

LeeAnne Carlson: A Nontraditional Student

LeeAnne Carlson (MFA, Fiction) began her studies at the University of Houston, back in the day when the school still housed a live cougar mascot. She left to pursue midwifery and eventually started--what else?--a goat farm with her family. She returned to finish her BA and is now a CWP grad student. As an undergrad, she also served as fiction editor, then editor-in-chief, of UH's undergraduate literary magazine *Glass Mountain*. We're so lucky to have her in our literary community.



Student Profile

Writing and goats--do they pair well together?

Of course! It worked for Carl Sandburg, right? When it comes to inspiration, definitely. Goats have a diabolical way of making you look at the world a little differently. When it comes to having the time to write? Not so much. Goat cheese, though, fuels anything.

You graduated with your BA from UH right before enrolling in the MFA program. How did being a student here prepare you for your studies now? (Were any faculty members particularly supportive?)

It was wonderful to be able to begin my MFA with faculty who were already familiar with my work. I know that one school of thought says it might be better to go elsewhere, so that I could learn from other writers--but I did not feel I had come close to plumbing the depths of what the faculty had to offer here at UH. In addition, having completed an undergraduate honors thesis with faculty here certainly saved time which will allow me to (I hope) complete both a nonfiction and fiction thesis during my time in the CWP. Supportive faculty? Beyond supportive. It often felt as if I had an entire team guiding me and cheering me on. Chitra Divakaruni and Audrey Colombe advised me throughout the MFA application process, Pete Turchi has been a valuable part of my work on the memoir. Toni Nelson was an incredible sounding board and advocate and I will always

be incredibly thankful for her support. I walked into my first undergraduate "Intro to Creative Writing" class and came face to face with Martha Serpas. I told Martha that I didn't write fiction or poetry, I just wrote nonfiction. Martha challenged me, pushed me, unnerved me, and changed my life forever by changing my perspective of myself as a writer.

Any advice for other "nontraditional" students?

I have always been nontraditional, between being a midwife, goat farmer, mother of a dozen--why should this be different? Nontraditional students should never allow themselves to feel "less than." The nontraditional student deserves the same opportunities as the traditional student, no matter how many decades divide them. Seize every opportunity you have, once you have enrolled. It can be challenging to juggle the additional outside responsibilities that nontraditional students often have such as family, jobs, etc, but nontraditional students also tend to be more committed and flexible. Particularly when it comes to writing, the nontraditional student has the life experience to make the most of the opportunities here at UH. How many undergraduate students get to study with faculty of this caliber? Seriously, though, I returned as a 48 year old college freshman and it took me two semesters to stop laughing to myself; I was having such a good time that it seemed I was getting away with something illicit.

What are you working on now?

Sometimes I wonder what I am not working on. In fiction I am working on how the odd and dysfunctional history of the founders of an East Texas town deep in the Piney Woods shaped the town as it is now. This is particularly seen through the relationship established between three very different women. My original goal was a Faulkner-esque sensibility, but as Robert Boswell cautioned me, "We read Faulkner to understand exactly what it is we shouldn't even try to do." I am also working on a memoir, which has the familiar backdrop of a family moving to the country and starting a goat farm, overlaid with how that family is impacted when this move triggers mental health issues. Then there are the poems, which increasingly looks at the environment in terms of fertility, such as contrasting trash in the ocean with a whale placenta. What can I say? I spent nearly 30 years not writing--I have a lot of time to make up.

Should you have queries or wish to support the cwp: cwp@uh.edu