

# Impressions of a Future Dream

KELLY WALDROP

*The Publish House*

SASHA STOOD BACK AND LOOKED AT THE CANVAS with the deep satisfaction that came with knowing a piece was complete. Her shoulders dropped away from her ears, and a sigh escaped her lips just seconds before the bell rang. Hurrying to put away her materials, she tossed her brush in the jar, her palette in the sink, and snatched the scarf that held her unruly curls out of her face off of her head. The newly released tresses sprang back into place just as the door to her room burst open, letting in the cacophony of the class-change bustle that was taking place in the hallway.

Three of the five who made up her student cohort came rushing into the room, talking and laughing amongst themselves, oblivious to Sasha's continued efforts to clear away her painting material. The last two came straggling in just as the bell rang again, and the apron that had protected her usual jeans and black tee outfit was flung over her head and onto the floor behind the easel.

"Hey, Sash," greeted B'lana, a grin spreading across her face. "I thought we were starting a unit on Impressionism today. Decided to go with First Nations instead?" she asked. Her tone and eyebrows raised in exaggerated fashion leaving Sasha momentarily speechless.

Helping her teacher out, B'lana turned her head to the side and mimed a movement of her finger from the corner of her mouth and along the ridge of her high cheekbone, all the while with eyebrows raised in a good-natured, mocking expression.

Sasha swiped at her face, and her hand came back streaked with the crimson color of the final touches of paint that she had daubed on the canvas. As she turned back to her jumbled desk, she thought, "This is why we don't paint at school." She searched the desk for a rag that she could use to clean the stray paint from her face.

"Whoa," came a low (or soft?), yet clear, voice from the back of the room. Nico rarely spoke, but when they did, the others usually listened, and the quiet that settled over the room deepened as they added, "Is that us?" The group turned to see Nico pointing toward Sasha's canvas, a stunned look removing all discernable emotion from her expression.

Sasha's shoulders rose back to their usual anxiety-laden level, as mild panic spread through her chest and a blush of embarrassment rushed up her face, from chin to hairline. Wishing she

could cover the canvas, yet not willing to ruin what felt to her to be a perfect image, she instead closed her eyes in a vain attempt to block the sight of her students witnessing this moment of intense, joint vulnerability.

She felt, rather than saw, B'lana turn toward the painting. "Hey," she said, a smile clearly coloring her tone of voice, "That is us!"

Relieved that the general sentiment regarding her work seemed to be one of delight rather than the rejection she so often feared, Sasha turned toward the canvas and attempted to assess it neutrally, although the feelings she always had for her work and for her students made that neutrality all but impossible. It was a large canvas, the four feet by five feet sort she used when working on group projects. When she had arrived at school that morning, similar ones had been laying on the classroom tables, all of which had been gessoed by her the day before in preparation for beginning a new unit. She liked to have a big blank canvas on the easel at the front of the classroom as a fresh start and a beckoning offer for students to consider as they began to discuss a new style or technique. She had anticipated that the Impressionism unit would begin as all units typically did, with a joint lecture and discussion section led by her, with input from Fiona, the history teacher, and Midori, the literature teacher on her team. She would then move with the cohort to support joint sessions in Fiona's and Midori's classrooms as the afternoon progressed. For reasons she would not be able to bring into full focus for many weeks to come, that day, when she entered her classroom to have lunch and prepare for her afternoon class, the canvas that she had tucked away out of sight of her students and colleagues demanded her attention. Rather than the newly prepared blank canvas, she secured the one she had been working on and feverishly began adding the final touches she had been imagining.

The finished painting that she now confronted had actually begun to form days before she ever set pencil to canvas to sketch out the broad strokes of her idea. She, Fiona, and Midori had been chatting over a potluck dinner at Midori's house, discussing their thoughts and any changes they might like to try in the upcoming iteration of their Impressionism unit. After having cleared away the dishes, the trio grabbed their drinks and headed into the comfort of Midori's sitting room to complete their discussion and conclude the evening with a friendly chat. As Sasha rested her wine glass on the silky surface of the teak coffee table, the cover of a book caught her eye. Picking it up and carefully paging through it, she was struck by the evocative artwork that sprang from each page, bringing to life the story that was only hinted at on the book's glossy cover. The Japanese text was undecipherable to her, but the images were astounding: clean lines and exaggerated features; color combinations and textures that felt odd yet perfect allowed the emotional content of each panel to leap off of the page.

Midori followed Fiona into the room and commented, "Ah, you found my *Mechanical Glass Valley Chronicles*. I've been meaning to get your thoughts on it. Kurata Kenta is up for a Kodansha Manga Award this year, and it's very controversial. Sera Kiyomi, their illustrator, is actually a professional calligrapher, and this is their first foray into Manga. Love it or hate it, everyone has strong feelings about what they have brought to the style."

"Well, I love it. I mean, I don't know anything about Manga. My kid brother was obsessed with the show 'Haikyu!!,' but I don't think he ever read the Manga. Still, this," holding up the book, "is extraordinary. The way they capture the light but have clean lines throughout. It's like some weird impressionist, cubist mashup. Can I borrow it?"

"Sure," Midori said, nodding. "I finished it last night and put it out here to give to you."

Later that night, tucked into her bed, Sasha turned for the fourth time through the pages, soaking in every bit of color and shape, as she let this unusual style wash over her. The next

morning, she began to sketch. In each drawing, her cohort seemed to become clearer and more themselves.

Now, standing in the presence of her students, her eyes roamed over the painting that had resulted from those efforts. In the painting, the five teens were gathered in a sort of super-hero assembly grouping. Each one was moving toward the viewer—B’lana running in from the right, Kit leaping a table on the left. Samantha and Tasneem, fully kitted in their gymnastics team sweats, appeared to be flying, and in the center, purposefully striding forward while pulling off their glasses, was Nico. The colors were vibrant, the lines clear, the finishing touches Sasha had painted only moments before were glistening slightly, adding to the seeming movement of the image. It was good, She thought, *It’s good. But the light isn’t exactly right. It doesn’t have the same quality as Sera Kiyomi’s work. I would have to do some research on Japanese technique and materials.*

Sasha was pulled out of her study of the piece by the animated chatter around her. The group was talking about their various poses and purposes.

“So, Sash,” Kit prodded. “What’s the story? Where are we going? It’s to fight crime isn’t it. We are clearly off to save the day, right?”

“Um, well,” stammered Sasha. “I don’t really know. The image just sort of came to me.” She turned to rummage through her desk and pulled out her sketchbook to show them how the picture had developed.

“Really?” added Samantha. “You didn’t have a story in mind when you made this?”

“Really,” said Sasha. “I was just focused on this style of art and wanted to try to make something, and this just sort of happened.”

“That is both badass and absolutely wrong,” asserted Nico. “It is not okay that we don’t know where we are going and why,” they stated firmly, gesturing at the canvas.

“Okay,” agreed Sasha, never one to pull her students back from a creative impulse. “You tell me. What do you think is happening and why? You know what? Hold up just a minute. Take out your notebooks and each of you take a few minutes to jot down your ideas. Sit with it for a bit. Think about the characters, the composition, the emotion the image evokes. Then, we can talk about it some more.”

Fifteen minutes was about Sasha’s limit for keeping the creative engine in her mind in neutral, an exercise she always attempted when her students were brainstorming, lest she settle on a path of her own, rather than allowing them the opportunity to discover the direction they felt they should go. After 15 minutes she said, “Let’s come back together and see what we’ve got.” Standing and moving to help the small group form up into a circle for discussion she said, “Right. Who wants to start?”

Two beats later, and B’lana, as was her way, led the discussion. “Well, I kinda got nothing, to be honest. I mean, bullying is, like, low hanging fruit, ya know, but it feels like that has been done to death...”

“Yeah,” Kit chimed in. “I had the same thought. Plus, it’s not nearly as big an issue as it used to be, now that we have the student justice council and all that in place.”

“And,” Samantha added, “there’s the problem of what we would have our heroes do about it. Kicking the asses of bullies is, just, so totally counter to everything the council has taught us about what those situations really call for if you want things to get better rather than worse.”

“Okay,” Tasneem added, “This really gets at the issue I was having in trying to figure out where we should go with it. Sasha said we should think about the characters, composition, and emotion in her work, and I think I got hung up on how good it feels to see us in these heroic poses. It makes me want to think about us as ass kickers, which feels pretty solid, but if you consider the

characters, that's just not who we are. That's not to say that we wouldn't ever kick ass, but I think it has to be for defense or in the service of some critical cause or something."

"So, maybe we need to figure out their cause first before figuring out the rest," said Nico. "What is it that these characters would all have in common and that they would take so seriously as to risk life and limb for it?"

Silence fell as Nico's question raced through their minds, and Sasha studiously looked at her notebook, continuing to capture the essence of the discussion so far and allowing the group time and space to think.

"Well," B'lana began, "Wouldn't we all say family and friends are the most important things to us? Maybe there's something there."

"We're all students," Tasneem noted.

"Good ones at that," Sasha put in, nodding her approval.

"Ooh," chimed Kit, "I think maybe I got something. The family thing and the student thing ... see I was talking to one of my dads last night about social media and info channels and stuff, and he said that one of the biggest problems in society right now is misinformation, especially people who spread misinformation for personal gain, rather than exploring ideas that will benefit the community. What if our heroes are just really good students? What I mean is, what if the plots all revolve around some sort of misinformation scheme that they have to combat for the good of the community? Seems like there could be a lot of possibilities for different stories, and they would get to show off their," throwing up some air quotes and adopting a fancy-pants accent, "'critical media' skills, and occasionally kicking ass if the bad guys try to protect their scheme..." Kit's voice drifted off and was picked up by the rest of the group. They all began to add in their ideas of how they could center the work on combating misinformation and what might be at the heart of their story.

Over the din of continued conversation, Sasha barely heard a knock on the classroom door and Fiona and Midori walking in.

"You ready for us?" Midori asked, looking from Sasha's face to the happily chatting students and back.

"Change of plans," said Sasha, grinning. "How do you guys feel about pivoting to a unit on Japanese art and literature and the development of Manga?"

The next sixteen weeks seemed to fly by in a flurry of research, weekly team meetings, and energetic classroom sessions. When the time came for the final presentation of the unit, Sasha felt the same rush of pride and nerves she always felt, but she also had an added rush of anticipatory delight. She knew what they had accomplished together was extraordinary. Several canvases displayed on easels lined the walls of the atrium, and their guests—administration, parents, students, teachers—milled around looking at them. Her watch buzzed telling her it was time to begin, so she moved toward the dais while scanning the room looking for Fiona and Midori.

"Friends," she said, in her best projecting teacher voice, "Please take your seats. Our presentation will begin soon."

The crowd began to settle, each visitor first taking the booklet that had been left on their chair before sitting down. Sasha nodded to Russell, the theater arts teacher who had helped them with music and lighting, to begin the show. Stepping back into shadow, Sasha beamed as her students, to the heroic swell of music, stepped into the light and assumed their places.

"So," Sasha noted, "As you can see, though there were several bumps in the road, our unit resulted in an extraordinary learning experience, along with, if I may say, a pretty wonderful Manga draft." She held aloft a copy of the booklet they had provided to each audience member as

applause moved through the crowd, accompanied by some shouts and whistles from the cohort gathered on stage with her. “I believe, as do these students, that continuing to pursue this project through the next unit, with us,” Sasha nodded to Fiona and Midori, “and with the cooperation of their STEM team, could result in deeper learning about Japanese history and culture, and with the added challenge of producing animation, we may be able to allow the ‘Heroes of High School Nine’ to leap off of the page and onto the screen.”

Sasha stepped back to join the students as another wave of applause washed over them. Russell brought up the lights, and the neat rows of patrons began to mill again with parents coming up to hug their students and natural groups forming around the snack station to discuss the presentation. Sasha accepted another round of congratulations from a group of parents and looked up to see Kallie, the cohort’s computer science teacher, approaching. Steeling herself for the encounter, yet hoping for a good result, she was relieved to see Kallie smile.

“I guess I better start researching digital art and design, huh?” said Kallie.

“I’m so relieved you like it,” said Sasha. “Do you really think you can help them with it?”

“I’ll do my best. From what I saw tonight, it doesn’t seem likely they are going to let it go no matter what I do. Tell you what, I’ll get on my team’s Discord, and we can find a time next week for a group meeting. I’ll shoot you some options.”

“That would be great. Thanks,” said Sasha.

A few moments later, as people were beginning to leave and the hustle had died down, Kit came bounding over. “Well?!” she asked. “What did Kallie say? Did she love it? She loved it. I could tell. Is she gonna help us? Can we do it during the next STEM unit?”

“Hold on. Slow down,” Sasha crooned, stemming the tide of questions. By this time, the other four students had gathered in front of her, and she smiled to note they were standing in the same configuration as her original painting. “Yes,” she began, pausing to let the shrieking hoots die down. “Kallie is on board. We are going to have a joint team meeting next week to discuss...” Again, her sentence was interrupted, but this time it was from being enveloped in a group hug.

### Needless Exposition

Tom Poetter and I have often debated whether or not authors of artistic work (fiction, poetry, etc.) should discuss the thinking behind their creations, especially when those works are meant to stand in some way as either *currere* or another form of narrative research, with me generally taking the position that well-written pieces should not need explanation and that an author’s intention is only one small piece of the puzzle of experiencing an artistic work. However, readers who know me will be able to quickly spot that the above story of the art teacher is not really what one could call *currere*, as I am not, nor have I ever been, an art teacher. I am a curriculum theorist/developer and a fiction writer, and this story is the result of a typical fiction-writing process for me, with a dash of curriculum thinking thrown in. As with many of my stories, this one began with a dream. I woke one morning a few weeks before Tom and Morna invited me to submit a story for this issue, intrigued by my dream of an art teacher who had painted a Manga-style portrait of a group of students. In the dream, the students discovered the painting and were delighted that their teacher had depicted them as heroic. It was unclear if the small number of students and teacher comprised a class or an extracurricular group or what sort of relationship they all had with each other. That was the full extent of what I remembered from the dream.

When Tom and Morna broached the subject of writing speculative fiction that would imagine a future of education, I was reminded of the dream and began to think of it as a story prompt from which I could begin to craft a portrait of an idealized educational experience. Again, as is typical for me in my writing process, I simply sat down at my keyboard and began to describe the scene as I remembered it. Stephen King (2000), one of my favorite authors, has said that, often, his writing process is simply about creating interesting characters and then seeing what they do. I generally also write fiction this way. As I described the scene of the teacher and students and considered what it may mean for them to be the jumping-off point for imagining how education may be, to put a fine point on it, dreamed differently, it became clear that the small group of five students and teacher were indeed a whole class. What's more, it became clear that they were a cohort, a group of students that shared teachers who, likewise, formed a cohort or team who worked together to coordinate and enhance learning. In this imagined school setting, each student cohort was comprised of five students who spent time, either morning or afternoon, with a team of three Humanities teachers, followed by time with a team of three STEM teachers, or vice versa. At the end of what I called the "unit," loosely imagined as a semester or some similar period of time, the group of students and teachers would produce a presentation to share their experience with interested parties.

Fleshing out the story was a bit of a challenge for me, as I am neither an artist nor an aficionado of Manga or anime. Again, following the advice of Uncle Stevie (King, for those who are less familiar), I chose not to let my ignorance of a subject keep my characters from making an important narrative turn (King, 2000). Sasha and I had in common our relative lack of experience with Manga, so I had that going for me. Like Sasha and her students, I had to go in search of information from those who know the subject. I discussed the story with one of my adult children who has followed anime for years and who also is a fiction writer. I also returned to some essays by Kazue Harada (e.g., 2017, 2022), a Japanese language scholar who specializes in gender and sexuality representations in Manga and whose work I have had the privilege of editing, to help me get in the headspace of someone who knows that field. Though I didn't explore it in my story, as I was writing, I assumed that the students would be familiar with at least anime, as it is ubiquitous and growing in number and popularity on most currently popular streaming services. I expect that Sasha would have been able to tap their existing knowledge to guide her in providing them with direction as they explored their creative endeavors.

The curriculum thinking was less of a challenge for me. I have often said, in concert with decades of research (e.g., Ackerman, 1991; Emig, 1977; Graham et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2008), that writing is learning, that at the least, when I write, I learn about myself. In writing this essay, I learned what is important to me, as an educator. I have rooted much of my own curriculum work and research in two key areas: small group work and student-directed learning. In considering a future of education, I couldn't help but write about an idealized student-teacher ratio. When I was working as a teacher and was crafting curricula that would incorporate small groups and student-directed learning, I regularly taught 180-190 students per semester. So, Sasha's reality of teaching a single cohort of only five students felt like a dream come true. The notion of both planning cross-subject learning and tapping into the learning of experts as needed, depending on the direction students chose to take, was likewise an easy choice when crafting an idealized education and schooling experience. Similarly to Sasha, I realized that I was being pulled in an unfamiliar direction and needed to seek out information and ideas that I hadn't experienced, which highlights another key curricular idea—as a teacher, I always wanted to feel I was learning and to lean into that feeling to keep the experience fresh and my support relevant to specific students' experiences.

Teachers are the ideal models of learning for the students. Not exploring that leaves so much out of the educational experience.

So, for what it's worth, that is my understanding of what I have done with this story. I'm sure, as is always the case, there are things that readers see and understand about it that I cannot grasp without their input. Of one thing I am certain, embracing the progressive phase of *currere* (Pinar, 1975) and imagining an idealized future educational endeavor can highlight for the writer what is central to their teaching philosophy. I can't think of a better way to understand what matters most to us, as educators and life-long learners.

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