

# FROM HATE TO LOVE: MY WRITING JOURNEY

ENG W131: SECOND PLACE

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One of my strongest writing memories is in regard to my writing a piece about my mental health within the metaphor of an ocean. It stands in the forefront because it was the first time that I felt completely free writing. I sat on my bed and let my mind guide my hands on the keyboard. I let the feelings trickle onto the page as tears trickled down my face. The more I cried, the more I wrote and the better I felt. It was the first piece I wrote for myself, about my experiences, about my journey and not about the journey of fictional characters. My literacy narrative has been a long and complicated road with many bumps, detours, and barriers and it only truly started to hit a change in terrain when I was in high school in South Africa.

It was 2017 and grade 11 was upon me. I sat in English class as my teacher, Ms. Hillowitz, announced our setwork book, the book we would have to study for the next two years and would either be our making or undoing in our final exam. She presented us with a relatively small book which bore the name *Washington Square* written by Henry James. We were told it was the easier of the two options the examining body allowed schools to choose from so I was relatively happy, but I knew nothing of what was to come.

The way we studied the book was composed of three elements: reading the chapter on your own first, rereading it with the teacher in class as she made us take notes on themes, and lastly, highlighting quotes. The first element was not really necessary for success and if the teacher didn't ask you directly for plot points during the lesson, you were in the clear. The second one was more important for understanding the text, but you were dead in the water if you

didn't have your four highlighters, each color representing a different character, and making sure to highlight every quote Ms. Hillowitz told you to. Reading the book was not really the point of this setwork, the plot came entirely secondary to the notes and quotes. I cannot emphasize enough how important those quotes were. If you ever wrote an essay, whether it was an assignment where you had access to the book or an exam without it, if you did not use quotes, you were done for. So, this book was whittled down from a story by Henry James to yellow for Dr. Austin Sloper, pink for Catherine Sloper, blue for Morris Townsend, and orange for Lavinia Penniman. "Just memorize the quotes and how you can use them in an essay and you're fairly good to go," was the motto adopted by everyone in the grade who cared to pass. I cannot remember a single element of the plot, nor did I remember the characters' names until I looked them up but as soon as I saw them, I distinctly recalled the highlighter color they were.

That's what reading a book became. It was not something to be enjoyed, it was not a story to fall into, it was a set of memorized quotes and pencil notes on the page. However, one book being represented in this way would not have deprived me of the joys of reading, but two definitely would.

I was required to take a second language in school, and I took Afrikaans, my teacher being Mr. Herbst. Around the same time that I came face to face with *Washington Square* I was put in the ring to face yet another book, this time an Afrikaans book, *Hoopvol* written by Derick van der Walt. This book was taught to us as a set of facts and information straight from the text that we would be tested on and if we liked the story, that's all well and good but that doesn't matter, all that matters is being able to say exactly what was in Ben's mother's green bag he had with him on the train... three tissues, makeup, money, and ID books belonging to his mother, his sister, and himself. Those were the questions we were asked in exams. We were not asked to describe how Ben felt upon learning that his father, whom he had been

searching for throughout the entire book, was dead; we were asked what he bought at the fresh produce market.

These teachers, along with the examining body, are literacy sponsors of mine who had a major impact on my writing, reading, and myself. I was made to interpret writing as something burdening and stressful. As Deborah Brandt states, "Obligations towards one's sponsors run deep, affecting what, why, and how people write and read" (Brandt, 1998). With these two examples spanning the same two years, I'm sure it is very easy to see why I had no interest in reading books. There was no enjoyment to be found, just quotes, notes, and useless facts. This, in turn, impacted my feelings for writing. My opinion didn't matter, the analysis was already done for me and all I had to do was memorize and write exactly what I had been taught. There was nothing about the writing that I did in school that I had a love for or even a like for. I had nothing but disdain for this process of regurgitation which left me with no wiggle room to insert my thoughts, feelings, and observations.

My high school history, biology, and English teachers battled it out throughout those five years to see who could change the format of essays the most. My history teacher wanted a discursive essay written one way, my biology teacher another way, and my English teacher yet another way. If that wasn't enough, my history teacher changed his mind three years in and thus another change was made to the way I was supposed to write an essay. I felt trapped within a cage housed within another cage, a Russian nesting doll of restrictions that constantly changed depending on the situation. I groaned every time another essay was to be written, trudged through every word as pen hit paper, and sighed each time I handed one in.

It would not be an understatement to say that I despised writing during those years. I found no enjoyment in it when I was being told exactly how to write something and that the way in which I expressed my thoughts was incorrect for a particular occasion.

Writing in school gave me the impression that I was not a good writer in any context and at any essay whether it be discursive, argumentative, or even narrative essays. I was not good at discursive essays because my history teacher didn't like the way I presented Mikhail Gorbachev's policy reforms, so a bad grade was given there. I was incapable of writing argumentative essays because Ms. Hillowitz did not like the stance that I took on Washington Square as it was not the one which she had taught us, or rather forced us, to take so yet another terrible grade was given for that. I also could not write narrative essays because the stories I told were not to the liking of whichever teacher whose desk it landed on and yet another dissatisfactory grade on that paper.

I think that it hurt the most to receive bad grades for my narrative essays as I had put a part of myself into them. There was no part of me in my writing about the Russian revolution, none of me was in my papers about Catherine Sloper's struggles in *Washington Square*, but all of me was in my narrative essays. This led me to believe that I could never write creatively or write something that was meaningful to me, and I still hold onto some of those feelings to this day. I am still extremely critical of my work, even those pieces that I write of my own volition, a form of writing that I only started doing long after I left the constrictive environment of high school.

In 2018 I graduated from high school and decided to study Mathematics in university for two reasons. Firstly, I was good at it and enjoyed it, and secondly, I would not have to write essays which were the bane of my existence at that point in time.

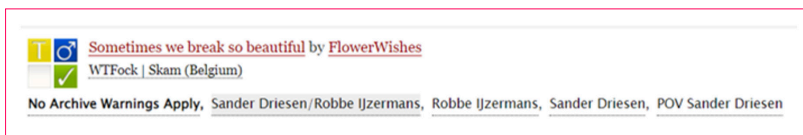
The bend in the road of my literacy past came towards the end of 2019. I had been watching a show called *SKAM Belgium* and over the course of the 10 weeks it spanned, I formed deep connections with the two main characters, Robbe, the protagonist, and Sander, his romantic interest. I was in a very dark place during that time, I felt my life had no meaning, felt like I was disconnected from everything around me,

merely existing. As the season came to a close, I felt empty once more aside from the tether that had formed between the characters and myself. I had this need to hold onto that connection and thought that maybe writing fanfiction, which was popular within the community and group I was a part of, would accomplish that. However, I did not believe myself to be creative enough to come up with entirely new stories, so I decided to build upon what the show had given me and wrote clips from the show from Sander's perspective as opposed to Robbe's.

There was a specific clip, the climax of the season, which was layered in emotions, completely raw with feelings and it had a major impact on me as it concerned the mental health of Sander following a mental breakdown he suffered. The entire clip pulled me in and I wanted to present it from the perspective of the person who needed to be reached out to, as opposed to the person reaching out. I sat in my dim room and wrote, titling it *Sometimes We Break So Beautiful*. For the first time I was writing for no other reason than I wanted to. Throughout the process of writing the clip, my words connected with the emotions of the characters. I learned how to express someone's innermost feelings, to decipher the tangle of thoughts in one's head and put them into words on a page. This was the beginning of honing my writing skills as I began to write more and more clips from the show, culminating in my attempt to turn the season into a book, a venture I am still working on.

I truly relate to Kathleen Blake Yancey's words, "Each writer is a combination of the collective set of different dimensions and traits and features that make us human" (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015).

Figure 3: *Sometimes We Break So Beautiful* AO3 Entry



The battle between wants and needs rages on within us all. I wanted to enjoy those setwork books in my own way, but I needed to study them in the way my teachers dictated. I wanted to write freely but I needed to stay within the guidelines of the rubrics. Finally, however, my wants and needs are one and the same. I can write what I want, I can express what I need to and there is no one to force my pen in their predetermined direction. There is no failure and no victory in my personal writing, there is only me and my words.

My literacy narrative has brought me to a wide variety of places. From the entrapment of high school essay writing to the world of building on other's works to finally writing about myself, a place where my writing and I live in harmony. I think that's why my strongest writing memory is of writing about myself. It's the piece of writing that touches me the most and I still go back from time to time and read it and I'm overcome with emotions as the memories of writing it are stirred up again. My path of writing will inevitable change and transform, as does everything in life, but I hope that no matter where life takes me and my writing guides me, I'll still be able to come back to that piece and to that harmonious place. ■

## REFERENCES

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