So You’re Thinking About Applying to Grad School in Creative Writing

Awesome. That’s great. Grad programs in CW aren’t the only way to continue developing your craft and building your community as a writer (after all, for hundreds of years writers haven’t had the opportunity to get MFAs and still managed to write brilliant work), but they can be a good opportunity to continue your development as a writer, and to be around those who care about story and thought and language and beauty, and to connect with literary opportunities and communities that have been pre-built for you.

This is a brief document for students considering grad school in CW (MA, MFA, PhD) offered by the faculty in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona. None of this is meant to be definitive advice; it’s meant as a starting point for further conversations with us. We’re all happy to be helpful throughout this often-stressful process, but we hope that this can cover some frequently asked questions and best practices for your grad school applications, so when you talk with us you will have already had this orientation.

A Brief Intro to Graduate Creative Writing Degrees

**MA programs in English (with a focus in Creative Writing):** these (typically 2-year) programs are usually a little less competitive than the best MFA programs or PhD programs, and offer some combination of creative writing and literature classes. MA programs may or may not require a thesis (typically a draft of a book-length project), and are often ideal for students who’ve recently graduated from undergraduate programs.

**MFA programs in Creative Writing:** the MFA is the traditional terminal graduate degree for creative writers. There are approximately 280 different MFA programs, and they range from low-residency programs (where you do most of your work remotely aside from a couple weeks intensive session each year) to traditional programs. Some programs are more focused on art/workshops, and some are more academic (the most academic ones usually require the GRE general or subject tests). Most MFA programs usually take 2-3 years to complete, though at least one is a one-year degree, and at least one is four years.

**PhD programs in Creative Writing / PhD programs in English with a creative dissertation:** These are highly academic programs with a significant focus on theory and literature and are designed to professionalize students for careers in academia. Very few PhD programs in English or CW accept applicants who do not already have MA or MFA degrees, so they’re best suited for those who have already done CW graduate degrees, are already publishing, and want to continue their studies, particularly with an eye toward teaching at the college level.
General advice: don’t go into debt to go to grad school in creative writing. Prioritize applications to programs that fully fund students (which often means avoiding schools in major metro areas like NY or SF unless you really want to do the NY/SF thing). The top programs support the students they accept, typically through teaching or research assistantships or fellowships.

A graduate degree in creative writing is not a conduit to a job (though it does qualify you for some and is certainly a useful credential in many fields). Taking on a lot of debt for this degree is usually unwise.

If you apply to grad school and don’t get in, or don’t get in with funding, that may mean that either you’re choosing the wrong schools (consider applying to a wider range of schools, and not just the top 5 programs in the country; or consider applying to some MA programs in addition to MFAs) or your application is not yet where it needs to be to be competitive. Most writers get better as they get older and read more deeply and widely, practice their craft more, and—simply—live more. It also helps to have more time to prepare your applications. Most writers are going to have a much stronger application to graduate school at age 27 than they will at 22. (Consider where you were just a couple years ago!) This makes a strong case for taking some time off between undergraduate and graduate study.

The parts of a typical graduate school application, in descending order of importance:

The Manuscript

- 90% of the admissions decision to most graduate programs is the manuscript, typically <15pp of poetry (no more than one poem per page) or <30pp of (double-spaced) prose. This is the thing most admissions committees read first, and the importance of a good manuscript cannot be overstated. Everything else is secondary. It should ideally show some sense of the kind of work you do as well as the kind of work you want to be doing in the program you’re applying to. So if you’re primarily interested in the novel, present an excerpt of a novel. It’s best to present yourself as honestly (but also as strongly) as possible, since admissions committees aren’t just looking for promising work: they’re really trying to determine which students are those that are the best fit for what their program does, and what their faculty and students offer. It doesn’t serve anyone to misrepresent what you want to be writing!
- Quality is the most important thing, as well as ambition and a sense of some degree of technical mastery. Focus on quality, not quantity. (Including a mediocre second piece of writing with a good first piece does not make for a better application.)
- Poets: practices vary as to whether it’s better to present cohesive sequences of poems vs a variety of different sorts of poems. Mostly, readers are looking for risk and
originality, and it’s probably best to submit work that shows the sort of work you’re most excited about writing.

- Prose writers: it can be valuable to show some range in an application, as long as you’re not sacrificing quality.
- Proofread this very closely.

**The Personal Statement**

- This is, first, a chance to demonstrate why you, specifically, are applying to this specific program.
- It’s also an opportunity to show your personality and a sense of who you are as a person and a writer. The more of you that can show through this (and through the generalities that most people start with: “I’ve always loved to write,” etc.), the better. Nerding out can be a good option if that’s how you roll.
- You certainly don’t need to name-drop specific faculty you’d want to work with (though it can sometimes be useful in framing your app and showing your work), but it’s important to talk about why you chose to pay the application fee to apply to this particular program. What do you hope to do there? What makes it seem like a good fit for you?
- Poets, especially: our faculty looks for a statement that shows that you can write fluidly (varied sentence structures, no jargon, etc), and that the candidate can identify and reflect in an engaging way on what makes their story or candidacy unique, idiosyncratic, etc. In that regard, most app readers are interested in your life experience. Generally, they like seeing that a candidate has taken some time to meet challenges and grow outside of a K-16 education structure OR that a candidate can show maturity, independence, and resiliency in some other way.
- Different programs have differing expectations as to what the personal statement should do. We’ve heard of one program’s poetry application review committee that reads the personal statement first, and values applicants who can provide some engagement with contemporary traditions in poetry or poetics. At the same program, the fiction faculty reads the personal statements only after the manuscript samples and doesn’t have any particular expectations for the statement. All to say that practices vary. Pay attention to the instructions on each application.
- Many of the most successful applicants are those who have found ways to keep their writing and reading and learning growing outside of academic structures. If you’re applying to a grad program in order to write, and you haven’t been writing on your own, then you may not be ready for the work that graduate programs often require and the opportunity that grad programs can provide.
- Proofread this very closely. Misspelling Hemingway as “Hemmingway” or Woolf as “Wolf” is a great way to signal you don’t know what you’re doing or you’re just not paying very much attention.

**Letters of Recommendation:**
• Typically you’ll need three letters of recommendation. These don’t necessarily need to all be from writers, or teachers, or teachers of writing with whom you’ve studied or worked closely. It’s best if at least one of them can speak to your work and work ethic as a student of writing, but the primary role of the LOR is to speak about your qualities as a student and a human. We’d recommend against using family members or close friends, generally speaking. You want folks who can vouch for you professionally. A LOR from a well-known writer can be useful in helping your application stand out, but a mediocre LOR from Famous Writer X Who Doesn’t Know You Well is much less helpful than a great letter from Less Well Known Teacher Y.

• If you’re applying to a program that funds students with teaching assistantships, it can be also be helpful for at least one of your recommenders to be able to speak to your potential as a teacher (based, perhaps, on presentations in class or whatever else).

• If you’re taking time off between finishing an undergraduate degree and applying to grad school (very strongly recommended), it is a good idea to keep in touch with the faculty with whom you’ve worked, both because we want to hear from you, and because it’s good to make sure that we remember you when you ask us for a letter of recommendation. So check in with us once every year or two...

• Ask for Letters of Recommendation at least a month in advance of the deadline. If your recommender says yes, usually, you’ll want to provide them a copy of your resume (especially if it’s been a while since you worked with them), a draft of your personal statement, and a draft of your manuscript sample.

• And do let your recommenders know where you’re applying, and keep them posted about the process and when you hear back from schools. (Sometimes some of us can help sing your praises through back channels: it won’t get you in, but it could help move you a little bit up on a waitlist.)

• A thank you note for doing this work is always a welcome practice.

• If your recommenders are your instructors, they can also be good resources for you as you navigate all aspects of the application and decision (hopefully) processes.

The Resume or CV
• This is one of the less important parts of your application, but it can highlight experience that may be relevant to your long-term goals re writing, publishing, arts administration, or whatever. If you’re applying to a program that has a lot of opportunity for editorial work, for instance, it’s probably helpful to have some editorial experience (that also helps to explain in your personal statement why you’re applying to this program).

The Transcript
• An unofficial copy is usually fine until you’re accepted. This isn’t a particularly important part of the application, but if your transcript shows that you have been less than a brilliant and dedicated student, then that’s something you would be wise to address in your personal statement. You want to be able to show at least that you can bring it
When you need to, or when you’re studying something that you love in a serious way.

**GRE test scores: general or subject**

- Neither the general nor the subject GRE is required for many graduate programs, but some programs do require these tests. You can sometimes get away with not taking them and still make an application to a school that requires them if you have good reasons for not taking them. Whether a program requires these test scores also tells you about how academic, generally speaking, the program is likely to be. A program that requires the GRE Subject test in Literature is likely to be more focused on the study of literature than one that does not require any test scores at all. PhD programs are almost certain to require some of these test scores.

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**Resources for MFA Applicants**

Poets & Writers (esp their fall MFA special)
AWP Listing to MFA programs
http://post-mfa.tumblr.com/
The MFA Draft Facebook Group
The MFA App Review, a group of volunteers who want to see more QTPOC writers admitted to fully-funded MFA programs, and offer personalized consultation to writers who self-identify as such

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**Some Samples of Personal Statements from MFA Applications**

*From Suyi Okungbowa’s successful application in fiction to Arizona’s MFA:*

Dear Selection Committee, I write speculative fiction about African experiences involving identity, community and belonging. I hail from Benin City—the biggest Empire in West Africa from the 1100s to the 1800s, but now a small town in south-south Nigeria, smothered by bigger post-civil-war ethnic groups. It’s impossible to be a young Bini man in 2017 and not be caught in this duality, not be burdened by the weight of a history that is, yet isn’t, mine. Through speculative fiction, I explore myself as an Other and a minority, and I explore Others and minorities the world over. I write for others like me—that they’ll look upon my work and know they are seen.

My first reason for pursuing an MFA is that I want to spend a couple of hard years working on a novel, and build my writing craft, discipline and community while at it. I’ve struggled with writing longform work for a long time, and the novel I plan to work on (which centres on an African scholar hailing from a highly traditional community in an alternate uncolonized Africa, who becomes the first of his people to journey outside his tribe to the great unknown beyond the confines of his continent)
deserves to be more than a notepad of ideas. A three-year MFA will not only give me ample time free of most distractions, but also aid me in asking better questions about my own work and performing self-assessment.

Another thing I wish to do at this MFA is dabble in as many genres as possible. There is an art to Creative Nonfiction that I’ve not quite been able to place my finger on, and within Poetry lies a number of keys to better expressivity that I’ve not quite nailed by writing fiction alone. The opportunity to study these with focus, understand the nuances of how they work individually, and learn how I can inter-borrow to enhance my expressivity is, to me, worth spending years on.

I’m first excited about the opportunity UA offers me to take creative writing craft seminars outside of my selected genre. This means I can try my hand on Poetry or Creative Nonfiction as I’ve always wished to. Also, after reading Mr & Mrs Doctor (I loved in the way it told the Nigerian immigrant story in an unusual reverse manner) I’m ecstatic about the opportunity to study under Julie Iromuanya and learn about such subtleties of craft.

What I really desire is a writing environment with order and ample time to grow my work, and a community of experienced and fellow writers to help me in this journey towards becoming a more efficient writer, as I hope I will aid them in return. Composition, in truth, is a collaborative process, and good work tends to come about as a result of writers pushing each other the way I hope my future classmates will push me during workshops.

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From Suyi Okungbowa’s successful application in fiction to Virginia Tech’s MFA:

I write speculative fiction about African experiences involving identity, community and belonging. I hail from Benin City; once the great Benin Kingdom, the largest Empire in West Africa from the 1100s to the 1800s, but now a small town in south-south Nigeria, smothered by bigger post-civil-war ethnic groups. It’s impossible to be a young Bini man living in 2017 and not be caught in this duality, not be burdened by the weight of a history that is, yet isn’t, mine. Through speculative fiction, I explore myself as an Other and a minority, and I explore Others and minorities the world over. I only began taking my writing seriously after my Bachelor’s, but I’ve always sought myself in books. Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi, in my early years, helped me visit a country before my becoming. Then came Stephen King, who embodied the struggles of deadbeats, stragglers, the forgotten of America–struggles of identity and belonging much akin to mine. Long before The Handmaid’s Tale became a post-2017-US-election hit, Margaret Atwood first planted in me the dread being nothing more than an Other. Hence my decision to write for others like me–that they’ll look upon my work and know they are seen. This is why I write and read and exist as a student of the world. I’ve decided to pursue an MFA to this effect, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, I want to spend a couple of hard years working on my novel, building my writing craft, discipline and community while at it. I’ve struggled with writing longform work for a while, and the novel I plan to work on (tentatively titled Son of the Soil, following an African scholar hailing from a highly traditional community in an alternate uncolonized Africa, who becomes the first of his people to journey outside his tribe to the great unknown beyond the confines of his continent) deserves to
be more than a notepad of ideas. This MFA will remove most distractions and keep me on track to write this book, while also offering me the opportunity to continue to grow the skills I require to deliver this project.

I also wish to dabble in as many genres as possible. There is a subtle art to Creative Nonfiction that I’ve not quite been able to place my finger on, and within Poetry lies a number of keys to better expressivity that I’ve not quite nailed by writing fiction alone. The opportunity to study these with focus, understand the nuances of how they work individually, and learn how I can borrow from them to enhance my fiction is, to me, worth spending a number of years on.

Lastly, I seek an MFA because I believe it will aid me in answering some of the questions I ask about my own work. I’ve been told the sense of place in my writing requires a bit of help; other times, my critique groups have pointed out a lack of relatability with antagonists in my stories. By learning to read critically through your program, I’ll be better equipped to perform self-assessment and fix any holes that crop up, especially after doing this over time with the work of my peers at workshops. While I did choose VTech on the recommendation of friends who’re currently enrolled there, I’m mostly glad that VTech offers a three-year program, which means I get a first year without teaching, giving me enough elbow room to navigate my new writing direction and settle into grad school life. I’m also very excited about the opportunity to work with Nikki Giovanni. She perfectly embodies not only my rising interest in poetry, but also the sweet spot where this intersects with matters of identity (race, in her instance). Lastly, a small class of seven to nine means I’m sure to get hands-on attention towards refining my craft, which is a priority for me.

Since 2016, I’ve been a part of WordsAreWork, a literary hub in Lagos that guides budding writers in the basic elements of writing fiction. With a team of literary enthusiasts, I’ve facilitated four masterclasses since, supported by not-for-profits like the Goethe Institut in Lagos. It has been less of a pedagogical experience and more of a learning adventure for me: I learn just as much as everyone else in the room, and this is what appeals to me about teaching. I mostly enjoy taking deep dives into the works of those who’ve done it well, dissecting it with students, and together engaging in stimulating discourse that brings about diversified viewpoints. This open ear and open mind is something I hope to carry into my workshops at VTech to maximise my learning opportunities in the college classroom.

What I really desire is a writing environment with order and ample time to write this novel, and a community of experienced and fellow writers to help me on this journey towards becoming a more efficient writer, as I hope I will aid them in return. Composition, in truth, is a collaborative process, and good work tends to come about as a result of writers pushing each other the way I hope my future classmates will push me during workshops.

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From Logan Phillips’s 2018 successful application to the Arizona MFA in poetry

Poetry speaks the unspeakable, convenes ears and questions perception. Arizona history is dead, insofar as history is a singular narrative pulled across a timeline, roped ankles and wrists,
stretched between horses. But there is not one story, there are many, presentes. The stories of this, my homeland, are contradictory and prismatic, actionable and galvanic, intersecting y bien cabrones. I believe poetry is the sharpest tool available to understand place, and so my purpose is to take up poetry as a hammer, not a mirror (after Brecht) and build other ways of knowing Here.

In my years since leaving Northern Arizona University, I fled the familiar. I ran to the horizons, internal and external. After years of touring and teaching and traveling, I need to return to the laboratory of language, to be surrounded by equals who will give my poems a run for their money. I return to be humbled, provoked, stretched thin. I’m involved in many projects and organizations, now I seek the opportunity to let them go, to again find focus on my first love: Poetry.

My first book, Sonoran Strange, wanders the world now, finding its own way. Strange represents my homeland as I re-encountered it after years of living abroad in Mexico. The book represents my artistic limits as I currently experience them. As always, I want to go beyond. To do so, I need the support and challenge of the MFA program at the University of Arizona. I want room to write, a faculty steeped in desert, independent study with anthropologists and historians, access to archive, and workshops where I can construct visceral poems of living story. This is the only place to do it. I am of this land and for this land—my next poems await me here. I want nothing more than to write them

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From Will Stanier’s successful application to Arizona’s MFA in poetry:

A mentor of mine has a line: “What does a word lens to objects?” That’s not a typo. Hold a word to your eye, what do you see? Bend the word, break the word. Now what do you see? Such is poetry in action, i.e., reality refracted, resulting in a different version of things. This refraction is what I seek in my writing: ways I may twist, remix, and decontextualize the familiar. I do this as resourcefully as possible, employing both imaginative lyric and found material.

My introduction to poetry came late in college and, upon graduation, I realized I had much to learn about my newfound passion. So I began a crash course in the subject. I built a reading list and discovered poets who inspire me. Poets like John Ashbery, Eileen Myles, Tomaž Šalamun, and James Tate. In their work, I recognized precedents and mutual quirks that guided my style. The more I read, the more I wrote. I edited my poems and crafted multiple drafts. In short, I made a serious habit of writing.

In concert with this, I engaged with the poetry communities around me. I did this in various ways, yet two are especially notable. First, I collaborated with a friend to host a local reading series in Athens, Georgia called Dude, Where’s My Poetry? The event became a place for artists to perform, exchange ideas, and gather inspiration. (We also produced a podcast by the same name.) Second, I served as an editing intern for The Georgia Review. This was an extraordinary opportunity. By
evaluating dozens of poetry submissions a week, I learned the details of both superb and rudimentary poetry. By contributing to weekly meetings of the assistant editors, I trained my critical eye and learned the basics of publishing.

I believe the University of Arizona offers the necessary components to improve my poetry practice; namely a community of artistic peers, a group of experienced instructors, and the infrastructure for creative production. Take, for instance, my interest in found material. A poem of mine might feature a Guinness World Records fact, a grocery receipt, a misread line from Rimbaud, and a diary entry. Combining these disparate sources requires outside intellectual stimulus – the kind I’d expect to find at an Infuse event or as a teacher for Writing the Community. My best work always results from situations where synapses fire at higher frequencies; these situations are also where I can contribute the most, whether by sharing my knowledge of D.I.Y. bookbinding or introducing people to the works of Jim Dine.

I look forward to studying at the University of Arizona, a program within an exceptional literary community. I have spoken with former students who have assured me this is a place of sincere artistic endeavors. I see this from the diverse specialties of the professors – memoirists, environmentalists, translators – and from the many journals in Tucson – Sonora Review, Diagram, The Volta. The latter is especially exciting for me, since I am eager to continue my experience in publishing. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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From Emilio Carrero’s successful MFA application to Arizona’s MFA in nonfiction:

First and foremost, I would like thank those in the Arizona Creative Writing Program for their consideration of my application. When I think about my reasons for furthering my education in writing, I am brought back to the idea of creating a particular kind of home that I’ve never had. I had a home and a family. But we were faux middle-class. Though I couldn’t give it a name as a kid, I grew up trying to reconcile the paradox of being poor while trying to live wealthy. Often I had torn or faded clothes and bugs crawling into my cereal boxes. The only solace I had was reading. Not until I started writing years later in college did I see that art was simply showing me empathy and demanding it of me in return. Now when I am in workshops, I approach it as an exercise in empathy through the elements of craft. Clarity, urgency, and self-awareness are the things I strive toward and try to find within other’s work. I think these are some of the essential, foundational parts of great writing. Art, for me, has always felt like I am building a house. So I see the workshops as opportunities to work with people who offer their art as a home and want to help other’s build one for themselves. Thank you for your time.

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From Hea-Ream Lee’s successful MFA application to Arizona’s MFA in nonfiction:

I studied biology in college and worked in research labs over summers breaks. During those hours spent digging around in the bloody abdomens of mice and watering rows and rows of genetically
identical plants, I was struck by the poetic, loaded images of biology—cells cleaving perfectly in two, a substrate sliding into the active site of an enzyme like a key in a lock, branches of a cladogram splitting and multiplying ad infinitum.

I’m intensely interested in both illustrating the many arresting images and stories I’ve found in my study of biology, and exploring the gap between science and my interpretation of it. The result is writing that exists at the juncture of technical descriptions of biological processes and lyrical, imaginative prose. I hope to continue to investigate this space through the MFA program at the University of Arizona. One of my goals for my time in the program is to use my thesis as an opportunity to complete a sustained book-length manuscript. My work consists solely of short essays, and I am looking forward to learning to write a longer piece with the guidance of mentors and the support of a workshop.

In addition to my ambition to write a longer work, my main reason for pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing is to have structured time to write. In the two years since I have entered the workforce, my writing practice has consisted mostly of stealing scraps of time on my lunch breaks and after work to write. This was thrilling but mostly unproductive. I was more successful when I began taking workshops. The regular feedback and the time pressure of deadlines allowed my work to blossom. However, I always wished I had more time to devote to writing. In this stage of my writing life, I crave the structure of an MFA program and the built-in, diverse community of writers that accompanies it.

I am especially interested in the University of Arizona’s MFA program because of its fascinating seminars and the opportunity to work with fantastic nonfiction faculty whose work I am excited by. I am eager to live in a vibrant literary city and take advantage of the on-campus and local Tucson-area opportunities for experience in publishing. Opportunities such as the Field Studies Program are extremely attractive to me as someone who is fascinated by the intersections of biology, language, and culture. I also hope to gain even more experience teaching through a Graduate Teaching Assistantship. I have cherished my experiences as a teacher and mentor to elementary, high school, and college students. The GTA will allow me to harness this passion and gain experience teaching creative writing at the university level. Finally, the University of Arizona MFA program’s focus on diversity and support of writers of color through organizations such as Many Voices is important to me. As a Korean-American writer eager to find a community of fellow writers of color, I am excited for the support and mentorship of programs such as this.

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From Emma Thomason’s successful application to Arizona’s MFA in fiction:

I once earned the title of Best American Cricket Catcher, fitting over 86 in a flat top wicker basket. Now, I write.

I write, primarily, about women. I am interested in the intersection of past and present, with a focus on the way femininity and female performance are influenced and marred by memory and experience. I like to write short stories, as they give me the opportunity to write in tightly wound
concentric circles. Which is to say, I like the cyclical nature of using repetition and flashback for emotional emphasis.

As they stand, my stories excite me. They ask me to seek out new, unexplored landscapes to exist within, to better time the ebbs and flows of their repetitions, to better develop their underlying themes, and to employ more unique experimentation, always. I am currently working on a collection of interwoven stories exploring the possibility of a collective female memory, and I am in search of the right place to complete it.

In 2017, as an intern for Omnidawn Publishing, I best liked the days when Rusty Morrison, my boss, would let me sit and thumb through the uneven piles of books on the warehouse shelves, sending me home with a handful of new chapbooks, free of charge. This is how I found an early proof of Cole Swensen’s Gave, a book that uprooted my understanding on the distinction between poetry and prose. There was an emotionally observational, and at times critical, voice driving the chapbook fearlessly forward. I studied the dangerous curves of the book, mainly to realize that the exploration of technique in genres other than fiction could greatly improve my own experimentation.

Arizona’s program encourages exactly this type of learning by advocating for the study of craft outside of one primary genre, making it ideal for a student and writer like myself. The greatest influence on my writing has not been my own experience, but my near constant consumption and discussion of contemporary American literature. In the fall of 2016, while taking my first fiction class, I found DIAGRAM scouring the internet for a bit of thrilling procrastination. It was unlike anything: instantly disrupting the ironed-in expectations I had for literature, and further, for literary journals. Attending UA would give me a place to continue to deconstruct and rebuild my own manuscript, while studying at the housing institution of a journal in full support of experimentation. I would cherish the opportunity to continue my studies in Tucson, Arizona

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From Emma Thomason’s successful application to Alabama’s MFA in fiction:

Choose Your Own Adventure: Journey Through A Statement Of Purpose

Beware and Warning!
This Statement of Purpose is different than other texts.
You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in the life of this candidate. The wrong decision could end in disaster, but don’t despair. At any time, you may go back and make another choice, alter the path of this Statement of Purpose, and change the result.

I.
You, a member of the admissions committee for the University of Alabama MFA Program, are now presented with a new adventure. Rather than taking place in a distant galaxy, or deep beneath the sea, this adventure will be set on a university campus in the city of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. At this time, you are deep in the process of sorting through the hundreds of applications to Alabama’s MFA program, and are faced with an important decision: to accept or deny the candidate Emma Thomason. Remember, the following sections may be navigated in any way that you like, though there will be occasional footnotes to help.

II.
To begin: some background. Emma Thomason is a San Francisco resident primarily interested in two things: cooking and writing. Born in a small farm town in the Northern California countryside, Emma grew up riding bikes along vacant farm lots and hitting wiffle balls off makeshift wood bats. As a child, she greatly enjoyed the books labeled “Choose Your Own Adventure,” as she liked to manipulate the end of every story she read. She liked to see the way a single shift in a story (a new element, an unexpected catastrophe, or a forced emotion) could change the outcome. Before graduating from the University of San Francisco, Emma worked as a baker, a waitress, a chemistry tutor, a part-time dog walker, a psychological study participant, and a technician at a bioanalytical laboratory. After graduating, she settled into an administrative position working directly with first and second year students at her alma mater. Once, she earned the title of Best American Cricket Catcher, fitting over 86 in a flat top wicker basket. Or so she claims.

III.

As mentioned in section 2, Emma is primarily interested in two things, but for the purpose of this adventure, it is only necessary that you learn about one. Emma is, above all else, a writer. She writes to slow the whole world down. She writes for the quiet hours: those moments of stillness when her mind becomes an easily navigated maze (with a map) rather than a sprawling racetrack with no finish line. Though she has only been writing for a few years, she is entirely dedicated to bettering her craft. She considers Alabama the perfect place to continue her studies because of their emphasis on cross genre experimentation, their rare four year degree track, and because of the subtly romantic way her grandmother always spoke about the South.

IV.

Before making a decision, you must know a few specifics: Emma writes, primarily, about women. She is interested in the intersection of past and present, focusing on the way femininity and female performance are influenced and marred by memory and experience. She likes to write short stories, as they give her the opportunity to write in tightly wound concentric circles. Which is to say, she likes the cyclical nature of using repetition and flashback for emotional emphasis. As they stand, Emma’s stories excite her. They ask her to seek out new, unexplored landscapes and worlds to exist within, to better time the ebbs and flows of their repetitions, to better develop their thematic purposes, and to employ more unique experimentation, always.

She is currently working on a collection of interwoven stories that will eventually explore the possibility of a collective female memory.

V.

As an undergrad, Emma spent seven months interning for Omnidawn Publishing in Oakland. Though her job was based in social media management and warehouse upkeep, there were days when Rusty Morrison, her boss, would let her sit and thumb through the uneven piles of books on the warehouse shelves, or send her home with a handful of new chapbooks, free of charge. This is how she found an early proof of Cole Swensen’s Gave, a book that uprooted her understanding of the distinction between poetry and prose. She studied the dangerous curves of the text, mainly to realize that the exploration of technique in genres other than fiction could greatly improve her own experimentation. She recently completed a thesis entitled “You, Wait Who? Processing Experience Through Distance: In Regards to the Second Person,” which centered on the use of the second person point of view in creative nonfiction. Though she primarily writes fiction, it is through the exploration and analysis of the second person in nonfiction that she learned how best to experiment using varying points of view in fiction.

Alabama’s MFA encourages exactly this type of learning by allowing students to enroll in classes outside of their home genre, including classes in comparative literature and linguistics, making their program ideal for a student and writer like Emma. The greatest influence on Emma’s writing has not been her own experience, but her near constant consumption and discussion of contemporary American literature. She

\[1\] If uninterested in the background information of this candidate, jump to section 3, and maybe skip section 5.
\[2\] To view another reference to the catching and releasing of crickets, see the story “Margot! Queen of Navarre” in the candidate’s sample.
\[3\] If you are interested in knowing more specifically why Emma decided to apply to Alabama, see section 5.
\[4\] This may seem like a lot to improve upon, but to Emma, these are the primary reasons she believes that an MFA is the next step. If this seems too large a list, please jump to section 6, and make your decision.
is currently reading Samantha Hunt’s *The Dark Dark*, and Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly*, but plans to revisit some of her favorite works soon.\(^5\)

VI.
There is little left to learn about Emma outside of what has been woven into this adventure. She worries that she has shared all of the wrong information. That she should have placed more emphasis on the women in her life and their varying influence, and less on the odd jobs she held between the ages of 14 and 22. Regardless, you, the reader of this Statement of Purpose and included Writing Sample, must make a decision on the status of this application. While the University of Alabama seems to Emma like the perfect place to continue her study of fiction, this decision is out of her hands. She will be patiently waiting, working, and continuing to write back in San Francisco until you are ready to end this adventure, and help her to begin her next. Thank you for your participation.

* 

You may well have more questions. Indeed the task is great in front of you. But lo, you have many resources at your fingertips, not least each other and the faculty at the U of A. So take advantage...

\(^5\) Including but not limited to: Ander Monson’s *Other Electricities*, Lorrie Moore’s *Self Help*, Lydia Davis’ *Almost No Memory*, and Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son*. 