

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).

Catriona Strang

We've been discussing the possibility of doing a series of interviews, particularly with women writers, about mentorship and supportive communities. If you're open to it, would you send us a reflection on the communities or practices by which you were nourished, or in which you were involved?

Dear Fenn,

A very interesting subject! I dislike the term "mentorship," which I suspect of a hierarchy I vigorously want to reject. I'm happier thinking about how we support one another in a practice of love and sharing, which for me makes community. I find it to be a more multi-directional concept, if that makes any sense. We should remember, after all, that any kind of "mentoring" relationship is mutually beneficial. I've certainly learned more from the younger writers I know, for example, than I've been able to offer them. And then there's the gift of friendship ...

I guess part of my resistance to the idea of "mentorship" is my continuing desire to acknowledge what is so often invisible and unrecognized, and to disturb the boundaries between "work" and "daily

life." I'm talking about friendship, about caring labour, about support. If that's what you mean by mentorship, then I withdraw my objections.

But OK, there is something to be said for "an example." As a young writer I was upheld and inspired and shown possibility by the examples of other women writers, some of whom I knew as well as read—Maxine Gadd and Rhoda Rosenfeld spring immediately to mind, both having always been extremely encouraging both in practice and by virtue of their work—and some of whom I only "knew" through reading—Lorine Niedecker and all the Women of the Left Bank come immediately to mind. The presence of the work of those women, as well as the incredible work itself, was immensely important to me.

And then there's shared reading and discussion, the communal development of ideas. I've been incalculably enriched and supported, upheld, by the comradeship and friendship of fellow writers, and of women writers in particular, for my entire writing life. As a young woman still in my teens I encountered other young

women enthused about writing and its possibilities, and attended a supportive writing group for several years with them. Some of my closest and most enduring friendships sprouted then. It's where I met Christine Stewart, for example. And my decade-long collaboration with Nancy Shaw literally kept me sane during my kids' early years; I believe and hope that

it was also helpful to her during her long illness. That collaboration offered me what I found lacking elsewhere in the writing community, which was a recognition and acceptance of the demands motherhood placed upon me, the conceptual and actual space for my kids and for my needs as a parent, which were often elusive elsewhere in the writing community.

Liz Howard

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?

Margaret Christakos, and the community of writers and thinkers that participated in her *Influency Salon* classes, were instrumentally supportive of me when I first began writing in a public way. Margaret was my first teacher and her genuine encouragement, combined with the expansive possibilities within writing that she taught, very much stoked the fire within me. There was a real culture of comradery in *Influency*, with socializing after class and writing groups. I felt that I was a part of something. Valued in some way. I think the crucial thing that was in the atmosphere at the time was that there was no real sense of competition or becoming "great." The writing sessions were fueled by mutual support, understanding and growth. There wasn't a lot of talk of publishing and prizes, as I recall. Everyone was

doing their own thing. It gave me the freedom to experiment. Be as strange as I needed to.

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

I'm currently a writer-in-residence so my job is to work with (mostly) less well-established writers providing direct feedback on their work and giving them general advice (i.e. places to publish, reading series to check out, online communities to join, etc).

It's a difficult question. I've provided emotional support and received plenty. I've connected people. Recommended texts, writing workshops/programs, possible mentors, where to send work. I've written letters of recommendation, countless blurbs, emails of support for manuscripts. I try to offer what I can without burning out. I'm not always successful.