

Art with Impact: An Afternoon with Ann Patchett

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I avoid speaking to professional organizations because really, what can I tell you about your work that you don't already know? I get a lot of requests to speak at medical conventions, but doctors are the worst. There's nothing you can tell a doctor that they don't already know, and they text while you're talking. I will not speak at medical conventions anymore.

I agreed to give this talk today because we're about four miles from my house and I figured any group of people who have spent as much collective time in the classroom as you have would be a good audience. In the many months since I said yes, I've thought about it a great deal, and while I can't tell you anything about your job that you don't know, I can tell you some things about my job that you could probably relate to.

I want to preface all this by saying I wrote a novel called *Commonwealth* a few years ago that was fairly autobiographical. Many people were horrified by the lack of adult supervision the children in that book grew up with. "It was the seventies," I would tell them. "We were feral. All children were feral in the seventies." Well, in my experience graduate school was feral in the eighties.

I went to Sarah Lawrence College in 1981 and had as good an undergraduate experience as any writer could dream up. I studied for a year with Allan Gurganus, and then Grace Paley, and then Russell Banks, and each of them taught me things about how to write and, more importantly, how to be a decent person, that I am leaning on to this day. I published my first story in the *Paris Review* when I was a senior.

I was a very promising kid, and when I left college I got it in my head that I needed to go to work and not back to school. I wanted to write stories about how people lived and I felt it was important to go out meet those people.

I made a very clear decision NOT to go to graduate school. I moved back to Nashville, back to my mother's house, and got a job as a cook in a restaurant. I wanted to make a living with my back and save my brain for writing.

Which is a beautiful idea, except for being tired all the time. Post-college lesson number one: manual labor is hard and should not be romanticized.

One day I burned myself while cleaning the grill at the end of my shift, and the woman who owned the restaurant told me I had to go to graduate school. I was covered in bruises and cuts and burns and she told me I needed to go to graduate school for MY SAFETY.

I got into the Iowa Writers Workshop. For the record, I didn't get in anywhere else I applied.

This was 1985. At the Iowa's Writers' Workshop in 1985 there were three levels of financial aid for first-year students: the best gig was teaching literature to undergraduates three days a week. It was the most money for the least amount of work and you got in-state tuition. The second-best gig was teaching rhetoric and composition four days a week. You were paid considerably less money for more students and more work but you still got in-state tuition. The third level of financial aid was office work, where you worked five days a week and were paid next to nothing and didn't get in-state tuition. There was also a group of students who got no financial aid at all. This system did not foster friendly feelings among classmates.

My best friend was my roommate, the poet Lucy Grealy. We had both been assigned literature fellowships, though neither one of us had ever thought about teaching. We were 21. We hadn't thought about much of anything. We were just happy that we had gotten a good financial aid package.

We showed up at the end of summer for our training program. We were told to pick two novels, one contemporary and one classic, not off a list but out of the air. I chose *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Madame Bovary*. One Shakespeare play— I chose *Othello*; one contemporary, *A Raisin in the Sun*. There was a standard *Norton Anthology* from which we would put together a section on the short story and a section on poetry once it was time to teach the short story and poetry. We filled out our order forms for the bookstore. We were given the room numbers of where we would be teaching and the name of our supervisor. Our training was then complete. I never met my supervisor.

Lucy and I went to find our classrooms in the English and Philosophy building, which everyone called Eggs and Peanut Butter. I remember it was very hot. We sat on the desk and swung our legs back and forth like we were twelve. We were 21. I had picked out novels and plays and stories I knew but Lucy's list was aspirational. The books she ordered for her students were books she wanted to read, not books she had read. Most weeks she managed to stay one chapter ahead of her students. Barely.

We were teaching literature to kids who were 19 or 20. When we collected our student evaluations, we read them and threw them in the trash. When my supervisor sent me a note telling me the day she was coming to observe my class, I sent a note back saying I was going to give a quiz that day so there would be nothing to see. I didn't know how to teach and I didn't want someone watching me do it. Fortunately, I never heard from her again.

I can only liken this experience to getting pregnant at 21 and having the baby on my own. The idea being that I was biologically capable of reproduction, and that I could be a mother because I had had a mother and seen other people's mothers and so I should know how it was done.

I was teaching literature not because I had the training, skill or desire to do so, but because the short stories in my application for graduate school, the same stories that were turned down by three other programs, had been deemed better than someone else's. Don't get me wrong, I was grateful. Even though I was making the most money possible, it still wasn't quite enough to sustain my extremely minimal existence. To avoid taking out loans, I got a job babysitting for the two-year-old daughter of Jorie Graham and Jim Galvin who ran the poetry program at Iowa. The poets and fiction writers had different schedules, so a fiction writer was needed to look after the child of poets. I was no more qualified to take care of a two-year-old than I was to teach. I had never been around a two-year-old, but I was a good cook and could clean a house like nobody's business so they liked me.

Going to the Iowa Writers Workshop was like sitting down at a poker table and being dealt a hand of cards – who was teaching the class, who was in the class, and your financial aid package – that comprised your hand. Jack Leggett, the director of the program, said on our first day when all the Workshop students were together, "Take a good look around you. You will become lifelong friends with some of the people in this room. You will have sex with some of them. You may well marry someone in this room, and then you will probably divorce them." Jack had been at Iowa a long time and he knew what he was talking about. All of those things turned out to be true.

The financial aid for our second year was handed out in the spring of our first year. Students submitted stories and poems and the faculty judged them. It was like something out of "Gladiator." The winners were called TWFs - Teaching Writing Fellows. In our second year, Lucy and I were both TWFs. TWFs taught an undergraduate workshop one day a week and made twice as much money as the people teaching three and four days a week, not because we were better teachers— nobody had any idea what kind of teachers we were – but because we were deemed to be better writers. Our time was thought to be more valuable. Again I will say it was not a system that engendered good feelings among classmates.

In the same way that I had drawn a spectacular series of good hands at Sarah Lawrence, I drew consistently bad ones at Iowa. Two semesters I studied with visiting faculty who had no interest in teaching, and two semesters I studied with long-time tenured faculty who had no interest in teaching. All four of those people are dead now and I will not speak ill of the dead, but oh, I could. The problems in those classes were not small. For example, one semester the very old and extremely unwell visiting professor conducted his workshop entirely in French. I don't speak French. That's pretty much what graduate school was like.

Back in those days the Workshop still fostered the Cult of Insanity which has played such a big part in the myth of being a writer and artist throughout the ages, that misery, mental illness, drug addiction and alcoholism were proof of your sensitivity and talent. Or to put it another way, the worse you were, the better you were. We still believed in Papa in those days, in masculinity. We believed the hallmark of literary greatness was going to war, racking up a long string of wives, and then blowing your head off in Idaho.

How, you might ask, does a graduate program foster such ideas? Like this: I was at a party one night at the house of a famous visiting professor who was not my teacher. He came up to me late in the evening and began to drunkenly harangue me in a loud voice, telling me he had never believed in natural talent, that he believed in hard work and perseverance, but clearly I had natural talent, which ruined things for everyone else. "I can only hope you die young and alone in a closet," he said to me. I was 22.

What I learned in those two years of graduate school came not from being taught, but from teaching. This new skill I was learning on the fly was something I took seriously. Teaching made me a better reader and a better thinker, I became more conscientious about how I expressed myself, which in turn made me a better writer. Still, I would like to the chance to apologize to every student I had during those two years. I'm sorry that their introduction to literature class happened to be the place I learned to teach. I'm sorry that they took out loans, or that their parents forked out money to pay for the classes I taught, but thanks to them, I got better at it.

Graduate school also made me tough. It helped me develop a very canny sense of who to listen to and who to ignore. Like Boot Camp, Iowa wrung every ounce of sentimentality out of me. I had been a tender thing when I arrived, and by the end I cared about nothing but writing better stories. Those workshops taught me to seek smart people who could help me make my work better. There is nothing more valuable than a good editor and a sharp critic, and I learned how to be that for other people as well. After two years in workshops I would say it's pretty much impossible to hurt my feelings, and that has served me well through eviscerating reviews and all manner of internet weirdness.

In the winter of my second year, the very end of 1986, I attended my first MLA convention. I had three published stories and from that landed 21 interviews, most all of them for tenure track jobs. Of all the astonishing tales from the Old World that I bring to you today, this is the most shocking fact of all, since no one would be interviewed for those jobs today without at least one book, probably two.

I don't know this, but I'm guessing MLA interviews haven't changed much in the years since I last went. The convention took place in a giant hotel and the interviewee would call up from the lobby and say, "I'm your eleven o'clock." Then you would go up to the room and knock on

the door. It was impossible not to feel like a hooker, especially since the English department faculty sat on one bed while I sat on the other. I remember arriving to one interview soaking wet from a sudden downpour on my way to the hotel, and when I started to take my raincoat off, the chairman said, "Have we told you about the wet T-shirt portion of the interview?" I pulled my coat back on and sat down on the bed, making a giant wet spot.

I got an on-campus interview at the university of Missouri. Those were wonderful people. They could not have been nicer or more welcoming. The poet Sherod Santos hosted a dinner party for me at his house, and before I ate with the search committee he called me into the kitchen. At the stove he told me, *sotto voce*, that they were going to offer me the job, and that I should not under any circumstances accept it. He said it would ruin me. He said I had a real chance to make it as a writer and a tenure-track job would be the death of me.

But of course I was going to take the job. I didn't have a job. I wanted health insurance and a TIAA-CREF account like everyone else. Before I left everyone kissed me and said they couldn't wait to see me in the fall. They didn't offer me the job.

When I think back on all of this now, and believe me, if I hadn't been asked to give this talk I probably never would have thought about any of it again, it feels like I'm cracking open a time capsule: the savagery of financial aid, the fact that there wasn't a single person of color in any of my four workshops, teachers slept with students, students slept with visiting writers, everyone was drunk, favoritism was the order of the day, and the thing that troubled me most of all, both then and now, a tenured member of the Workshop faculty who encouraged her students to shoplift when we went to evening reading at Prairie Lights, the wonderful local bookstore. She told us to stake out the book we wanted, then lean against the shelves while the author was reading and slip books in our pockets. We were poor artists, she told us. We deserved those books. Dear God! What was going on?

But then I think what an older faculty member might have said in 1985 if he, and it would have been a he, was asked to stand up and speak of his graduate student experience thirty years before? What will your own students say thirty years from now? Because in this present moment we always feel that we have fully arrived. Finally we are fair and sensitive, helpful, kind, no longer predatory. But the future will call us out just the same. As the old saying goes, every generation believes they invented sex and war. I will add to that list: graduate school. Honestly, it only seems horrifying from a distance. At the time it was kind of fun.

Here's a happier story: when I was at Iowa I was flying home to Nashville for Christmas. I was changing planes in Chicago and got lost in the airport. Remember when it was still possible to get lost in an airport? I had a very heavy bag full of zinc plates I was engraving for a printmaking class, because I failed to mention this earlier but I was actually enrolled in a the MFA program in both creative writing and printmaking for my first year in Iowa. I was that kid. I got in

completely over my head and eventually dropped out of the printmaking program but on this particular Christmas vacation my zinc plates and I were heading home.

I was walking back and forth in O'Hare, trying to figure out which way to go, when a young man in a pink Oxford shirt and khakis who looked like John Denver asked me if I need help. I did need help, and I was also flattered because he was cute. He took my ticket and said I was indeed a long way from where I needed to be and that he would walk me there. He took my heavy bag from me. I asked him if he worked in the airport and he said sort of. He was a Hare Krishna. I was briefly terrified, thinking I was going to be snatched up and forced into a cult, but he had both my ticket and my zinc plates so there was nothing I could do except follow him. When we got to the gate my plane was delayed and so of course he sat down with me. I decided I could either fight it or go with it. I went with it.

I asked him about his life and we talked for more than an hour while we waited. He said, "Imagine loving God so much you'd be willing to stand in an airport day after day trying to tell people what it was like - to love God, to feel so loved by Him. What if this joy you felt, this love, was so great that you wanted to share it with everyone, but they all rushed right by you, looking in the other direction?"

All these years later, this is still the best description of how I feel about books. The truth is to this day I would stand in an airport to tell people about how much I love books, reading them, writing them, and making sure other people felt comfortable reading and writing them.

I've had a few teaching jobs in my life, mostly visiting writer positions, but for the most part I followed Rod Santos's advice and stayed outside. I spent years as a writer for *Seventeen*. I used to write the entire magazine at *Bridal Guide* using half-a-dozen pen names. I've been a waitress, a ghost writer, a travel writer, a writer for the *New York Times*. I published my first novel at 27 and pieced together a slim financial existence until I wrote my fourth novel, *Bel Canto*. After that I bought a house, protected my privacy, and wrote.

Everything changed in 2010 when Nashville lost its giant Borders and our last independent, Davis-Kidd, which was really a semi-independent since it had been purchased by a small chain out of Ohio a few years prior to closing. People were wringing their hands and gnashing their teeth but no one was actually getting it together to open a bookstore. Whatever dreams I had for myself had never included retail but I didn't want to live in a city without a bookstore. A mutual friend introduced me to Karen Hayes and seven months later we opened Parnassus Books. That was eight years ago. Since then we've doubled in size, added a snappy blue bookmobile that goes to schools, and opened a store in the airport, which makes proselytizing in the airport more convenient.

An MFA is a funny degree. Unless you're completely delusional, and many artists are, you don't

think it's going to land you a job in your field, and yet MFA programs are thriving. I think, more than anything, it's the idea of finding like-minded people, people who care about words, color, light, meter, chapter breaks and ideas more than they care about food and shelter. As much as I look back on my time in Iowa as complete and utter madness, I did love all being in the company of people I understood.

I love the fact that Lucy and I memorized so many poems, that we tried to memorize the first chapter *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and danced in the kitchen every night after dinner. I love that the students went to bars after class to talk about Alice Munro and Raymond Carver, that we couldn't stop talking about Denis Johnson's stories in *Jesus's Son*. I saw Steven Jay Gould give a talk about evolution. I saw Tobias Wolff read "Back in the World." I saw Louise Erdrich not long after she published *Love Medicine*. I saw Czeslaw Milosz read his poems in quiet, formal English, and then turn into someone else completely as he thundered them out in Polish.

Lucy and I went to readings two or three nights a week, and on the other nights we watched foreign films. I remember going to see Cocteau's *Orpheus*, and how thrilled we were when a fight broke out in the Poet's Café, a fight over the importance of poetry! Lucy and I walked home from the theater that night, arguing over which of us was more in love with Heurtebise. We were two girls in love with a dead French actor who was playing a dead French chauffeur. When you're a writer, it's worth two years of bad classes to feel like you're with your people.

And that's what the bookstore has been like for me, it's reminded me about what I loved about graduate school. It made me realize that I could use the tools I'd been given in ways I never knew they could work. I have made a soft place for this ever-expanding group of friends and strangers to come and exclaim and argue over books. Some of us have lives that revolve around the humanities like planets circle the sun. It's not who we're trying to be, it's who we are. In the last month I've seen the Korean film *Parasite*, the four-hour Philip Glass opera *Ahknaten*; I staged a table reading of *Our Town* in my living room with neighbors; I'm presently reading *How to Catch a Mole*. I'm pretty much the poster child for the humanities at work. It is my greatest love, my deepest joy, and all I want to do is share it, to use books and writers to bridge the lonely technological divide we find ourselves stuck in. And I'll tell you, as satisfying as it is to see the store packed to the rafters for Colson Whitehead, it's even more amazing to see it jammed with the people who'd come to meet Pat Summit, the legendary coach of the Lady Vols who was dying of Alzheimer's, or Antoni from *Queer Eye* who had a new cookbook out. These were folks who might not have been in a bookstore in a long time, and they eyed the place with wonder.

When I went to graduate school hoping to be a writer, I had no idea that owning a bookstore was one of my career options. But I feel like I've done more good on behalf of culture by opening Parnassus than I have writing novels. I've made a place in my community where

everyone is welcome. We have story time and poetry readings and cookbook demonstrations. I've interviewed more authors than you could even imagine. Many of them sleep at my house. I promote the books I love tirelessly, because a book can so easily get lost in the mad shuffle of the world and it needs someone with a loud voice to hold it up and praise it. I am that person.

As every reader knows, the social contract between you and a book you love is not complete until you can hand that book to someone else and say, Here, you're going to love this. I always thought that sharing the books I loved with students, requiring them to read those books, was the greatest perk of being a teacher. But at the bookstore, people who actually want to hear my recommendations walk through the door all day long. It's a dream to hand a stranger a copy of a Jane Gardham novel, or connecting just the right person with Halldor Laxness's *Independent People*.

And it isn't just about books. Yo-Yo Ma came in one day and played a Bach suite for the twenty people who happened to be in the store. Emmanuel Ax once played the Brahms Intermezzo on our upright piano until I thought it would leap straight off the floor. High school kids come in and play that same piano. We have puppet shows and jazz workshops. Artists show their paintings. My ideas about what constitutes beauty and culture and art are constantly expanding. I've become friends with a 90-year-old whittler from East Tennessee. Book clubs meet regularly to discuss and praise and disagree. People sit and read with a dog in their laps, all sorts of different people, all political stripes, coming together to talk and listen and read.

It used to be when people came up to me in the grocery store to tell me how they felt about my books it made me nervous, but now they want to talk to me about the bookstore, they want to thank me. They tell me what they're reading and ask me what I'm reading. They introduce me to their children. "I know you," a little girl said to me once. "You're the person who owns all the libraries." Not exactly, I said, but you're close.

Here's something I never learned in graduate school: if you want to save reading, teach children to read. Engage children in reading. "You have to raise your own customers," a bookseller friend told me before we opened. He was right. We have a magnificent children's section. We have a story time reader who can play the ukulele. I have befriended Sandra Boynton and Jackie Woodson and Kate DiCamillo and Jason Reynolds. I've published a children's book of my own since opening the store called *Lambslide*. It's about voting. I can make a safe place in my community for reading and I can excite children about voting. I might as well be Spider Man.

One night in the grocery store a couple of rock star hipsters came up and asked me if I was the bookstore lady. I said I was. They said their daughter, who they had read to since birth, was not a comfortable reader. They had bought her *The Secret Garden*, they had bought her *Anne of Green Gables*, they had gotten nowhere. "What can we do?" they asked me in the cheese section, and to my own astonishment, I knew the answer because I had seen it played out time

and again. I told them to bring her into the store, give her a copy of *Captain Underpants*, and let her sit on one of the filthy dog beds with a shop dog in her lap and read the book to the dog.

They brought their daughter to the store the next night and she read to a very old dog named Bear. I cannot tell you how much this thrilled me.

I'm so sorry I made my students back in Iowa read *Madame Bovary*. Don't get me wrong, I love *Madame Bovary*, but these were not literature majors. These were kids who may have had one shot in college to feel thrilled and engaged by reading and I'm fairly sure I blew it for them. When I was young, I thought that *Madame Bovary* was the embodiment of a liberal arts education, but the embodiment of a liberal arts education is the ability to be flexible and curious, to be able to teach *Othello* and then write for *Bridal Guide*, publish several novels and open a bookstore, to promote the work of living writers, to change and change and change. There was a time when I thought nothing could surpass winning a big literary award, but the thing that's been so much better has been creating jobs in my community, to be part of the Parnassus Foundation which buys books for children who can't afford books so that they can know the thrill of owning the book they love, to find as many ways as possible for literature to make a difference in the lives of as many people as possible.

I have become a spokesperson not just for Parnassus but for reading, and for independent bookstores everywhere. Last week Amazon opened a brick-and-mortar store in the mall across the street for us. How well are we doing, people want to know. I'll tell you how well we're doing. They've come to kill us. But we'll survive. Nashville has been incredibly kind to us. They value all things independent, and as a Nashvillian, so do I. The money that you're so kindly paying me to be here today will all be donated to the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, BINC, which makes emergency grants to booksellers in need. I'm the BINC Ambassador, and right now we're helping California booksellers who've lost their homes and jobs because of fire.

Not everyone is going to open a bookstore, I understand that, but I had no idea that this was something I could do. That's what I call on all of you here today to tell your students - their future is not one thing. There are so many possibilities that can come as a result of intelligence, education, curiosity and hard work. No one ever told me that and I'm sorry it took this long for me to figure it out.

Did I need an MFA in order to write a novel? No, I did not. Did I need an MFA to open a bookstore? No again. But I had been a solitary kid, and I had imagined a solitary life for myself. My MFA showed me the value of community. We are social creatures; even the introverted readers, the silent writers, need to have a place to go. People need to feel welcomed, understood, and given a place to belong. I had needed that once, without even understanding that I needed it, and now I can give it to others. That's how I wound up putting my degree to work. Sometimes your truest destiny is the thing you never saw coming.