

Charles Page High School English Department
Challenge Minds. Inspire Hearts. Empower a Community of Learners.

June 24, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

Several years ago, a young man whose reputation as an avid reader, deep thinker, and gifted writer I knew quite well, finally walked through the door of my classroom; I had heard both his sophomore and junior teachers speak highly of his abilities and his demeanor. During that year in Advanced Placement English Literature, I watched Kevin Ryan delve deeply into complex pieces of literature, analyzing and writing about them with an ease and enjoyment quite rare in a high school senior. His ability to craft such powerful prose continues to delight me.

When I sent out a plea to former students asking that they help me convey the benefits of enrolling in Advanced Placement courses, Kevin sent me nothing short of a masterpiece detailing his epiphany about words and literature. Even though it might seem unorthodox in a letter of my words, his words will speak more powerfully to the qualifications he brings to your program:

This pursuit [an undergraduate degree in literature] is the refinement of my fascination with words, with the boundlessness and the grandeur of language. Its myriad capacities and facets have drawn from me a feeling of absolute freedom—like when you've accomplished the rare feat of saying exactly what you mean, or more than you thought you knew; like floating down calmative water. Music belongs to language, so do poetry and architecture and romance and autumn and futures untold and the miracle of life and the power of laughter.

Eventually, I eschewed Kerouac and his rambling brethren for a cast of writers equally without rules yet somehow less chaotically rebellious, all the while attending English classes that left me dull, listless, at a disconnect—voiceless. Because, be their intentions well-meaning, teachers in middle school could never make the book's words any more than dead on the page. They were teaching the undusted lexicon of precociously estranged poets, all long dead, whose work, as I saw it, was probably on display only because some thrifty publishing company realized there was money in public domain. Why pay living, innovative, and possibly starving writers when there are so many dead ones that would will for free?

Of course, this teenage logic put a barrier between me and some of the finest literary achievements—so that Shakespeare's hilarious, potent, devastatingly poignant, and sometimes dirty-minded plays were merely the stuffy, pompous, masturbatory ramblings of some tactless, outmoded lawyer-guy, bereft of coolness, incapable of subtleties. Nor did I see the human side—and how sadly human it was—of Poe; instead, he was just that creep with his odious bird and his noisome basement and his unneighborly proclivities. And Whitman—what was his deal, always going on about captains and horoscopes?

Point being, I continually was unable to make a connection between what my teachers were presenting and what I had—on my own time—found so enthralling. In their version, it all came out blandly distant, selfsame, like a cubicle amid a maze of identical flimsy grey partitions. I'd been dropped into a courtroom of Kafka's design, hearing only knotted contradictory nonsense, mumbled and ever-incongruous, being spoken by affectless faces in monotone.

It was my freshman English teacher who first pulled me aside and told me that he wouldn't have me in his class.

"Why," I asked.

"Because you belong in AP."

"Okay," I said.

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On the first day of class, my sophomore year AP English class, I read aloud a poem I'd written as part of our summer assignment, and—to my absolute surprise—Ms. Simmons mystically asserted that I was destined to be a writer. Every once in a while, over my final two years, she'd get a slight glow to her eyes, nod a little, and say it all over again. A writer, she said. She knew it.

Well, I'd never considered that.

To me, a pure, true writer drives the (pure, true) reader into obsessive head spins, an expertly-ordered loss of control—joyful, yes—and attaches irremovable meaning to each word so well that to skip even one syllable would be criminal. A felt awareness, knowledge that words are more solitary than most people seem to think, yet that, also, they're strangely capable things, that they comprehend their own collectivity, and, if the writer is a gifted arranger, the whole world can become a choir, singing only for you, blissfully lost in the way nimble fingers themselves can play a piano or an athlete can jump arcs without realizing. As if given to something else, something more intact than any of us is able to be. How, though? And what can you want? As a writer, I want to find that pinhole of undiscovered terrain and break it open into the light. Slowly, I have found a voice I comfortably think of as my own, and I am grateful to Ms. Baker and Ms. Simmons for encouraging me, for saying, "Go ahead: speak, speak, speak..."

Given Kevin's wide and deep reading and the vicarious experience gained...and his sensitivity in picking up nuance as well as fact, I believe Kevin can translate life's triumphs and tragedies with insight, truth, fairness, and an eloquence that, in my 41 years of teaching some of the nation's best and brightest, I've glimpsed in only a rare few. Please give Kevin Ryan strong consideration for admittance into the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism. Give him the chance to hone his skills under the guidance of your professors, to prove that he can, indeed, "speak, speak, speak" to the hearts and minds of those eager to make sense of the world around them.

Sincerely,


Sheree K. Baker