

UBC Creative Writing Information Session 2023: The Alumni Perspective - Danny Ramadan

My name is Daniel Ramadan and my pronouns are he, him and his.

I'm a Syrian-Canadian author and public speaker.

I also advocate for the rights of LGBTQ identifying refugees.

I have been writing since I don't know when and I am the winner of the Lambda Award for gay fiction just this past summer.

I saw that news, Danny. I'm very pleased for you. Congratulations on that, first of all. And thank you so much for joining us today. We're excited to chat about your experience as a participant in our program and your life as an alumni.

So let's just start at the beginning, if you don't mind.

Tell me a little bit about your decision to come join us in the program.

Of course, honestly, it was a very difficult decision, if I have to say so. I was working a full-time job in the nonprofit community, and the decision to leave my job and focus a full-time on an MFA felt quite daunting. But at the same time, it felt like it's the right thing to do for my career. I'd always been an author in the Middle East before I came here to Canada, and I wanted to be recognized for my talent, for my hard work, as well as for the messages that I wanted to deliver into the world. So I took the decision with the support of my husband to drop out of my work and to focus on the MFA. And genuinely speaking, I think it paid off. It was the right decision for me to make.

It was the right time for me to make that decision.

I just published my debut novel

maybe six months before I joined the program.

And the program really helped me focus my intention

and focus on what I wanted to do next in my career.

- Now you mentioned fiction

and you and I worked together on fiction.

So I'm familiar with that side of your writing practice.

Can you talk a bit about the full range of genres that you worked in while you were with the program?

Absolutely. So I started with fiction because that was the intention of why I joined the MFA.

I'm a fiction writer through and through, and it felt quite foreign to me to think about other

genres. However, the program required me to take multiple genres. It was part of the

program structure. So, I ventured a bit into writing scripts. I ventured into writing for

children, as well as writing non-fiction. And I couldn't be happier with that decision because

it really made it so much more approachable for me to actually do those projects in real life.

And to have projects right now, I'm a children's writer as well. I have four children books

that came out. I am finalizing my memoir, which comes out next year, and I have a TV and screen

agent as well. So, it seemed that that really opened my horizon, that requirement has really

opened my horizons to other genres. Let's talk a little bit more about that.

What are some of the surprises and discoveries that you've enjoyed as you move into these other

other genres like writing for children and writing for television and also the creative

nonfiction that you mentioned?

I was terrified of specifically nonfiction. Nonfiction for me is about the memoirs. It's about the stories of my past. It's about my perspective in the world. And as somebody who's a queer person of color with an immigration experience, it felt quite daunting to actually look into non-fiction because it had divided itself into two sections in my mind. Either the memoir, which means that I have to dig into my own traumatic past and write a book, or is it going to be essays or such? And I always felt like I had nothing much to say that is of value. But honestly, taking that class really let me write those like three essays that I really It made me feel very comfortable digging into that genre.

And one of the essays ended up the opening chapter of my memoir.

So really, it surprised me that I was able to bring that to the service,

but also was quite meaningful to be able to have that skill, to learn that skill, and to be able to use it.

And which genre did you write your thesis in?

I wrote my thesis in fiction. I wrote a novel. I worked with John Vinnia, who is one of the greatest mentors I've ever had in my life.

And I wrote a novel called The Fog horn Echoes, which just won the Lambda Award for gay fiction.

And can you tell us a bit about that process? How a novel came together for you and perhaps what you remember learning as you went through that longer process?

I think the biggest learning that I had from working with John and working on my thesis as part of my MFA was that I needed to change my perspective on writing from the way that I would write for an Arabic-speaking audience to the way that I would write for an English-speaking audience for the Canadians and the Americans and the British.

Americans and the British.

It felt like I'm just jumping genres, right?

Like I'm still writing fiction, but the Arabs

are expecting more poetry.

They want laminations on the world around them.

This is the kind of novel that we as Arabian-speaking people expect, while North American folks, they expect the action and specific way of dialogue and specific layers to the story.

And learning that, I think, helped me hone my talent and learn all of those different skills to meet the expectations of the audience here in North America.

John was extremely generous in his teachings.

We had multiple meetings through and through our relationship about the book.

Our partnership on the Faulkner Echoes lasted for over a year.

And we talked through the book in so many ways from the structure of the novel before I actually sat down to write a single word, to down to the copy editing of the book at the very end.

And it felt enriching, it felt beautiful, but most of all, it felt safe.

It felt like I'm not just writing into the ether,

that something is coming out of me
that people can look at and then judge.

Instead, I felt that there was a safety barrier,
somebody who would read the work
and then tell me if it's any good.

- What were your approaches to some of the job opportunities
available through the program
and which ones did you participate in while you were here?

- Sure, so my approach was to apply for all of them.

I really wanted to apply for every single job
that was available on campus,
mainly because I wanted every opportunity
and I wanted to take advantage of it.

My approach to the whole MFA
and specifically to the job market that was a part of it,
is that I wanted to take advantage of every second
of every minute in the day with this program.

I was one of the mentors on New Shoots,
the program that allows students to teach creative writing
at schools, at high schools for one year.

And then in the next year,

I became the supervisor of the program

for all the other students as well, which
was quite enlightening.

I really enjoyed working with my own faculty supervisor.

And I genuinely enjoyed going to schools
and teaching 17-year-olds about creative writing.

It felt like I am passing on the knowledge from my professors
down to the 17-year-olds, who were quite talented, honestly,
and very engaged.

And what about your work experience
since leaving the program?

What have you been up to?

And I wondered if you'd comment a bit on how you feel
the program prepared you for some of that.

- The program really prepared me for my career afterwards
by firstly offering me the opportunities to meet agents.

I met my agent, Rachel Atofsky at AWP,
which was supported by UBC in sending me to AWE,
my first experience there.

I also really enjoyed the ability to pick up the phone
and call my professors and ask them,

do you think that this is the right thing for me to do?

And I ended up being contracted for two books right after.

So I had the Farhoon Echoes being released

and my memoir being the second of the two.

- And can you talk,

you mentioned the meeting your agent through the program.

In a similar vein, can you talk a bit about the other aspects of your professional network that you were able to build through your participation in the program?

Since day one in my MFA, I sat on a table of five or six other students, and we became a posse of sorts.

We were hanging out together all the time, we were picking the same classes, we just felt like we are kinder spirits together, right?

And those folks are still some of my best friends.

They were invited to my wedding.

They were part of my life ever since.

I also felt a connection with my mentors in the program.

I kept in touch with multiple of my mentors,

John Vinnia being one of them.

Emily, what's her name?

- Emily Paul Weary?

- No, Leon, Annabelle.

Annabelle Leon.

Annabelle Leon, yeah.

Yeah, it was on the top of my tongue.

Sorry.

I also kept in touch with some of my mentors in the program, John Vinnia being one of them, Annabelle Lyon being another, who were my, both were my thesis supervisors.

And I kept receiving the emails from the program, which kept me in touch with the happenings at the MFA, which was quite delightful every now and then.

Now, Danny, do an imagination exercise with me. Put yourself back in time, and now that you know

what you know, having gone through the program and learned what you've learned, what advice would you

give to the younger version of you as they applied to the program, or even as they participated in the program? What sorts of things do you wish you might have been able to tell your former self?

- I think I would sit down with my former self

and I would be like, those are the two years

that are most formative in your career.

This is when you have to start those two years

with a plan on exactly how you're going to navigate

this MFA, what classes you want to learn

from what professors you will feel connected with

and what exactly are you hoping by the end

of those two years you would accomplish.

So I knew that I wanted to write my novel and,

sorry, let me repeat that.

At the end of the program, I wrote a novel

and I'm so thankful that I am, by chance,

been part of a lot of fiction classes

because that's really helped hone my talent.

I did not know that I would be so interested

in writing children's books.

I'm so thankful that I ended up in that class and it taught me a lot and I wish I knew more

back then so I can pay more attention in that class, be part of that class and include it in

my plan for those two years. Those two years were much easier than I expected them to in some

aspects and much harder in other aspects

and that's okay. I think part of the

the

first part of the first day's

juttees

was how terrified I was of taking on

this experience.

And yes, some of it was quite hard

but also some of it was quite joyful

and and I'm happy I kept record of both.

So that brings me to the end of the

questions I had prepared. Do you, is

Is there anything that you'd like to add, anything you'd like to cover that I haven't asked you about?

I am, yeah, I am very thankful for UBC, for the MFA program at UBC. I genuinely am. I felt like

it took my talent, my raw talent, which I'm very proud of, it's part of who I am, and it slowly made

it more and more honed and clear and helped me become the next version of myself as an author.

leading.