

Writing for Awareness: Addressing Themes of Chronic Illness, Envy, and Self Identity Through a Summer of Fiction Writing

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I set out with the aim of writing a series of interconnected short stories centered around themes of chronic illness, envy, and self-identity. These themes are very real, very common, and I have personal experience with all three—and yet, I have found, fiction often lacks honest and realistic portrayals of the three in conjunction, particularly of chronic illness, that honor the protagonist without commodifying or sentimentalizing the pain itself. I wanted to write from a perspective of truth, of curiosity, of imperfection, that brings light to the chronically ill protagonist without setting chronic illness as the story's major impetus. I hoped to convey a life that was marked by illness, not defined by it. The latter two themes are, undeniably, inextricably linked to life: disabled or otherwise. I envisioned the arc of my story collection to mimic that of the *Bildungsroman*. I was interested in exploring the perspective of my protagonist in three categories, beginning with the child, using naïve envy as a lens to examine the authentic self, transitioning to young adulthood, experiencing diagnoses and navigating feelings of physical and psychological powerlessness, and concluding with the older adult: gradually folding into her identity while reflecting on the rich tapestry of her past. Across the whole collection, I aimed to capture emotions, such as inadequacy, that come with, are equated to, but in life are not unequivocally linked to, chronic illness. I wanted to reconstrue these emotions as side effects—not of pain, but of life itself.

I very quickly discovered that I was prone to over- rather than under-writing, so I made the decision to switch to the novel rather than the short story form. This enabled me to explore the same plot in depth, emphasizing atmospheric detail and backstory while moving forward at a more comfortable pace. I chose to pursue the young adult storyline, since this is what I am presently the most attune to in my own life. Over the course of the summer, I developed a routine that afforded me not only the time and space to write, but the capacity to read and study published works that informed my own project. I began with Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* as an exemplar of first-person narrative. From here, I moved on to E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* for an analysis on the craft of writing and classic novel structure. Shortly thereafter I read *The Writing Life* by Annie Dillard, which offered wisdom and insight for writers new and old. I read a number of novels, including: *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, which offers a beautiful, sensitive portrayal of rural life, friendship, love and belonging through rich characterization and first-person narration; *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich, which epitomizes place-based narration, character redemption, surrealism, contemporary social issues and metaphor; and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, which, though marketed for younger audiences, addresses the predominant theme in my own work from the perspective of the ill protagonist. I am currently reading Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor*, a nonfiction work which examines how society views illness and how illness is portrayed and often exploited metaphorically in fiction.

Towards the end of the summer, I turned to films as a source of structural and thematic ingenuity. Among them I found Greta Gerwig's films *Lady Bird* and *Frances Ha* for platonic love, subverting traditional romance tropes, and female friendship. From these sources, from conversations with my peers and fellow creative writers Mei Bock and Silas Brown, and from reading and listening to interviews by published writers, I learned to observe the world and the people in it; to listen—not only to the people who surround me in life, but to those I create on paper. I am now mid-process of writing a novel with the working title *An Imitation of Duality*, following two female-friends and recent college graduates (one of whom, the protagonist, has a chronic illness with physical and psychological manifestations) who travel across the country to confront medical skeptics: parents so deeply ensconced in "the simple life" they decline to acknowledge the mortality of their son. The novel aims to address the duplexity of friendship and the blurriness between friendship and love. I look forward to continuing my draft as I enter the new academic year.

I am indebted to the Micoleau family for their dedication to the arts. Owing to their generosity, I was able to spend the summer in Maine surrounded by literature, theater, music and—most especially—salt water and trees.

Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

Funded by the Micoleau Family Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts

