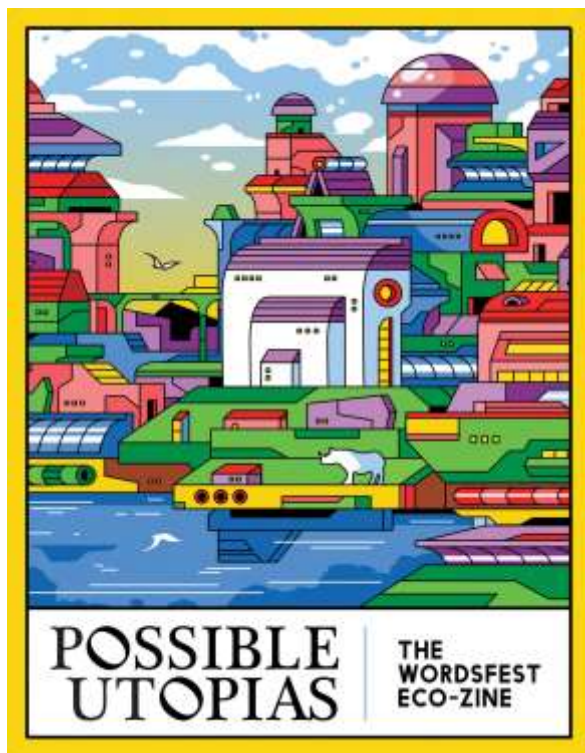


Fig. 4:

I was one of the senior editors in the 2020 WordsFest Zine. This was a fun opportunity because I was a student editor of the zine in 2016, as well as having my work published for several years of the festival zine. I was well prepared for an editorial position because I am Editor-in-Chief of the Arts and Humanities publications Semicolon and Symposium at Western.



Fig. 5:

I was the judge for the Undergraduate English Society's poetry chapbook competition. I was responsible for selecting a winning entry and two runner-up poems to win monetary prizes.

## Alice Munro Festival of the Short Story

Fig. 6:

I am currently judging the Alice Munro Festival short story competition. There are 88 entries of about 2,500 words each and the grand prize is \$1,500. It has so far been really enjoyable getting to read so many diverse stories and the judging process will certainly not be easy to decide.