



## Letter to My Teachers

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**T**HERE ARE TWO TEACHERS I'd like to write letters to. One is no longer with us, and the other lives on the other side of the Atlantic.

Mrs Strickland – we only ever called her Mrs Strickland – was Head of English at my secondary school in London. She was tall and thin, with large blue eyes, a little watery, a little like my mum's. Mrs Strickland was passionate about the powers of education, perhaps because she'd been the first in her family to stay in school after the age of fourteen.

She made us choose a poem and learn it off by heart. It would be very useful, she said, if we were ever bored and at a dinner party; then we would have something to recite in our head. I couldn't imagine ever being at a dinner party, but I can still recite 'Ode to a Nightingale'. I just have to hear the first lines, 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense', and I'm off.

Mrs Strickland introduced us to the poems of Emily Dickinson, who wasn't as well-known in the nineteen-seventies as she is today. I had to write an essay on the poem 'Because I could not stop for Death — / He kindly stopped for me'. I really wanted to please and impress my favourite English teacher, so I went to the local library, took half a dozen books off the wooden shelves and painstakingly copied out *huge* chunks of literary criticism, much of which I didn't understand.

I was crestfallen when I didn't get a good mark on that essay. 'What did



you think of the poem?’ asked Mrs Strickland. I was confused. Wasn’t I supposed to write about what the experts – the academics, the literary critics – thought? Could I really examine the poem myself? Yes, Mrs Strickland told me, if you can back up what you say, if you can analyse the text, then you can.

So thank you, Mrs Strickland. You gave me the confidence to trust in my own opinions — and I have never, ever forgotten that.

A few years later, while studying in the States – not far from the birthplace of Emily Dickinson – I took a class on landscape painting with a professor called John Conron. He specialized in ‘interdisciplinary approaches to American literature and culture’, and while I didn’t really know what this meant, I signed up for one of his courses. I learnt about the Picturesque and the Sublime, studied the techniques which created atmosphere and place. I got as excited as Professor Conron, the more I looked at a painting and the more I took it apart. ‘I hear you!’ he’d cry, whenever he was particularly delighted with a comment. First he’d give a sort of explosive whistle, then he’d point across the table, and then he’d cry, ‘I hear you!’

Professor Conron is still at that same university today. He’s described as ‘Awesome!’ by his students. His online biography includes a link to the précis of his latest book. ‘*Earth Music*’, it reads, ‘a forthcoming book not written for tenure or a raise.’ This makes me smile, it sounds just like him.

So thank you Professor Conron, for showing me that writing can be motivated by passion, not by a desire for status or money.