

Ella Schmidt

Summer 2022 Final Research Report

As the recipient of the 2022 Nellie C. Watterson Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts, I spent my summer writing a novel entitled *Divinity School*. Under the guidance of my faculty mentor, Professor Anthony Walton, I ended the summer with a 200-page novel that amounts to my English major honors project. In conjunction with my writing, I closely studied relevant texts to hone my skills as a prose writer. These works included Philip Roth's *When She Was Good*, John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom novels, and the complete stories of Anton Chekhov.

Written in third-person free indirect prose, the novel takes place between Hoboken, New Jersey and Manhattan. The plot follows the lives of retired Divinity School professor Hal Macpherson, his wife Annie Price, and their daughter Esther Macpherson. After Hal's professional life is upended by a scandal, his wife and daughter grapple with the matters of when to trust and when to forgive. The central themes include motherhood, domestic femininity, marriage and infidelity, Protestantism, and the shrinking distinction between the characters' public and private lives.

Divinity School 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 in the present-day political climate, when changing gender roles, generational distance, conspiratorial paranoia and distrust of leadership are widespread. This moment in time gives way to a portrait of faith and doubt on both professional and interpersonal scales through the story of a mother and an estranged daughter who long to believe in something. It is this longing that threatens to destroy what's left of love for both of them.