

The Bad Is Mine

*The write suffers from
instruction*

Colin Fleming

Usually I tell people I don't have a college education, because there wasn't a single thing I learned in a classroom when I was there.

My grades were sterling in high school, with me doing eight hours of homework a night. We had moved from Connecticut to Illinois after my sophomore year, and I had gone from being a hockey star who worked diligently at writing well to not playing hockey and having no friends, no life, but being someone who still wished to try and write well. So, I learned all I could, memorized the poems we had been assigned, looked up every last bit of Shakespeare I didn't understand.

And I wrote a lot of shitty poems, trying to ferret out the relationship between sound and sense with language. I had a girlfriend, a year older, down the street, and that was a godsend at the time, the whole of my social life. I'd gone from public school to an all boys school, which proved a tough change, and I wasn't ready for how clannish things would be in these new academic digs.

It sucked, I was on my own, and everything I was went into learning, because I didn't have much else going on.

I was lonely. That's why I couldn't wait when I got to leave for college and head back East, where I was always much more comfortable. The relationship with the girlfriend died the natural death such relationships do when she left for Fairfield University the year before, and now I was going to Boston College.

I didn't really wish to be at that particular school. It was my so-called safety school, but as the likes of Brown, Wesleyan, and Amherst wouldn't have me, that was where I ended up.

At least it was in Boston, my favorite city by the widest of margins, and close to where I'd been brought up. The Common, Fenway, ducklings one made way for, tales of Minutemen, ice cream with

those chocolate sprinkles, Old North Church, the Bruins—wonderful Old Towne, classic New England stuff.

I was in the honors program at BC, on account of the high school grades I largely got because I had no life. That was something of a tonic for me, as I was doubting myself somewhat because I hadn't been able to get into those schools I'd been told would have me gladly.

I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't gotten into BC. That would have been a mess. Sitting at home for a semester in the Midwest, contemplating how flat everything was, how a really big lake is not even vaguely like an ocean, wandering a mall or two in suburbia until January and I could go somewhere else?

No thanks, right? So, I was going to make the best of BC. Was going to do the writing bit and write so well that I could make a go of it professionally while still an undergrad, get me a smart, hot girlfriend, take in some football games, hang out downtown in the city, and then start another phase of life, eventually, maybe after years of toil, as a full-time writer with a writing studio in some place like Beacon Hill, and a house out in the country, by the sea. Plan in place!

The teacher of that honors program class was a guy named Tim Duket. When you're eighteen, people have a way of looking older than they are. At the time I probably thought he was in his early sixties, but I bet he wasn't out of his forties.

Graying hair with some brown still in it, not tall, in shape but not athletic, glasses, thick voice but not a smoker, one of those people who stretches words longer than they are. If he were Southern, he'd probably have had a drawl. That was the first class I went to, in one of those Gothic throwback buildings called Gasson Hall. It's sort of BC's signature building. You know the deal—spires, a bell, some ivy, the kind of building that features on the cover of the alumni magazine a lot.

We were given a short in-class writing assignment that first day. It wasn't about anything we'd read, because obviously that hadn't started yet, but rather about who you were, what you were looking

to find here. Everyone did theirs, syllabi were handed out, a reading assignment was given for Plato's *Republic*, and off we all went.

A couple days later, we were back again in Gasson. The honors classes met in what was Gasson's de facto library, which was an unofficial school library. It was more like a sizable conference room from a bygone era, with mullioned windows high overhead, built-in bookcases, a piano in its center, and a table—a classy table, not some mere fold-out deal—at the far end.

You could “check out” whatever book you wished, and return it whenever you wished. There was no formal system, nothing was scanned. You were “on your honor.” Very *Dead Poets Society*.

They've done away with it since, and all the books are now more safely secured—something which I think I had something to do with, but we'll get to that in good time. There were fifteen people in the class. No getting lost here amidst a throng of 200 in one of the big lecture halls.

We filed in. I had done the reading, marked that shit up, too, with plenty of notes in the margins, and I was ready.

You're naïve at that age. That's a given. But what I don't think is a given is something that you're probably not supposed to say, because you're bound to bother some people in the saying of it, but I think most people are almost always naïve, and if you learn to become otherwise, it's because stuff has happened to you that sent you reeling for a while.

And, more importantly, rather than roll along with said reeling, you halted yourself mid-roll, and you mulled.

Think of the times in your life someone has said something childish and catty to you, which they could have said to anyone. Let's say it was a person who didn't know you at all. Chances are, you still looked at that comment, wondered if they saw something that was true with you that you hadn't seen, and maybe this was a big problem you hadn't been aware of. You're stung, probably, no matter who you are. No matter how otiose, moronic, lazily tossed off the comment is.

Everyone was settling in, when Duket tapped the spine of his copy of *The Republic* against the table. I didn't know how fancy college classes started. I thought maybe this was like a judge tapping his gravel to say, "here we go." Duket didn't say "here we go." What he said was quite different.

"I'm afraid Mr. Fleming is not free to sit in with us today. On account that he would be better served being somewhere else, and working on his substandard writing."

I thought he was fucking joking. That feeling lasted for all of two seconds. Those thirty or so eyes on me felt like 30,000. I was frozen there, halfway between sitting and standing. He was serious. Walked me out of the Gasson Honors Library, even. I was a kid. And even if I sucked at writing, was just the worst ever, near about, how bad could you suck at eighteen to get walked out of class three days into your college career?

That made me reel. The semester went like that. Duket gave me a shit grade on everything. For what it was worth, so did every other professor I had. C this, D that, F that. One guy who taught Postmodern American Poetry gave me back-to-back D minuses, then said, after the next paper, that I wrote better than any student he had ever had. I thought, okay, that blip is over, gonna be getting a good mark this time, the tide has turned, etc., only to find myself in his office a day later, staring down at that paper—which received an F—and listening to this very boring man drone on about very boring man things.

Duket, back in Gasson, would be openly hostile. He'd ask a question, making five words sound like fifty because he stretched every syllable, like he was some dude for whom Hooked on Phonics was akin to the most lascivious porn.

This man was not smarter than I was. I find it notable that, when I should have been doubting myself more than ever, I wasn't. Because I knew this guy was an idiot and a bully. And also, a failure. I didn't know at what. But he wasn't what he had wanted to be. Maybe he thought I was going to be it, and thus had instigated this

projection-fest. But I went back at him. Hard. I was learning that what I did in college was not going to mean fuck all in my life. I'd be in other classes, and I'd see how professors would even get dates wrong, for when a film came out or a book was published. Everyone else would write down the dates, because, really, who would know better? Why would you doubt this man or woman who is supposed to be this expert? But I was learning that they weren't. They just had pieces of paper you didn't have. And no one to question them, no checks and balances.

The last time I saw Duket was when I had finally managed to transfer out of his class. That was frowned upon in the Honors Program. He told me what a disappointment I was, and that maybe someday I would learn to write and become an average writer. I was writing professionally by then. I told him that. I couldn't believe how dispassionate my voice sounded to me. You know how you get when you know you're right, when that little voice that, at other times, sounds that refrain of doubt in your head, is completely quiet? Not even a whispered "are you sure?"

I was eighteen and this was the first time I had that internal quietude. Years later, I'd look back, and wonder how the hell a kid, who is getting blasted from so many people supposedly in the know, was able to just think, *no, that's not true, that's not nearly true, do what you do, son.*

It was weird. For a while I wouldn't have an explanation for it.

Just as Duket didn't have any explanation when I leaned in close and told him to go fuck himself.

That was college for me. Didn't change much over the years.

There was no more rancor, but one professor after another told me I couldn't write. This happened in English classes, and in all of the music and film classes I took.

I started working for the school newspaper. They fired me. I was writing for a free paper in Boston, doing lots of album reviews, features, sometimes going to gigs and writing them up, too.

After Duket I ended in the class of a guy named Peter Norberg. He was twenty-six at the time. Kind of looked like Joey from *Friends* crossed with Hugh Grant with a more rectangular face. We'd be friends for twenty years. At the time, he gave me the shit grades, too. We'd hang out after class. Like me, he'd been a hockey player, and he loved the sea and the sea's history. If someone likes hockey and recognizes the power of the ocean, we're usually golden, they and I.

By then I knew what was going on. Norberg was just the first person on the academic side to articulate it to me.

"Colin, look, this kind of writing, it's not what you do. It's not what you should try and do. Academic writing isn't for the world. You have a gift. One that is for the world. The people of that world are your audience. Not the people in academia."

"You're still giving me that D, then?"

"I am. But I'd given Dickens the D, too. This stuff isn't going to matter with you. Do what you do. Find what you have it in you to do. Someone with your ability isn't going to be about grades, and couldn't be about grades."

I thought it was pretty ass backwards, but that didn't matter. People went out to clubs and bars. I wrote. I had a girlfriend for a couple years, and that had the effect of providing some stability in that we were a thing, we cared about each other, and there seemed to be less of this need to gallivant about like college kids do, which would have wasted time and energy.

I was learning everywhere, but I was never learning anything in a classroom. Not about art. About stale theories, sure, that were being trotted out, all glazed over and lukewarm, in the exact same language, for year number twenty in a row. Sometimes I'd have questions about what I was learning, and I still held out hope that a professor would have some insight. I asked a guy who taught film what the difference between a form cut and a match cut was, and he told me there were no such things. I mentioned Eisenstein and the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, and Hitchcock with Janet Leigh and that dissolve involving her eye and the shower drain in *Psycho*,

and he just stared at me. Okay then, boss.

As a member of the Honors Program—somehow, I hadn't been kicked out—I had to write a thesis my senior year. But first, I needed an idea. I toyed with a horrible one involving rock music and Vorticism poetry. It was more that I didn't know what I was doing, and was flailing about. A long, continuous work? This was new. And, for me, I also knew this was important. I was going to do a bunch of these, in various forms, over the years. This was the maiden voyage.

I also needed a thesis advisor. Norberg had left by then. But he recommended one William Youngren. Norberg, who had been a BC student himself, had taken a Melville class with Youngren. The thinking here was that Youngren was an English professor who wrote about music professionally. A lot of the stuff he did was for this classical music magazine called *Fanfare*, which featured scads of in-depth analysis and then crazy classical music people fighting with each other in a point/counterpoint letters section. He also wrote for *The Atlantic* on jazz.

I took one of his jazz classes, and my first thought, when Youngren walked in the door, crashing into its side as he did so, was “this fucking guy.” Norberg was his own physical admixture, but Youngren looked like a cross between Christopher Lloyd in *Back to the Future* and Robert Vaughn in *The Magnificent Seven*. Handsome, almost movie star so, with this wild look in his eyes, like he was a touch unhinged.

Unlike Duket's, his voice was clipped, somewhat singsong. He'd unleash a torrent of words, you'd think he was done, but he was just taking a random break before pulling up the dyke and letting the next torrent out.

Every class he'd wheel in a stereo on an AV dolly, bouncing that off the door, too. You'd want to cover your ears each time he hit the play button, because that sucker was going to be cranking, Youngren not understanding that the key to turning a stereo on did not in some way involve turning the volume knob all the way to the right.

Charlie Parker, say, would then come on, and Youngren ... well,

ESSAY

Youngren would jive. He'd snap his fingers, prance about with his right knee bent and pointing outwards, forming some sort of internal axis—maybe it was a fulcrum—with his left elbow, which was similarly bent. Youngren, in the parlance, of the 1950s—which was also his heyday, more or less—was a hep cat. A swinging Daddy-O. Definitely not L7, a term he once uttered to me when we were deep in conference in his office.

“It means not a square. Not square. As in, ‘I’m no square.’”

“Yes, I know.”

He smiled. He liked that I knew that.

He took me on for my thesis. I ditched the Vorticist gobbledygook, and I started planning how to write about rock and roll as an art form at the level of literature, albeit a sonic make of literature, with, say, Robert Johnson's guitar doing for a narrative what a Greek chorus did for an Aeschylus play.

There was lots of Robert Johnson, some Elvis, lots of Beatles. Everyone who did a thesis got a token A for the first semester of your senior year, because, hey, you had decided to take on this bad boy of a challenge! Not me with Youngren—he gave me a B. I didn't care. That wasn't what I was there for.

We'd argue about John Coltrane in long conversations in Youngren's office. He hated anything post-*Blue Train*. He'd lend me CDs, I'd lend him CDs.

“Oh, Colin, those Coltrane Village Vanguard sessions. I don't know. I can't get aboard this particular sailing vessel. Dear me. Perhaps the bad is mine.”

“Are you trying to say ‘my bad?’”

“Yes. The bad is mine. Maybe. I am not altogether sure. Now what do you have for me this week?”

Years later I'd fall in love with a girl who showed me a paper she wrote on Coltrane. She was still in college at the time. The kind of student I never was. Could write the way professors wished one to write, and was also able to appear especially effervescent when need

be, like in a post-class hallway exchange. Not sincere. But I thought that was just the drill, how these things worked, not an indictment of your character. Like I said, we're naïve for most of our lives. She told me that she had really admired the professor, and wanted to show him just how much learning he had imparted to her. "So I wrote the best I could." The thing was so bad. It said nothing, and was just terminology misused and double-speak upon double-speak.

"You got an A on this, right?"

She said she had. I asked her if she honestly believed it was any good, if she had written it with sincerity, and the tale of the massive outlay of effort became one of "it was late, it was the last minute, I knew what I had to say to get the grade" and frustration with me.

I sometimes think about this girl and Youngren in conjunction, odd couple though they would have made. I think he would have seen through that kind of crap. That's one reason why he meant so much to me at a crucial stage in my development. I had used the phrase "pivotal link," for instance. And Youngren just about lost it.

"That's a mixed metaphor. A link doesn't pivot."

Such a simple point. It changed my life.

When we write, we tend to focus on and control, as best we can, the three or four words directly in front of us. They're what most people look at, and they're not even looking at them fully, in every possible interpretation they might have, with every repercussion.

Writing, as much as anything, is a way of seeing. The better you are at it, the more you see at once. You see how the word in one form at the bottom of page five plays off that same word in a slightly different form, a different conjugation, seventeen pages later. The more you see, and the more you see how everything relates to everything else, and the more you hear, feel, and cogitate, the more you're able to make a seemingly endless dialogue of voices and parts come together in one sweet, smooth-flowing song. And when that all slows down in your brain, and becomes so obvious, like there aren't a thousand 100 mph fastballs zipping around but a whole lot

of suspending beach balls all set for your measured inspection, you and Mozart could get together, have a beer, and talk over common ground.

Those processes were beginning for me in Youngren's office. I believe in this life that at some point, for all of us, a switch is thrown, and we become that thing we were always going to be. For some people, this happens early on. The particulars of their lives change, people come and go, but that dude at sixteen is often that same dude at forty-six. He just looks different.

Same goes for artists. This was my flick of the switch moment. I began to see language with I'm going to say ninety percent more clarity than ever before. My thesis itself was largely shit. I looked at it before writing this. The writing is not worse than what you'd see in a newspaper or magazine, and there are some parts—well, a passage here or there—where you can really see that there's talent. But it mostly sucks. Juvenilia. But language kept slowing down for me, kept making more sense, and I was able to tour rooms and veritable museums housing more and more of those beach balls hovering in the air, and I could do so faster and faster, with hardly any time passing outside in the world, as I passed a hundred years internally in the space of a single second on Earth.

Youngren and I hung out for a while after I graduated. He was in his sixties at the time. We got grilled chicken sandwiches at this place near BC called Cityside, a popular bar. We'd discuss Laurel and Hardy films, Faulkner's short fiction, the Rolling Stones' *Beggars Banquet* ("Oh, so 'Stray Cat Blues' is concerned, shall we say, with the capaciousness of a young girl's orifice, and how feasible said capaciousness might be in the context of this would-be assignation," as Youngren put it), Emily Dickinson's poems, often in the space of two or three sentences.

It was electric. I wondered who I might ever have conversations like this with again. That was part of the reason I fell so hard for the girl who wrote the Coltrane paper. She wasn't there yet, but she

had enough in her to get there at some point. But you never want to build something, even in part, on what might be, do you?

After college I worked shit jobs. Bouncing at a bar, for instance, and trying to write at the same time. College grad becomes a bouncer. But whatever. I wasn't going to grad school. Fuck that. I couldn't get clear of academia fast enough. I asked Youngren how he wrote for a place like *The Atlantic*, to which he said, "You sort of just fall back into it." That was disheartening. Because I knew it wasn't like that anymore. Youngren probably had fallen back into it. He was at his club, some friend of a friend of a friend was an *Atlantic* editor, they had a whiskey, and the guy said, "you like jazz, would you like to try your hand at penning something for us?"

I'd seen enough stories like that. I thought maybe Youngren would help me get into that classical music magazine, *Fanfare*. It was the size of a very thick literary journal. We're not talking a million-circulation place here. But I could never get him to give me a sense of where things stood one way or the other, though he kept promising that he'd talk to the editor. Finally, long after having sent some writings, I phoned that editor. Took a lot of courage for me. He was brusque. Told me they had no interest in my work.

"We only hire one new person every five or six years anyway."

Bugger. I wrote something and mailed it to *The New Yorker*. A kindly note came back, saying the piece was quite good, but they couldn't use it. The note was signed by one Erica Youngren.

I asked Youngren about this at Cityside, on what was the last time I ever saw him. Not the most common last name, and if you like nepotism, boy howdy, publishing is the place for you. I told him about the note, not really thinking it was anything but a coincidence.

"Oh, Erica, yes, she's great, she's my daughter."

Dude? What the motherfuck? Not even a word to help me out a little? A note of introduction? A heads up?

Time went on. I got into *The New Yorker*. After a couple years, I wrote the *Fanfare* guy again, making like I'd never written him

before. Sent some clips. He couldn't have phoned me fast enough. "It was like you were born to write for *Fanfare*."

Yeah. Wasn't it, though?

Fanfare paid you two dollars a piece. No joke. And they were a lot of work. So if by the end of the year they cut you a check for forty bucks, you had invested serious amounts of time. I must have written fifty pieces on all kinds of classical music, which just became one more thing I wrote on, in addition to what, eventually, included literature, film, sports, ballet, architecture, art, rock, jazz, plus all the fiction I did. And I stopped writing for them. There was no point.

But I'd follow what Youngren was up to. *Fanfare* ultimately fired him. His health hadn't been good, and there was some major disagreement between him and the editor over a piece on C.P.E. Bach. Youngren loved C.P.E. Bach. More than J.S. Bach. My sense was that he intended this piece, which I never saw, as some sort of critical swan song. It was a baby of his, and it got the chop.

I felt bad. And I felt bad, too, when a year or so after, I encountered Youngren's obituary in the *Globe*. I knew his daughter had stopped working at *The New Yorker* years before. One of the passerby people in publishing. It doesn't mean that much to them—it's just something they do for a while.

Whereas the art of the written word was all I was, was everything I was. I cut the obit out, and I must have kept it for nearly a decade. It was as though it existed as a reminder for something I hadn't fully admitted to myself in the replaying of my memories. Whenever someone asked me about college, or someone was extolling how wonderful college was, I always had that line of thinking in my head that I never learned a single fucking thing in a college classroom, not pausing in those memories to correct what had become my official record and say, "But what I learned in Youngren's office is more than just about anyone gets to learn anywhere else."

Youngren had been dead for a while when I had some occasion to talk to a guy who used to write for *Fanfare* and who taught at BC. Youngren mentioned him a bunch. I thought we'd have a nice little

exchange, share a “the bad is mine’ anecdote” or two. I brought up Youngren, my history with him, how he’d spoken so highly of this particular fellow.

“That’s odd,” he said to me. “You know, don’t take this the wrong way, but Youngren would regularly mention students to me whom he thought wrote really well, who might go places.”

“Ah.” I knew, of course, where this was going.

“And he never once mentioned you. Strange, isn’t it?”

Wasn’t remotely strange to me. Was in keeping with everything else. Which is to say, it was also in keeping with something I knew was beyond having people roll the log for you or even remembering to put you forward, or to give you some reward, be it deserved or not. The latter happens far more often than the former, I had learned by then. But what really mattered is what I had, and what I had discovered further down in myself, with an assist along the way.

And I guess, in a more pedestrian, more topical, albeit more rake-hellish way—never lose your spirit, baby—what also mattered was that I had zero compunction about looting the fuck out of many of the books in that Honors Library. No wonder they needed a new security system to protect what remained. But what few people knew about me was that I had one, too, and what remained was always more than what was there last, and then more still.