

Julia Tanner

### Reflections from a Student Author

When an artist decides to start the task of creating a piece of art millions of thoughts go through her mind. For me, for my art form: writing, the main thoughts centered around am I crazy to try an attempt this? What college student in her last year attempts to write a novel? I knew the moment I was accepted into the Lee's Honor College at Western Michigan University that I wanted my honors thesis to revolve around my writing. It took a few years before I fully realized what I was meant to write. I first thought maybe poetry, or a play. Then a website and blog I follow called National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWrMo, gave me my final direction. I would write a novel in a month. Across the world writers and editors participate in this program to come together in a safe environment and dedicate a whole month, November, to writing a novel.

For my novel I am calling it *Whiskey Hotel*. My novel is using characters that I created while overseas with Richard, during the Prague Summer Program. I wrote about Faye and Drew mostly in short story format and never in novel form until now. The setting in *Whiskey Hotel* is mostly in Marshal, Michigan and surrounding cities, like Battle Creek, Michigan, and Kalamazoo, Michigan. I choose to make my novel a novel of place because of the unique histories these places represent to me on a personal level and also because to me they are more than cities they are lifeways. I grew up in a part of Battle Creek that was ten minutes from Marshal and now I live in Kalamazoo and have for the past three years. I believe that I would be able to write my truth of these three cities in a way that is unique to my own story.

The fact is that my thesis is only the first rough draft of my novel and it clocks in over 70,000 words. Now months outside of the 'finished' product I wonder what it took for me to write this novel. What were the real pains of the writing process and what did I learn about

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myself in the process? For *Whiskey Hotel* the idea of the story came of course from places, but it is also a very personal novel verging on touching the memoir genre. The courage it took for me to write about my childhood traumas, even in a fictional setting, taught me how writing about the truth and about what matters to me is a form a therapy. Whether or not *Whiskey Hotel* is a fully interesting rough draft does not matter rather what I learned from writing it does.

I focus on my novel in making characters intrinsically Michigander in nature. What does being a Michigander mean to me? Well, it depends on the part of Michigan a person identifies with, and for the area I am writing about it is the part of Michigan that values farming but also values the city life. Battle Creek is two hours from bustling Grand Rapids and Lansing but still surrounded by corn fields and cattle farms. People keep chickens in their backyards and almost every family that has any land has at least tried their hand at gardening. Battle Creek in particular was once both an agriculture point and the main source of the Kellogg Cereal company. Every morning the smell of fruity pebbles or other sugary cereal is in the air because of the Kellogg plant that was one of the main sources of income for families in Battle Creek. Then the plant in the early 2000's was moved overseas for cheaper labor and once Kellogg left others followed, like Post Cereal Company. Battle Creek was forced to try to find employment for thousands of out of work parents, students, and just plain adults. I am trying to create characters that while understand what kind of impact the factories leaving would have.

Writing this novel I was forced to see how the working class family would have changed because of the failure of the city of Battle Creek to create jobs after the factories left. I was in seventh or eight grade when Kellogg finally shut its doors. My family in turn did not work at any of the factory plants but I knew parents of friends who did. I thought back to those years and the following years and realized how much that affected the daily life of most of the middle and

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lower class of Battle Creek. When I write subsequent drafts of my novel I want to really describe this social shift and economic downturn in Battle Creek and surrounding areas. Kellogg's and other factories leaving Battle Creek would directly impact my characters in my novel and it is important to me and the story that I am trying to tell that I get the struggle of the city and the people in it correct.

Other than the economic shift of Battle Creek another very important factory in my novel is aviation. The novel's title itself is a popular tail name for planes, or at least a partial tail name. Drew himself is a pilot and within the novel I try to keep aviation terms and lifestyle as authentic as possible. Drew is a pilot because I have a very in depth knowledge of what it takes to becoming a pilot and thus what a lifestyle of one is like. I know the terms and lingo that are authentic to a pilot's life. I have this knowledge and I wanted to create a character that would do this amazing lifestyle justice. I feel that not many great novels have been written about pilots, or even focus on one as a main character. As Toni Morrison said, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." *Whiskey Hotel* is the book I have always wished to read, and now I am writing and editing it.

If Drew has the job that I wish more novels would focus on Faye has the backstory that I have always wished to read. Faye is the character that mostly resembles myself. Faye's backstory comes a lot from my own childhood and the childhood of my sisters and closest friends. Faye's backstory is something that confronts a lot of issues of the middle class and a family's religious framework. While in the rough draft the religious undertones are not as overt as I think is needed it is still one of the main motifs of the novel. I used religion as a reason why Faye has a hard time dealing with past sexual trauma and also other life decisions. Faye is raised in a strict Catholic family and because of this she feels guilt whenever she goes against what she was raised to

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believe was right. The idea that religion can cause overwhelming guilt is a strong theme I am trying to explore in my novel. I want to question the social norms of why religion is allowed to act at times in a cult like manner with kids and why we allow something to damage our self-worth, such as religion is capable of doing.

Since religion is such a powerful motivator in *Whiskey Hotel* it shapes how Louis views himself when it comes to his sexuality. Louis is afraid to come out to his friends, who are middle aged like him, because when they were growing up homosexuality was still not accepted in most circles. Even though I personally am not exclusively in the homosexual community I feel like I have the power to tell a story with a character who is very rarely written about and I want to do that character justice. I have always found myself a great supporter of the LGBTQ community and wished to write a character who would connect with them.

Even though my characters are not old enough to have been in a major world war the American war atmosphere of the Iraq war would shape how they view life. I picked the more lethargic about life in America as a way of expressing this affect. The main male characters in my novel would have lived through the Great Recession of the 2000's this would have also affected the way they would act and feel about life. I think it needs again in new drafts to have a more major role. Living in Battle Creek personally I watched as my own father lost his job during this time and then my mother. We, a family of four kids, talked about downsizing to a house with three bedrooms and getting rid of our family pets. My father would have been at the time only maybe ten years older than my characters if he lost his job over ten plus years then the odds would have it that my characters would have lost theirs too. I believe in order to make my novel better I need to have this fact that not long ago my characters struggled to make ends meet,

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struggled to provide for their families, and maybe struggled to keep trying to live their dream life. Instead, I barely mention it and I need to change that.

In conclusion my novel while it touches on many of the issues of middle class life in the current and past years in and around Battle Creek, Michigan it also deals with what it means to grow up and into yourself. My novel uses two different generations of people to compare and contrast how similar life is for every generation, how the struggles might change shape but they don't change the meaning or the growth a person gets from getting through it. I would like to believe that one day a person maybe who also lives in Battle Creek, or a city like it, will read my novel and realize someone else has felt the way they have. I hope to accomplish with my thesis the fact that yes, a student can write a novel in a month with dedication but more importantly if a student has the will to write, they should, their voice is important to the world. Even student can start the process if not finish a work of art.