

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]—

I hope this finds you well. Thanks for your patience waiting for my comments. I've read through your draft a few times now and feel ready to respond. I'm going to write out two sets of comments for you. The first are motivated by my sense of what your goals seem to be for this directed study. The second are more, for lack of a better word, editorial. In other words, the second set are more about the text itself and how I read it as a piece of creative nonfiction, not really memoir as I see it, but as a kind of essay of ideas. So:

#### Part I

In talking to you about this project, I came away with two ideas. First, it was my sense that you wanted to be done with this fairly quickly and with an honest commitment to the work and writing—but within reason. I did not get the sense that you wanted to meet regularly or to do much additional reading or revision. Additionally, it was my sense that your goal was to essentially be able to use your extensive and impressive career in publishing as a way to earn credit towards your MA. I want to be respectful of your goals here. It's these goals, really, that are the purpose for this text to exist. So, to that end, as you will see in the hard copy of the draft, this is a very cleanly written document. It's a very straightforward account of the handbooks you were connected with during your time in publishing. I recognize that the document is not finished at 20 pages, that you had some questions about what you might expand on, and that you do not have a conclusion. Of these, I would say you need most of all to conclude the piece, but I do not know that adding more based on the parentheticals within the document would really add more to the text beyond length. If you would prefer, once you've concluded the piece, titled it, and cleaned anything up that needs cleaning within the document, you can submit the piece for a grade of B+. This is a graduate level course and grading works differently than in an undergraduate course. A B is reasonable grade that will not hurt you academically. You can choose to revise based on the feedback that I will include in Part II. You aren't obligated to, and you certainly can make decisions about how much of the revision you elect to pursue. I can't guarantee an A grade if you do chose to revise, but I think that meaningful revision would not result in anything lower than an A-.

#### Part II

In this section, I'm going to respond to this text the way I respond to all writing that I get—from my first year students to my graduate students to my colleagues on this campus. I respond as a reader of creative nonfiction, not even so much as a teacher or a writer in the genre, but as a reader first and foremost.

This is perhaps more information than you want but since you really don't know me as a teacher or reader I will give to you the same talk I give to all of my students—again from first year right on through—about how I read and respond to student writing. First off, I don't give grades in classes except for at midterm and the end of the semester. I do this via grade letter—and I've included a few with names changed so that you might see that when I say this is how I

respond to student writing I really mean it. I do this so that I might have the privilege of reading and responding to student writing in a way that is not tied explicitly to a grade. This practice, for me, comes from St. Augustin's idea of *Caritas*—or charity. That was his theory on how we should read the bible. You read with an open heart, you find God; you read with a closed heart, you find evil. So I read your work with, wait for it, love. I look to find what is possible in the writing rather than what is there. And that is the basis for my comments here.

As I read and thought about your text, I wanted to identify those parts that I was most interested in and wanted to know more about. And I wanted to pay attention to those parts where my attention and interest wandered. I also thought about what felt missing from the text for me as reader, first, and then in terms of the genre of the personal essay or, more generally, creative nonfiction, second.

What I am interested in as a reader is the ways handbooks changed over your career. You talk about layout and sales numbers, but what is most interesting to me is when you talk (often briefly) about the significant changes in the philosophy of what a handbook should be doing that then manifested in considerable changes in content. What would be interesting to me is to hear from you why you think those changes took place and what that actually means. Very specifically, what do the changes in the handbook mean in terms of a public understanding of literacy? What do the changes mean in terms of the publishing industry? What does this say about who students are and what kinds of literacy practices are valued both in higher education and beyond and the changes over the years? I feel like the handbooks you've included here would suggest interesting observations/answers to these questions. That is where I'm most interested in your work.

In other words, I see the handbook as a totem/metaphor. Investigating changes in content, platform, design suggest things about a larger world—publishing, higher education in a democracy, what it means to be literate. I think that a tighter focus on the handbooks would be a very interesting study.

What was less interesting to me was the name dropping of folks you worked with and the sort of longish explanations for why these people were the people to work with. As I write in the margins, these people are not Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. It doesn't impress a general reader as much as perhaps it should, but there it is.

I am also less interested in the litany of sales figures and the like. It's not that I don't think a sentence or two about popularity isn't relevant. I do—see my comment about the handbook as totem/metaphor. But I don't need as much of it as I get.

Another aspect of the text that I struggle with is character development. There are no characters in this piece. There are names but no characters. Even you are not a character in this piece. There is a decision to be made here. What is not that interesting is a kind of march through the highlights of your career. What *is* interesting is what these moments meant to you not professionally in terms of career trajectory, but professionally in how you, an expert,

understood the shifts and changes in again, publishing, literacy practices, the landscape of higher education. There is a decision to be made here—use your professional history as a frame to discuss the handbooks or actually say something about your personal understanding of your professional history, but I don't need the timeline unless you are going to do something with it.

One way I could see your professional history working is as another way—a sort of second strand—of identifying change. From what little is here, it seems to me that there was a very elite identity among publishers and publishing when you started. The way they called you college travelers and the idea of publishers having “book bags.” Was it all tweed jackets and white men? Were most of you educated in small liberal arts colleges in the East? When did that start to change? Or did it? And why? We lose sight of your story really quickly, though you would have to return to it in the end. I wonder if reintroducing you as a person learning the field would enhance this piece.

From a genre standpoint, what I was looking for in your narrative was threefold: 1) what was your argument. What is it you want to say about the evolution of the college writing handbook over 36 years and what that tells about . . . what? Like I've said elsewhere, what I would be most interested in is seeing how those changes represent shifts in things like who has access to a college education and how do we make space for them in the academy.

2) In this draft, the narrative arc is not clear. This starts with you as a wide-eyed youth eager to get back from the hinterlands and back to Boston, where does it end? Still wide-eyed? About some things? How did you bob and weave for 36 years to figure out and be successful in this landscape?

3) There are no scenes. The genre's mantra is “show don't tell.” Now, that's not entirely true. You need to tell sometimes. But knowing when to tell and when to show is the real trick. You may recall in our meeting that I talked about this essay as unfolding in five scenes. What would those scenes be for you?

4) There is no theory-making. This is the biggest thing. This is a straight march through events. There is no reflection and what was important about different moments. That is what is most interesting to any reader—what does it all mean? Why should I care about any of this? What do I understand better for reading this story? This connects, of course, back to #1 (what is your argument).

So, this is, I know, a tremendously long set of comments. I can see so much bubbling under the surface, and that is, frankly, what I'm most interested in. I can't help but want to hear more. But you are the author here and will make the decisions about where this text goes. I want to give you some time with it before moving forward. You essentially have two choices: you can complete and proof the document I've read and be done with it or you can engage in whatever aspects of revision you'd like to engage in and we'll go from there. Either way, I'm satisfied we've both met our obligations.

I've included a copy of this letter with your draft (that really has very little writing on it) in a manila envelope on my Tilly 310 door. You can pick it up when you are next on campus. I did not include the sample grade letters in the envelope and only included those documents in this email—I've changed names to protect student privacy. This week I have to take a job candidate to dinner on Thursday so I'm not here when you are. Next week, I could meet on Thursday if you want to talk further about this draft and my comments. I'm on campus Tues/Thurs and Wednesday, but not Monday or, usually, Friday.

Again, thanks for your patience with my response. I hope that I've given you some directions to take your remarkable professional story to the next level.

Best,

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