

# We regret to inform you that your child has enrolled in a creative writing course

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## In my opinion

Once students get a fever for writing, sometimes you have to just let it run its course – and, in certain cases, it never goes away.

BY ROBERT MCGILL | NOV 13 2020

Dear parent of a university student,

You might want to sit down because I've got news you've dreaded for some time: your child has enrolled in a creative writing course.

I know it's scary. As the course's instructor, I've heard the same stories you have. On the street, they call creative writing the most potent of the humanities' gateway drugs. Students get their first hit, and before you even have time to threaten to cut them out of the will, they're writing every text message as a haiku and studying Soviet film.

Your child might have already hinted to you that creative writing was a possibility. They might have mentioned something called a "workshop." You probably laughed, because the poets and novelists whose photographs you've seen in newspapers seldom look like they know how to work much of anything, never mind a drill or power saw.

You might be angry with the university for allowing your child to take a creative writing course. You might be angry with me for teaching it. Let me assure you: in class, I do everything possible to pull back the curtain on creative writing. We talk about how hard it can be to put anything on the page without lapsing into clichés. I explain just how much there is to learn about things like form, style and genre. I tell them what a misery it can be to sit alone at a keyboard for hours, moving words around.

I say these things, but every year, students keep signing up for the course. They just seem to love writing. They seem to love it even though it involves struggle. Maybe *because* it involves struggle. They seem to relish the challenge of describing the world closely; of imagining how it could be different; of treating language as a puzzle and a game; of discovering new things about themselves. Sometimes, getting the right words in the right order feels impossible, but they seem to think that it can be important work.

I'll admit, it's pretty messed up, what creative writing can do to a student. I've watched more than a few of them fall into writing sestina after sestina or start see-sawing endlessly between satire and social realism. Once they get a fever for writing, sometimes you have to just let it run its course – and, in certain cases, it never goes away. Your child ends up sending you villanelles for your birthday. They publish stories with scenes taken from family holidays – holidays you organized! One day, they dedicate a novel to you.

And look, I know what you're thinking: if a young person wants to pull in six figures a year straight after graduation, they won't do it writing sonnets. But let me ask you: how many successful people – and you can define "successful" however you like – achieved what they did partly by using language well and telling good stories?

That's the mercenary pitch. Here's the idealistic one: by taking the course, your child might live a freer life. A preposterous claim, sure, but it does seem to me that by learning to use words and narrative in agile, inventive ways, we enlarge the boundaries of what's possible for ourselves in what we say, think and do. The philosopher Wittgenstein once wrote: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." Creative writing is about expanding those limits.

So don't stage an intervention quite yet. At some point, a few weeks into the term, you might ask your child how the course is going. Try inquiring in a friendly tone. If you're lucky, they might even share some of their work with you. If they do, and if you find that it features a protagonist with a complicated relationship to one or more parental figures, immediately step away from your child's writing and shoot me an email. I'll be happy to speak with you.

Best wishes,

Robert McGill

*Robert McGill teaches creative writing at the University of Toronto. He is the author of two novels, The Mysteries and Once We Had a Country, and two non-fiction books, The Treacherous Imagination and War Is Here.*

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1. Robbin Derry / November 18, 2020 at 13:31

I love this. Shared with select students and offspring. Thanks, Robert!

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