

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

3/25/24 Renee Haddad

Individualized Major: Creative Writing and Film

Ken:

This is Indie Major, a show devoted to the wide-ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier.

I'm here with Renee Haddad. How are you Renee?

Renee:

I'm good. How are you?

Ken:

Very good. Very good. So you're here to tell us about your individualized major. So why don't you tell us what it is and what it's about?

Renee:

My individualized major is called Creative Writing in Film. So a lot of the courses I've taken have focused on analyzing literature, films, and then actual writing with the emphasis on writing four films. Is this something that you've been interested in for a long time? I've always loved watching movies, reading books, and thinking about the ways that those types of art can impact people. And I never really thought that it would be possible for me to make a career

there until I realized that I could combine them into a major and not give up that passion, I guess.

Ken:

So your major combines not just the creative writing part. And we'll get to that because I think you're writing, you have written some fiction and you're also writing in the screenplay genre, right?

Renee:

Mm hm.

Ken:

But in addition to the writing, your major also includes studying various forms of creative work, film and literature, is that right?

Renee:

Yes. So a lot of my film classes have focused on things that you would need if you were like directing films. So lighting or like set design and stuff. And I kind of realized that that wasn't exactly what I was interested in. But then I took a film writing course and we talked about how dialogue and movement of an actor and different language can really impact the way that an audience feels when they hear or see something visually. And I really fell in love with that aspect of it. And trying to communicate without speaking, I guess, but having somebody else speak through their movements, with what they're withholding, anything like that. I really enjoyed in terms of screenwriting.

Ken:

Now, how much have you actually written as part of your major?

Renee:

So I took a class and we wrote like different scenes, but not like a cohesive project. Until the very end, we wrote a short film screenplay, but like just kind of scenes using different, like storytelling strategies, like elliptical storytelling, like all that type of stuff.

Ken:

Can I ask you what your final screenplay was about, your short screenplay?

Renee:

It was kind of like a drama. It was talking about grief and forgiveness and kind of in that realm of things.

Ken:

And when you write a screenplay like that for this film writing course, do you start to imagine maybe finding somebody on campus who does film and video production or that kind of thing. And actually maybe showing your screenplay and getting some kind of project together, like to actually make it happen?

Renee:

That would be very cool. I struggle a lot with expressing and showing other people what I'm working on. I get very self conscious about it and that is one thing. That doing an individualized major that's focused on this exact area has really brought me to and that's what I need to do if I want to do anything in this field that's necessary. And practicing that has been very challenging. But I would be interested in that if that came up.

Ken:

So I know that you've also taken film studies classes, right? Where you've just watched what? Like films from a certain region or in a certain genre. Is that true?

Renee:

Yeah, I've taken a woman gender in film class that studied how women have been portrayed in media, even some works of writing. But over time and how that's changed given like social circumstances. I've taken like a film genres course that goes across different genres and how certain films are influenced by films of the past and how they have changed over time. Again, I'm taking a film film course right now called Studies in Film History, I think it's called, and we watched like a chaplain film the other day. And then I think it's something like Journey to the Moon.

Ken:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. George Melies.

Renee:

Yeah.

Ken:

And what was the Chaplin film you watched? Modern times?

Renee:

Yes.

Ken:

Oh, yes. Nice. Oh, good. Also, as part of your major, you're taking literature courses, right?

Renee:

Yes.

Ken:

Has there been anything in the area just of studying literature that sort of leapt out? Was there a book or a certain genre that you really ended up enjoying or finding valuable?

Renee:

I took a class that focuses on short stories and my professor, right off the bat, he was like, this is a course that's going to talk about structure. And like how an author uses different techniques to do things. And I was a little put off at first, but I think I learned like a ton in that course about how different structures can influence an audience. I guess obviously it's not a film or it's not like a visual medium as much as it is just like reading and, you know,

understanding what you're reading. But I think that like structure, characterization, metaphor, anything that impacts an audience can translate over in a different sense with film. So like elliptical storytelling is something we talked about in film writing, but it's also something that we touched on a little bit in the short story. And there was a lot of like narrative techniques, overlapping and stuff like that.

Ken:

And remind us what elliptical storytelling is.

Renee:

So it's kind of like you have a scene before something major happens, for instance. And then you have the scene after. Without including that scene where the huge thing happens. You're able to convey that something has happened without explicitly saying this happened.

Ken:

So you really think a lot about technique and it's true, short stories, I've often told creative writing students because they're so visual and they're so accustomed to watching film and TV that all of the detail that you see on the screen when you're writing fiction, you have to accomplish all of that in language. So you see authors really taking a lot of space and time to describe highly detailed and specific settings. For example, or the way that characters look or they're dressed or whatever, or their gestures.

Renee:

Yeah.

Ken:

So all that, in some ways it really is a visual medium in the sense that it's describing all those details and evoking them in your imagination. So let's say from your short story class, was there a story that leapt out at you as doing that particularly well, that stood out in your memory?

Renee:

Yeah, A hunger artist by Franz Kafka and Good Country People by Flannery O'connor leapt out at me.

Ken:

Interesting, so Kafka and Flannery O'connor, sort of different right? Kafka, what about the Hunger Artist you, you know, leapt out at you?

Renee:

I think a lot of what leaps out at me in short stories is like the emotion. Because I think because it's such a short form, it has to focus on conveying one emotion. Obviously there's more, but like I think a lot of them like heavily convey one emotion. That one, like desperation, kind of like loneliness, almost like a lack of attention that this like the hunger artist he's experiencing that leaped out at me, kind of like that lasting emotion, right?

Ken:

And Flannery O'connor. What about her stuff? Did you like?

Renee:

I think a lot of the suspense and just like, I don't know, a lot of her stories, like the last thing I think will happen always kind of just happens. And I really like that element of just like human absurdity almost.

Ken:

Right. Yeah, yeah, no, that is great about her stuff. And I think that stuff really works well in film too, doesn't it?

Renee:

Yeah.

Ken:

A lot of screenwriters take advantage of that. Suddenly this thing comes up and turns the plot in a completely different direction, and you did not see it coming. Let me ask you this. When you write dialogue, have you had any specific coaching on like what makes good dialogue Or what makes believable dialogue? Or different tricks you can do to make dialogue do what you want it to do. Because it seems sort of like a difficult prospect.

Renee:

A lot of what I've learned from writing not great dialogue and trying to get better at it, is trying to make it seem natural and realistic. Like a lot of what we communicate through dialogue when you're writing

is actually unspoken. There's like, okay, two characters, if they've known each other for a long time, they're not super formal, they have inside jokes. They might be able to say like a word and communicate a whole idea to each other that the audience maybe isn't so clued in on. And it's kind of balancing that so the audience can understand, but also it feels like, yeah, these two people are not meeting for the first time.

Ken:

Now you mentioned career. When you think about this individualized major in creative writing and film, and think about that in terms of your long term pursuits, what is it that you envision?

Renee:

I think in my wildest dreams, I would be able to write something or either like a film or a show, or something that is received well. But I also have been trying to be really realistic and have a plan that's solid to do as well as I'm writing. Instead of just trying to write and maybe not working, unfortunately, and then not really knowing what to do next. My professor said that no matter what you're doing, you can always be writing. It doesn't have to be the main thing you're doing, but you can always go home and write. You can always write on your commute, like whatever it is. You can always be writing without it necessarily being this huge risk you're taking.

Ken:

Right. I did want to mention, so not only have you done this major in creative writing and film, by the time you came to us to talk about the possibilities of doing an individualized major, you had already completed a major is that right?

Renee:

Nearly it was mostly done. I had I think one more. I've only taken one, like math class to complete my math major.

Ken:

All right. So, you had practically completed a math major by the beginning of your junior year?

Renee:

End of it I would say.

Ken:

It would be the end of your junior year. Okay. So you're a math major, double major in creative writing and film, and math. Now, for a lot of people that probably seems like there's some cognitive dissonance there or some interesting contradictions. And so what is interesting to you about math?

Renee:

I really like algebra and number theory, I think is very cool as well. Because once you finish like the calculus and like the multi variable sequences, it's all about proof writing. Introductory courses to proof writing would be like, why is an odd number plus an odd number and even number? Why is that true in every single circumstance as opposed to, you know, you can't just say three plus 3 is 6. It has to be like every single odd number. Every

single odd number is always going to be an even number. And then it advances from there. And so analysis was a lot about proving things that we had done in calculus like years and years ago and abstract algebra, which I just took, that's probably my favorite math course I've taken at UConn.

Ken:

Wow. In my mind I'm always wondering like, how do you, do you ever bring these two things together, math and the realm of literature and creative writing and film. One thing I would maybe ask you is, do you see a parallel between them in terms of the fact that they're both asking questions, whether it's human questions that you're dealing with in a narrative, with characters who are maybe working to try and figure something out about their lives. Over here you've got this process of algebra and creating proofs and observing things and asking questions. Is there some parallel there?

Renee:

I think you could definitely make a parallel. A lot of math, especially like upper level is like teaching you how to think, how to problem solve. I think of it a lot like a puzzle and you're trying to fit the pieces together and create something that is logical and makes sense. Whereas creative writing, as opposed to like teaching you how to think, looks at why people think the way they do, in a sense, like a character. Why are they doing what they're doing? I honestly like I got into creative writing and started considering it as a major, as something real that I could pursue because of I felt it was lacking in math. Like I wasn't getting that out of it like that human aspect.

Ken:

And yet when human beings do math right, why are they doing that?

Renee:

Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah.

Ken:

Because they're trying to manage their reality, right? They're trying to break it into component parts and figure out maybe something about it, to set their minds at ease or something? I don't know. So was math something that was interesting to you from way back when you were a kid or when did that sort of all happen?

Renee:

I think that high school level math, I think I did relatively well in and it was something that made sense to me without having to put obviously you have to do you have to put effort into things, but without having to put a lot of additional effort in, I was understanding what I was learning. But I don't know if that has been my biggest passion, I would say.

Ken:

And writing is becoming a passion, it sounds like?

Renee:

Yes.

Ken:

And do you feel like it comes to you as easily as math?

Renee:

It's different but I think aspects of it, do I like, I really like to like observe people and like the different types of people and see how they act, how they react in certain circumstances and stuff like that. So being somebody that does that a lot and writing different characters has been really fascinating because, you know, everybody reacts differently to everything. But why is that? How does that come into play, especially when people are alone? I think that's really interesting. Like loud personalities, How are they when they're alone? Like what does that look like has been super interesting for me.

Ken:

Wow. All right, well that is great. It sounds like you're working on all kinds of fascinating projects and going in different directions. Thank you so much for coming in.

Renee:

Thank you so much for having me.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to Indie Major. If you'd like more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, please visit our website at iisp.uconn.edu. That's

iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.