

Ella Schmidt

Summer Research Final Report

As the recipient of the 2021 Martha Reed Coles Fellowship in the Arts and Humanities, I spent my summer writing a novel entitled *Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God*. Under the guidance of my mentor, Professor Anthony Walton, I expanded what began as a 120-page novella to refine its lyricism and structure. In conjunction with my writing, I closely studied relevant texts to hone my skills as a prose writer. These works included Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and *The Human Stain*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It*, and Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*.

The novel is a framed tale told through Georgia Durst, a professor at Rutgers University in present-day New Jersey, as she reflects on her childhood in St. Louis. In the year of 1982, Georgia was a high school student in Webster Groves, Missouri when her mother Harper began an affair with a house painter who introduced her to a growing Evangelical "cult." Through this project I sought to explore the cultural and religious history of St. Louis and America's changing attitudes toward religion in the latter half of the 20th century. I also ventured deeply into themes of loneliness, doubt, distrust of political and religious institutions, and the secrets that separate us from the people we love.

I am continually drawn to these subjects in my creative work for both personal and academic reasons: the history of St. Louis, the city I call home, is one of deep-seated and ever-evolving warfares of race, class and religion. St. Louis is the birthplace of America's infamous "Delmar Divide," which separates the north and south regions of the city and forms a stark socioeconomic and racial barrier between the two. The divide influences the culture of the city in every aspect, including in its religious and political leanings, two themes that are crucial to the plot of my novel as it unfolds to reveal the characters' loss of faith in local and national government during the Reagan administration and the Cold War. Walter Johnson's brilliant book *The Broken Heart of America* examines St. Louis as an isolated portrait of American history. Johnson makes the case that St. Louis is a microcosm of a fraught national identity that, as each passing day reminds us, is as much a fixture of our present as of our collective past. *Make Straight in the Desert a Highway for Our God* follows the lives of a mother and daughter in a city that was claimed by poverty, violence, and housing inequality in the second half of the 20th century, when it was shelved as a haven of industry and struggled to rectify itself.

At its core, the novel is a story of mothers and daughters who find their relationships challenged as time and doubt drive a wedge between them. The question of where one places her trust is asked of these characters at the height of the Cold War, when national paranoia and distrust were widespread. This moment in time gives way to a portrait of faith and doubt on both national and interpersonal scales through the story of two women who long to believe in something. It is this longing that threatens to destroy what's left of love for both of them. The novel is dedicated to my mother, Ruth Marie Griffith, and to her mother, Ruth Nannelle Griffith.