

Basket Weaving 101

By Maria Adelman

From the book *MFA vs. NYC: Two Cultures in American Fiction* published by n+1 and Faber and Faber

I remember the two postcollege years I spent in New York as one long day in a windowless office. I shared a room with four other people and a printer that emitted heat like a radiator. I decorated the space above my desk with little quotes and scraps from glossy magazines, reminders of the life I wasn't living. Each day when I arrived at work, I'd place the novel I was currently reading at the corner of my desk—it was my beacon of light, my reward. Books were how I measured my days and how I endured them.

After finishing college, I had gone straight to a full-time job in New York. I knew I wanted to write, but I didn't think I wanted an MFA—it seemed silly to get a degree in something so personal and, in theory, unteachable. Besides, after college I needed money, I needed to act like an adult, I needed to feel the pressure of the “real world.” I thought I could earn money by day and write by night.

By day, I was a Visual Merchandising Creative Manager for a clothing company. I dressed mannequins and drew illustrations that detailed how stores should fold clothes and set up displays. I thought the word “creative” meant I would be doing something fun. For a few months, it did. Then it got old.

And by night? By night I was . . . asleep.

At my most lucrative, I was making \$55,000 but spending sixty hours a week at, or commuting to, the office. I had two friends, peers from my windowless office. Tasks became repetitive. And to what purpose was I working? To sell crappy clothes? I started listening to books on tape at work, pretending it was music. I wrote down a quote from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and pinned it to my bulletin board: “Experience is merely the name men give to their mistakes.” Women, too.

I began planning my escape. If I switched to a part-time job that allowed more time to build a creative life, I would take a severe pay cut and lose my health insurance. I recalled a college creative writing professor once saying my story might earn me a spot in a competitive MFA program and that such programs often paid tuition and living expenses. I used the printer in

my office to make an 11x17 spreadsheet about MFA programs, their requirements, and what funding they offered. I applied to eighteen fiction programs, which cost me about \$1,000. I chose fiction not because it was my preferred genre—at the time I was more interested in just about every other genre, including poetry, nonfiction, and screenwriting—but because I had an appropriate writing sample and could conjure up recommendations. I was not going to spend another year in New York.

I was accepted to seven programs and waitlisted at a few more. I accepted admission at The University of Virginia, which offered a \$16,000 fellowship in the first year, and a teaching salary of about \$10,000 during the second and third years. The \$40,000 “pay cut” didn’t weigh on me at all. I’d lived on less, and, regardless, it didn’t end up to be quite the cut that it seemed. My new salary left me in a friendlier tax bracket, my student loans could be deferred without interest because I was in school again, and everything in Virginia cost less than in NY (my car insurance payment, for example, decreased by \$100 per month). The most significant change in my finances was not my spending but my savings—I’d been putting away nearly \$800 per month in savings, and sending another \$1,000 a month to pay back student loans.

I actually spent more money in Virginia on going out than I had in New York—suddenly I had time and friends. I drank. A lot. I even blew a thousand dollars on a hazy, one-week bender in Tennessee. I ate out—more often than in New York, but very cheaply. In 2010, I ate dinner at IHOP on twenty-one Thursdays, for the 50% student discount. In 2011, I spent thirty Tuesdays at a local restaurant that had a \$5 dinner special.

During the MFA, I never held a steady second or summer job, though many of my classmates did. I budgeted carefully, occasionally dipped into my savings, and filled in the gaps with odd jobs. I scored tests for ETS, taught at a community writing center, helped UVA freshmen enroll in classes, house- and pet-sat for professors, edited grants for the university hospital, and even won a few writing prizes. I could do most of these gigs when, where, and how I wanted. (Rough calculations suggest I only spent some two hundred hours over three years actually *at* a job outside my house—about the time I spent at work in a single month in New York.)

Yes, many of us MFAers were rounding into our thirties while making 10PM IHOP runs, eating eggs for dinner that didn’t look quite right, as if they came from some other kind of bird, maybe a pigeon. I lived in a questionable neighborhood (literally on the wrong side of the

tracks—freight trains ran right through the yard), in a government-subsidized house that had a mouse problem and a-possibly-related plumbing problem. One weekend, the kitchen literally filled with shit; I found a dead mouse at the bottom of my trashcan and a lizard in my mousetrap. None of this was very different from New York—just replace the lizard with a cockroach—but living off canned beans and pigeon eggs for the sake of art seems somehow cooler and more risky as a New Yorker than as ... a graduate student.

When I first arrived in Virginia, people seemed to move in slow motion, and graduate school made me feel lazy. I could spend an entire day in bed reading David Hasselhoff's god-awful autobiography or making a dress out of *Star Wars* sheets because I wasn't in the mood for real "work"—which, I realize, is a serious misnomer, because work is something you get paid for. Writers talk a lot about "gestation," about letting stories brew. Especially writers with funding.

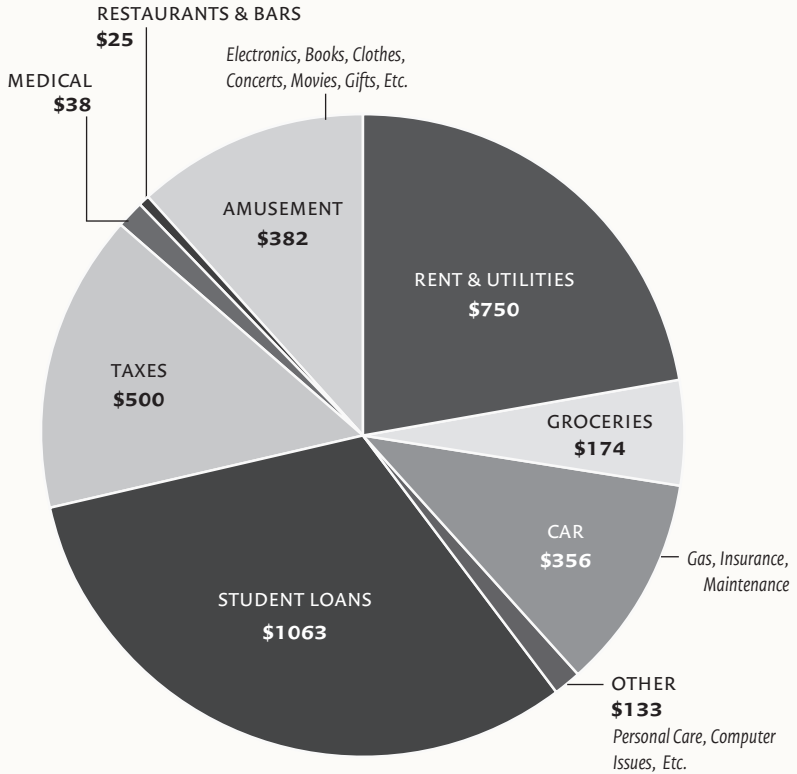
Once my brother, an engineer, asked what I was writing. "Short stories?" he responded. "Didn't you write those in, like, fifth grade? That would be like if I went to graduate school for addition and subtraction." When I told my dad I had written a novella, he was similarly skeptical. "Novella?" he said. "That chocolate spread?"

I might have made more money off of chocolate spread, as novellas are notoriously unsellable. But that is the beauty of the MFA—we were given the opportunity to follow our whims.

A sharply dressed New York agent in black heels who visited the MFA program told us, somewhat hostilely, why our future books wouldn't sell (because no one reads short stories, because Jonathan Franzen already wrote that novel, because no one cares about your road trip across the US). We looked back at her in shock, like children who had just been told that Santa is dead. In a way, the MFA had helped us to keep our innocence about literature and publishing, and thus allowed us to discover what we wanted to write instead of urging us to write what would sell or was trendy. This is not to say an MFA is perfect.

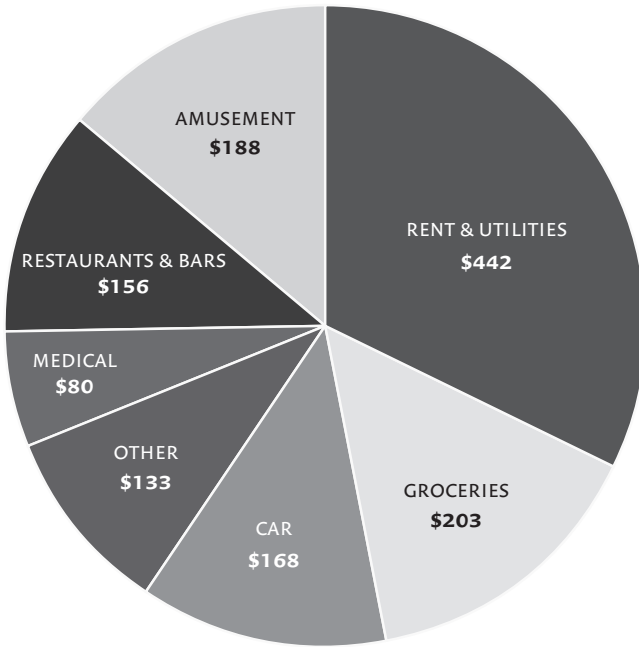
I didn't use any of my time in the MFA program schmoozing, most likely because I'm socially awkward, but also because it wasn't on my mind. Maybe that was stupid of me, but it also shows you the headspace of the MFA, a very different headspace from that of New York, where I once ran into a young woman who worked in publishing who told me that I should stop being so shy and start making connections because I had "a pretty enough face to sell a book."

NYC



\$3421

MFA



\$1370

I didn't use all, or even most, of my time in the MFA program writing. I became at peace with gestation or laziness or whatever it was. There were long, dry periods where I hardly put pen to paper (finger to key), but I managed to fill my time with inexpensive pleasures. I spent a week hiking the Appalachian Trail. I ran three half-marathons. I made detailed board games and intricate Halloween costumes. I cross-stitched the entire cast of *The Royal Tenenbaums*. I collected copious data about myself and drew up reports. I made YouTube videos that never went viral. I painted pictures of my bookshelves. I went to local historical sites. I hung out with friends in the middle of the day—we painted our faces, swapped clothes, went strawberry and apple picking, baked and delivered holiday cookies.

Friends were one of the greatest surprise assets of the MFA program. I found an immediate support system of like-minded peers. We were bound together, like a congregation or AA, by something more powerful than ourselves—not the degree or even the writing, but by the craving to be creative on our own terms. We were all skeptical of “the system” (most systems) and, thus, of the MFA itself. We feared becoming notorious “MFA-style writers,” robots churning out technically perfect but emotionally dead stories. Would we get so beat down by Ann Beattie (whose workshop, the *New York Times* had recently told us, was “like a blood bath”) that we would give up writing for good?

Most of us had enrolled in an MFA program for the same reason—we were looking for a way out, an escape either from the rollercoaster of fluctuating income cobbled together from part-time employment or from the full-time jobs that had left us with little energy to write. We had been drawn to the MFA by its quantifiable benefits—time, money—but it turned out that the unquantifiable support was worth a great deal to us, too.

You might think the MFA program allowed too much free time. For example, you might look closely at my paintings of books — I recreated over 70 spines and 25 covers, each with meticulously painted letters—and wonder if I could've found something more productive to do. I'm not so sure. Is it so naïve of me to believe that the best work is completed outside of the market, from a place of personal passion? How can I help but quote Thoreau?

“I . . . had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.”

During the MFA, I wove a lot of crappy baskets. I wrote 347 drafts resulting in twenty-six full stories, not all of which were very good. My best story had the most drafts—forty-eight. Thank god I didn't have to try to sell them.

When I was on a roll, I would spend several days and nights in a row writing. I would venture from my room only occasionally, zombie-like and unable to speak, in great need of protein. I'd eat black beans from the can while standing in the pantry. "She must be writing," my roommates would whisper as I staggered back to my room. Some of my best work was composed over these focused, manic bouts. I cannot imagine another place where a person can take a week off from life, simply because she has an idea.

Over the course of two years, I workshopped seventeen of my stories and gathered 172 critiques from twenty different sources. This is too much advice from too many people, but if we were lucky we could tune in to one or two readers who offered advice that felt relevant. Admittedly, it could be difficult to ignore the background noise. As a group, we were very conscious of the need to be kind and give positive feedback, but nonetheless comments could be hurtful, and professors could play favorites. Sometimes, the glut of contradictory praise and criticism felt like a flashlight shining directly into my eyes, beaming so much light that I couldn't see a thing. A third year of workshop would have been exhausting, and after an unpleasant thesis defense at the end of my second year, I didn't write for many months. But now that I'm back at it, I often long not just for an honest reader, but for a deadline.

Our bad stories taught us what to do better next time—though we tried not simply to eliminate our "imperfections" but also to cultivate them. Some of the greatest writers have managed to transform their "flaws" into the best components of their style. But before flaws look like style, they look like flaws, and you write a lot of bad, unsellable stories. (Sometimes, even your good stories are unsellable.) Of course, though there can be space for such irregularities in an MFA program, there is also a great danger of eradicating them.

Some of my "baskets," irregular as they may have been, did turn out to be unexpectedly profitable. During a particularly bad bout of writer's block (or, as the doctor put it, major depressive disorder), I gave myself a project that wouldn't require any heavy thought but would both get me out of bed and save me money on Christmas presents. I turned my book paintings into notecards by scanning in the pictures and copying them onto cardstock. Figuring this all out was much more complicated than I'd first imagined, and for a while I could be found at the

twenty-four-hour Kinko's at an array of odd hours. Eventually, I realized I needed a bigger print shop to get the cards as I really wanted them. This required ordering in bulk, so I decided to try to sell the extra cards at local bookstores and stationary stores and on Etsy. My big break came when Anthropologie found them online and ordered sixteen thousand. I never dreamed, during the idle-seeming weeks I'd spent painting books, that those paintings would sustain me financial, and yet they earned me more than \$10,000 in less than a year. Now, when I'm not making as much money as I should be, I email a bunch of bookstores hoping for card orders—and I usually get several.

I tried my hand at the business end of writing, too, submitting to literary magazines and contests during my final year of the MFA. I received mostly rejection letters, some encouraging feedback, and just enough acceptances and winnings to keep me sated emotionally, if not financially.

I graduated from UVA two months ago, although I went on a road trip and skipped the ceremony. They mailed my diploma in a tube to my mom's house in New Jersey. I just saw it for the first time yesterday, because I am here, in my childhood bedroom, with all of my belongings, writing this essay. I could have stayed in Virginia, or looked for a full-time job just about anywhere—I still have some money saved up. But I'd rather sell book cards, pick up odd jobs from time to time, and keep the freedom to follow my intuitions. I never know in advance which of my baskets will turn out to be valuable, financially or otherwise, but some of them will. The important thing is to keep making baskets. My MFA program may not have mirrored the "real world" (thank goodness for that), and it may not have taught me how to make money, but it did teach me what my time is worth.