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From the Author's Chair: Podcasting the Summer Institute

An Interview with Matthew Brown

by **Cornelia Pokrzywa**

Recently, Matthew Brown and Cornelia Pokrzywa sat down to talk about the genesis of the MBWP podcast, a promising new way to take the products of the summer invitational experience to a wider audience.



Cornelia Pokrzywa

CP: Matthew, during the summer institute, we were all working very diligently on our research inquiries. You had already presented a demo on using comic books in the classroom (a very successful presentation, I might add), but I was still working on my research into best practices and plagiarism. At the same time, we were working on some personal writing that we first shared in small writing groups, and later brought to the "author's chair," where each participant read his or her own work out loud to all of the SI participants.

MB: Yes, I remember reading a story that I wrote regarding my first experience with the Ouija Board. I tried my best to make the story a bit unsettling, and it seemed to work, as no one wanted to actually sit in the author's chair after I was finished.

CP: The first set of creative pieces generated a lot of reaction because nobody knew what to expect (especially after your piece!). For me, writing the second piece was more difficult, and the third one seemed impossible. I had a lot of false starts, and the pieces that I tested in the small group just didn't work. I was feeling pretty frustrated during the brainstorming sessions, until I happened to look in your writer's notebook.

MB: I felt that everyone was significantly freaked out by my first story dabbling in the occult, so as a joke, I decided to make a list of the most disturbing things I could think of to add to my next story to really blow some minds. I tried to come up with things that were purposely shocking and bizarre, and I enjoyed juxtaposing weird ideas with innocent ones, like "zombie apocalypse" with "the Count from Sesame Street." Of course, I was never going to write about any of this, but I had lots of fun coming up with a list of creepy, weird things.

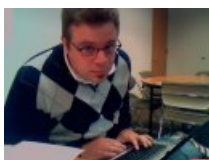
CP: It was probably so much fun because you're really a nice, respectable young man! With encouragement from you and the other members of the writing group, I started developing a "throw-away" piece. In the group, we even talked about revisions and ideas for further development. But, ultimately, I decided the piece wasn't something I would be comfortable reading in the author's chair. You suggested recording it, and the next day you came in with a microphone and we waited until everyone left and recorded the essay.

MB: You were obviously uncomfortable reading it in front of the project, but our more intimate writing group loved it. I've been interested in music and performance for quite some time, and, taking my cues from Ira Glass, decided to cut it to record, making a spoken word piece out of it with musical accompaniment. You just read your essay into the microphone and I spent a couple nights piecing it together.

I've been told that I have a pretty sharp sense of humor, so I put it to work with your essay, adding music and sound effects that I thought would add another dimension and layer to the text. Really, I approached the whole thing like the instrumentation to a song, and being a musician, this came somewhat natural to me. Putting together the podcast was really a blast, and (to be honest) I surprised myself with the results. You can do a lot with a couple songs, a microphone, a great essay, and [internet sound-editing program] Audacity.

CP: On the last day, there was a lot of excitement and nervousness as everybody read one last piece. I was the only one who decided not to read mine aloud, and your recording – complete with my voice and your specially selected background music and visual graphic – forced everyone to pay a different kind of attention to the "author's" chair.

Writers have to take risks, and the institute provided a safe setting for that. Although the recording is not one I want published or shared with anyone outside of the institute's participants (even though it has given us so many inside jokes since the institute ended!), it gave you the amazing idea to record three more essays and weave a narrative theme to tie them together. The end result is terrific! Laura Gabrion, Rebecca Rivard and I each read a piece about some aspect of pop culture in our lives, and the editing, music and narrative you added brought them to life and gave them purpose.



Matthew Brown

MB: The first formal podcast that I made was terrific fun. I have to admit, the moment when I knew I was really doing something cool was when I was editing Rebecca's essay; it was out of my comfort zone, because it's not necessarily a humorous essay. I really worked trying to get music that really worked with the essay. My favorite moment is when Hank Williams starts singing "Let's Turn Back the Years." I feel like the music becomes an actual character in her essay in particular, speaking where the characters can't.

CP: I heard that there might be future editions of the MBWP podcast soon!

MB: Yes, as a matter of fact. I really enjoyed working on it, and it's a different side of creativity to explore. I would look forward to more podcasts, for sure.

Cornelia is a 2008 Summer Institute Fellow and member of the MBWP Technology Team. She is also a Special Lecturer in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at Oakland University, specializing in teaching first-year, technology-intensive, writing classes.

SUMMARY

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