I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Micoleau Family Fellowship. I am an English major with a vested interest in creative writing. I had exhausted all the classes offered in fiction writing at Bowdoin when I was accepted in the 29th annual Summer Writing Program organized by New York State Summer Writers Institute (NYSSWI) in Saratoga Springs. I used my grant money to help fund my tuition and living expenses for four weeks at Skidmore College where the Program is hosted. The Program attracts several eminent writers to conduct creative writing workshops, to read their work, and to interact with students in both formal and informal settings.

This much I knew going into the program. The chance to work closely with Pulitzer-prizewinning Paul Harding, and the Guggenheim fellow Mary Gaitskill in workshops, among other writers, also sounded like an experience few young writers would want to miss out on. And it truly was a definitive experience. Because I had been put into the advanced workshops, my fellow students for two weeks were mostly MFA students. There was a vigor demanded that I had not been asked for ever before: all of the four stories I had submitted for workshop had originally been written for fiction writing classes at Bowdoin; two of the stories had won awards on Bowdoin’s Honors Day. Bringing these stories to the workshop table showed me how the revision process never ends: the stories were full of holes I had not even noticed. The classroom environment in the advanced workshops at Skidmore was almost aggressive at times, with little space for molly-coddling. With other instructors and groups, it was more nurturing, experimental, or relaxed. This was what I needed, to be in a larger fishbowl, where the level of discussion remained challenging, but the style of workshop changed just so that I could not fall into the trap of repeating unoriginal workshop comments that often tends to happen in semester-long creative writing classes in College.

This much I had anticipated. But what I had not anticipated was the opportunity this program created to interact with several beginning writers, from all across the country and beyond, writers of all ages, some seasoned and some only beginning, some changing their careers in journalism, medicine or publishing to commit to writing. All this created an environment where everyone was invigorated by the idea of writing but had different things to say. I was exposed to different styles, learnt about different authors and books, gained an insight into the redrafting process, a process that is hardly discussed at length in College creative writing classes. All this interaction also led to developing a group discipline, where people indirectly influenced each other to write but writing themselves and thus creating a sense of friendly competition.

Moreover, every Tuesdays and Thursdays were reserved for Q and A rounds with renowned writers. Francine Prose, who was an author one of my professors at Bowdoin had
assigned in her class, talked about the value of MFA programs. This was a topic that often came up in discussion elsewhere as well, with students already attending an MFA program, or debating to apply to one. Bowdoin’s world is far removed from the world of professional creative writing, and I was glad to have gotten access to a plethora of voices on the topic of how to further ones writing and build it as a profession. Thus, I believe my time at the NYSSWI was important at this time in my life, when I am becoming more pragmatic about taking up writing as a career. I am grateful for having achieved this opportunity using the Micoleau Family Fellowship.