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DEERFIELD MAGAZINE REPRINT
"The Write Life"



The Write Life BY JULIA ELLIOTT

Hannah Pittard '97 is the author of three novels: *The Fates Will Find Their Way*, *Reunion*, which was published this past October, and the forthcoming *Listen to Me*. She has also written numerous short stories that have appeared in publications such as *The American Scholar* and *McSweeney's*, she teaches the art of writing fiction at the University of Kentucky, and serves as a consulting editor for *Narrative Magazine*. Ms. Pittard recently sat down with *Deerfield Magazine's* Julia Elliott to talk about *Reunion*, writing, and why fiction is often so much more than "just" a story.

DM: *Congratulations on Reunion! I read it and I loved it. It's a great book—you must be so proud!*

HP: I am proud, and I'm relieved to have what they refer to in the industry as the 'sophomore effort' under my belt. I just feel like this is really my career now. So yeah, I'm very happy.

DM: *I hadn't really thought about that. It's just such a good book, it hadn't occurred to me, but is that a big hurdle to get over—there's all this anticipation for your sophomore effort? Or do people just assume that it's not going to be as good as your first book?*

HP: I think that, yes, it's a serious hurdle that every writer faces once they are on the other side of that initial excitement, they—and obviously I'm grossly generalizing here—but my feeling is—and I've talked with other people who have experienced it—is that, yeah, there's this incredible pressure that you start to feel once you're through that debut. And I felt pressure—probably we're all putting it on ourselves more than anyone else—but there's that desire to prove to the literary community that you deserve to be a part of it and you're not just a one-hit wonder, for lack of a better phrase. I certainly wanted to get that second novel out there to prove to myself, but then also to prove to everyone else, that I meant business . . . You do have to be ambitious in this world, and you have to be willing to get beaten up a little bit. My ego took a beating, certainly, that first year of sending out stories and getting rejection after rejection after rejection. And fortunately, every rejection made me want to try harder and made me want to be in this world even more. So having a thick skin certainly is a useful thing, if you're a writer.

DM: *Well, you did it! Congratulations. I want to talk about the book more, but let's go back first . . . You graduated from Deerfield in 1997. How would you characterize your Deerfield experience?*

HP: I think that I got the education of my life at Deerfield. I still tell people that I'm not sure I've ever taken a more rigorous or demanding class than I did junior year; taking US History was epic and wonderful and insane . . . It was a class that prepared me in almost every way for my college experience. I went to two different undergraduate colleges: St. John's and the University of Chicago. People told me that University of Chicago would just kill me—that it's difficult to survive there academically—and I've got to say, Deerfield made the University of Chicago feel like a breeze. Obviously, I struggled—in the right way—education should be a struggle, I believe; it should be a constant push and pull.

DM: *It's interesting that you mentioned a history class; I thought you were going to jump right into English classes. Did you already know you were interested in being a writer when you came to Deerfield?*

HP: At Deerfield, yes, I was already very much invested in my identity as a writer. Probably to a silly degree.

DM: *What do you mean by that?*

HP: If you're coming to Deerfield as a freshman, just the year before you were in eighth grade, so it's sort of silly to think of yourself as identifying as anything other than a lunatic thirteen-year-old. But I think I already had some baby aspirations to be a writer, or think of it, or wonder if it was possible.

I got to Deerfield and my writing was taken so seriously that really gave me the confidence to pursue this . . . what do I want to call it? To pursue this art. Frank Henry and Peter Fallon were instrumental in my development as a writer and a reader. If they hadn't taken me so seriously, I don't know that once I finished college I would have had the gumption to say, 'Okay, I'm going to try to do this . . .' They planted the seeds.

I wrote all the time. I cannot believe how many bad stories my teachers were willing to read and give me feedback on . . .

And I had a couple of wonderful peers—Evelyn Hinkley and Tom Bowman—who were also terrific writers and readers. It was neat having a little community that probably took itself too seriously, but we had a lot of fun taking ourselves too seriously. Tom had his debut novel come out recently; it's beautiful. It's a lot of fun to see how far we've both come . . .

DM: *So your friends at Deerfield were just as important as your teachers . . .?*

HP: Deerfield was a struggle for me socially. I had my little unit of friends, but socially it was difficult. I was a wallflower. I was an introvert. I was just so self-conscious . . . In that way, you know, Deerfield can be a difficult place, even though the faculty is so open; if you have any social stage fright, Deerfield can be an intimidating place. And I definitely had that social stage fright, which is a funny expression for me to be using, because the other part of Deerfield that was so important to me was the acting world. I was in the advanced acting tutorial, just had the best time, and found a real home for myself there, as well.

DM: *What books influenced you as a writer?*

HP: The English Department had a shelf of books that anyone could borrow; I remember discovering Harry Crews on that bookshelf. The book that I pulled out was called *Car*, and I think that it had some of Frank Henry's notes in it. It blew my mind. It was Southern fiction; I loved Southern fiction, but this was Southern fiction like I'd never experienced before.

DM: *What about it blew your mind?*

HP: It's a pretty risqué novel. It's about a man who decides to eat a car, piece by piece. It's completely ridiculous, but it's also 100 percent rooted in realism. It's absurd, and it's sexy, and it's raunchy, and it pushes limits in every way possible, and yet it never—in my mind—risks becoming pornographic. It is art. It is art and it is messing with the reader. It's asking the reader to become engaged; it's asking the reader to become uncomfortable. It does everything that I think good fiction should do. Every single page I would read, and I would stop, and I would think, 'Oh my gosh, what does that mean about my understanding of beauty? What does this mean about my understanding of family, of relationships?' It forced me to have a conversation with myself that I had never had before. I think that's what blew my mind. >>>



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DM: *You earned a Master of Fine Arts in 2007. Did you enjoy the experience? I know there is often a debate about getting an MFA—what's more beneficial: the school of the MFA or the school of life . . .*

HP: I think getting the MFA was a terrific experience, and I think this debate between MFA versus NYC is a conversation that doesn't need to be had as often as it is. What's great about getting an MFA is it gives you time and money to write, and if you're lucky, you'll meet a mentor, as I did. I met Ann Beattie. I think she picked up where Peter Fallon left off, and whipped me into shape. You know, if you can write, you can write. What's neat about being in school, and being with people who have already made it in this world, is that there's advice to be had.

This idea of MFA versus NYC would suggest that if you're in an MFA program then you're not also living your life. I take huge issue with that; while I was in graduate school, my adoptive father died, and I watched him die. Many things happened to me. I waited tables full-time. I struggled to pay bills. Many, many things were happening to me that influenced my writing and influenced the person that I became. I think it's terrific if people can go to New York and become successful writers, and there are so many teachers, successful teachers, who don't have MFAs, and there are

successful teachers who do . . . successful writers, too. So I think, you know, pick your poison. But if you're a writer and you want to write then you are going to do it and it shouldn't matter which route you take.

DM: *That is interesting. Let's get back to Reunion. When you meet people who haven't read the book, how do you describe it?*

HP: So, part of what interests me as a writer is the use of time in narrative. *The Fates* followed a group of boys over essentially forty years; it was very important to me for my second novel to do something completely different. In this case that meant changing genders, changing person from first person plural to first person singular, changing tense from past to present, and it also meant condensing time; *Reunion* takes place over four days. That collapsing of time meant that I would be looking at much different aspects of a personality and a character; what I wanted to do with *Reunion* was distill a human being into as few scenes as possible in order to create the largest picture possible.

But I guess the sound bite is I wanted to write a book that was funny, and I ended up writing a book about suicide, and debt, and infidelity. My paternal grandfather committed suicide just about on the eve that I was sitting

down to work on this novel that I had wanted to be so hilariously funny . . . If you are at all familiar with suicide, then you understand that it's difficult to block out of your brain. And so every time I sat down to write, it was there. I was still determined to write the truth, and the truth was that there was a sort of ridiculousness to it. I would call it a dark comedy.

DM: *Why was it so important to you to do something completely different with your second novel?*

HP: Part of why I love writing is that it is a challenge. It's important that I not do the same thing more than once—for some reason that challenge is what keeps the whole enterprise interesting to me. Which is funny, because some of my favorite writers—Roth, Graham Greene—are known for, perhaps mistakenly, but are often accused of writing the same book over and over and over again, and I could read those books over and over and over again . . .

And I guess I tackle similar themes as well; it's neat to be able to try to tell as many different stories as possible, to address as many different worlds and hearts as possible, while still ultimately trying to work through and closer to a better understanding of certain issues.

DM: *You've mentioned that it was partly your grandfather's suicide, but also the days that followed—when your family all gathered together—that were inspirational . . . What was it about this time that was so influential?*

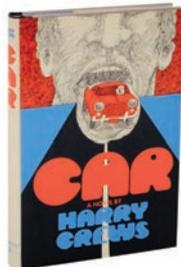
HP: I think it was less their specific reaction and more seeing these people return to this place—Atlanta—where they had all known each other several decades earlier. It wasn't just my mother and father, it was the friends that they had had when they were in their early 20s and 30s—when they were raising my brother, sister, and me.

When my parents split up . . . you know, there's a faction that goes with the mother and a faction that goes with the father; I think my mom lost a lot of truly great friends, so for her to be back there, and for them to be seeing one another, but now they aren't just grown-ups—they are grandparents—some of them are great-grandparents, and here they are—being instantly transported back in time just by virtue of being close to one another. That was really provocative to me. And I wanted so much to be able to write a memoir or a piece of non-fiction about that experience, but I just couldn't do it—it wasn't my story. It was their story. I didn't know a way in. So, I stole their story. And I completely broke it down and broke it apart. And made it into something that has nothing to do with their lives. But that moment was necessary for me as a story-writer—the storywriter in me immediately turned on, and I was just observing all weekend, which is what fiction writers do—that's why we're often awful to be in a room with—we tend to stay against the walls and watch.

DM: *Was there anything else about this book that was drawn from your own experience?*

HP: I've said this before and I do think it's the truth: that this is the most autobiographical novel that I've written to date and that I plan on writing. I am very, very happily married and I'm also very, very happily faithful, as is my husband. But I have experienced extreme credit card debt. So that aspect of the story is very true to life. In fact, there's a chapter that outlines specific numbers, and those specific numbers for a while were my numbers—

Hannah's Bookshelf



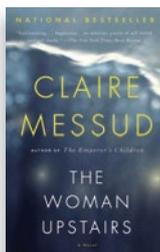
CAR / BY HARRY CREWS

It blew my mind . . . It's completely ridiculous, but it's also 100 percent rooted in realism. It's absurd, and it's sexy, and it's raunchy, and it pushes limits in every way possible, and it never—in my mind—risks becoming pornographic. It is art.



WALKS WITH MEN / BY ANN BEATTIE

A triumph of a novella that is about a young woman who is being taught how to be a human being . . . but she's also teaching the reader how to read a story, and how to interpret a life.



THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS / BY CLAIRE MESSUD

I was working on *Reunion* when the debate was taking place about *The Woman Upstairs*, and would you want to be friends with this character? And she said, 'That's a ridiculous question,' and there was so much backlash. A really interesting conversation came out of that . . . I am definitely and firmly in Messud's camp. I am not writing fiction to supply my reader with a possible coffee date. I am writing fiction in order to get to know the human heart better.

ON GRAHAM GREENE AND PHILIP ROTH—

Part of why I love writing is that it is a challenge. I don't have children, and I have no plans of having children. But I very much think of these books that I produce as, quote unquote, 'babies' in many ways. It's important that I not do the same thing more than once. For some reason, that challenge is what keeps the whole enterprise interesting to me. Which is funny, because some of my favorite writers—Roth, Graham Greene—are known for, perhaps mistakenly, but are often accused of writing the same book over, and over, and over again, and I could read those same books over, and over, and over again.

Kate's numbers were my numbers. But I'm out of debt now. I mean, I have a mortgage, but I feel like that's an okay kind of debt.

Writing this book—I would say it was a cathartic experience. It was also a way to begin a conversation with my family; I kept my debt completely to myself. My husband knew about it, but nobody else did. So in writing this book, I think part of me was looking for a way to confess a sin that had already happened and that I had already taken care of—if you can take care of a sin. It was a wrong that I had righted, and I was ready to start talking about.

DM: *Was there anything else that felt autobiographical?*

HP: I have a really strong relationship with my siblings. But they are nothing like the people in *Reunion*, and at the end of the day, I'm nothing like Kate, either. As I said, I don't have any firsthand experience with infidelity, but being a grownup now, and being married, I've started looking at the world in different terms—possibly less idealistic, dogmatic terms. When I was younger, it was definitely: 'Adultery is the worst thing in the world, and nobody can ever forgive anybody anything.' But, you know, I have friends who have gone through it. It's not ideal and I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but I think it's an interesting topic. I think a lot more people have experience with it than we think. And that's another thing: the minute I see potential—you know—something that maybe the majority of the world understands but isn't going to talk about, that's again when the writer brain kicks in.

DM: *So how do you go about understanding something that you haven't experienced yourself?*

HP: That's what being a sort of conduit for other people's stories is . . . I don't think I have to be man to write from the male perspective. I think I just have to be a human being that is paying attention. Faulkner famously declared that fiction should show the human heart at conflict with itself, and I think if you have a heart 'at conflict with itself,' then you understand a heart in somebody else in conflict with itself. I think that's at the core of all fiction—or it should be.

DM: *One of the things I loved about Reunion, which was so smart and kept me on my toes, was how Kate was always saying, 'If this was a screenplay the dialogue would go this way, or this is where I would have my epiphany . . .'* *It felt like you were writing a novel that was very reflective about how stories are constructed, and was in some ways going along with those typical constructions, while simultaneously turning that construction on its head. How deliberate was that?*

HP: It was deliberate, and I'm glad you noticed! I love fiction that talks about the process of storytelling and story-making—I'm attracted to that type of quasi, meta narrative. Anytime I'm sitting down to write a story, I'm thinking of the storytelling; I'm thinking about the relationship between the author and the narrator, and the author and the narrator and the reader. I always want there to be some sort of question of the storyteller, and the storytelling experience. I'm very interested in working through my own beliefs and understanding of narratives through my writing.

DM: *What's your process for writing? Can you write anywhere? When do you write?*

HP: I really don't have a process; I can write pretty much anywhere and anytime. If a room is overly quiet, I get uncomfortable—it's nice if there is ambient noise somewhere near me. About the one place that I have not yet been able to write fiction is in my office on campus. It's a place where my brain goes straight to the academic side of things and my students' work.

I love to write by hand but when I'm writing with a pen, the pen can't keep up with my thoughts, so I tend to write on the computer. Sometimes I will go months without writing, and when I'm not writing, I'm reading. I'm just devouring books, and I'm waiting. I'm waiting for a sort of feeling to take over, or an idea to come through that I wasn't expecting. And one morning—literally I will wake up one morning—and I will have to sit down and write. And then I go into a sort of frenzy of writing that can last anywhere from a week to several months. Sometimes I can get a full draft, just non-stop writing. Once I have a



*The author in her studio,
from her website:
hannahpittard.com*

I love spending time with sentences.

draft, I find that there is this sort of lull, this wonderful calm lull that comes over me, where I am just content with everything, because I know that I have a draft, and soon I'll get to go through it, and look at lines, and look at the words, and do that wonderful thing called revising, which is my favorite part. I love spending time with sentences.

DM: *You mentioned your campus job; you are part of creating a new MFA program at the University of Kentucky—tell me about it.*

HP: Being a professor is a dream job for me, and the University of Kentucky happens to be a really wonderful place to have a job. I have amazing colleagues. I love teaching. I think almost every professor can point to a moment in their education, and point to a teacher and talk endlessly about the things that we learned from that person or from several people. For me those teachers were at Deerfield and St. John's.

One thing that I try to impress upon young writers is that it is so easy to look outside, to look out your window, to walk down the street and say, 'That's ugly. That's bad. I didn't like that shirt. I think that building is too short.' But it's so much more difficult and for that reason, I believe, so much more gratifying to walk down the street and to try to see everything from a different angle.

The beauty of fiction, as far as I'm concerned, is that it provides a little window into how other people live, and the minute you're able to see how other people live and you are able to understand why other people might make decisions that are contrary to the decisions that you might make, or just different than the decisions that you might have made—the minute you give a student that sort of resource, you've created empathy. The minute you've created empathy, you've created—I think—a better person. There's very much a social contract. I think fiction helps that social contract to be maintained.

DM: *Do you have any advice for Deerfield students who are interested in writing?*

HP: Read. Read as much as you can. Read everything you can get your hands on. Once you've read everything you can get your hands on, ask your teachers what you should be reading or find somebody who is older than you are who you look up to and ask them what their favorite book is. And don't just read the last five years—read books from 50 years ago; read books from 150 years ago; look for the older books, not just the newer ones. The writing will come. If you're going to be a writer, you will write. It's reading that we need to encourage more than ever. //