

Paul Michaud

Groton School, Nashville, TN



2018 Claudia Ann Seaman Award Runner Up for Fiction

Advanced Fiction

The consensus among the members of the University English Department was that, while Melanie's writing sample was neither diverse nor inclusive, it sure was a good study of some sensitive white kids who went to college and found themselves sadder than they thought possible. This sadness was partly because the characters in her story had had a (predictably) sheltered upbringing in a (predictably) upper-middle-class town in Connecticut. The English department also agreed that, while Melanie's story didn't tackle any issues currently plaguing the country (racism, division, gun violence, fracking, etc), it revealed things at just the right moment. Things like that the main character Ida's boyfriend of three years was cheating on her with another girl from their shared hometown when they (Melanie and the boyfriend) went back home from Wesleyan for break. Or that Melanie had never noticed that the other girl was in a picture on her dorm room wall. Or that it was a class photo, featuring her boyfriend Chad and this other girl, standing next to each other at graduation. The general consensus was also that Melanie's word choice was understated and powerful, and her use of commas was, to quote one professor, "exemplary." And so Melanie was admitted to ENG400: Advanced Fiction.

She got the email on a Friday night. She was at a party getting what her boyfriend Brody called "daunted." Sometimes Melanie felt like Brody was a fraud but at some moments she could feel his straining sincerity. She could virtually hear his brain whirring at 200 rpm, trying to impress her. *Did you read The Sun Also Rises? Daunted is from The Sun Also Rises!* Melanie was almost on her third drink but nowhere near daunted. Some bass-boosted music was playing from a speaker in the corner. There was a big, rusty boat in the middle of the room filled with beer cans. Someone from the frat they were at had spray painted it with the title of a Jimmy Buffet song: boat drinks. Melanie could see Brody out of the corner of her eye. He was jumping around in a cutoff tee shirt, waving his arms like something she didn't have a word for yet. She checked



her phone and saw that she had gotten into the class. Her hands were shaking a little as she checked the other recipients of the email. It was a lot of people she didn't know.

She started her first story that night in her room, still a little drunk. It was about a high schooler who read too much. She titled it *Bookish*. All the main character did was wander around his prep-school campus and cherry-pick lines from books to describe people. The main character, Alton, had a math teacher who was "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax." The headmaster was "Hemingwayesque." He called his physics teacher Yorick. It was a bad story, and it lacked plot development, but Melanie had worked hard on it. So she was surprised when, after reading *Bookish* aloud in workshop, she looked up to find nine faces simpering back at her, full of pity. The professor asked the class what they thought worked in the story, to start. Seven hands shot up, and Melanie felt like crying.

Class progressed. Her classmates were all wearing Birkenstocks and held gel pens in their right hands. A few hadn't showered. She thought about how Brody sometimes strained, and how the main character of *Bookish* sometimes strained, too, but how both Brody's and Alton's straining combined was nothing next to everyone in class. Everyone was interrupting each other and rephrasing what had already been said. Someone described Alton as "ruminative." Someone else described the prep school as "sumptuous." A third person said that the story didn't seem real. Some others snapped in agreement, and Melanie became aware of just how many people had read something she had made up.

That night, Melanie called her mother and told her that she wanted to come home. Her mother asked what was wrong.

"I don't know," Melanie said.

"You've never wanted to come home before," said her mother.

"I know," Melanie said.

"Well, what's wrong, then?"

"I don't want to see Brody anymore."

"Oh."

Of course, this wasn't true. Brody annoyed Melanie sometimes but never enough that she didn't want to see him. Whenever they drove to college together, he would invent little songs for all the towns they passed. She knew his bedroom as well as she knew hers. But coming home still seemed the right thing to do, and so, with apologies to her teachers she did.



At home, she took the opportunity to write the second of three stories for the class. It was longer, since she had more time. Sort of vindictively, Melanie thought, it was hyper-real. The counter in the main character's off-campus apartment was dusty and scattered with poppy seeds. The character (named Melanie, too) wore grey-green pants, like Melanie herself. She went to Wesleyan. She had the beginnings of a drinking problem, as did her boyfriend (referred to in the story only as B – – .) Story-Melanie went to her political science classes and wrote papers and went to the dining hall and ate alone. The story took place in the winter and Story-Melanie was sad. Not really so much sad as in constant, screaming pain about the problems of the world. Story-Melanie thought about all the issues that the first story – the one she'd used to get into the class – hadn't dealt with. She thought about how screwed-up the system of American higher education was. She thought about how no one was really genuine. She called her best friend back at home twice a day. She refused therapy because therapists were frauds.

This time, in class, no hands went up, and everyone looked at their shoes when the professor asked for the good parts of the story. The professor stopped Melanie after class and asked if she needed help. Melanie said that Story-Melanie was a character. The professor said that, in that case, Melanie should think about why she named Story-Melanie what Melanie had named her.

The third story was two pages, single-spaced. It followed the plot of *Macbeth*, but it was set in Seattle. Macbeth was a short-haired female barista who saw a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* hovering in front of her face instead of a knife. Lady Macbeth was her long-haired boyfriend whose blood-stained hands were actually stained with tomato juice from canning tomatoes for Saturday morning's farmer's market. Everyone laughed in class, including her professor. Melanie joined in, but she hadn't meant for it to be funny.

When she got back from class, Brody was asleep in her bed smelling like cologne. Melanie changed out of her hot sweater, slipped out of her dorm room in flip-flops, and went to the campus Career Center, on the third floor of a huge concrete building.

She hadn't ever been there before. There was molded, bright-colored plastic furniture everywhere. The motivational posters on the walls were cheesy and sincere but didn't really strain. The receptionist was walking on a treadmill desk, wearing yoga pants and running shoes.

"Hi!" Said the receptionist.

Melanie became suddenly aware of how she looked in the office. She was wearing her flip-flops, a dirty pair of jean shorts, and a flannel shirt tied at the bottom. She was carrying a canvas backpack. In her back pocket was a copy



of a Graham Greene book. She fled without explanation, out the door and across the street and back up into her room.

When she opened her door, Brody was still asleep in the bed. Melanie sat down on the couch and thought about things. About how “Brody” didn’t sound so much different than “Chad.” About how her mother had talked to her after she had walked past Brody and that other girl on the street. About how Brody had basically cried while telling her how he had only kissed the other girl, and only once. About how clever it was to add the detail about the class picture into her story, even though it hadn’t really happened. She hadn’t been proud of the original story like she’d been proud of the ones she’d reached deep inside and made up. It had seemed more natural, though; she hadn’t been able to find any flow since.

But now there was nothing for her to say. Pages of gently worded comments piled on her desk. Melanie could skim a few from where she was sitting on her couch. She thought about how you had to word your comments. “*I liked this, but...*” “*Nice descriptions, but...*” “*Good job! I’d like to see...*” Melanie was glad no one had read the first story – the one she had used to get into the class – but she also knew it had been the best one, because it was all true. She had changed the names, of course, and fucked around a little with the timeline, but there it was, all of it. And she was glad that no one had put comments in the margins of that one.

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I fell in love with it and immediately saved it to my desktop. I love the start, I love the pace, I love the joke about comma use, I love the idea of a litmag publishing a piece about an author working through feedback. Oooooooh. There’s something here that I think most of our authors and readers will fall in love with – it’s eerily relatable.

Paul Michaud lives in Nashville, Tennessee. He attended the Groton School in Groton, MA, from which he graduated in 2018.