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Teaching Writers How to Write

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Teaching writers h

It may have taken Anna Keeseey 10 years to finish her first novel, but it was worth the wait.

With her keen sense of place and rich command and love of language, it's little wonder that *Little Century* has been lauded by the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Oprah Magazine* (annakeeseey.com/blog).

Keeseey, the Renshaw Distinguished Professor of Literature and Writing, is still surprised at the success of her first novel.

"I tend not to be a person who attaches a huge amount to a particular outcome," she said. "So I feel really grateful. One thing that is so nice is that people I know are going and buying my book."

Coupled with requests to present readings from *Little Century* throughout the Pacific Northwest, Keeseey is deep into reading the work of the budding

young writers she teaches in her creative writing classes.

Becoming a teacher was almost natural for Keeseey – both of her parents were professors and learning is basic to her happiness.

"I want to be in a place where it happens," she said. "I want to show up so that when learning happens I get to be there. I see tremendous growth in my students between the first short story they write and the second draft. They get their feet on the ground and they start striking out in very vivid, original ways."

A voracious reader as a child, Keeseey cared more about the stories than how they were created. At 15, as one of a handful of high school students accepted into a writing workshop conducted by poet Sandra McPherson and the late

Native American writer James Welch, she realized that a writing career might be possible.

"It was the first experience I had of being with other people who had some of the same feeling I did for language," she said. "I didn't realize it was even a quality. I would read books over and over because I liked how they sounded."

Little Century combines historical fiction and Oregon's high desert, two of Keeseey's passions. Set amid the haunting beauty and hard landscape of central Oregon, the book is the coming-of-age story of a young emigrant from Chicago caught up in the range wars between sheep and cattle ranchers in the early 1900s.

A native Oregonian raised in the Willamette Valley, Keeseey has long been



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fascinated with central Oregon's high desert.

"I found it so beautiful, interesting, strange and different in its feel," she said. "It has a kind of mysterious charge for me."

She calls it a "triggering point" – a town, landscape, an animal, weather or something that can make the imagination whirl.

In her Linfield classroom, she helps students find their own triggering points – those images that send their minds spinning. Many of her students have a good sense of language. Her role is helping them create a repertoire of words and phrases that they can use to build a sentence or create a scene.

She's succeeding, according to her students. Calling her one of the best teachers she ever had, Jamie Lyon '11 said Keeseey creates an environment in which it is safe to ask questions, voice concerns, make jokes and engage in the learning process. "Anna has a way of couching her instruction in the belief that her students are more than equal to the task," Lyon said.

Keeseey's workshop style of teaching, in which students look closely at their work and the work of others, helped Lyon learn the mechanics and structure of fiction writing. "It brought into sharp relief the techniques, both instinctual and learned, that we used and allowed us to learn from others," she said.

The lessons carried over into Lyon's other classes at Linfield and even now as she applies to graduate schools.

"Constructing a piece of fiction requires you to balance a number of things – plot, setting, character, pattern, dialogue – you can't leave any of that to chance," she said. "You have to force yourself to think all of the time about connectivity, about linkages. In Anna's class, as in all the writing and literature classes I took, I learned how to think critically and communicate well, two skills that are invaluable in every aspect of life."

Miles Oliveira '12 found Keeseey's lessons on the process of writing eye-opening. Keeseey focuses on the importance of details in writing, which made him a stronger essay writer, and he learned that a good story rarely appears in the first draft.

"Anna tells you she wasn't always a great storyteller," Oliveira said. "She teaches the process of writing and tells her students that we are going to write, rewrite and keep drafting over and over until we have something really good. She trusts her students to do that and helps by giving great advice. The good writers are the ones who revise the best. And that's important because when you look at her writing, she's always tinkering and making something really good."

Long journey

Writing and publishing *Little Century* was a long journey for Keeseey, and her life has changed dramatically. She was in the process of adopting her son, Joaquin, now 6, and planned to return to the Northwest when she was hired by Linfield's English department five years ago, bringing her full circle back to Oregon and family. The book is dedicated to Joaquin, because, "writing the book and becoming Joaquin's mom were huge commitments I made on my own and the two most intellectually and emotionally demanding things I've done in my life as an individual."

She's thinking ahead to her next book, a contemporary story most likely set in post-9/11 Portland and again touching on issues of political control and the importance of water in the Pacific Northwest.

And, thanks to a new endowment, this fall she was named the first Renshaw Distinguished Professor of Literature and Writing. The endowment will allow her to be released from teaching one semester each year, meaning she can pursue her

The Keeseey file

- At Linfield since 2007
- Renshaw Distinguished Professor of Literature and Writing
- Education
B.A., Stanford University
K-12 Teaching Credential, UC Berkeley
M.F.A., Iowa Writers' Workshop,
University of Iowa
- Recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship
- Published in: *Best American Short Stories*, other journals and anthologies
- Residencies: MacDowell Colony, Bread Loaf, Yaddo, Provincetown
- Teaching: Washington University-St. Louis, Northwestern University
- Academic interests: American literature, short fiction, historical fiction, pedagogy of creative writing

own creative work and draft a new novel much more quickly.

"I can have the best of both worlds – continuing to teach and be involved with students and faculty, continuing to be a presence in my department and in the creative writing major, yet having a substantial period of quiet each year, when my mind can be filled with my own thoughts and stories instead of those of others," she said.

The appointment is a win for Linfield as well. Keeseey said donations from alumni and others that create endowments such as this are important because they allow faculty to pursue significant scholarship work that invariably energizes their teaching and collaborations with students. 🍷

– Mardi Mileham