

Mentors have appeared at the right time in my writer's journey to tell me the truth. VCFA will gift me with more excellent teachers and also a community to help my craft evolve, at a time when I'm primed to make the most of such an experience.

When I couldn't gain admission to Advanced Fiction Writing in the fall of 1989, my advisor, John L'Heureux, delivered unforgettable advice. My fiction, recently dubbed "sorority girl lit" by faculty gatekeepers, could perhaps squeeze past if L'Heureux pulled some strings. But then he shared something personal: he said he made strides with his writing only after leaving the Jesuits, becoming a teacher, and getting married. Live a little, he said, and see what you write.

He knew my prose wasn't ready. I wasn't ready.

So I dropped the creative writing minor and earned an English degree. I embraced teaching. I learned you can stanch blood with stage curtains when a kid slashes his hand with an antique sword during a re-enactment of the *Ramayana*. You can find a way to console students while watching the Twin Towers fall on live TV. You can survive the boxing ring of faculty politics. And in between the drama, the grading, and the late hours, if you love storytelling with your heart and soul, you rise again while nursing those charred feathers, because there's a voice saying, "Maybe you ought to write that down?"

And lo, a novel poured forth: my early-'90s version of *Sex and the City* where a callow high school teacher fumbles her way through dating. This Never-ending Novel landed before Doris Betts in 2003. She loved my first-person point of view and asked me to read aloud to our workshop. When I wrote later to ask if she would give my manuscript to her agent, something she offered during the residency, she wrote, "I would never submit anything that wasn't ready."

She was right. That novel, now shelved, had no discernible shape. VCFA faculty will likewise give me truth in manageable doses, helping me corral myriad ideas and find the

necessary “narrow convent room” Wordsworth noted when he celebrated the limitations of the sonnet form. I would be honored to work with teachers such as A.S. King and Nova Ren Suma, who know what it means to be lyrical and succinct. I loved *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* and *The Walls Around Us*. *A Room Away from the Wolves* is on my nightstand right now, and I consider *Dig* a must-read for my work in progress. I would love to be mentored by Anna Marie McLemore, since I’ve developed [classroom materials](#) for her essay, “Her Hair Was Not of Gold” from *Our Stories, Our Voices*. I’d love to study alongside students who feel the same drive and passion. I want colleagues who value compassion, rigor, honesty, and support. Everything I hear on 88 Cups of Tea or hear from my former student, Carolyn Friedman, tells me I’ll find growth, challenge, and connection at VCFA. As Virginia Woolf said: “The room is your own, but it is still bare ...With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms?”

At VCFA I’ll be the student who knows what it’s like to write 130 query letters when your agent leaves the business, while your manuscript’s on sub, and what it’s like to then sign with an agent who wants another round of edits—okay, maybe two. With experience self-publishing fiction and traditionally publishing education books, I get there’s a long game. You must rewrite the same pages countless times to get a personalized rejection from *The Missouri Review* or *Glimmer Train*. You’d better return to Flannery O’Connor’s or Charles Baxter’s words to see how it’s done. What I’ll bring to the community is passion, persistence, and support for tough moments. I can celebrate what’s working. I geek out on character motivations, third-person close versus first, and pedagogy. In fact, I love it so much, I’ve designed creative writing curriculum for gifted youth. At the [Curriculum Vault](#) or [Lesson Blueprints](#) at [teachersworkshop.org](#), you’ll see me sharing ways to get kids engaged and developing skills.

Though I started writing when I was seven, it's really been since 2003 that I've studied, revised, and collaborated with agents, editors, and co-authors in what I'd call my "personal MFA." These choices and experiences have led to awards, a grant, a great agent, six books, and better prose. I love writing about gifted, weird, wise girls who fight injustice: teen journalists outing corruption. I know I can nail a voice. My characters are young warriors who overcome sexual assault, homophobia, and racism. They speak truth to power. I can embed historical facts or explore journalism ethics without making these dull or plodding. I am the perpetual student working her way through books like *White Fragility* and *Not Light But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* as I write my new novel, or *Burning Down the House* and *From Where You Dream* while working on craft.

Where I struggle is plot: mapping a meaningful, cathartic arc, and creating an effective outline. I want to get nimble at imagining bold character choices earlier in the process and committing to these twists and turns. Right now it takes me too many rounds of revision to get the story tight. I also dive down too many rabbit holes, seeing too many thematic connections in additional characters and side plots, so I'd love to master strategies that lasso those explorations.

Here are my career goals for the next decades: write a new book every two years, meet my readers via workshops and tours, and teach at community college, where I can work with adult and high school learners. Earning an MFA will help me return to my vocation while following my forever passion, writing. While I attend a low-residency program, I'll continue as Director for Curriculum and Instruction at the Duke University Talent Identification Program. I have Fridays and weekends available for study, and every day I make morning time to write.

VCFA would help me find my people, give me structure, and let me be a scholar again. I'm ready: ready to bring gifts, and ready to receive those that only VCFA can give.