



From Poop to Published: My Writing Journey

Until the end of fifth grade, I attended a brick box of a school, sterile and anti-septically clean. We formed lines outside the doors in the morning, marched through the halls in lines, sat in lines, and thought in lines. Occasionally a teacher would read a tiny excerpt from some book out loud, and then we would do a craft project that was perhaps tangentially related to the book. After hearing a bit of *Frog and Toad* (Lobel, 1970), I drew green blobs meant to represent Frog after an eighteen-wheeler smushed him. (Yes, I was *that* kind of child.)

My parents took me out of that intellectual wasteland and put me in a noisy, chaotic, dirty school—The Children's House—where the kids were in charge. Literally. For example, I had to go to Math and Reading five times each week—but I could go anytime I wanted to. If I got my ten class sessions done Monday and Tuesday, I could goof off for the rest of the week and no one cared. More often, I goofed off on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, tried to cram all ten class sessions into Thursday and Friday, and got in big trouble when I failed to complete my commitment for the

week.

But the most glorious part of this school wasn't the unorthodox schedule—it was the fact that we were expected to write. Every day. And read. Every day. And we could write about anything we wanted to and read absolutely anything we wanted to. In my three years at The Children's House, I never was given a writing prompt. Or an essay test. Instead, I was expected to write at least a page every morning before I was allowed to leave Morning Work.

When I mention that I was allowed to write about anything, I mean exactly that. One day, a girl in my class bet me that she knew more dirty words than I did. So we spent the next three days in Morning Work doing nothing but writing lists of dirty words, and the teacher let us! I'm still a little bitter, though, because she beat me—she knew more than 180 dirty words, and I could only think of 147.

But most of my time in Morning Work was spent writing my first novel—an epic work of pure, distilled genius titled *Captain Poopy's Sewer Adventures*. I wrote a page per day for three years. I even illustrated this opus, although I can

only draw two things: poop and hot dogs. So I drew them both in the margins.

Unfortunately, The Children's House was only a K–8 school. (Otherwise, I'd still be a student there. I'd be in 38th grade now.) I went to a traditional high school and quit writing for a long time. Now I wish I'd kept it up, because nine years after I quit, Dav Pilkey (1997) published *Captain Underpants*. And now he's rich and famous. But there's still one thing I do better than Mr. Pilkey—I spell better than he does. He forgets the silent “e” on the end of his name on the front cover of *every single one* of his books. You don't see me typing Mik Mullin, do you? So I'm a better speller than he is, and you can tell him I said so.

The Children's House's kid-centered philosophy extended to reading as well. I was never once assigned a book to read. Or told to choose from a list of books I could read. Or asked to select my books based on the length of the words and sentences they contained. I mostly brought books from home to read, because the collection at school was sadly lacking in adult science fiction.

My reading interests broadened but I never gave up my first love, young adult literature.

I can hear the protests already: that kind of kid-centered education could never work in today's test-obsessed, common-core world. And while I question both the validity and usefulness of standardized testing, my own test results were illustrative of the power of freedom in education. At the end of 5th grade, I took the California Achievement Test and scored a 4.9 grade-level equivalent in math. In sixth grade, after a year of studying at my own pace, I took the exact same test and scored a 12.9 grade-level equivalent. (My reading scores were 12.9 both years.)

High school, with its stultifying press of assignments, ended my personal writing life. In 9th and 10th grades, I played the school game, loading my schedule with the toughest classes offered, dutifully turning in every assignment, slanting everything I wrote to fit whatever I believed the teacher wanted to hear. My report cards gleamed like a state-fair-winning apple.

Early in 11th grade, I quit. The combination of social stress and intellectual monotony overwhelmed my limited coping skills: I skipped school whenever I could get away with it, left in the middle of the day several times, and didn't do any of the assigned work. Needless to say, I quickly went from a straight-A

student to a straight-F student.

I'm not sure I would have survived high school without an escape hatch; luckily, I already had one. With my squeakily perfect 9th- and 10th-grade record, I had applied to be a Rotary Youth Exchange student. Early in my junior year, I was informed that they had an opening—not in my first choice country, Costa Rica. Or my second choice, Argentina. But in the 14th country I'd listed on the application: Brazil. Did I still want to go? Does a drowning man want a life ring? I went.

High school in Portuguese—a language I'd never studied—was challenging enough to interest me. And in Brazil, many of the high schools focus on trades. I studied construction engineering, learning to plan and draw structural, electrical, and plumbing systems for schools, high-rise apartments, and office buildings. Forty-three hundred miles of physical distance equated to about forty-three thousand miles in social standing. I went from being one of the lepers in my ritzy high school to being something akin to a rock star in the backwater city of Cuiabá. It was a great year.

When I returned, I couldn't face the prospect of another semester in high school, so I trooped down to the Educational Services Center to take the G.E.D. It was astonishingly easy. Perhaps my biggest regret from my high school years is that I didn't take the G.E.D. immediately after 8th grade. I'm certain I would have passed, and thereby saved myself from a starring role in the four-year horror movie titled *Mike Mullin Goes to High School*.

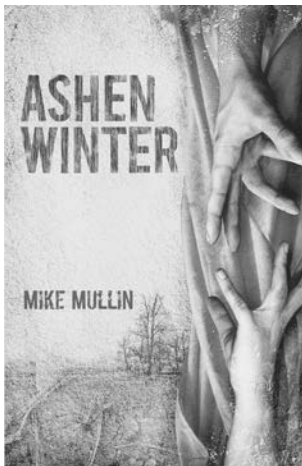
I did well in the freer environment of college and graduate school, racking up near-perfect GPAs and earning an undergraduate degree in Political Science and a Master's in Business Administration. I was young and foolish, believing that the size of my bank account would somehow correlate with my happiness, and so I entered the corporate world, working in marketing for many years after finishing my MBA.

But underneath the executive veneer I wore, my heartwood still coursed with the sap of a writer. An MBA classmate once read part of my contribution to a group paper out loud. "Too much?" I asked. "Should I take it out?" "No," he replied. "I'm just amazed. I wouldn't have come up with that phrase in a million years." At Procter & Gamble, where I worked on the Pampers brand, my memos were famous for their brevity, persuasiveness, and humor. Within my first month there, I'd written one—an analysis of a particular type of coupon—that landed on the CEO's desk.

And I never quit reading. I had been reading young adult fiction since I was ten and adult science fiction and fantasy since I was twelve. A large portion of the substantial checks I was earning went to buy books—many of the more than 5,000 volumes my wife and I have amassed were acquired during that period. My reading interests broadened—I read more nonfiction, literary fiction, and poetry—but I never gave up my first love, young adult literature.

When I returned to writing after my long and ultimately miserable sojourn in corporate America,

it was natural that I'd write young adult fiction. My first attempt, a horror novel titled *Heart's Blood*, was so awful that two of the three literary agents who read it quit the publishing business forever. My second novel was *Ashfall*, which has won numerous awards and sold more than 30,000 copies to date.



Ashen Winter is book 2 in Mullin's *Ashfall* series.

I'm well aware that my experience isn't typical, and that it isn't possible to generalize from a sample size of one. But I do believe that my literacy history illustrates some of the grievous wrong turns that policymakers are forcing on educators today.

Teaching is difficult enough without interference from policymakers. They seem determined to make teachers' jobs more challenging, what with high-stakes tests, bizarre evaluation systems, and ever-more-complicated voucher schemes. Here's the simple, core idea that the policymakers are missing: humans get better at whatever activities they practice (Gladwell,

2002). If you read a lot, you become a better reader. If you write a lot, you become a better writer. If you spend a lot of time taking tests, you become a better test taker.

Test taking isn't a particularly valuable skill in today's job market. I've held more than a dozen jobs in seven different industries over the last 30 years, and I've taken a grand total of two tests during that time. Both were pre-employment tests, and both were quite a bit easier than the tests my wife administers to her fourth-grade students.

Test taking not only isn't a useful skill; it's also harming our students' ability to perform in the workplace. The emphasis on testing is one of the factors contributing to the decline in creativity among America's youth (Kim, 2011). And what's the most important job skill according to a 2010 survey of 1,500 CEOs? Creativity (IBM, 2010).

This makes perfect sense if you think about it a moment. All the noncreative jobs are being replaced by automation. Three million truck drivers will soon lose their jobs in the US as we transition to computer-driven vehicles. Cashiers are being replaced with self-check-out lanes, and the widespread adoption of RFID tags will only accelerate that process. Who will stop to

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wait for a cashier when it becomes possible to wave your phone at a terminal as you drive your whole cart of groceries through a scanner that tallies them all instantly? Factory workers in the US quit doing tasks like screwing caps on toothpaste tubes more than 50 years ago. Today, they're largely problem solvers who monitor and maintain millions of dollars in high-tech machinery—tasks that require analytical skill and mental flexibility. Skill in memorization and completing rote tasks—like test taking—is worse than useless in these careers; it retards development of the essential 21st-century job skill: creativity. The jobs of the future will go to writers, actors, engineers, architects, artists, designers, scientists, teachers, and managers—jobs that can't be automated.

Other skills that will continue to matter include reading, writing, and mathematical literacy. I define mathematical literacy as the ability to analyze and use numbers and statistics. What we spend the most time teaching our students and testing—how to do mathematical operations—is utterly irrelevant. The next time someone needs to solve a quadratic equation by hand in a business setting will be the first time that's happened in well over 50 years. Testing does nothing to improve students' ability to read, write, and use math. What does work? Practice. That's why the top predictor of reading competence is students' enjoyment of reading (Schiefele, Schaffner, Möller, & Wigfield, 2012). Students who love to read are the ones who read more and get better at it. Students who love to write are the ones who write more and get better at it.

If [students] enjoy reading, they read more. And if they read more, they get better at it.

Let's try a thought experiment. Imagine that I told one group of people that they had to read my novel *Ashfall* as part of their job—that it contained important concepts relating to geology and the monomyth, and that they would be given a comprehension test when they finished. A second group, the control group, will be comprised of people who happened across *Ashfall* in a library or bookstore, thought it looked interesting, and picked it up to read. Which group do you suppose will enjoy the novel more? Which group will be more motivated to read?

This is why top-down education—like Common Core—is tragically misguided. Humans learn best when they are intrinsically motivated. Freedom is so powerful as a motivational force that it takes very little of it to have a huge impact on students' lives. I was only enrolled at The Children's House for three years, yet that brief period dramatically altered the trajectory of my life. I'm a successful writer now largely due to those three years.

When I entered sixth grade, I was struggling with basic math. When I left eighth grade, I had mastered mathematical concepts that I didn't see again until my second semester of calculus in college.

Another manifestation of the current mania for top-down education is Lexiles and their ilk. Here's a multiple-choice test: when selecting a book to read for enjoyment, do you check its reading level? A. Yes, B. No. Students are no different. And guess what, if they enjoy reading, they read more. And if they read more, they get better at it (Stanovich, 1986). By limiting students' reading choices, Lexiles and similar systems make it more difficult for teachers to inspire proficient readers. For a more thorough discussion of the deficiencies of the Lexile system (and lo, they are legion), see my blog post on the subject at <http://mikemullin.blogspot.com/2012/10/how-lexiles-harm-students.html>.

What can be done? I take heart from the example of the courageous teachers in Seattle boycotting some of their district's standardized testing (Kaminsky, 2013). I know many teachers are creating space within their classrooms for student-centered learning, and many parents are seeking alternative schools or homeschooling rather than subjecting their children to a one-size-fits-all, sausage-grinder educational system. Even small steps can have

a big impact on students' lives. Three years was enough to turn my educational career around and ultimately, to lead me to a satisfying and fulfilling profession. I hope all our students will be afforded the same kinds of opportunities I had. If they are, our economy, and our democracy, will be better for it.

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Harvey Daniels: 2012 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

Harvey “Smokey” Daniels is an extraordinary teacher leader whose writing, presentations, and professional development work define a model for teaching and leadership development based on research, best practice, common sense, trust, and respect. An author, editor, and consultant, he is a professor of Education at National Louis University in Chicago, Illinois (currently on leave). Smokey served as Co-director of the Illinois Writing Project for 26 years. A prolific writer, he has authored or coauthored 17 books, beginning with *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America’s Classrooms*, now in its fourth edition. In addition to books, he has contributed numerous articles and essays in professional journals. A common thread runs through his writings: literacy is accessible to all, and it should offer joy to all. In 1989, Smokey founded a summer residential retreat, the Walloon Institute. During Walloon’s two decades, thousands of teachers from across the country were renewed and inspired, helping them to create classrooms that are experiential and active through increased levels of choice and responsibility, which in turn leads to higher student achievement. Smokey’s commitment to exceptional teaching led him to spearhead the creation of Best Practice High School in Chicago in 1966. In addition, his belief in the leadership capacity of committed teachers launched the Center for City Schools, a dozen interrelated projects that supported teachers and parents in restructuring schools around Chicago and the Midwest. In his numerous workshops and presentations, Smokey connects theory and practice in a way that embodies the kind of learning we envision for our students and ourselves. Smokey Daniels has initiated work that is visionary, and his impact on the profession is of lasting significance.

Search for New Editor of *English Education*

The Conference on English Education is seeking a new editor for *English Education*. The term of the present editors, Lisa Scherff and Leslie Rush, will end in July 2015. Applicants for the editorship should be tenured (or have completed the tenure process with a reasonable certainty that tenure will be granted) and should have published in *English Education* or a national journal of similar quality.

Applicants should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 31, 2013**. Letters should be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one published writing sample (article or chapter), a onepage statement of the applicant’s vision for the future of the journal, and letter(s) specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to consult with administrators on the question of time, resources, and other institutional support that may be required for the editorship of this journal.

Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “EE Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Senior Developer for Publications, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.

Finalists will be interviewed by the search committee at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston in November 2013. The applicant appointed by the CEE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue to be published in October 2015. The appointment is for five years, nonrenewable.
