



Letter to My Teachers

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‘WRITER’ WASN’T EVEN LISTED on the form to fill in for ‘Careers Night’. Crestfallen, I chewed the end of my pencil. Clearly, I needed a Plan B for my life. Eventually I ticked the adjacent boxes, for pupils without a vocation for the sciences: ‘Journalist’, ‘Lawyer’, ‘Teacher’. I urgently needed an alibi while I worked out a path to my goal.

Whether or not they knew it, my teachers had been laying the groundwork that led me to a writing career. They instilled a love of literature, and wonder at the power of language, in the heart of an adolescent with an inchoate longing to become. It was, however, a maths teacher who, early on, lit up my life when she told me, joking perhaps as I sweated over pages of algebra, that I’d ‘better stick to my stories and get an accountant to handle the maths.’

I was jubilant; I was flooded with relief. The revelation that mathematics was something you could *outsource* overshadowed *even* the implicit acknowledgement that I might have some skill with a pen.

In those days, there were no clear routes for becoming a writer. Degrees in creative writing had not yet mushroomed at the universities; I’d had no idea that writing might be taught. Literature landed ready-made in libraries, but how it came to be written, how novelists learnt their craft and made a career of it, to me was an utter enigma.

Instead, that slow becoming, with detours into some of those adjacent



professions, all still lay in the future; to each writer, their own trajectory into the field. But if, finally, I found the courage to make the leap into fiction, the seeds were laid by my teachers in my Australian secondary school.

And I don't mean only those who taught English and Maths. Thanks to my teachers of French and German, I learnt the mechanics of English, and a sense of linguistic dimensions that barely existed in my native tongue. My history teachers, meanwhile, made sense of the past with narrative arcs that nudged me towards the outside world.

My English teachers, though, loomed larger than life, thanks partly to their eccentricities, partly to the passion they conveyed. They exposed my adolescent mind to words that moved or thrilled me, to language that made me think. As school progressed, I started to take risks in my creative work. That they took my efforts seriously was enormously encouraging; it was at this, I came to realize, that I wanted to succeed most of all.

Most of those teachers were women. Intellectual, idiosyncratic, their personalities made everything memorable. One was a red-headed Scot with an accent we tried to emulate; another brought Shakespeare compellingly to life; another still was enraptured by Donne and Yeats. They were exactly the teachers I needed as I groped blindly towards a profession that didn't exist, at least in Careers Night terms.

Who needed a box on a form? Thanks to those teachers, I was already learning to become a writer. Though none of them could have known it, collectively they had set me on the path.