

From Where I Sit In the Vineyards of the Napa Valley

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The beauty here in Napa Valley astounds me.

As I drive down Highway 29 through Napa, making my way through lush vineyards, I feel lucky to call this place home. While a student at UC Davis, I used to take jaunts over to Napa occasionally to shop the outlet malls and make my first clumsy attempts at wine tasting. I'd always felt compelled to visit, and was happy when my path eventually led to a job opportunity in Napa five years ago. Now, I put my English degree and years of experience as a student writer for the *California Aggie* newspaper to work in my role as director of communications at the Napa Chamber of Commerce. I make use of my history degree on the board of the Napa County Historical Society. Often, the hauntingly beautiful vineyards trigger memories of adventures inspired by books read and deciphered in those UC Davis classrooms.

In 1998, during the summer following graduation, I embarked upon a two-week adventure through London and the British countryside, chasing the ghosts of literary legends. My path ultimately led to the fabled inspiration for Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* in the misty Yorkshire moors deep

in Northern England. The sky there felt like an extension of the earth, almost as if I had to duck down to avoid hitting my head on the clouds. With the abandoned stone farmhouse in view, I was sure I could hear Heathcliff's tortured pleas on the wind. Words first read during late-night study sessions came alive, as if I was now the one directing the characters to act out their roles.

That summer, I soaked up the atmosphere and inhaled their legacy. Ever since then, I have been determined to follow in the footsteps of great writers, many of whom formed the basis of my UC Davis English degree. Four years of dedicated guidance and instruction from professors like Jack Hicks sparked a life-long interest in the stories behind the words. His "Literature of California" course brought my love for literary history home. At the time, I was a bright-eyed Aggie reporter. I remember distinctly the April 1997 memorial that Professor Hicks held for poet Allen Ginsberg. Aware of my interest in the Beat genre, he invited me to meet writer Gary Snyder following the memorial. Both intimidating and inspiring, it was a moment that cemented my desire to

build upon introductions made in the classroom and shake hands with the great figures of literature.

Eleven years after graduating from UC Davis, I found myself back in the Bay Area, embarking upon a masters' thesis project focused on California writers. I often thought back to Professor Hicks' classroom, where we delved into the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, the tales of Jack London, and the words of John Muir and Mark Twain. Studying the life stories of the writers—exploring that intersection of literature and history—often interested me as much as the words themselves. These explorations have formed the basis of my "Literary Legacies" blog, a growing collection of stories about my literary ghost hunts.

The tattered, college-issued novels remain on my bookshelf. These books serve as reminders of long nights spent devouring language and days in the classroom searching for the meaning behind it. These books have inspired journeys. Isn't that what education is all about? ☺

Follow Julie's literary explorations at:
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