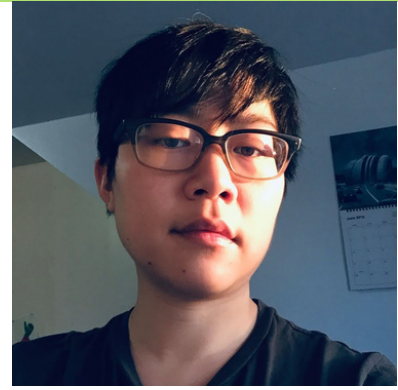


Q&A: Sagan Yee (CW '21)

Six-Week Workshop Alum



Did you do the 2021 virtual Six-Week Workshop from your usual home environment or from a different environment? What worked best for you in creating a setting that helped you participate as fully as possible in the Workshop?

Because I wouldn't get to have the traditional Seattle experience, I knew I wanted to do something special and physically transportative. I'd been stuck in my bedroom for most of the pandemic, and things in Toronto were cautiously reopening after the first wave of vaccinations. After doing some research and assessing my personal safety boundaries, I decided to book a 5-week residency at Artscape Gibraltar Point. It's a former schoolhouse on the Toronto Islands, where artists from various disciplines can take time away from their everyday lives on the mainland to work on creative projects. There's an old lighthouse and an amusement park nearby, and even a nude beach! It was a fantastic environment to get story ideas, while being physically distanced from the density of downtown.

How was your class able to bond and form community with each other, instructors, and staff despite being in a virtual setup?

Clarion West staff (shout-out to Jae, Rashida, Izzy, and Jane!) went above and beyond in making things feel special. They built in a lot of extracurricular activities like casual hangouts, virtual LARP, craft and movie nights, and fun weekly surprises to keep things fresh. And of course, we got to know everyone's pets and their unique methods of Zoom disruption.

Clarion West has also been doing a ton of work to make the program more inclusive, with a critique structure that's less focused on competition and picking out what's "wrong" with a story, and more about helping each writer connect with their own work in order to make it shine. I learned so much about giving feedback that was not only constructive, but also generative. It helped me become a better reader as well as a writer, and I think this process positively affected how the students interacted with each other even beyond the program.

What were the biggest challenges to forming community given the virtual setup?

It can be hard to muster up the energy for social time outside of class hours, especially when it entails being stuck inside all day on Zoom. You don't have quite the same experience you would with an in-person group, where you'd be able to go out for dinner or drinks and off-the-cuff outdoor activities in between sessions. That being said, I found plenty of time to virtually hang out with classmates and instructors outside of the critique sessions and workshops, even if I didn't attend every single event. I am incredibly grateful we were able to share and make art together in a time of widespread social isolation and chaos.

How did you take care of your self-care and other needs during the virtual Workshop? e.g. screen time breaks, healthy food, alone time vs. social time, juggling family/friends, sleep, etc.

Being on an island where I had to take a (mercifully short) ferry ride just to get groceries presented unique scheduling challenges. In addition to waking up and going to bed at consistent hours, I developed a strict routine that involved shopping and meal prep on weekends, reading the submitted short stories on my e-reader during meals, and going for a jog or a swim in the lake to clear my mind before and after writing. I think I tried to make it out to at least one or two optional social activities a week, and dedicated some time to exploring the island and mingling outdoors with the other residency artists. Being away from my usual work space also helped with social media distractions; I didn't feel as tempted to doomscroll Twitter when I was immersed in the rhythms of a different environment.

Do you have a favorite memory from the Workshop that you'd like to share?

There were so many in-jokes and memorable moments that occurred over the course of those six weeks, but solving puzzles in order to get out of a haunted cabin with Ted Chiang was one of the highlights. Someone in our cohort had been working for an Evil Dead-inspired Escape Room that had pivoted to a remote set-up during the pandemic, in which players on Zoom directed a staff person (our CW friend, wearing a webcam) by issuing commands like "look at that red triangle over the candle, maybe it's part of the code! No, to the left! Up a bit! Maybe it's a button? Try pressing it!" Thanks for helping us unlock that chainsaw, Ted!

Any words of wisdom or advice for the incoming 2023 Clarion West class?

Don't be afraid to take risks and step outside of your comfort zone! There were several times when I scrapped a week's worth of work and handed in something I wrote the day before the deadline, and I loved how that frenetic energy showed up on the page. Some of my favourite pieces that I wrote during CW were also the least "publishable."

Aside from that, every cohort is unique, so you'll discover your own shape of things as you go. Be kind to yourself and others, trust your instincts, make space for the unexpected, and above all, have fun! We're all rooting for you, and can't wait to see what you'll write next.

Anything else you'd like to share about your Clarion West Six-Week Workshop experience?

One nice thing about being used to interacting virtually is that a lot of us continue to keep in touch online, well after the conclusion of the workshop. A few of us live in roughly the same geographical areas, so we try to make plans to see each other when we happen to be in the same city or country. I'm part of a monthly short story critique group within our cohort that has been running since February 2022, and I've made friends with several writers who met each other through the Write-a-Thon. So in a sense, for me, Clarion West never really ended!

Where can people find you and your work online?

Website: www.saganyee.com/writing

Twitter: @SaganYee

Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@saganyee>

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Sagan Yee (he/they) is a media artist and organizer whose creative practice includes animation, video games, interactive collaborations, and most recently speculative fiction. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming at places like Best Microfiction, Tales & Feathers, Apex Magazine, and Lightspeed. They are currently pursuing an MFA in Design Media Arts at UCLA, where they intend to further explore the fuzzy boundary between machines and the human imagination.