

Chicken and Writings with Professor Donaldson

An interview by Jay Clark

Okay, well, first off, how are you today?

I'm good. How are you?

I'm doing good. Thank you. So, first question, who are you?

Okay. I am an Assistant Professor of English here at JSU, and I'm also a Transman and Queer.

Okay. Where are you from?

I grew up in Jericho, Vermont.

What brought you to Alabama?

I originally came to Alabama for grad school, and then got a job here at JSU afterwards, so I stayed.

What brought you to become a professor?

I just really love teaching. It is fun to have a job where you talk about books with smart people all day.

What brought you to become a writer?

That's a good question. It's fun to get to, like, send a question for yourself and then get to explore it. Like, "what would happen if this happened? Or what about this scenario?" You then get to write as a means of explaining that world to being. I just love it.

What is something that you do, that many don't know about?

I raise chickens. They don't lay eggs during the wintertime. They just eat a lot and sleep a lot. Which I mean, same, frankly, but they're starting to lay eggs and run around the yard again.

How many chickens do you have?

I have three. I think if I had more land I would have more, but 3 is good.

How'd you become a member of JSU faculty?

So, I applied for a job here in early 2019. After my review, I was accepted, and started work here in the fall of 2019.

In your biography, you specialize in fiction and nonfiction as a creative writing faculty. How'd you come to these genres?

Around the end of undergrad, I realized that poetry wanted to create a puzzle, kind of, that got me more interested in fiction, and kind of exploring possibilities. I also realized I read a lot more fiction. So, I had a lot more familiarity. Nonfiction started because of a class I took in Grad school on writing an essay. I felt like I didn't know how to write an essay from my creative nonfiction perspective. But I took the class and realized like, okay, I feel like that kind of opened my path to writing essays.

That's cool. You currently have an Integrated Studies course called Queer Arts and Culture Surveys. What is this course about?

So, we don't teach that course anymore. That was a one-time course co-taught with Matt Hill, who is now the senior lead advisor for the College of Arts and Humanities. Michelle Taylor, who was a visiting professor in drama also co-taught the class. Hopefully, we'll get to have the Queer Arts and Culture Survey again.

As far as I know, right now, we don't have the software.

Why was this course created then?

So, it's kind of like a first offering to have queerer, and trans based academic classes here. Dr. Reed, last semester, just taught her first LGBTQ literature class.

So, what was the best work you have ever written?

I kind of feel like every time I finish something, I've learned so much along the way. I'm still improving as a writer, every new thing feels like they are better than the things that came before it. That's my perspective at least, someone else reading the same set of work would find something like this and think this is the best thing. But for me, every time I figure out how to do something new, that feels like the best thing.

What is the most recent thing that you have learned?

So, I just published a story in the online magazine Catapult called Yeet! That! Teet! about a top surgery game show. Originally, when writing that story, I had written out all these scenes taking place on the set of The Game Show and like kind of going step by step, explaining what happened. In the final draft, I just cut all this, and I was like 'the reader doesn't need to see this, it's not relevant to the emotional part of the story.' That felt like a huge risk that I had to take.

These last few questions are from your website. You had written Genrequeer and Genderqueer in Alabama back in 2017 where you talked about the lack of representation of non-binary faculty. Have there been any changes from when it was written? And if so, how?

Honestly, no, I wish it were different. I mentioned to one of the other faculty here about being the only trans-faculty member at JSU, and as far as I know in Alabama. But like I don't- and it sounds impressive, but also like comes from my search of wanting more peer. Because, they know that there are other trans faculty elsewhere in Arkansas, in the Northeast, some in Florida, a couple of Georgia, but I don't know of any others in Alabama, and I want peers. So, part of what I see as my role in mentoring students is to try and get peers to help other individuals, so that they can at least become curious. But as far as I'm aware now, I mean, this is kind of a depressing answer, but I think things might get worse in terms of trans faculty specifically. But also, current trans faculty in the south, because of the growth that has become more prevalent lately. Particularly, how universities interact with queer and trans communities. We are seeing a lot in Florida, and I think probably what will happen is that there'll be more movement out of the South, as opposed to movement into the South which is what I would like to see. But I also understand why the opposite was probably most going to happen. Sorry, that's not the answer you wanted.

You're fine. I was just not expecting that deep of an answer. It seems that JSU has been a lot more open to queer faculty, from what I've seen with queer faculty and the Safe Zone too.

We do have a number of gay faculty, bi faculty, and queer faculty, and I think that's awesome. I'm glad we have that, especially because, historically, others and I felt insecure/scared to come out. It's awesome that you have that. For me, I also want trans peers to like, have community in that aspect of shared experience, so, I do wish that there were others.

How are you able to network and communicate with other writers on various writing projects, like Connections and Influence in the Russian and American short story and Representation in Steven Universe?

So, for that, I applied to what's called CFPs (calls for proposals), and it's like a big website where you apply to stuff. It's kind of abstracted this idea that you want to publish it, like a collection of school. Both of those articles came out that way. As far as networking with other writers, I do that a lot. Mostly on the internet, but also just through attending stuff, which has been a lot easier over the last couple of years (as more stuff is remote). I regularly attend a writer series that takes place in Brooklyn, because they live stream every time now on Twitch. So like, I can be in the audience, yay, sitting on my couch in Alabama. These Writers Workshops are also a great way to network. I did the Tin House Writers Workshop in summer of 2021 and I met tons of people.

With the writing workshops, how were you able to get into those and improve as a writer?

They all kind of have application processes. So, Tin House is known for its story and scholarship application, and they tell you if you've been accepted. There are 15 applicants, or so, I think. You just send your stuff, and they'll tell you if you get it. It's like a class, you give each other support and you give each other feedback. They also host social networking events, slow talks and craft lectures, and just like, you know, speed zoom trivia or carrying the key here. It's a lot of fun and I recommend it. Even applying for scholarships can be prohibitive, because you still must pay an application fee, but I think it's worth it. It's just such a good experience.

The next question is about your focus on research conduction. How did you figure out what your interests were?

Over time, interest deepens and new things develop, right? So, like mentioning this interesting fiction in undergrad, I was like "okay, fiction, like specifically short stories, and novels." Going to grad school, reading, and writing a lot is primarily what helped me. Figuring out what you like, what you're interested in exploring, and the things you find yourself returning to again and again. The writer Kelly Woods describes this as your obsession. Every writer has their obsessions. Sometimes, these obsessions aren't necessarily even clear to another person and sometimes they are. But finding out what those are and using them to your advantage helps a lot in terms of figuring out what you're interested in writing. So for me, I realized I was writing a lot of weird relationships in reason like various kinds of relationships, not just romantic, but like really close to platonic relationships, chosen family stuff. That's primarily what I find myself writing, it's more like specifically trans relationship stories.

How have you maintained those interests to be your focus on conducting research?

Just like continuing to do it, I guess. Also, trying to make time for it, it's always hard when researching. Unless you have a paper accepted already or something, no one is waiting for it. So, no one is bothering you like, "where's your short story?" or "I need to this short story right now while you're writing it." You just have to find a way to make that time for yourself.

Do you have any events coming up or new books published that you'd like to share?

I don't have any events coming up, right now. I have a story that's coming out in the new journal *Astrolabe* in March, which I will send in about. *Astrolabe* is a web project that is focused on each issue is a constellation. They're trying to make like a galaxy of issues, which I think is just an amazing concept.

What was your story, if you feel inclined to share?

I mean, it's a flash piece. It's very short. But I think it'll be the timeless story in that collection that I am working on called "Iridescence." The story itself just talks about the spiritual wild qualities of going to a drag show.

You know, I've never been to a drag show. What is that like?

It's an experience worth having, it's fun. But I mean, it's just people lip syncing on stage, you know? I mean it's cute though and fun; Drag and burlesque. I've been going to Atlanta more the last seven years, specifically because of the search for peers that we mentioned earlier, so I was brought along the journey more than in the past. Also, I'm like such an old man. They start at like 9pm and I'm like, "oh, that's when I want to be in bed", so, I haven't gotten to that many.

Yeah, I want to go to bed at nine o'clock though. I feel that.

I mean, there are drag brunches, or Drag Storytime's. That stuff I can get on board with, because it's like, "okay, it's a lovely time. This is a good time for me to be awake."

Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me?

Not that I can think of, just think you should keep writing. You know, working on the best ways for yourself to thrive, because that's important.