

I was only 12 when my teacher called me a real writer. That moment defined my life.

My first novel was dedicated to Mr. Youngs. We are still friends, 60 years after he taught me composition.

By **Kate Woodworth** Updated September 5, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



The writer with her friend and former teacher, Bill Youngs, in May. FROM KATE WOODWORTH

My teacher uses a cane now, but he tends to leave it in the other room while he's visiting me.

"Don't treat me like an old man," he says when I offer him an arm for balance. He says it gently, his voice still as velvet as it was in the classroom at Dedham Country Day School 60 years ago, when he leaned over my desk and said, "This is the way real writers punctuate." I knew in that moment — at age 12 — that I was a real writer. Not that I wanted to grow up to be one; that I already was one. A moment that defined my life from a teacher I've never forgotten.

We are, of course, both old now, but in 1965 I was on the verge of graduating from elementary school and he — our composition teacher, known to us as Mr. Youngs — was a novelty. The summer before his senior year in college, Mr. Youngs had ridden his motor scooter across the country, throwing his sleeping bag down wherever he landed, striking up friendships with people he met in campgrounds or gas stations, and writing his thoughts and experiences in a notebook.

I understood, from the snippets he shared with us, that his trip had been both adventure and self-discovery, and that glimpse into an adult's world — a teacher's world — opened for me the possibility that I could have a life different from the one I'd sensed was laid out for me by a childhood of private schools and dancing lessons. I could leave the East Coast, for example, and I did, moving to Salt Lake City in 1978 and living there for almost 30 years. I could embrace my identity as a writer, and I did. When I published my first novel, *Racing Into the Dark*, in 1989, I dedicated it to Mr. Youngs. He reciprocated by sending me an autographed copy of one of his first books, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*. By then, he had earned his doctorate and was teaching American history at Eastern Washington University, where he continues to teach today.

Mr. Youngs' influence on me and my classmates extended to reading as well as to writing. Under his tutelage, we moved from stories about magic and animals with human characteristics to books with human protagonists who were our age. He assigned *To Kill*

a Mockingbird, and I wanted to be Scout — a tomboy willing to befriend someone others mocked and who was courageous enough to stand up to a bully. He read aloud to us from *Shane*, a 1949 Western written by Jack Schaefer, a passage in which Shane and his friend Joe Starrett uproot a stump while Joe's son Bob looks on. Bob, the story's narrator, was — like us — observing the adult world and feeling adult emotions without fully comprehending them. Through those stories, we learned that fiction could help us understand life.

This year, Mr. Youngs endowed a writing scholarship in his name and mine at Dedham Country Day School, and together we met with students to talk with them about how their education would lead them to adult careers. Remarkably, Mr. Youngs still had some of our compositions from 1965, as well as some of his lesson plans about similes, personification, and using vivid words ... all lessons that are threaded through my writing in the decades since and which were visible in my classmates' essays. As part of those discussions, we talked about another shared passion: the natural world and our concern for the environment. I invited the students to commit to one small thing they were willing to do to help mitigate climate change. One student wrote, "I will write a book about animals being threatened by climate change from their perspective. I'm hoping it will change hearts."

Maybe he doesn't ride a motor scooter anymore, but my teacher is still changing lives. And now, thanks to him, I am, too.

Kate Woodworth is the author of Little Great Island and Racing Into the Dark. Send comments to magazine@globe.com. TELL YOUR STORY. Email your 650-word unpublished essay on a relationship to connections@globe.com. Please note: We do not respond to submissions we won't pursue.

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