

February 2023

**THE ENGLISH
AGGIE |**



**Q&A with Riley Womack '19 | Upcoming Event:
Macmillan Publishers Informational | Contests:
Rhetoric & Discourse Essay + Charles Gordone Award**

Q&A with Riley Womack, an MFA candidate at Columbia



Please introduce yourself! Where are you from? What are you interested in outside of English?

Howdy! My name is Riley Womack ('19), I am originally from Beaumont, Texas (on the gulf coast, close to the border with Louisiana), and I'm a current MFA candidate in Columbia University's Writing Program (fiction concentration).

Outside of my English studies, I've always harbored a deep appreciation for history (I was nearly a history major at A&M) and I think that has seeped into my writing in myriad ways, namely when examining certain practices of American mythmaking and how it has affected our culture. My parents—both, shall we say, *former* musicians who both studied music in college—bestowed a deep love of music onto me, and so I have always loved music and the other performance arts. I played the trombone up until my graduation from A&M (I was in one of the university's jazz bands) and, while my horn is collecting dust in a closet back home, I still love music and take as many chances to see live music as I can. And while I would not call myself an *avid* outdoorsman, I do enjoy spending time in the great outdoors; visiting each National Park is a bucket list item for me. I also play a lot of tennis.

What made you decide to pursue an MFA?

Initially, when I arrived at A&M, I wanted to go to law school. After I was dissuaded from this by a family member during my sophomore year, I had to ask myself, "Okay, now what?" That next semester, spring of sophomore year, I took Dr. Jason Harris's "Elements of Creative Writing" class. I had always loved to write, but never thought about it as a serious craft or serious thing to pursue. Dr. Harris, in addition to being a great professor and passionately extolling the virtues of a creative life, encouraged me in my own work, and at some point suggested the MFA might be something for me to consider. My first round of applications, for what would have been Fall 2019 admissions, were not successful,

but I stuck it out and had better luck on my second try. An MFA in Creative Writing is not just about wanting to write some great work, but it is also about learning the business and life of a working writer. It teaches you discipline, how to remain focused on the work, but also how to be a better writer or reader in general. Most MFA programs also have great teaching opportunities which will then allow you to teach creative writing in academia. All of these things led to my decision.

What was the application process for Columbia's MFA program? Did you find it daunting?

Most application processes for MFA programs are similar: you fill out an application, compile three letters of recommendation, submit a personal statement (or statement of purpose—and, yes, they are different!) and a writing sample (generally anywhere from 10-40 pages). For Columbia, I submitted 25 pages of an unfinished novel for my sample, a statement of purpose, as well as a short, one-page essay about something I had read recently (something only Columbia asked for). Then it was just a matter of hitting "submit" and waiting.

Was it daunting? Whew. Of course it was! Sending off any of your work—whether in submissions for publication or for admission into an MFA program—is like having a kidney removed. You have essentially removed this piece of yourself that you helped grow and breathe, and are now asking for complete strangers to sit in judgment of it. That is the hardest part of being a writer, right? You want people to read your stuff, but you also want people to like it. But doing that is the only thing that allows us to know ourselves (and our writing) better. It is daunting, sure, but endlessly necessary.

What are your long-term writing goals and career goals?

Like any writer, I would love to reach a place where I can

write full-time, although that is quite a distant mountain-top that few writers will ever summit. So, I want to finish my MFA and hopefully find a nice teaching position that will allow me to indulge my creative tendencies but also have a sustainable income. (This is all, of course, very lame, very square.) So how about current goals for this year? I am working hard on finishing a collection of short stories, and I have an unfinished novel waiting in the wings.

What do you think of your MFA program? Do you believe it is making you a better writer and helping you improve your craft?

Columbia (and New York City in general) is a writer’s dream. The faculty here is top-notch, a murderer’s row of heavy hitters. But the other writers in my cohort are some of the smartest, nicest, and just *fun* people I have ever met. My friends are brilliant; that I am able to write alongside these people, to riff with them like jazz musicians up on stage, to hear what they are working on and get feedback from them in workshop makes me very grateful. The seminars and lectures and other classes at Columbia are all in service to the work and is supplemental to the work you are doing in your own work and in workshop. I took a seminar on William Faulkner last semester, and, while the manner of the class was similar to your run-of-the-mill English lit course, the instructor was able to impart lessons to us about style, language, and theme that we were able to take back to our work.



Above: Riley during his time at Texas A&M University

Did you feel prepared by your education at Texas A&M University?

I will be eternally gracious to the English Department at A&M. Many people don’t think of the liberal arts and humanities when they think of A&M but I will take any chance to compliment the faculty and students there. The English

program is a great program, and its strengths lie in its diverse faculty and the variety of courses and programs they offer to students. I was able to take classes on the American novel after 1900, science fiction, a wealth of film classes (I minored in film studies, and I feel like not everyone knows that exists at A&M!), as well as the aforementioned creative writing classes. I was able to participate in writing contests like the annual Science Fiction/Fantasy contest, among others, which helped push my craft to places I had not previously explored. The research programs at A&M are top-notch, and I am lucky that I participated in ACC (the Aggie Creative Collective) in its first year, and then the LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Program afterwards. If I had not undertaken a creative thesis I probably would not have been prepared for Columbia, and I struggle to envision a future in which I even reach Columbia without ACC and LAUNCH.

Did any particular professor or class make a significant impact on you during undergrad?

Oh, yes. I was lucky to cultivate great relationships with professors during my time at A&M, with faculty who encouraged and assisted me in my academic pursuits and creative endeavors. I took Dr. Juan Alonzo’s “The American Novel After 1900” class in the spring semester of my freshman year, and he became a staple throughout my time at A&M; I took a class from him every year. He is, like, the consummate academic, but he is also a funny and extremely passionate professor who cares deeply about his students and about what he does. I took that American lit class from him, as well as a few film classes, I believe his “Advanced Film” and “Studies in Genre” courses.

As I’ve already mentioned, Dr. Jason Harris encouraged me in my creative pursuits in his creative writing class. He would later become my thesis advisor, and to this day, I ask him for feedback on most of the things I write (he read my writing sample before I applied to MFA programs—so, thanks, Dr. H!). Dr. Harris is an astute observer of craft, and he was able to expertly guide my ACC cohort through the trials and tribulations of undertaking a research project of that size. His work, alongside Dr. Lowell White, to aid the creative writers at A&M is truly astounding, and I appreciate their efforts to encourage younger writers. They are expert readers of craft and really astute minds, and there will be a vast network of writers indebted to them in the coming years. Without them, I certainly would not be at Columbia.

Florence Davies and the entire Writing Center must be thanked. Flo has been one of my greatest defenders for quite some time, and I am deeply indebted to her calm, guiding presence throughout the process of writing my thesis and also my MFA applications (both rounds) and my employment at the UWC. Look, Flo rocks. She’s, like, the coolest. After my first workshop at Columbia, I called her because I was so amped up, and she calmed me down. She takes care of her people.

I should also mention Dr. Apostolos Vasilakis, the Direc-

tor of Undergraduate Studies there in the English Department. I took my senior seminar with Dr. V, and the topic of that seminar coincided with my own thesis project, and so he became a major boon to my ongoing research. We also shared a mutual respect of the French film director Jean-Pierre Melville, which was great. While I was writing my thesis, Dr. V also loaned me three or four books he thought would help my research (spoiler alert: they did, in a major way) and I was very sad when, at the end of the semester I went to return his books, I had to leave them with someone else as he was in a meeting. Hope you got your books, Dr. V!

While at A&M I discovered so many writers that I now love. Sam Shepard, Annie Proulx, Tim O'Brien, and in particular, Denis Johnson, and I have the great English faculty to thank for that.

What about at Columbia?

Yes! Although I'm only in my first year, I feel like this faculty has already left a great impression on me. Last semester my workshop instructor was Megha Majumdar (author of the 2020 bestseller *A Burning*), and in workshop she was so perceptive, so attuned to the mechanics of story that I hope to take another class with her. She offered guidance that drilled down to the very essence of story and character, and I hope I can run a workshop half as well as she did.

I must also mention Erroll McDonald, the professor of the aforementioned Faulkner seminar. Erroll is a genius and his CV certainly speaks for itself (he was Toni Morrison's editor!). Each week, a friend and I would discuss the readings before class and try to guess what Erroll would talk about... we failed every time.

Do you think an MFA is necessary? Do you think writers should pursue an MFA?

Not at all. I could talk at length about the ongoing debate that has raged in the literary community about the importance of the MFA, the prevalence of the *workshop method*, etc., etc. I am very lucky to be at Columbia, and I would be remiss in not acknowledging the place of intense privilege I find myself in, but an MFA is certainly not necessary to becoming a writer. Do you write? Congratulations! You are a writer.

With that being said, I think that there are many reasons people should pursue an MFA. As I mentioned before, I think MFA programs extoll the virtues of *literary life*, and they help writers learn how to be productive even when deeply enmeshed in whatever domestic milieu they find themselves in. If you are interested in teaching creative writing, then you would perhaps benefit from an MFA. I would say if you're interested in pursuing an MFA then research specific programs, reach out to their admissions folks, and see if you can talk to people who already have their MFA as well as

people currently in those programs.

What's the best writing advice you've ever received? What writing advice do you have for current A&M students?

The best writing advice I have for current students is the one you most commonly hear: *just write*. Writers can intellectualize, wax poetic, and think/talk ad nauseam about things they *want* to write. I am just as guilty of this as anyone. But, at the end of the day, it only matters if you get in on the page. You must do that one thing if you are going to be successful, that's it. Young writers (such as myself) hear that piece of advice, and we roll our eyes, like, *of course*. But it doesn't make it any less true. Look, the only thing that matters is the work. You should be craving to go back to the work at every possible moment. The work is the most important thing. To quote David Lynch: "You just keep doing your work, and try to stay true to the work. Keep your eye on the doughnut, not the hole."

That could also pass as the best writing advice I've ever received, but it isn't. When I was working on my thesis—which was about combat trauma and inherited trauma as manifested in the fiction following the Vietnam War—I met Larry Heinemann, who, in addition to being a Vietnam vet was also a writer (who, in my opinion, should be much, much more widely read than he is) who won the National Book Award for his novel, *Paco's Story*, which is one of my all-time favorites. He also taught at A&M for a time, although he retired before I came to College Station. Anyway, I met him at a reading there in the Liberal Arts building, and, I was struggling with my writing at the time, and so I asked him what advice he had for a young, struggling writer such as myself who was writing fiction about the war, all those things. And he looked at me from behind his long hair and with these deep, very kind eyes. He put his hand on my shoulder, and he leaned toward me, and said, "The great thing about being a writer is we get to make things up. We get to pull beautiful things out of thin air as if they're on little strings. What you have to always remember is that you can do it." As long as I live, I'll never forget that.

To read the full interview and hear about Riley's experience in constituent services and its impact on his writing, visit [The English Aggie blog](#).

If you are interested in pursuing an MFA, consider attending the MFA Creative Writing Application Workshop hosted by Dr. Fuentes and Dr. DiCaglio on Wednesday, April 12th from 2-3 PM in LAAH 453.

*Interested in a career in professional writing
or publishing?*

Join us for an informational panel hosted by

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February 27 at 5PM

Zoom Link: <https://tamu.zoom.us/j/99896114578>

We'll go over:

- How we got started
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- Book departments
- A book's life cycle
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- The need for greater diversity
- How to get a job in publishing!

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welcome!

We'll make sure to
leave about 30 minutes
for Q&A, so bring your
questions!



RHETORIC & DISCOURSE STUDIES ESSAY CONTEST



\$250 PRIZE!

DEADLINE: 2/28

The Rhetoric and Discourse Studies Essay Contest annually recognizes and rewards outstanding undergraduate writing at Texas A&M University. The winner of this contest will receive a \$250 stipend and recognition at our annual awards banquet.

- Submissions must relate to rhetoric, linguistics, or discourse studies
- Must be between 2500 and 5000 words in length
- Written in response to an ENGL or LING course at Texas A&M during the 2022 calendar year

Entries should follow MLA or APA conventions with a separate title page including: the name of the submitter, UIN, email address, name of the instructor and course, and term composed. The student's name should be removed from all pages except the title page. Submissions should be sent as a Word document to engl-undergraduate-office@lists.tamu.edu by the deadline for consideration. Only one entry per student.

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your entries!



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Black History Month at Texas A&M University is an ever-expanding celebration. The mission of the Black History Month Committee is to collaborate within the university to plan, execute, and facilitate a month-long series of events and activities that provide education and enrichment about people of African ancestry and culture and their contributions to society past and present.

The Committee's goals are:

- **To provide continuity for Black History Month programming**
- **To enlighten the greater Texas A&M community of the contributions of people of African ancestry and culture and their contributions to society past and present.**
- **To enhance the sense of community amongst and promote the visibility of Black Aggies at Texas A&M.**

Learn more about Black History Month at Texas A&M and view the calendar of events at <https://dms.tamu.edu/bhm/>.