

UBC Creative Writing Information Session 2023: The Alumni Perspective - Shaelyn Johnson

Hello, my name is Shaelyn Johnston. My pronouns are she and her. I am a alumni of the
Optional

Residency MFA program. I just completed the program this past November 2022.

And I'm Timothy Taylor. I'm an associate professor with the Creative Writing program. I teach

fiction and nonfiction. I'm very pleased to be here today as the co-grad chair of the

program, talking with Shaelyn, who is one of our alumni. And we're just going to chat a bit about

her experience in the program and how it's influenced and contributed to her life as a

writer. So let's start with the beginning, if I can put it that way. And tell me a bit about

your decision to come to the program initially. Yeah, well, so I graduated from the Creative

writing BFA back in 2016 and like absolutely loved my time in the program and knew that I
wanted to

do my MFA. I wasn't 100% sure if it was going to be UBC, but I knew that at some point I was
going

to want to go back to do my MFA. So I took some time after I graduated from the BFA and I did
some

traveling and you know had some life experiences and finally felt ready to go back to school.

And throughout that time I had like toured some other programs and I found that like every
single

time that I was touring other programs I was comparing it back to my experience at UBC. And

and I just couldn't find anything that was like oh but that's going to be a better experience I

I guess just because of how much I had enjoyed my time in the program previously.

And so I applied to the program. I had done obviously the BFA experience was on campus,

but I had decided to apply for the optional residency because I was working at that point.

I was working a full-time job and I wanted to do my MFA, but you know the cost of living in a city

is expensive and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to take time away from work to do my studies

full-time. So the optional residency program just like fit for me perfectly. I could go to work

during the day and do my Monday to Friday nine to five and you know in the evenings and on the

weekends I would have time to focus on my classes. So it worked for me that way and I also knew that

that I just wanted some dedicated writing time.

I wanted some time outside of work

and everything else that was going on

to just be able to focus on my own work.

And that's why I ended up coming back to do the MFA

in the optional residency program.

- And when you came into the program,

what genres did you initially pick to work on?

- My main genre was screenwriting

and I think my second genre was nonfiction.

I can't remember if I applied with a third genre,

but those have always sort of been like the main two

that I've gravitated towards.

- And did you find that you made other genre discoveries

and courses that you took along the way,
and genres that you hadn't anticipated enjoying,
for example?

- I ended up taking a YA class,
writing for children and young adults,
and like absolutely loved that class.

And I didn't feel like I was a strong fiction writer.

So it was good to sort of like play
with those muscles a bit more.

But also what I realized is that the stories
that I was telling in screenwriting were also stories
that were geared towards like children and young adults.

So it was fun to sort of see that overlap
in different genres and different ways
of being able to tell a story,

like having one story and deciding like,

is this something that I wanna try as a novel

or is it something that I see more as like a short film

or a feature length film?

And then I also just wanted to like branch out a little bit.

So I ended up taking a poetry class,
which was like not up my alley at all,

but you always hear from other people,
like try taking a different course outside of like
what you're used to just to see what comes of it.

I still don't see myself as a poet,
but I had a lot of fun in that class,
just doing like different exercises
and stretching different creative muscles
and seeing things from different perspectives.

So I'm glad that I took that class.

- And tell me a bit about your thesis.

What did you end up,
what genre did you end up writing in
and who did you work with
and how did that whole process go from your end?

- Yeah, so my thesis was a screenplay
and it was the project that I came into the MFA with.

It was the project that I wanted to work on
and develop further.

And I had tried it out a little bit like during my classes
and sort of had something to start off with.

And then it ended up like changing
from what it was originally.

So I came in with a story that was based off
of like my own personal experiences
with the passing of my mom.

And so I decided that I wanted to put that
into a film version to tell my mom's story.

And my thesis supervisor for that was Shann Gowan,
who I had an absolutely wonderful experience with.

She was just very caring in the way that she was helping me
approach the material and work on the story
and just sort of like let me take the lead
and take my time.

And yeah, I can't thank her enough for getting me
towards the end of that thesis, because it was a process.

I don't know if I would necessarily choose
like a personal story again as like a thesis project,
but also at the same time, I feel like I couldn't imagine
working on another project for my thesis at all.

And I'm very happy that I had that space
to develop that script as my thesis project.

- Now, for some students, well, for all students,

I think the thesis really stands apart from coursework.

It's a different level of intensity.

It takes place often over quite a bit longer
a period of time.

Can you talk about the learning experience of the thesis
and maybe some of your biggest takeaways
from the process of completing
such a substantial piece of work?

- So some of the things that I took away from this project
were to take my time with it,
to know that I can approach my thesis supervisor
if I had questions or if there was things
that I was unsure about.

And also, I think one of the other things
that I took away from it is that even though
it's like your own project that you're working on
and it's this thing that you're off doing by yourself
that you're not in a classroom setting with,
that you still have this whole community
of other students who are in the same,
who are going through the same process as you
that you're able to check in with.

So it's not just me sitting in a dark room
with just my computer working all the time.

I had several friends who were doing their thesis
at the same time and we would do monthly check-ins.

We still do monthly check-ins.

We're all finished and graduated now

and we still check in once a month

to see how we're doing with our writing.

But just being able to go away and work on something

and then to come back and have my fellow classmates be like,

"Oh yeah, I'm really struggling with this."

Or like, "Hey, have you considered this idea

for your project?"

And just being able to still have that community

while having this like very personal, important project

that I'm working on was just something

that I really valued throughout that process.

Does that answer the question?

- Yeah, that's fantastic actually.

That throws some really interesting light

on the different takeaways from thesis and workshop.

Thanks for that.

Shaelyn, did you take either the 550 teaching course

or the 530 career prep class?

Were those other of those courses on radar for you?

- Yeah, I took a 550 course with Nancy Lee.

It was an online course.

And I had a lot of fun with that.

I think I had also done the instructional skills workshop,

which is also recommended if you're TAing.

And so being able to have that instructional skills workshop

and also the teaching course with Nancy,

just I think like grew my confidence like exponentially

in terms of like being able to design a curriculum

and feel more confident leading a classroom.

- That's fantastic.

Thank you for that.

What did you pursue other job opportunities

the program, TAing you mentioned. Did you do any of the others? Yeah, so I worked as a TA in

2006. I was a TA for that, and I was also a TA in the Creative Writing with an Indigenous Focus,

so that was really great just to see how like the different classes were operating, and I had a lot

of fun with that. And then I also worked as a, what was it called, a Graduate Academic Assistant,

with Maureen and Linda and that was handling the SSHRC process. So that was, I had been successful

the year that I applied for SSHRC and then so the following year I assisted Maureen and Linda

with their process through like guiding the next round of applicants to the SSHRC process. And that

was really great just to be able to like share my own experiences with the students who were going

through the process because it's very tough and complicated. And then probably my favorite role

was as the coordinator of the Scripted Media Career Accelerator. I get to work with Sharon

McGowan and Sarah Graef and Martin Kinch on that project. And that was like something new that was

starting in the program. So it was really great to be able to sort of help develop that and help it

grow. So it's designed to help students who are in scripted media within the creative writing

program get like more professional development opportunities and just help to make network

connections so that when they finish the program they can go out into the industry and not sort of

feel like they're just floating in the air. They know how to approach people within the industry,

you know how to continue on with their career. So I had a lot of fun with that and got to meet

some really great people. That actually leads directly to my next question, which is can you

talk a little bit about then the job experience that you've had since leading the program

and how the program helped prepare you for that work? Yeah, so I've continued to work,

sort of doing a similar role to my coordinator role with the Accelerator. So, I'm working at

Kabbalahna University right now and in that capacity I coordinate professional development

workshops for Indigenous filmmakers. And so it's doing a lot of the things that I was doing in my

role in the Accelerator, which is, you know, lining up guest speakers and working out, doing

like all of the admin and marketing and promotion and working with the participants. So being able

to like hone those skills within my role in the Accelerator has really helped me in my role as

coordinator at Capilano. And I've also had the opportunity to teach screenwriting workshops

through GEMS, which is a gender equity and media society in Vancouver, which is formerly Women in

Film and Television Vancouver. And so I've been able to use what I learned as a TA and in the teaching course with Nancy, I've been able to put, you know, those into practice as I've been leading these screenwriting workshops through GEMS.

Can you also talk about professional networking and how the networks that you were able to develop

while you were in the program became important to you after leaving the program?

Yeah, so I had several different opportunities for like developing professional connections and networking during my time in the program. That was of course like through my role in the accelerator, I had the opportunity to meet all of the industry guest speakers that we were bringing

So I was meeting people who worked at like Crave and CBC and, you know, being able to build those connections so that, you know, when I have my own projects ready to go, I sort of have those connections to say, hey, you know, I had the opportunity to meet you when you came to speak at UBC.

And I also got to meet alumni who are working in the industry through my role in the coordinator, as the coordinator.

And so being able to continue growing those connections has been really beneficial.

And then there's just also the connections that I made as a student in the MFA program with, you know, other people who are working within the industry now.

I had the opportunity to meet another screenwriter at the recent alumni event that we held during the summer residency.

And, you know, just got to chat with someone else during that and try and discuss some future like networking events that we want to keep going for alumni in the program.

So just like, you know, there's a whole bunch of different connections that have come through different avenues throughout my time in the program that I'm just really grateful for.

And having learned what you've learned coming through the program, having had the experience of the program, can you imagine yourself for us giving advice to the younger you?

And what are the things that you would advise the younger you with regards to the application process or how to do the degree, how to spend time in the degree?

What are some of the things that you would tell your former self?

I would say, just say yes to the opportunities.

I think that there's a lot of really great opportunities, you know, for networking and building community outside of the work that you're doing as a writer.

And I think that, you know, as writers, we just sort of only think about our own work and getting our own work done.

But sometimes we like we don't give consideration to how important community is in our work as a writer as well.

And so I would just remind myself to remember that aspect of community going into the program.

And, you know, take part in the readings, like the reading, the reading series, take part in location.

you know, even if you're not reading, go and support your fellow writers. If someone wants to do a meetup, like, you know, if it's somewhere where you live and you're able to go and you're comfortable with it, like, go and get to know your classmates outside of the classroom

so that you can continue to build those connections because after you finish the program, those connections are going to be so important to your work as a writer.

And, and I think a lot of, you know, you don't you don't just want to focus on on just the work because that's only like that's such a, it's not such a small part of the MFA, but it's just one part, and I think that that community building is just as important

as well.

well.