

Ways to Grow as a Writer

Part 2: Critical Discussion

by Karen Krossing

In the Summer issue of the CANSCAIP NEWS, I wrote about the value of critical writing and how it's given me mind-blowing insights about my creative writing. In this article, I'll talk about how critical discussion has done the same.

I'm a big fan of critique groups and partners, as well as conferences like CANSCAIP's annual [Packaging Your Imagination](#) and seminars with writing experts like John Truby, author of *The Anatomy of Story*. I'm such a fan that I wanted more and deeper critical dialogue, which led me to enrol in a two-year [Masters in Writing for Children and Young Adults at the Vermont College of Fine Arts \(VCFA\)](#).

Before I enrolled, I already knew what a writer can learn from interactions with other equally committed writers and motivating mentors, so I wasn't surprised when the critical discussions at VCFA took me in wonderful new directions. Now, in my second semester, I've experienced a variety of types of discussion that has expanded my awareness of writing technique in a way that is directly applicable to my works-in-progress. Like critical writing, discussions can reveal insights that writers didn't know they had, and it can open them to new ways of thinking about craft in general as well as the specifics of their creative work.

But don't just take my word for it. [Martine Leavitt](#), who is a faculty advisor at VCFA as well as an alum, enrolled in the program after she'd published four novels. Leavitt says, "I had never belonged to a workshop, and had very little training in craft, so the MFA model was a revelation. In workshop discussions and lectures, I



grew a language for what I was doing instinctively. And of course, when you have a word for something, you gain a certain mastery of it. I upped my game. Of course, you want to be careful—I've heard of workshop groups gone wrong. But in many MFA programs, you can generally expect to find experienced facilitators who will guide the discussion in honest but helpful ways, and who will help foster a culture of support and encouragement." Since graduation, Leavitt has published six more novels to critical acclaim, including [Calvin](#), which won the 2016 Governor General Award of Canada among other accolades. Her upcoming novel, working title *Buffalo Flats*, will be in bookstores in September 2019.

Here are some ways I've participated in critical discussion at VCFA:

WORKSHOPS

I've seen three approaches to workshopping: First, the traditional approach of a cone of silence over the writer who is being critiqued while others discuss the work, followed by a response from the writer. Second, a conversation that includes the

writer to extract insights about the piece from the writer directly, such as the emotional core of it. This approach involves the group asking the writer a series of questions about a work-in-progress in order to help him or her discover truths about the story. Third, generative exercises followed by a discussion of what worked and why.

LECTURES

A major portion of residency at VCFA is the lecture experience. Over the last twenty years, faculty and students have developed an evolving canon of critical discussion about children's literature that we can all access even after the MFA is over, since these lectures are available in audio form in an online community. It's an invaluable resource that I'm grateful to have.

INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS

With plenty of social events as well as the opportunity to chat over meals or in hallways, informal critical discussions abound at VCFA residencies. I'm a little shocked when I arrive home after residency and my family doesn't want to constantly discuss writing.

ONLINE FORUMS

During my [Picture Book Intensive](#) semester, I participated in a six-month online forum with four other students and my first-semester faculty advisor, the talented [Liz Garton Scanlon](#). It included both big-picture discussions and manuscript critiques, and I found it to be more demanding and focused than monthly writing groups. Amie Valore-Caplan, a fellow student in the forum, had this to say about it: "Our online conversations really fostered deep thinking for me. It's one thing to think about a topic and another to gather and organize those thoughts. Our online forum was a rich, academically focused space to talk about our work (and the things we were thinking about). The camaraderie was wonderful, too." I'm excited that my Picture Book Intensive

group plans to continue our discussions and critiques, even though our semester work is done.

In a wider online conversation, faculty, students and alumni are invited to participate in weekly forums about craft, books we read and poetry prompts. This helps to continue critical discussion even after the completion of an MFA.

DIALOGUE WITH A FACULTY ADVISOR

The core of the VCFA program is one-on-one dialogue over a whole semester with an experienced mentor about specific creative work. Martine Leavitt says, "In the VCFA model, I work closely with five students only over the course of the semester. I become highly invested in their work—I think about their characters over breakfast, I puzzle over story problems when I'm out in the garden—I am part of the evolution of the story. You can't help becoming deeply involved in the success of the writer whose work you come to love. And this work we do—it's all about love: love for words, love for the work, love for the world and for the reader. It's in this kind of environment that writers can flourish and grow perhaps a little more quickly than they might if they struggle along on their own."

This semester, my advisor is a writer with great heart and instinct—[Amanda Jenkins](#), author of the Printz Honor Book [Repossessed](#), among other titles. I'm super stoked to dive into how to better connect to my characters and convey emotional depth on the page, which are my goals for this semester.

Any critical discussion at VCFA is designed to develop growth and skills that we can use long after an MFA program is over. (This is what is different from working with a publisher, who typically gives more project-based feedback.) In my opinion, critical discussion should meet the writer where she is on her writer's journey. We should aim to be supportive of the writers we are all striving to become. It's also important to remember that the discussion should be craft-

based, rather than personal. All comments should aim to improve a piece as well as foster writer's craft. Personally, I try to avoid telling a writer how I'd revise a piece of writing, favouring an approach that helps her find her own revision plans.

To apply what I learn through critical discussion to my creative writing, I first listen with an open mind and then experiment with suggestions, rather than taking them as fact. I also like to compile discussion notes on craft wisdom in growth areas for me, like how to revise a picture book. Then when I'm writing, I pull from my notes to help me solve problems in a work-in-progress. I also form mini-projects for myself to explore an aspect of craft I've discussed. For example, I'm currently writing poetry to experiment with how to write deep emotion.

Of course, you don't need to take an MFA course to benefit from critical discussion. We can seek it out in our critique groups or more formal mentorship opportunities, like [CANSCAIP's Blue Pencil mentorship program](#). And we can apply the same approach to critical discussion that I've outlined above.

What writing craft element do you want to discuss? How can you bring together a group of like-minded writers to chat about it? How can you seek out a formal or informal mentorship to focus on that area?

Writing is such a lonely occupation—or it can be, if we don't find ways to reach out. With that in mind, I wish you many fruitful conversations that bring you writing insights. Good luck with your explorations!

KAREN KROSSING's recent titles include [Punch Like a Girl](#) (Orca Book Publishers, 2015), which was runner-up for the Kaywell Books Save Lives Award, and [Bog](#), (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2014), which won the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award. She'll be a workshop leader at CANSCAIP's Packaging Your Imagination 2018 in November.