

Alumni Spotlight: Joe Manning

B.A. English (2012)



Why did you choose UofL English?

I wanted to read books and talk about them with very smart people, of course!

Please share a little bit about a favorite class or project you developed in English about which you are particularly proud.

I chose to write an undergraduate honors thesis which was overseen by Drs. Ryan, Jaffe, and Pecknold. I researched and wrote about early commercial hillbilly and country music as a convenient and reproducible means of supporting the national mythos around the pre-Civil War agrarian South. I argued that the tropes and motifs of the music were instrumental in sustaining the utility and durability of the Lost Cause Movement into the 20th century. My professors were really thoughtful in their support and interrogation of my ideas. I continued my preoccupations with those concerns when I pursued a Master's in Creative Writing.

Share your best memory of being an English student.

My computer crashed and I lost my entire thesis manuscript. I went to Dr. Ryan's office, was a ghost, and said, "Well. That was it. I'm done for." She told me to breathe while she fetched her computer with husband, Brian, who restored the file, and my academic ambitions, within about five minutes.

What is the most important thing learned while you were an English student?

I learned how to read with my whole intellect, I guess. What I mean is that I learned how to read beyond and through the text. How to inspect and interrogate ideas in a way that can render more information than is on the page. I also learned my own tolerances for criticism as a tool and, by and by, how to put that tool away when it's time to make art. This last part took a while, if I'm honest.

Describe your career path. How did your English education prepare you for what you are doing today?

I think the impulses that draw us to the major are the impulses that make us the right candidates for so much interesting and important work out in the world: dedicated curiosity, the ability to correlate concepts and find the resonances and dissonances between them, and the love of language and story. Ferreting out narrative threads that could constitute compelling, humane nonfiction is at the center of my work. My liberal arts education, and my focus on English language and literature, gave me many of the tools I need to be a sensitive and curious writing instructor, interviewer, and editor. I feel a lot of gratification working with people as they cultivate, amplify, and celebrate their lived experiences as narrative, and I need every bit of my English major to do that work.

What is one of your favorite professional accomplishments and/or most fascinating aspects of your job?

What still shocks me after ten years of working at Louisville Story Program, is how readily apparent our common dignity is when we just stop and listen to one another. Everybody is out here living incredibly rich lives, carrying all of these magnificent stories and perspectives with them through the grocery store check-out line or the car wash. It can be sort of staggering to contend with, actually. Like the feeling of awe you get looking around the stacks in the library, but multiplied by 8 billion. I can't believe I get to hang around and listen to people talk about their lives and work with them in the process of committing those experiences to the page or to the airwaves.

What advice would you give current students or recent graduates interested in pursuing a career in your professional field?

Be rabidly curious about the people you encounter. Cultivate a reflexive view of strangers as people who are inherently amazing and very beautiful. Find the voice inside of you that says, "It is possible that I am not correct about my assumptions," and believe that voice for a little while. Make a practice of periodically NOT having an opinion, NOT generating a position and instead just observing and listening.

What advice would you give students pursuing an English degree?

Read until you are dizzy, and then go to instructor / professor office hours with difficult and weird questions in hopes that you will receive difficult and weird answers. Find a mentor.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your time with UofL's English program?

As an undergrad, I habitually picked the lock to a graduate carrel in Ekstrom to study in silence. Thank you. I am sorry.