

UBC Creative Writing Information Session 2023: The Student Experience - Adrian Matias Bell

Hi, I'm Sharon McGowan. I'm an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing program, and I'm the co-chair of the Grad program. And today we're speaking with a current student in the MFA program, Adrian Matias Bell. Welcome.

Thank you. Hi.

Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, Adrian?

Yeah, so I'm an incoming second year in the creative writing MFA program at University of British Columbia.

I am originally from Southern California and moved to Vancouver for this program last year from the San Francisco Bay Area.

I am writing a novel for my thesis, although the genres that I applied to UBC with were poetry and songwriting.

And yeah, I don't know what else to say.

Well, maybe you could tell us a little bit about your writing experience before you decided to apply to the program.

Yeah. So I feel like I've been writing for like my entire life, like since I was like, capable of reading and writing. I feel like I've been doing it.

I went to an arts high school actually in Southern California, and I was in their like creative writing kind of magnet program. So I was in like a four year creative writing intensive as

a teenager, which was a really interesting experience, and a really good experience.

And so that was kind of how I got like more seriously interested in writing as a young person.

And then I did not study creative writing in college, but I continued to kind of do it and and explore music more.

I went to USC, so I was going to college in Los Angeles.

And then, yeah, and then I was out of college
for several years and I just realized like,
anytime I have free time, I like,
am working on writing or music and like,
that's what I always want to be doing with my time.

And so I decided that an MFA was a good idea
and it would be nice to have a couple of years
to kind of focus on that.

And it's been a really great decision.

- That's great, thank you.

What made you decide to apply to the UBC program in particular?

What was it that attracted you from your experience?

Something I really admire about this program and the whole department
is the focus on multiple genres.

Because I knew I would be applying mostly with a poetry portfolio.

That was a lot of what I had written up to that point
that I was confident in enough to use on an application.

But I had so many ideas for fiction projects I wanted to work on.
and I wanted to get more confident
and comfortable with fiction.

And I really liked that, you know,

UBC was not going to make me pick a genre
and just stick with it for the whole program.

And in fact, you know, we have to take multiple genres
and we have to, you know, share workshops
with other people who have very different genre focuses.

And I just think that's like very healthy
for my personal artistic practice.

And I also think it,

I think it just contributes to a really nice kind of atmosphere in the program,
because everyone's interdisciplinary and everyone's kind of there both to work on
the thing they're most comfortable with and to try new genres.

So, yeah, that was kind of the main pull for me.

OK, and what was the part of the application process that you remember
working on the most?

I want to say probably the, I don't remember what it's called, but like the
statement of intent, the personal statement, it was
interesting, because I felt, you know, I had been out of school
for three years. And so the last time I had applied to school was
like, I don't know, seven, six or seven years beforehand. And
so I remembered the portfolio part. And I put a lot of thought
into the portfolio. And then I remember getting to the personal
statement part and being like, Oh, I have to explain myself in

my work. I completely forgot about this. So I think that when I went through many, many iterations, I was also lucky enough to have a really close friend who was applying to different MFAs, but MFAs at exactly the same time. So there was a lot of proofreading with all of my friends, basically. But yeah, I put a lot of work into that.

Oh, yeah. And now what were, if you can recall, what were your first impressions when you arrived

of the school and the faculty and the whole experience?

I mean, I feel like this is probably influenced also by me being from the States and hearing about, because the States has many, many MFA programs. But I was I was really impressed in like in a in a positive way with actually how like relatively large the program is. It's actually like pretty, pretty big cohorts compared to other MFA's, which is because I think we combine genres.

And then but then on the other hand, we also have, I think, a lot more faculty than other programs.

And so I was just very impressed at like the number of professors we had and the number of students we had and the number of different genres also that were being taught. There's much more

going on than just like the standard fiction and poetry workshops. And also this is, I think a lot of Americans have this experience moving to Canada, but everyone's just very friendly. Everyone was

just like, you know, very warm. And also I felt that the other people in my cohort, I was like, oh, I enjoy these people. Like I actually want to be friends with them. 'Cause I do feel sometimes as a creative writer, you hear about the really like cutthroat competitive MFA environments,

which is really not something I get from UBC. And I'm very grateful for that. So, yeah.

All right. Is there anything that you wish you had been prepared for more when you arrived?

That's a really good question. I thought about this when I was reading through the questions.

I think, um, hmm, I think that the, uh, the classes, like I, on the one hand, I kind of wish I'd taken fewer classes in my first year, but on the other hand, now going into second year, I'm kind of relieved I did that because now all my classes are out of the way.

And I have like much more time to focus on my thesis in second year.

But I think that there were some cases where I just forgot how much time taking a class takes, you know, because on paper it's like, whatever, two or three hours.

But realistically, I think particularly for me, the prose workshops, probably because I'm just less used to prose, took way, way more time than I thought.

Because it's not even, you know, you go to class and then you should allot for time to write your assignments and to do any reading, and then to do the reading of what your peers have written and to write them thoughtful feedback.

And all of that stuff takes a lot of time and energy. So I think I could have done, especially the first semester, I could have done a bit better with my time management.

Because when you're out of school, you just forget that school takes a lot of time. So, yeah.

Yeah, it does. Yeah. So what was your course load exactly? Could you sort of describe how you laid out your program?

Yeah. So for fall and spring last year, I was taking three classes a semester. And then on top of that, I was TAing both semesters.

And I also work at PRISM, the literary magazine. So I had two jobs and three classes each semester. It was a lot. It was a bit much.

I probably could have easily gone down to two classes

and not felt like I was missing out on anything.

But that's also sort of, that's who I am as a person

as I think I tend to sort of over commit myself

and then walk it back.

I don't think it's a good habit, but it is the pattern.

So yeah, that's what I did.

And then by the time I finished first year,

I had knocked out six of the classes.

I did one class this summer.

I actually picked an online class,

even though I'm an on-campus student

since I can take two of those.

And so I did an online poetry workshop,

which was honestly a wonderful experience.

I really, really enjoyed that class.

So yeah, and now going into second year,

I'm obviously doing my thesis

and then I'm in like one class per semester

and I'll probably take one class next summer

and then I'm done.

So very dramatic shift in workload.

- Right, no kidding.

How did you get through it all?

Did you have any, do you have any special tips?

- I don't know.

When I say it all out loud,

I'm sort of like, I'm not really sure how I did that.

I don't know.

I use like, I have a lot of like strategies
in my life generally to sort of help me manage my time.

So like, I don't know.

I was using my calendar very strictly and yeah.

And I think also just like trying to sort of like
every week, like kind of pick like one or two classes
or jobs I had going on and like prioritize those.

I think being able to prioritize things
is extremely challenging,
but will also help you quite a lot
if you end up in that kind of time management situation.

But I think the best thing I could have done
would probably have been to take fewer classes,
but I'm also benefiting from it now.

So I don't know.

Yeah.

- That's great.

So what genres have you been working in
and have you discovered any new genres
that you're enjoying while you're in the program?

- Yeah, so I have the last year,

I took kind of a little bit of everything.

I took songwriting, creative nonfiction, fiction and poetry
and I took speculative fiction as well actually.

Yeah, and I mean, as an example,

like I really enjoyed the speculative fiction class
that was with Nalo Hopkinson.

She's amazing, I had so much fun.

And it was interesting because I took that class

'cause I heard she was a great professor,

but I really don't normally write speculative fiction at all.

My thesis is just kind of like literary fiction.

That's like kind of mostly what I read,

but I felt that taking that class was so fun

because even though it's still fiction,

it's such a different focus from literary fiction.

And so we were talking about, you know,

when you're in like a, I love literary fiction workshops,

but when you're in them, you know,

you're talking a lot about like the emotional journey

and like, you know, the whatever, the symbolism in the plot,

How do you structure the plot?

And those things are present in speculative fiction,
but there was also just much more this element of like,
we're gonna use our imaginations.

Like, you know, like what kind of world building can we do?

Like, how can we incorporate
these different technological ideas?

How do we explain it in a way that's like fun to the reader
and moves the plot along?

And it felt very like playful
in a way that I think I really needed,
especially because I'm writing a very like
emotionally heavy, like literary fiction thesis.

It was just really nice to have, yeah,
have this class that was just a much more kind of light-hearted and generative approach to
fiction.

And I think it sort of got me much more into this mode of like, "Oh, fiction's fun, and I could
play

and just write whatever I want." And I think I had been so intimidated by my thesis that I had
been

falling out of that mode. So yeah, that's kind of the main new genre that I've enjoyed.

That's great. Now, can you describe a little bit more about the work opportunities that you
mentioned?

While you've been in the program, what have been some of those and how have they worked out
for you?

Yeah. So I've really done like a lot of different work stuff with the department at this point.

And I've had good experiences with pretty much everything. I TA'd both semesters last year, like I said,

I said, because I was a first year, I was, I think I was TAing, like kind of, like more

beginner level classes for the undergrads. I really enjoyed that, actually, because I

just I think it's really, it's really kind of refreshing to work with undergrads who

are just getting started in their writing practice or like discovering a new genre,

because they're just like, they're just so excited about I don't know, like my favorite,

my very favorite thing about TAing would be the conversations I had with students, because

they just have like, they have like new perspectives on writing and like in many ways it's so the opposite of spending time in workshops with people who are like incredibly skilled and have like devoted like many years to like zeroing in on what they want to do.

And it was really cool to have sort of like both those kind of conversations about art happening in my life at the same time.

I also work for Prism.

I started as the managing editor

and I'm now the editor-in-chief.

That is like, I find an extremely rewarding job

because you're making a magazine.

Like it's just very cool to work on something

and then have the like physical print product

in your hand three or four times a year.

And that also is a, that's a work-learn position.

So it's a different category than TA ships.

But yeah, that position runs year round, basically.

And then also this past summer, I've been working with Sharita Warriner, who is a poetry professor in the department, basically helping with a project she's working on called the Provocation Collection, which is basically collaborations with visual artists for poetry props.

And it's going to be a pedagogical tool.

And so I've been creating a website for it.

That's kind of like a gallery of all the provocations.

And it'll be like an easier way for the students to access them.

So, yeah, it's interesting. I feel like I've used many different skills in all of these different work opportunities and I've really enjoyed all of them.

So, yeah.

Thank you. And do you feel like the program has contributed to the creation of like a more professional network for you?

Yeah, I would say so. Yeah, I think, you know, in the most immediate sense, like I have just met a lot of really fantastic people in my cohort.

And, you know, I said earlier, this is a this program is larger for an MFA, but I feel like in a way the sizes is just right, because it's still definitely small enough that you will know everyone in your cohort pretty well.

And yeah, and I've been able to make connections with people who I definitely would never have met, especially because I'm not from Canada.

You know, I've been able to meet all of these people from really all over the world, which is really great.

And then with the professors as well, it's the because we have so many students, but we also have so many professors, the workshop size is still quite small.

So I feel like I've been able to to build actual relationships with professors, which has been really

great.

That's great. And did you take advantage of the summer residency this year?

I actually didn't know.

Oh, OK. It sounds like you were too busy.

I was too busy, to be honest. It was funny because I was right there.

I live very close to campus, but I was like, I don't have time for this, sadly.

But I heard great things. So, yeah.

So what do you, is there anything that you wish you knew when you began the program that you'd like to share?

I think actually, yeah, I think contrary to a lot of what I've said about my own experience, my advice would be do not over exert yourself and then dial it back.

Try to like undercommit yourself at the start and know that you can always add things.

I think this is an experience that a lot of people in really any grad program have.

But like, it's just it's so exciting and it's a new environment and you're working on what you're passionate about.

I feel like it's extremely tempting to say yes to everything.

But don't do that at first.

It would be my advice, I think.

So, yeah.

Now, this is the same question, but different.

I mean, is there any other advice you'd give to your former self when you were applying to the program?

Like, is there anything?

Yeah, I think like, this is pretty broad,

but like, don't be scared.

I think a lot of people, myself included,

have like show up in an MFA or have moments in an MFA

where they just like kind of like

are at risk of developing an inferiority complex

because it feels like everyone around you has

a ton of experience and is like so

dialed into what they're doing.

And like really like no one knows

what they're doing, which is great because that's

why they're in an MFA.

I feel like it's been such a great experience for me

for a lot of reasons, but I think also because

it's this really kind of rare opportunity

to completely restructure your time as an adult

and be able to do something that is not just working

for 40 hours a week at an office job.

And so I think that it's,

this is maybe like a strange word, but in many ways,

I've had a very playful experience, which is nice.

it's creative, it's supposed to be that way. And like, you're in the MFA to try new things,

especially this one, because you can do so many different genres, to try new things and to write

new things. And you're not there really to like, you know, create the create your perfect piece of art, or, you know, immediately, like show up in the MFA and start like, looking to sell a manuscript.

I mean, people can do that. And that's, that's okay. But I Yeah, I think at least for me, it's yeah, it's playful. Everyone's trying new things and there's no reason to be scared because no one knows what they're doing and we should all try to have a good time. So, yeah.

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That's so great. Thank you so much. I think that's -- is there anything else you'd like to add that we didn't ask you or cover that you think prospective students should know, like, besides these points? >>

That's a really good question. Yeah, I guess, I mean, you know, this is almost kind of like of like a counterbalance to the thing I said about not over committing yourself right away. But like also, this is a very special opportunity.

Let's take advantage of it, you know, in a way that does not exhaust you.

And yeah, just like talk to everybody you meet and ask them what they're working on, you know, professors and students and even, you know, the undergrads you're taking.

Like just like ask everyone about their practice and like be genuinely curious about the people around you because they're really fascinating people.

And this is like such a rare opportunity.

So, yeah.

[Silence]