

UBC Creative Writing Information Session 2023: Career Planning

Hello, welcome. I'm Timothy Taylor. I'm one of the grad chairs here at the UBC School of Creative Writing. And I'm pleased to join you today with my colleague, Sharon McGowan.

I'm an associate professor. I teach fiction and nonfiction.

Oh, I guess it's me. Hi, I'm Sharon McGowan. My pronouns is she/her and I teach screenwriting.

I'm pleased to be the, what we'll call ourselves, the other grad co-chair. We're both chairs of the graduate program. Two co-chairs. And today in this segment of the programming, we're going to talk

to you about thinking about your career while you're in the MFA program, the ways that you can begin to build towards a career in writing, taking advantage of some of what the program has to offer.

So I'd like to start by noting that our program is a fine arts studio program, which means that it is in many respects an opportunity for you to take time and work on your own writing projects and to produce publishable work in the genre of your choice. That's very much a core part of our mission, and students often will approach the program from that perspective primarily, or originally as they think about the two-year MFA program as a chance to really park time and make progress on these types of projects and that's important. But our program is something else at the same time and together with that studio aspect of the program, the UBC School of Creative Writing offers an MFA program that is a career launch point in itself with many opportunities that are sort of woven into the fabric of the course offerings and the other offerings that are part of the program that are designed specifically to address the professional needs of a future writing practice. So we're going to do a summary of those today, talk through them,

and hopefully at the end of this short section you'll have a better appreciation of what the MFA program can be used for in addition to the writing space that it provides you, but as this sort of a career launchpad that we're referring to. So we're going to talk about the program elements that allow you to build industry connections, for example. We're going to talk about work opportunities in the program that can be used while you're studying to sort of assemble a suite of skills that are highly relevant to future work opportunities in industry. And we're also going to talk about program course offerings that are specifically addressed to the working life of writers in the various genres that we teach. Sharon?

Thanks, Timo. I'll start with talking about taking advantage, how you can take advantage of actual work opportunities that are paid while you're in the program. And these work opportunities generally give you the way that we've set them up is job experience. They give you money, they give you credits to put on your CV, and they build your confidence and your exposure to working as a writer in a number of fields. First and foremost are the teaching assistant positions. There are quite a few of those available within the program. You apply for them, but we have a lot of large enrollment classes where you would be a teaching assistant, where you would do some lecturing as needed, mostly a lot of grading and supervision of students.

You'll learn a lot of organizational skills, a lot of teaching skills, and it will prepare you really well for teaching on your own with your own courses. And then there's PRISM magazine. PRISM

International is a literary magazine published by the Creative Writing School. It's one of the oldest literary magazines in Canada. And on PRISM there are six paid part-time editorial positions.

Editor-in-chief, managing editor, prose editor, poetry editor, reviews editor, and a promotions editor. And these are 12-month positions starting in May through April to the following year.

They're competitive. You apply for them. But if you get these jobs, they're fantastic professional preparation for working in a literary magazine or an editorial position. There's also Brave New

Playwrights, which is another major pro project of the school. This is an annual play festival founded by Brian Wade, a former professor in 1986. And it's a showcases, it's a festival that showcases

short scripts written by BFA and MFA playwriting students each year. It offers two to four work-learn

positions each year, one producer and up to two associate producers, and a shorter position for a festival marketing coordinator. And these of course are subject to an annual budget. And these

positions with Brave New offer connections with Vancouver's professional playwriting and producing

community, but most importantly, they offer students the opportunity to work as part of a

festival team in which, and where they can learn how to do the creative and management involved

with producing their own plays once they graduate or even starting their own festivals. It's

absolutely invaluable work experience. And we've also got a new project started just two years ago

called the Scripted Media Career Accelerator, and there's one position in that that's paid for a

coordinator. The accelerator organizes events throughout the year to help connect students

who are writing scripted media, screenplays, television, theater pieces, new media,

connect with members of the industry, producers, agents, commissioning editors, and the coordinator

does a lot of the organizing around this and the reaching out to the industry and liaising.

So, that's another terrific paid opportunity. Timo, over to you.

Timo Yeah. So, in addition to the ones that

Sharon has mentioned, there's TA positions, there's editorial positions at PRISM,

there's the Brave New Playwrights program and the Scripted Media Career Accelerator.

We have several other work opportunities in the program that prospective students should be aware

of because these are really excellent workplace environments in which to develop skills that can

be useful to you going forward. The first of the ones that I'll mention is New Shoots. New Shoots

is a program that is led by Creative Writing students who go into Vancouver schools and

participate in Creative Writing workshops, working with teachers in those schools with students at

the junior or senior high school level. So typically there's going to be one student

coordinator position and about eight to ten students who are hired as workshop facilitators.

So the students will work with the program, match to teachers, mentored by a program coordinator and

a faculty supervisor. So you get lots of instruction and support in taking on one of these positions.

But it's just an excellent experience base for people who have an interest in carrying on with

teaching in creative writing or even other areas of writing and the arts. I should note that three

of the facilitators who are involved in this New Sheets program will also receive a small additional

honorarium to edit and curate an annual anthology of teen writing. So that's a pretty exciting

project to be involved in and contributes to a different skill set, which of course

more in line with what PRISM offers, you know, which is how to be involved in a publication,

how to coordinate the input of various writers, as well as organize a public reading that is associated with that project. So that's a really exciting one. There's also an online magazine run through the program that is called Young Adulting. It provides reviews and analysis of books for young readers. There's a paid associate editor position as well as a paid volunteer, or sorry, no there's a volunteer proofreader position. But again, these are jobs that you can take while you're an MFA student that will really put you in a position to make professional connections, get editing, direct editing experience, as well as publishing experience. This is a busy position.

Each week there are typically two reviews published in Young Adulting. There are monthly author

interviews. There is an honorarium for the associate editor to put the newsletter together

and to do the copy editing. And then of course, as I mentioned, this volunteer proofreader position

for someone who wants to gain some editing experience. And just to generally prepare

yourself for work in the magazine world, but also for mentoring and teaching. I think this is really

great hands-on experience to work with other writers in this capacity. The last one I'll

mention, a little bit different than the ones that we've spoken of so far, like other programs at the

university, we do have a student association in creative writing. It's called the Creative

Writing Student Association or the CWSA. The CWSA is an umbrella organization at the UBC School of

Creative Writing which serves to represent the needs of Creative Writing BFA and MFA students

to the Creative Writing faculty and the staff and then ultimately to the university. So the CWSA

fits in a very important spot in the overall academic governance model, helping to by electing

a chair for example and officers at the beginning of each academic year, the CWSA plugs itself into

to the key issues of concern for students

in our area of the university.

And they also organize events.

There are monthly student readings and other community oriented programs.

So this is a really interesting broad-based position and organization to get involved with and of particular use and benefit, I think, to people who see themselves participating in governance and policy initiatives going forward or who are just in general interested in engaging with their community.

I note that many writers who are into their careers, myself included, will take up a string of governance positions on a volunteer basis.

It's very much part of what a lot of people in the arts do.

You sit on boards, you help out with non-profit organizations, all to sort of pitch in to keep the community vibrant and to be involved in the artistic undertakings of other people in our fields.

So this is an exciting way to sort of set yourself on that path and get a bit of early experience with governance and policy. Sharon? Yes, thanks Timo. There's also courses that are specifically designed to train writers for professional careers within our program. Creative Writing 530 is called

Preparation for a Career and it's focused on book publishing, print, and online publication, forging those connections, you know, how to behave in the industry, going after residencies

and grants, all that kind of good stuff for building your career. And then there's Creative Writing 550, which is called Teaching Creative Writing, which is great for people wanting to pursue post-secondary teaching. It helps you learn how to set up large format lectures and how to conduct small workshops, how to handle workshop dynamics and sensitive material and that sort of thing. And then Timo, there was another course you mentioned that would be two other courses you thought that seemed to be leading directly into kind of job situations for people.

>> Timo Yeah, the two that I wanted to mention, it's relate to creative nonfiction. And I just want to quickly touch on these. All of our creative writing workshops in all genres have in mind that you would emerge with publishable work that could indeed be sold and could contribute to careers in writing, of course. So that doesn't set these two courses apart. But what does set these apart in both the case of a Creative Writing 570 is the course code at the moment, although I with a warning that that may change. But Creative Writing 570 is designed to teach popular science writing and it is a course that actually is taught in concert with PhD candidates from various scientific programs at UBC. So you'd be working with science students in developing ideas for science articles. What is notable about that course is that there is a voracious appetite in the marketplace for science writing, so students from a course like that can quickly emerge and find themselves engaged with a busy and commercially viable world of science writing. So I wanted to draw attention to that. And to a similar degree but parallel, my Any Creative Writing 505 contributes to the creation of creative non-fiction output for which there is also a wide market and into which pieces from directly from your coursework can be sold.

So just two things to keep in mind.

You can think both about the career dedicated courses as helping you in this regard, as well as some workshop courses in particular, which are oriented very much towards selling publishable work and sort of emerging yourself into a particular writing market.

So, I guess the other area we've talked a bit about work opportunities in the program, and we've talked about course-specific offerings that contribute to career growth and sort of give you tools that help you enter the workforce with greater confidence and with things to sell.

I will just draw attention here as a sort of a final component of what we're going to talk about today, to the industry connections that you can build while you're in the program by taking advantage of some of the things that the program itself offers. So this is a way of saying that the MFA program is all of the things we've mentioned. It is a studying opportunity, it's a production opportunity, it's a studio program where you emerge with finished work, it's a work opportunity as we've gone through in some detail, and of course it's a studying opportunity as we've covered in

in these courses, but in a final way,

it's also a networking opportunity.

And one of the real deliverables to our students

when they graduate is that they all typically come out

the far end of the MFA program

with a writing community in place,

which speaking from experience,

most of our instructors I think will tell you

is a really crucial part of how to be a writer in the world,

is to understand yourself as part of a community of writers.

With that in mind, I'd just like to draw your attention to some of the real crucial networking opportunities that our UBC School of Creative Writing MFA program offers by building it into the sort of fabric of what we do.

The first is the Visiting Writers program that is run at any one time by one of our faculty members.

We have a really busy program of agents, authors, editors, producers, and people working across the genres coming in to talk to us and share their work and doing so in various program settings.

By taking advantage of these, by taking those opportunities to get out and listen to people and learn from them, you also create natural opportunities to make contact with people in the work world and to begin to build your network with people that are out there and working.

This is an excellent opportunity for students and lots of our students take full advantage of it and do so to their great benefit.

Another parallel offering

would be our own Student Association Readings.

which are called by the name locution. Locution readings happen monthly, but there's often a guest

author who's brought in to participate in those readings. So again, to make yourself part of the

of the locution calendar year, to participate yourself as a reader, for example, puts you into

direct contact with guest authors that come from other parts of the country and the world,

and is another great opportunity to develop your network. I'll draw your attention to the fact that

that the UBC School of Creative Writing sponsors an event

each year at the Vancouver Writers Festival.

This too becomes, it happens every year in October

in Vancouver, typically on Granville Island,

which is not too far from the UBC campus.

So this is a great opportunity for students to go to

not only a single event sponsored by the school

as students of the school and meet other writers

and people working in the field,

but to just generally involve yourself

with the writing festival

and make yourself a part of what those festivities are all about.

Another opportunity would be offered through the Harper Collins Prize for

Fiction, which is sponsored by the UBC School of Creative Writing in connection

with the Cook-McDermott Literary Agency.

There's an event that's associated with the presentation of the award each year.

Again, an opportunity to meet agents, to meet a publisher, to talk to

editors, a really great chance to sort of get out there and get into

conversations with people who are doing the kinds of things that you yourself may well like to one

day be involved in. I think overall, I need to end by saying that there's a community building aspect

to almost everything that the program offers. You're going to graduate with friends and

colleagues and professional contacts that become your network, and these are people that will be

invaluable to you as you move forward, you know, not just from the possibility that they might

one day give you a job, but even in a softer way from the confidence that one picks up from working

with professional colleagues and the general sense of involvement and all of the associated benefits

of involvement that come with that. So, those are my comments on the ways that industry connections

can begin from within the MFA program and I really hope that one day you'll have a chance to take

advantage of some of those things yourself. Yes, and just to wrap things up, I'd like to

point you to our website where you'll see lots of details about the accomplishments of our

various alumni, many of whom have gone on to wonderful publishing careers and teaching careers,

as well as related writing work in other fields. So we also have a new page that we're building

on the website where we promote and publicize the accomplishments of our graduates as they leave the

program. So please have a look at that to see what kinds of things people are doing and

if this program is for you I hope to see your material up there soon.

