

## **Capturing Maine Through a Summer of Short Story Writing**

**Catherine Crouch, 2023**

At the onset of the summer my goal was to write a collection of interconnected short stories centered around the idea of place, and how where we are influences our actions, thoughts, and feelings. Maine has become a home to me, so I wanted to explore different stories through fiction tied to the state. In the past, I have tended to write exclusively character-driven stories. While I still like this approach, before this summer I had never experimented with using setting as anything more than that, so I am grateful that the fellowship allowed me to experiment with using place as a driving force for the first time.

I wanted to explore the different relationships we can have to where we are and where we would like to be, so I aimed to capture Maine from several different angles. I first wrote about it as a home—a positive place that characters want to get to. Next, I looked at it critically, written so that my characters might want to escape it. And finally, I chose to depict Maine in its most idyllic form, as how I think many people view it: as that magical and almost mythic corner of the Northeast that many dream of getting to. In this I tried to capture the idea of Maine, and what it may be imagined as for someone who has never been here. My goal in all of this was to write about how we feel about place—whether real or imagined—and how it affects who we are and what we want.

Having the time afforded by the summer months, I was able to fully analyze not only my work but also myself as a writer and make active efforts to step outside of my comfort zone. Upon reflection I realized that my past works all bore similar traits: I would exclusively write in the past tense, and I would often write realistic dramas about being middle-aged that would almost always feature a male protagonist. Though I still enjoy and feel very comfortable writing under these parameters, I realized that I had been closing myself off and confining myself to what I knew I could do. So, with each new story I began this summer, I decided to challenge myself to incorporate a new element into my story—whether it was through character, theme, or structure—and use the time I would not have otherwise had to try these new things. For example, I began first by playing with time, and writing a nonlinear story about a young couple. The following week I began a story about young boys, written in the present tense.

By taking these personal risks I learned that playing with these elements not only broadened what I was comfortable engaging with as a writer, but also enhanced the material itself. For example, after writing my piece about the young boys, I can see that this story is best suited to be written in the present tense, just as I had done. This is not something I would have ever known had I not challenged myself to write the story in that way.

I plan to keep working on my collection during the current academic year, taking the lessons I have learned this past summer with me as I continue to write. I am looking forward to having a project to work on along with my courses, and I am excited to see how the collection develops as Maine changes around me and fall begins to bloom, and as what I am comfortable working with continues to grow.

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