

Daniel Poirier: The Return

Transcribed by
Jaiden Dembo

On March 26, 2018 World Literature hosted an evening with Daniel Poirier, an SFU World Literature alumni and current English instructor at Langara College. Poirier is a teacher and a writer, having completed his MFA in Creative Writing – Fiction from Sarah Lawrence College, and returned to his roots at SFU to offer World Literature students insight into the industry, his experience with World Literature and the myriad of possibilities that the World Literature program offers.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Melek Ortabasi, the current director of the World Literature program. This conversation was edited for clarity and length.

DR. O: Are there any courses, or directions you would have liked to pursue when you were studying, but didn't?

DANIEL: I wanted to take all of the World Literature



SFU by Carlos Suzara

courses, but could only take so many. Although field school was something I never did and regret big time. I made excuses, that were grounded in reality, financial and otherwise, but I do regret not going. The Honours program wasn't around when I was here, but I would've liked to have done that given the opportunity.

O: Were you involved in any extra-curricular volunteer activities such as student magazines or student unions while you were studying here?

D: I co-founded The Lyre in 2009 and stayed for the first two editions. Ken Seigneurie was the faculty go between at

the time, but it did start with the students and was definitely student lead. SIAT also had a magazine at the time that was more on the tech side of things, and so I gave them some fiction to put into their magazine. I was also a part of the student union, which was just a fledgling and loose at the time, and so I didn't go too hard into that. But I did design the original image of the globe in a book that's still floating around.

I'm thrilled that the Lyre is still a thing, since we were making it up as we went in the beginning.

O: When you first started studying World Literature,

did you expect to end up in the career you now have?

D: Yes, and no. When I first started I didn't know what I was doing. I transferred to SFU as a History student and thought I would become an English major. I'm not a career goal driven person, I'm more

“There's a certain value in aimlessness

of a “what am I interested in” person, and so World Lit was an easy hook for me. I was in between the cracks of interdisciplinary areas, and people in World Lit come from many different areas and different backgrounds and that's the way it always has been.

I knew I wanted to write, and I tried the pragmatic route of BCIT, the “how could I get a job” route, but that didn't work. So yes, once I was in World Lit I just needed to find a way to keep doing it. Whether I thought I would be teaching in the future, I don't know.

O: Students worry about what they're going to do when they graduate, but it's okay to be clueless because as long as you're applying yourself to something its going to lead somewhere.

D: Yes, there's a certain value in aimlessness.

AZADEH: But your desire to write was always there, and your talent for it.

O: Do you find your approach to teaching English is different than your colleagues because of your background in World Literature?

D: I don't attend their classes, so I couldn't exactly tell you, but I do stress certain things in my teaching. For example, teaching literature across boundaries and stressing a more interdisciplinary approach. I go out of my way to teach non-English canon literature as well, and I don't know if other teachers do what I do.

Like the World Literature program, Langara also has small class sizes, and I really like that. I'm not a stand up in

front of the class for an hour and then go home kind of teacher. A lot of my teaching methods come from World Lit, the way we pull ideas out of students, being engaged in the classroom and immersive in what we're learning. I try to push those methods, to not just tell you what to think about what we've read but to form your own thoughts and ideas. Students sometimes say things that are pretty incredible. You get somewhere either way with a discussion.

O: Has studying WL influenced your creative work in any way?

D: That's an easy one. When doing my MFA, I was supposed to be writing my thesis, but I wrote a novel instead. It was in dialogue with Kafka's *The Castle*. World Lit was when I was doing the most reading, and then during my MFA. As you get older life gets in the way. But the reading I did here, when I was the most invested, and taking it apart applies directly to my creative process.

O: Which books really stuck with you after graduating?

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“Literature is the closest you can get to knowing a person really well.

Have you taught texts that you studied at SFU?

D: Most of them, honestly. Well, I was kind of a nerd so I did engage with them a lot. But for WL 200, Metamorphosis, which I actually taught this semester at Langara, and The Great Gatsby stuck. The Fortress from WL 304, everything from East/West (WL), Andalusian poetry from Ken Seigneurie’s class, and even The Odyssey, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, and Spring Awakening, all from WL 100. I also still have my copy of Lois Tyson’s textbook, which I’ve recommended to other people. I’ve kept it, and you learn a lot about me by knowing that [laughs].

O: Have the skills you learned while studying World Literature been useful in other aspects of your life, professional or otherwise?

D: Yes, my teaching style for sure. My writing is also influenced by World Lit, and even the way I talk is influenced by it. I try to hammer home the importance of literature to my students without being pedantic.

Literature is the closest you can get to knowing a person really well. A lot of my fictions deal with identity and not knowing how to deal with other people. It’s made me more empathetic, to other people in other places too.

When doing my MFA, the director of the program had a daughter who had a disease that required a bone marrow transplant. She had to go through intense transfusions that involved a lot of pain. They created a story together when she was in pain which involved beating up monsters. Using a writing framework to place your pain on something

else is a therapeutic thing. It’s important to be able to do that, that in those bleak times in your writing life to remember that it’s worth it in the end. I couldn’t live without writing and literature.

O: Any advice for students looking to pursue similar career options as you?

D: I don’t want this to be advice. I don’t feel like I made career oriented decisions. I did sort of want to teach, there were some elective courses within the MFA to help with that. I was able to teach at an IB school and create a creative writing opportunity. I took opportunities as they came. I got an MFA, which was not the best financial decision, and I’ll be paying it off for a while, plus going to a school in the USA comes with its issues. When I was accepted into the MFA I texted my wife “Do you want to move to New York and be poor forever?” My options for jobs were low paying and limited. So debt, yes, I’ve got it.

However, I kept in contact with professors from my undergrad and they are a great resource. They’ll go to bat for

you, so don't think that when you're done here that it's over, as far as World Lit goes. I did the same with my MFA, kept in contact with professors I met and important people I met along the way. I'm teaching at Langara, I had contacts that helped me get in, because it was a highly competitive position to get.

O: It's personal connections that will help you. We know you well enough that we can write good letters of recommendation that have flavour and say something distinctive about you, not just forms letters without personality.

D: And most professors are happy to talk to students. The job market is a difficult one, but hopefully there's a job you can find. I wanted to write and read, and I embraced the possibility of failing spectacularly. Life is too short to do something you hate, whether you love it is debatable.

O: Any food for thought for fellow writers?

D: As far as a career as a

writer goes you need a certain amount of vulnerability, but to try not to take rejection letters so hard. There are so many considerations editors take when accepting or rejecting someone's writing, so don't take it personally. The nastiest rejection letter I got was a form letter, but usually that's a time issue on the editor's part. The wins will be when you get a personalized rejection letter, and if they say to keep submitting that's a huge encouragement and that

means you're getting closer. Writing moves in steps, and a lot of the time the piece of writing you're submitting needs more editing and reworking – take it as an opportunity. Rejection is a learning experience.

O: Do you find people/colleagues you talk to are unfamiliar with World Literature? How do you explain it to them?

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D: This came up more when I was an undergrad, but for my current colleagues they're curious, and familiar with comparative literature, so I tell them about the World Lit program here and how it was when I was at SFU, which isn't too different from how it is now. I tell them about the different things I read, the small class sizes and the amount of opportunities I had here and would not have had otherwise.

O: What is your best piece of advice for a student just starting to study World Literature? What about a student who is just preparing to graduate?

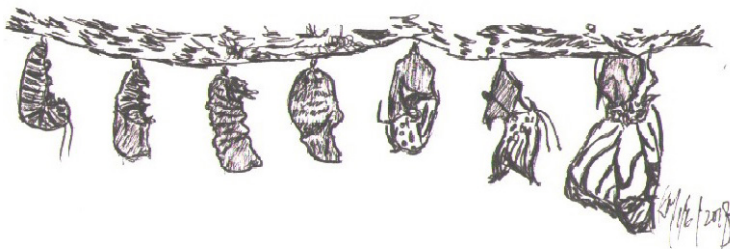
“There's no better time than now to do the thing you love.”

D: If you are just starting to study World Lit major in it, if you haven't already. You have a unique opportunity at a large university because of the small class sizes and the professors who will come to know you on a first name basis. Take all the opportunities you can, if something comes up grab it because it differentiates you from other

candidates and looks good on a resume. For first years, do field schools or go on exchange, especially if you're studying World Lit.

As for the graduates, it's a weird time in the world so I don't know. There is no better time than now to do the thing you love. Do the thing you're interested in, or at least try it. Now you have the most time and the least time to lose, even if it doesn't feel like that. That was my hesitation to pursue opportunities when I was younger. Some of this is starting to sound cheesy, but live with no regrets. At least try the thing you want to do and there's always time or pragmatism.

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Metamorphosis by Kathy Mak