

Mentorship Interviews

Interviewees in this series generously donate their contributors' fees to support VS. Books, Vivek Shraya's mentorship and publishing opportunity for an Indigenous or Black writer, or a writer of colour, between the ages of 18–28, living in Canada (see vsbooks.ca for more). Téa Mutonji is this year's recipient of the mentorship opportunity.

Erín Moure

Thinking back to earlier moments in your life as a writer, which writers and communities supported you, and how? What did you get that you needed?

I think that to find mentors it's important to watch and listen to people, and when you find someone you want to learn from, either in terms of writing or life skills, you just try to find ways to ask them the questions you need. Or you observe, read their work, read other things they write. See how they treat other writers or persons. Of course there are professional mentors, i.e. instructors in universities, but you still have to attend to the ones who have comportments, ethics, joys that you want to emulate.

When I think of my own communities, early on, I think of groups of writers who mentored and supported each other: a small group I was part of in Calgary led by Colin Morton in 1972 or so that I learned about from a practice teacher at my high school; the

Vancouver Industrial Writers' Union five years later, the Kootenay School of Writing five years after that—I had left Vancouver before KSW formed, but was invited several times and felt common ground with many of its writers, such as Lisa Robertson, and mentors of those writers: Roy Miki and Fred Wah in particular, Robin Blaser, George Bowering, Sharon Thesen, Gladys Maria Hindmarch.

I also think warmly of the University of Calgary after Fred Wah started teaching there in the 1980s and '90s, and the Alberta College of Art and Design where Pauline Butling taught, and others at U of C: Aritha van Herk, Susan Rudy. I was invited to read and work alongside them and their students such as Ashok Mathur, Nicole Markotić, Hiromi Goto, Jeff Derksen, Louis Cabri, Susan Holbrook, Suzette Mayr, Rosemary Nixon. This space was key for me; it was respectful and full of the thinking energy that challenged

me. And when I was growing up in Calgary in the 1960s when I was in junior high school: Claire Harris, clearly, for helping me and my classmates understand that we too had access to language.

My own community of translators-curators-poets-artists in Montreal over the past 35 years has helped me thrive, with links through the generations and to other places and languages. And local bookstores such as Le port de tête that create literary hubs of great energy. Studio XX, the feminist digital media group that started in the mid-90s. La Galerie Powerhouse, which became La Centrale. Friendships and working relationships in other countries—Chile, Brazil, UK, Portugal, Galicia of course. So critical. I also learned infinitely from my working life at VIA Rail, as a freelance translator, and from my birth and chosen families. Without them who would I be?

Now it is me the older generation, but there is no age at which we don't need friendship and support. We all both give and receive. And set examples for each other. And we have to call out those who don't act respectfully toward others, I think, or at least not hang around with those who aren't respectful.

What's been most important for me always has been a kind of shared compassion, generosity, respect, that is without hierarchy, that cares for the web of thinking and writing, reflection

and learning in which we all exist. No big egos or claims for centrality, just continuous care and endeavour, respect for boundaries and for the integrity of the individual but also for the legitimacy of their seeking, which may be very different from mine. The key is helping and encouraging others to create for themselves the environment in which they can best do their work. When individuals can do their work safely and with joy, we all benefit.

Thinking about the present, what do you try to offer other writers (particularly those who may be less well-established)?

I don't work in a university and my own processes are at cross-purposes with much that is institutional. I try to be available to listen and to offer thoughts, always with that same goal in mind: to encourage writers, younger or whoever, to create the environment they need that will allow them to do their best work. I try to be active on social media and share work and ideas there, and from time to time do university residencies that allow me to contribute by reading drafts, suggesting readings, modelling revision practice, and sharing my experience in the hope of making things easier for others. I also translate works, edit, and when I find amazing work I try to help. I try to be among those who provide a larger view, a space from which to reflect, so that people can keep themselves healthy

and working. Appreciation, too: it's so important to let others know you appreciate their work, even if that's all you are in a position to do.

What do you see other people needing and not getting?

I think it's getting better, but support for people developing daily habits and planning work so as not to see their writing crushed by what they must do to make a living. To plan worklife so as to give time and space for writing and personal relationships. To support mental and physical health. And continually call out toxicities such as sexism that kill energy (a never-ending battle)...

What current programs/initiatives /possibilities would you like to promote (or ask others to consider contributing/donating to)?

In this epoch where traditional reviews and review space is rare: it's important to help younger and newer writers find space for their work to be known and

enter the conversation that writing is. Important too to try to bring in influences from other literatures (why I translate).

I also think it is important to try to live modestly, and to share when we can with those who are struggling and with organizations that work to help the homeless and those whose support systems have broken down. Some of them are or would be writers! Stand up and fight when people who contribute so much to our collective well-being see their rights as humans squashed or undermined, legally and illegally: support queer and trans folk, Indigenous folk making their own spaces and arguments and descriptions, Black writers and organizers to overcome the crushing effect of racism on their communities, support disabled and deaf creators to have physical and aural access to the conversations and spaces and contribute so we can learn from them too, support migrants who flee violence and war, and help advocate for affordable housing, clean water, and safe food.

Vivek Shraya

Thinking back to earlier moments in your life as a writer, which writers and communities supported you, and how? What did you get that you needed?

Maureen Hynes, Farzana Doctor, and Amber Dawn are writers who were

hugely supportive when my writing career first began, as people who regularly reviewed and provided feedback on my work, connected me with other writers and institutions (including reading series and grant and publishing opportunities), and were overall champions of my voice.

I truly believe that a key to success is having champions in your corner, and I am hugely indebted to Maureen, Farzana, and Amber Dawn.

That said, it's been challenging to access mentors who can support the specificity of my multi-disciplinary practice and can provide guidance from a similar experience of being trans, queer, and poc.

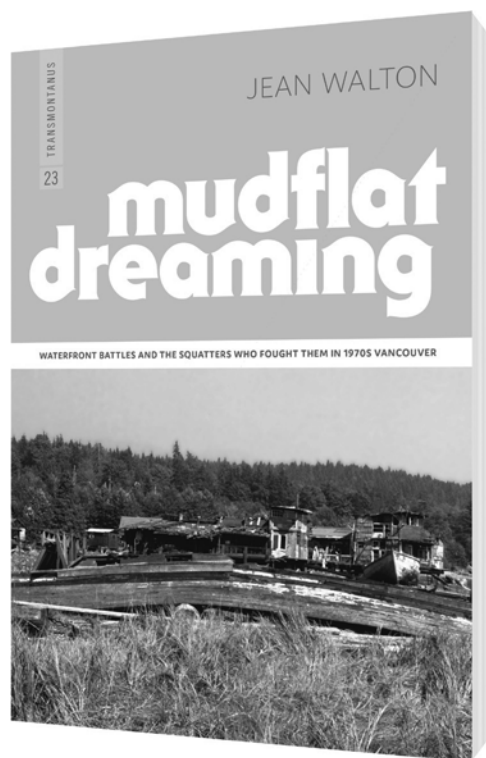
Thinking about the present, what do you try to offer other writers (particularly those who may be less well-established)?

VS.Books is centered around supporting young Indigenous and Black writers, and writers of colour, as these writers still face barriers in the publishing

world. I also try to provide a range of support beyond writing feedback, including how to apply for grants, how to establish an online presence, and any other support the writers are seeking.

What did you need that you didn't get? (What do you see other people needing and not getting?)

Many mid-career and established writers want to provide mentorship but worry about how much time will need to be committed, but there are many ways to provide mentorship, formally and informally, that aren't lifelong. But also, the only way we keep moving forward is if we keep giving back.



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