

Sabbatical Leave Report

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Summary of Sabbatical Leave Project

My sabbatical leave consisted of six graduate units of independent study in creative writing with Professor Randy Cauthen at CSDHU. Under Professor Cauthen's supervision, I worked on my fifth book of fiction, a novel set in 1975, with the varying locations of Vicksburg, Los Angeles, Big Sur, and Annapolis. During my sabbatical leave, I was able to outline the novel and to draft the first 250 pages of the book.

The novel, tentatively titled *The Besieged*, rotates between the points of view of the eighty-year-old matriarch of a Vicksburg family, Mamie Farris; her daughter, Gloria; her son-in-law, Tolley; and her grandson, Flynn. The novel is divided into three parts: "The Birthday," "The Wedding," and "The Funeral."

The first part, "The Birthday," establishes the onset of Mamie's dementia in the form of hallucinations, but it also establishes her desire to bring back together her daughter, now diagnosed with breast cancer, and her daughter's estranged husband. The couple recently divorced after twenty years of a difficult marriage, made difficult in part because of Tolley's mental illness. Mamie engineers a rocky reunion of the two on the evening before her eightieth birthday party. But the reunion ends badly, further traumatizing all characters. After that night, Gloria flies to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur in an attempt to

heal herself, Tolley drives to Los Angeles to appear as a comic on *The Gong Show*, and Flynn breaks up with his girlfriend and takes the train to Annapolis for his appointment at the Naval Academy and plebe summer.

The second part, “The Wedding,” follows the fortunes of these characters. Flynn struggles at the Naval Academy and asks to be relieved of duty, after which he returns to Vicksburg to work on his uncle’s car lot and reunites with his girlfriend. His father, Tolley, fails as a stand-up comic in Los Angeles and returns to Mississippi, to the gulf coast where he grew up, where he meets and decides to marry a younger woman, a waitress and a single mother with a young son. Gloria, still in California, comes to understand that her cancer is not being healed by the various encounter groups and activities and mineral baths at Esalen. And Mamie fights off the attempts of her family to persuade her to sell her house, which she wants to keep for her grandson to inherit. At the close of this section, Flynn and his girlfriend travel to Gulfport for his father’s wedding, and the visit does not go well. The section ends with Flynn abandoning his family and his girlfriend driving his car to Mexico.

The final part of the novel, “The Funeral,” sees both Flynn’s murder in Mexico—he is beaten to death by a group of men trying to rob him--and his parents brought back together for their son’s funeral. Tolley now vows to be a better husband and father his second time around. Mamie learns of her daughter’s illness and fears she has seen not only the full arc of her grandson’s life but also the full arc of her daughter’s. Gloria understands that she must now take up a new burden, that of her aging mother, and this

will be her third burden, along with the burdens of her violent marriage and her terminal illness, and yet she plans to live as fully as possible all the time left to her.

How the Sabbatical Benefitted Faculty Member and Students

The sabbatical gave me the time needed to plan and execute the novel almost in its entirety, and after revising this summer, I plan to submit the manuscript to my current publisher, HarperCollins, which holds the option for my next novel.

As I teach fiction writing at El Camino, both my students and I benefit from my continued work on my craft, which enriches my teaching of that craft to my students. In this novel, I used multiple points of view, third person voice, flash forwards, flashbacks, all techniques I teach my students. As well, I conducted an enormous amount of historical research, strategies for which I regularly share with my students who create dense historical worlds and science fiction scenarios and who ask for help in doing so. As well, continued publication expands my network of agents, publishers, editors, and fellow writers, both nationally and locally, contacts from which my students can benefit.

How the Sabbatical Increased Faculty Member's Proficiency

The sabbatical increased my proficiency as a writer by giving me time to write. My last novel, *The True Memoirs of Little K*, was published by Farrar Straus Giroux in 2010, eight years ago, was translated into six languages, and was a finalist for the California Book Award. It took me eight years to write my fourth book, *The Magnificent Esme Wells*, which will be published by HarperCollins in April 2018. The novel has already been the subject of two feature articles in *Publishers Weekly* and will be the subject of an

upcoming article in *Kirkus* in April, as well. The book has received starred reviews in *Kirkus* and *Booklist*. My fall 2017 sabbatical made it possible for me to focus solely on my writing and to be able to finish a novel in just one year—instead of taking another eight years to do so. I'm grateful to El Camino for its support.