

Steph O'Neil

## MFA Personal Statement

John Green's 2008 speech at The Alan Conference has been incredibly influential in my life, both as a writer and a teacher. I am especially drawn to one idea: "Books give us the faith that others are real, that their joy and pain should matter to us, and that ours can matter to them. In some ways, this confirms our own existence, because most of our mattering is in the context of one another" (Green). Before reading Green's speech, I had never been able to articulate what drew me so strongly to storytelling.

Even though writing is often seen as a solitary endeavor, the joy comes from the social construction of co-creating a story between reader and writer. It is an intimate connection because, for me, writing is exploring what it means to exist. Sometimes that means I'm writing a story that lets me understand and forgive my mother. Other times, it might include coming to terms with the parts of humanity that can be devastating to confront. The world can be a dark place, but, as Green points out, we do not have to navigate it alone. Books can be a source of hope.

What drives me as a writer is inseparably entwined with what drives me as a teacher, and I constantly find myself going back to Green's speech. My greatest joy in my work is connecting students to literature, whether that is a newly released novel from my classroom shelf or tricking them into falling in love with Shakespeare's dirty jokes. I love watching them learn not only to make personal connections to stories but to let the the story connect them to the greater world around them. Ultimately, those connections are my goal as a writer and a teacher.