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17th Edition of The Laureate

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Literary Publications in a Brave New World

Jessie Fales

The Laureate has existed long before my time at Western Michigan University, and it will continue on, long after I have left this place. The magic of a literary publication such as this one lies in its existence beyond my own contribution to it. Becky Cooper first introduced me to this collection in 2009, when I was a freshman in High School; she has been the faculty editor since 2008. The 17th Edition of *The Laureate*, with me as its editor, was published in 2018, celebrating ten years with Becky at its helm.

Everything I am is because of Becky Cooper—I say this in my letter from the editor, and I will reemphasize my gratitude at any available opportunity. I knew nothing of academia or the possibilities surrounding creative writing when I met her ten years ago, as a student in her classroom. At fourteen, there was no doubt I loved art, books, and creative writing, but even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't have imagined building a life around them. Becoming a writer has fulfilled a dream I didn't know I could have, and now that I am here, about to graduate with a Bachelore of Arts degree, I feel all the magic in the world.

I am choosing to highlight Becky Cooper in this reflection, because I believe our literary world relies on its mentors to support and inspire young writers. Becky taught me to imagine a place and to make it mine. She taught me to marvel at marvelous things. She taught me to marvel at the not-so-marvelous things. She supported me throughout my angsty teenaged-poet years. She introduced me to great literature, so any time someone mentions Vonnegut, Dostoyevsky, Dickenson, Orwell, Huxley, or Atwood, I enthusiastically declare, "That story

changed my life!” and now, no one takes me seriously when I praise a literary work. I love it all. Declaring my life as changed is no hyperbole. It’s *Gilmore Girls’* Paris Geller, quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson, who really stays with me: “I cannot remember the books I’ve read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so, they have made me.”

Who would I have been, without the books that have made me? Everything from *Goodnight Moon* to *Pride and Prejudice* has contributed to my journey of becoming myself, and therefore, I challenge those who argue I speak in hyperbole when I speak about literature. The best and worst moments of my life are preserved in my literary memories. I read *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* the week it was released, while backpacking in northern Michigan. My copy of *Dandelion Wine* smells like sunscreen and I lost its cover while kayaking on a mountain lake in Glacier National Park. I bought *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* at the Barnes and Noble attached to the Mayo Clinic, and I read Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild* while healing in Tucson, Arizona. I say all of this in order to honor the importance of reading and writing to the human mind and soul.

In 2013, four of my pieces were published in *The Laureate’s* 12th edition. At the time, I was only a senior in high school. The editor, Andrea, made me feel as though I had won a Pulitzer Prize: she announced to the launch’s audience that I was only in high school, and she revealed that I had more work accepted than any undergrad. Her praise mattered more than I can say. Before the 2013 launch, I remember nervously emailing her and asking for help choosing a title, and I saved her response after all these years: “I’m reluctant to suggest anything because the last thing that I want to do is push my voice into your work.” Until that moment, I had never understood my work as my own. My only experience with writing

involved academic projects, almost all of which were graded. Reconceptualizing writing as an art, and art as a personal and spiritual experience, has fundamentally altered the course of my life. It broadened the possibilities of my relationship to the literary world, and it allowed me to claim freedom and agency over my writing. Everything I write is by choice—even if I accidentally make typos or grammatical mistakes, I *choose* to correct them. I remember feeling completely embarrassed when Andrea pointed out that my line, “Because everything that is bright and higher than them” was grammatically incorrect. She said, “It should be ‘they’. Was that intentional or can I change it?” Flash forward six years and I’m here to point out that the period after “they” should go inside the quotation marks. I do not point this out to shame a previous editor—it’s such a minor thing! I point this out to show the beauty of growth under the care, supervision, and support of a solid literary community. My community helped me grow from a timid and terrified creative teenager into a daring creative writer.

Now, it is my turn to mentor and encourage new writers. Before taking on the role of editor in chief, I revered *The Laureate* as something hallowed and untouchable. If Becky had not encouraged me to submit in 2013, I wouldn’t have. I did not submit to any contests or publications between 2013 and 2018. I did not lack in talent or motivation, but I did not believe in myself or my writing as I ought to have done—and so, being born from this lack of confidence and then becoming an editor felt unbelievably surreal. I am acutely aware of my own history as an artist and as a writer and reflecting on my insecurities has made me a stronger editor.

I thoughtlessly assumed that the actual act of editing *The Laureate* would be the most difficult part of the project. Not so! I found it most difficult to persuade artists to submit their

work. Some of the strongest pieces published in the 17th Edition are pieces I chased down. I paraded through Brown's hallways, caught people between classes, and begged them to send me their work. More often than not, students didn't think their work was worthy of publication. I sent personal invitations to art students, I stopped creative writers after workshops, and I asked my graduate student friends to encourage their first-year students to submit. And of course, I sent an email out to high school students who were enrolled in WMU courses.

The submission process, more than anything, convinced me that young artists need serious help and support. The imposter syndrome I felt for years as a writer is not a unique experience—almost every artist I know feels their art is invalid, and the imposter syndrome never really goes away. Even I, after this huge literary experience, struggle to value my own work. Writing this reflection has taken almost a year, mostly because I felt I had nothing valuable to say.

In an age of social media, particularly Snapchat, experience teaches us that words have little to no meaning. If we send a text, it disappears after it's read. If we send a photo, it appears only for a few seconds. When we post something on Facebook or Twitter, we know we have the power to delete it at any time. When we share our art on the internet, we can remove it and pretend it never existed, especially if we feel no one likes it. Art is fleeting. Besides, the art that does achieve wide popularity rarely reflects artistic genius. Consequently, many students choose to imitate crafts they find on Pinterest or poems they see on Instagram, emulating what is popular rather than inspiring. I do not say this to disparage any particular genre of art, but to point out the changes in popular artistic culture.

I believe the changing artistic ethos poses new challenges to literary publications, and *The Laureate* is no exception. The journal's unalterable nature provides a unique experience for writers and artists who have never published their work in a material way. They say art is never finished, only abandoned—does this make our publication a collection of abandoned work? Even after tedious review of the selected works—including my own—I sometimes wish I had made changes or different suggestions. Alas! The thing is printed and published. What's done is done. This finality creates a sort of anxiety for all involved. Once we send the manuscript to the design team, its existence is out of our hands. It really is rather terrifying. Or maybe it's riveting. The stakes are higher because the works we surrender to the page become immortal.

My reflection on *The Laureate* is unique because of the time span it encapsulates. I was seventeen when I first saw what *The Laureate* had to offer as a platform for WMU's literary community. It seemed magical and exciting—the room was packed, and everyone seemed engaged. Last year, I was determined to restore that sense of magic while I was editor, and I'm not sure I succeeded. Now, as I've followed the efforts of my successor, Hannah Ryder, and witnessed her 2019 launch, I feel inclined to conclude that our artistic world is changing. Eight artists attended this year's reading (I was one of them). The room felt quiet and empty. I do not say this to minimize Hannah's project—her collection is stellar—but to illustrate the chronic disenchantment among literary communities. I could also point to the public MFA reading held last week—the audience only comprised of performing artists, a professor, and a few friends. Some professors encourage student engagement by promising extra credit to those who attend readings. The Gwen Frostic series, through the English department, almost always begs for an

audience. The local bookstore hosts writers from out of town, and sometimes there will only be a few occupied chairs.

I do not know where this leaves us. I cannot say exactly how or why the literary world is changing, though I feel it in my bones. Such investigation feels beyond the scope of this reflection, but wondering at the state of our artistic world serves this reflection far more than using it as a platform to pretend to marvel at my project's success. Even though I loved working as Editor in Chief, and despite how much I value this opportunity, I believe what I've learned here extends far beyond this small WMU publication. And so, I suppose I must circle back to Becky Cooper. Becky created a door through which I could enter the literary world, and by doing so she altered the course of my life. Graduation is less than two weeks away, and my whole life has led to this milestone. Soon, I'll have to work towards something else—a new goal. Of course, I must follow in Becky's footsteps. The world needs teachers, artists, mentors, and friends to open doors for young people, encouraging them to step over the threshold into a world that is magical, creative, and good.