

**Seattle Arts & Lectures**  
**Interview Transcript: John McCartney & Arianne True (WITS)**  
Interviewer: Gabriela Denise Frank  
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*Note: this transcript has been edited for clarity and flow.*

**Gabriela Denise Frank**

I am Gabriela Frank and I am here on behalf of Seattle Arts & Lectures with John McCartney, a Writer in the Schools (WITS) teacher at Hamilton International Middle School, and poet and WITS Writer-in-Residence, Arianne True.

**John McCartney**

Hello.

**Arianne True**

Hi.

**GDF**

I have heard that the two of you have—the word “magical” came into context about your collaboration—for the benefit of the SAL audience, can you tell us how you met through Writers in the Schools and how your professional relationship has blossomed into a collaboration?

**AT**

Yeah, so, last year—that was 2019—I got asked out of the blue to take over John’s residency, which was very exciting. We didn’t get to meet before, right?

**JMC**

I think we met briefly—very briefly. Most of it was coordinated through emails between the two of us at first.

In my memory, I think the thing that clinched it was that first day. You started explaining some of your classroom expectations to the students, and one of our students raised her hand and said, “Are you Mr. McCartney’s sister or something?”

We had very natural similarities in how we approach interacting with students and what we want to see [in] a classroom from the get-go.

**AT**

I remember being really excited—and really taken aback by that. I love all the teachers I’ve worked with, it’s been awesome, but it is also rare because I used to do contract work with a lot of schools and other places, and I had trouble with some teachers because of the way they treated their students.

Seeing someone else treating their students the way I want to treat my students, [I thought], *Oh, I don't have to worry about this. We can just get to work.* That John was so excited about doing dancing and poetry with the students [made me think], *Oh, okay, so we can really take off.*

**GDF**

These are middle school [students], so eleven, twelve and thirteen-year-olds?

**JMC**

Yeah. My classroom was eleven and twelve-year-olds. This is their sixth grade class.

**GDF**

Can you compare and contrast other classroom situations? When a WITS resident comes in, what have students been learning to that point, and what changes with a WITS Writer-in-Residence?

**JMC**

That can look really different, of course, depending on the classroom and the arrangement of the school year. We're usually coming off of a fiction unit in my class when we start with residencies in the spring. In order to work on poetry, we've been learning a lot of fiction-based stuff and how to analyze fiction. We freshly move into poetry after that point.

**GDF**

A breath of fresh air! Are they reading novels, or mostly short fiction and then into poetry?

**JMC**

Again, that's dependent on where you are. We read a lot of short fiction and we read *The House on Mango Street* [by Sandra Cisneros] at our school.

**GDF**

Oh, nice! That's great. And then poetry. How do you prepare them for that?

**JMC**

Well. . .

**AT**

I thought you did a really good job this year.

**JMC**

Aw, thanks. This year, we tried a lot of new things. I wanted to make sure we had a common language around terms like *stanza* and *line*. I coordinated with Arianne ahead of time to decide, okay, what terms do you really want the students to know once you've come in? I try to give a range of different kinds of poems from different backgrounds. I had some poetry by San'yō, the Japanese poet from the 12th century. I had some pieces by Langston Hughes. A pretty broad survey.

**GDF**

Where do they go from that?

**AT**

We only had [only] a few days this year, unfortunately. We got cut off. I did find that it was helpful going in when they already had a good understanding of terms like *stanza* and *line*. I forget that if you don't spend time with those, you don't know them. Having those really basic concepts meant that we could jump in more easily, which was very exciting. We could play more.

**GDF**

How do you find that the students go into poetry in the body? Is that something that you have to coax some of them into? Or are they ready to go there?

**AT**

It depends. Everyone's different. Last year it was fun seeing which students were and how they responded. There was one kid who was very small and fairly quiet. But then, on our dancing day, busted out these sick moves and was the energetic center of the room. And was responding to the poetry through that. People respond differently. Some kind of struggle with it. Some get it right away. But everyone was willing to try.

**JMC**

Yeah. To build off of that, I'd say that all students have different learning preferences. When we're talking about poetry being in the body, especially in a language arts class, you don't think of it being a class that is kinesthetic in any sort of way. Giving students who might not prefer writing, who might not prefer doing things on paper, this other way to interact with poetry—I think it gives the best chance to get all kids engaged and involved.

**AT**

I love that because writing poetry isn't the only way to interact with it. There's so many ways you can interact with poetry. Getting kids, or anyone, to put it into their body and manifest it that way is so fun—it's fun to watch. That's one of my favorite days.

**GDF**

Students today [seem] much farther ahead. When I was a student, we mainly read right out of a book [of] somebody else's words—and the likelihood that person was long dead was pretty high. These days, there's slam poetry. I love seeing WITS students kick off all the SAL events. It feels like there's much more visibility within young writers today that performance and reading and dancing about poetry is actually part of writing. [Is that] the dialogue you have with students? Both of you?

**JMC**

I almost take it for granted that it's easier to do those things these days, and the education overall has gotten—you know, I have my criticisms—but it's gotten a lot more progressive about including different kinds of voices with expression.

**AT**

Absolutely.

**JMC**

It's normal to be that way.

**AT**

I agree with John. I sometimes take it for granted until I stop and notice.

I went through a fairly traditional schooling here in Seattle but, outside of that, I had a lot of writing teachers at places like Youth Speaks and Hugo House. I didn't realize until I got to grad school and heard stories from my professors [about] how great all of my writing teachers had been—and how that wasn't the norm everywhere, especially in formal schools. They brought in everyone. They brought in every mode. They brought in so much interdisciplinary stuff. Everything was fair game and everything was play and low stakes and fun.

**GDF**

Are you able to continue any of this in the current climate?

**JMC**

That's the question, isn't it?

**AT**

We were touching on this.

**GDF**

One of the things SAL wanted me to ask is, what is it like to be a teacher now? We can pivot—I'm personally really curious what it's like to teach now.

**JMC**

I think it'd be good to—and this is really nice for Arianne and I to do this—walk back to the day that the announcement came out. We were in the middle of the residency, in the middle of a lesson.

**AT**

In the middle of a lesson!

**JMC**

Yeah. And this voice comes over the intercom in our school that says, “Teachers, everyone check your email right now.” And...

**AT**

...we’re, like, “Oh no.”

**JMC**

Instantly, in every single classroom, all of the students charged right up to the computer and it—absolute chaos reigned. We were able to hit a point of, “Okay, now we’re just gonna talk. We’re gonna talk about the continuity that we’re going to try to reach for.”

Back then, we thought this was going to be a two-week closure. This is where some hard stuff comes in. The nature of saying goodbye at that point, when really it ended up being kind of a permanent goodbye—in the case of some students, they’re moving on at the end of the year. We didn’t know that then. It put us in a rough spot in terms of being able to easily develop continuity after that point.

**AT**

John and I talked when that came down the pipe. We do think that the curriculum we have together is really much better done in person. So much comes from that. Even aside from all the other reasons we’re doing everything digitally and at a distance. We were hoping we could come back, as soon as school opened back up, we could jump right back in where we left off and finish the residency.

**JMC**

I think that, when we were talking about having similar priorities and values when it comes to education earlier, Arianne, I’d say we both look at school as community first. Not in terms of, *Here are these educators who are storehouses of knowledge who dole out knowledge to people.*

You’ve got spaces where children come every day, and they’re growing and learning without any input from adults. Our job is to guide them through their own learning. To address things that would keep them from being able to grow the way that they want to and that they need to. Our tools for taking away so many of those obstacles—we don’t have those things right now.

**GDF**

John, you mentioned you’re not really reaching all of the students. What are ways that you *are* reaching them, or that you are able to make connections under the current circumstances?

**JMC**

So we’re talking on [April] 24th. We had the school board vote on Monday of this week where they solidified some of the directives. Schools are giving A’s to all high school students right now. They’re passing all middle school students. We have a pass/fail system. Functionally, I

don't know how you say, "This student gets a failing grade for not having internet at home." I don't know why that would be an option on the table.

We're all working to create asynchronous models of learning. The idea isn't that everybody's doing the same lesson at the same time. You prepare a set of activities and the student can contact you when they have that done. We have semi-regular video chat meetings, but what are those supposed to be for, knowing that not every family can attend, not every student can attend? It gets hard to decide what should go into sessions you have to offer but you don't have to require.

There was an NPR article recently that said about sixty percent of students overall seem to be showing up at their lessons. On a good day, half of my students can participate in some way. Occasionally, I've had twenty out of 120 kids respond to something I've put out there. It doesn't feel fair to weigh expectations.

**GDF**

As a writer, I've struggled to show up and, yes, in some ways writing is comforting—although to try to make something coherent is a struggle. I wonder, for the kids, is this something that you two are continuing to collaborate on? I imagine there are some for whom poetry is saving their life in a way, [providing] a bright spot. Are there ways of getting the curriculum that you two worked on together out to them?

**JMC**

We've been talking about that.

**AT**

We've got one lesson. All of us WITS teachers are recording lessons so that we can send [them to students], or people can access the video if they have internet. John and I did one lesson together because it was a lesson that we wrote together.

**GDF**

Can you describe it?

**AT**

It's a shortened version of the dance lesson.

**JMC**

A much shortened version. There are lots of different activities in it that we don't do. Though, I think you technically could have done all of them in some way. We watched a video of Chance the Rapper, who is not a trained dancer himself, performing one of his songs. I think that one's really nice—we use that in the classroom. Seeing somebody who is recognizable and not necessarily great at dancing makes it safer for a lot of kids.

**AT**

And he dances with someone who is a trained dancer and choreographer. I'm a trained dancer, and John is a fantastic dancer but does not have classical training.

**JMC**

Nice way to put it.

**AT**

I like how that mirrors it. Whatever level of dance or whatever level of dance training that you have is a great level to start engaging from.

**GDF**

What have you learned from each other and from working together?

**JMC**

Wow. That's a good question.

**AT**

It *is* a good question.

**JMC**

I think we've got this rich and ever-growing friendship. It's hard for me to place this landmark at one point, but—what did I learn up to this point? I've become more confident in where my body fits into poetry, and I don't have a trained background. I'm willing to be up in front of a crowd of students and be as weird as possible.

**AT**

Which is very important, and I love you for that.

**JMC**

I think it's been more meaningful, what I can do in those contexts. We have lots of conversations about student experiences, about what you bring to art. From that far-out-there philosophical level where a lot of that starts all the way down to the details of learning about new poets and being able to go and see poets speak at Town Hall events together.

**AT**

It feels less like I have learned new things and more about confidence. For me, it's all the weird stuff I want to do—and the experiments I want to do with students are great and welcome and not something that I have to sell. *This* is what I want to do. *This* is what I think is going to be great. For someone else to jump right on board with that and say, "Yes, and let's add this thing to it—and here, I have this perfect video to fold into that lesson," was very empowering for me.

I like more experimental stuff and I come from an experiential and facilitative background as an educator, so that is how I like to teach. It's what John was saying earlier about how [the students] are having their own processes and we're just helping them through that.

Because I don't have training as a classroom teacher, I have often felt I should defer to my classroom teacher. Actually, I do know a lot about how these dynamics work. I know a lot of things that other people don't because I've had a different background as an educator. Having John reaffirm and build on that with me has [helped me realize] I do know what I'm doing and what I have to offer is really cool.

**GDF**

When you work together are there certain days, Arianne, that you come into the classroom or are you there every day?

**AT**

Our residency has been set up as a two-week intensive, meaning every day for two weeks I'm in all of the language arts classes. Sixth grade all day, which is super fun.

**GDF**

Imagine the energy!

**AT**

It's one of my favorite things all year.

**GDF**

What do you see coming down in the future, if the stay-at-home order extends into the fall? Are there adaptations that you could imagine happening from the struggles going on right now? Something new or even exciting that might come out of this from an educational perspective?

**JMC**

Definitely. Although, I do have lots of worries about what that might look like. One of the most cynical thoughts I had was, "Wow, is this gonna be the end of snow days? We're never gonna take a snow day off again, ever?" That's more of my joke answer.

There's a real opportunity right now to notice inherent inequities in the system and try to address them with policy before we get back. There's a lot of contradictions in that public schooling is supposed to be a resource for all students and especially for students who don't have privileges or advantages at home.

Unfortunately, I feel that during this crisis the push into digital learning has been more about how many advantages can we give to the students with means before the kids without privilege can catch up? How much education can we make sure we give to a minority of the population before we offer it to *all* kids?

**AT**

A minority of the population that is already a lot more okay.

**JMC**

Precisely. That hasn't been properly addressed. My hope is that we can start addressing it before this all ends. That would give me more confidence about how we would move into the next year.

I do think there's lots in terms of asynchronous learning that is valuable and real best practices for students. I read this article that talked about a math classroom where the teacher said the students can all work through everything on their own. They get to decide when to do the lessons. There's an end goal of all these different math skills and one big assessment at the end of the year, and the kids have power and agency to approach learning how they want.

This is cool, but there's some piece that's missing. Then you get to the end of the article. The teacher says, "I notice when students are not using time well independently. I'm always going to sit with those kids every single day to help make sure that they can meet these goals."

That part is completely missing right now. I think a lot more teachers will be excited about the first part, because there are a lot of educators out there who [say], "Oh, it's cool. A lot of my kids [are] putting the effort in and they're figuring things out on their own."

**AT**

*If* they have access.

**JMC**

Right. My concern is the ones who are going to need the support or going to need the backup, not technological, but emotional and social.

**GDF**

Absolutely. What does this do to collaboration—this distance?

**JMC**

A lot of Zoom meetings. Microsoft Teams in the school district, but—

**AT**

Zoom everywhere else.

**GDF**

For kids accustomed to seeing people in person and having that classroom full of faces they see every day—turning desks together and working together—suddenly that's gone. I imagine that, even though they're problem-solving or working together [learning at home] suddenly becomes very different.

**AT**

Yeah. I do a few different freelance teaching things. This spring, I'm with a private school, a local private school, and I've been contracted to help teach a two- or three-week course. That was set before any of this happened. They switched to online learning because they have that capacity. They have that access. Everyone has technology to go to school. They have financial aid that helps them get that. Most students have internet at home, so we're thinking about collaboration there because it was originally supposed to be a highly collaborative class where the last day was supposed to be a physical collaboration with the entire grade. We had to scrap that entire part of the curriculum. There was no way to replicate it.

We can't promise that people have the materials at home to make that happen. It keeps pointing out, over and over, the glaring access issues. Things that were already happening, but this holds up a magnifying glass.

**GDF**

I was saying to John earlier that my husband and I don't have kids. I feel very distant [from] the world of raising young people and what education for young people is like. Is there something that you would want to make the rest of us who don't know as much firsthand aware of—things that we can do to help? I will profess my ignorance.

**AT**

One thing I have found helpful is thinking about myself as a kid and specifically thinking about myself as the ages of my students or at different points in my schooling. When I was in sixth grade, how would this have affected me? When I was in high school, how would this have affected me? Trying to remember and connect with that has been very good for me and how I want to relate—and the permission I give myself and the permission I'm willing to give my students.

In sixth grade, school was my salvation. School was how I got safety and access. I probably wouldn't have done any schoolwork at home. I would have played video games and read fantasy novels until the order was lifted. As an adult, I would be okay with a kid doing that. You got to get through however you're going to get through. I want to see you on the other side of this.

**JMC**

For my part, I would say that it's really hard to communicate to so many people the broad range of needs that students have. We start with, do they have a computer or not? Then, when we start talking about the circumstances that allow students to learn at home, we write to the most extreme example. There are some students who can't learn because they might be living in abusive circumstances. That's definitely real. But there's a million other things before you even get to that level.

You have students who have to help take care of a sibling. You have students who have to take care of really needy pets. I see toddlers in my classroom Zoom chats—they don't have any

option—they're just there. I even think of the type of parent who will ask their student a question and then they'll go and answer the question for the student. I'm thinking of how to ensure best teaching practices. You can't do that. There's a million distractions, a million ways for your attention to go off. Social and emotional needs are not just helping out a student who's in a moment of acute crisis. There's lots of different aspects to mental health that kids need addressed. It's hard right now because the different ways we've traditionally been able to reach out to those students are not available to us.

**GDF**

I imagine a world in which we're all able to be out there again and parents—having had to try to teach their kids—I imagine there might be a different dialogue between parents and educators after this is over. Maybe a closer relationship. Do you foresee a change in the dialogue with parents?

**JMC**

I don't know. I hope so.

**AT**

A lot of my friends who are parents [say], "I'm trying to homeschool my kid and I'm learning why I'm not a teacher. Thank you for who does this job for me." I've been really excited to see that because, you know, I feel like we can go unappreciated.

**GDF**

Knowing that your students can hear this recording and read the transcript of our conversation, is there anything that you would want to tell them or anything you wish that they knew right now?

**AT**

I think they're the best and I miss them. I'm so bummed we didn't get to have our whole residency together. They're really cool.

**JMC**

Yeah, it's really the same. I have the benefit of [seeing] them a little bit. If this was getting out there to some of the kids who I haven't been able to see already, I would want them to know that it's cool. It's cool if you haven't been able to make it, you know? Do what's best. If there's anything I can do, it would be amazing that I could offer you help right now. Otherwise, don't be down on yourself.

**GDF**

What is keeping each of you buoyant? Are you reading? Are you writing? Are there other things in your life that are bright spots?

**AT**

My silence is not meant to indicate a lack. There are a lot of things for me. I've lived in a split-coast kind of way for the past decade or so. I'm already used to connecting with people at a distance and having that feeling be good enough. Continuing to keep that up feels very good, [and] getting back into things I loved when I was younger but that I revoked my permission to like for some stupid reason. I've been playing a lot of video games, which makes me very happy.

**GDF**

What's your favorite?

**AT**

I have been playing *Pokémon Let's Go Eevee*. It's the same game I've been playing since I was in elementary school, and I'm still having just as good a time.

And everyone's selling cool things. All my friends are doing cool projects. My friends who are touring musicians say, "I can't tour. I'm going to make an album right now." That's been really wonderful, to see friends who are artists continuing to make art and continuing to share art with each other, which is pretty much the best.

**JMC**

Yeah, fairly similar across a lot of that. I paint Dungeons & Dragons miniatures. So, I've been getting a lot of that done.

**AT**

They're really cool!

**GDF**

Do you have any you can hold up?

**JMC**

Good thing I live in a studio since I can just reach anything in here from where I'm sitting. Here's a skeletal thing.

**GDF**

That's some detail work!

**JMC**

Why, thank you. My wife and I are also avid birdwatchers. When it's really quiet outside you can stand under a tree and you can get to know the voices of all the little hopping and fluttering creatures out there and figure out who's who and who says what, where they like to build their nests. That's been really great.

**GDF**

I was surprised the other day, we saw a bald eagle flying over Burien, which I've never seen before. Someone has a reflecting pond nearby, and we were walking by early one morning and a heron flew out. I mean, we're in suburbia.

**AT**

But Burien, the coastline of Burien [has] some pretty amazing intertidal ecosystems. So that's the habitat to support that. I'm glad you're seeing them.

**GDF**

It's true. They're starting to come inland. It's unbelievable.

**AT**

I've noticed there's no traffic sound anymore where I live. It's so much quieter. I'm hearing things I couldn't hear before. I live near Carkeek Park and I used to hear the train whistle but now, even though I'm well up the hill at the other far edge of the ravine, I can hear the train on the tracks and I can hear birds I couldn't hear before. That's been a joy.

**GDF**

An awakening of the senses.

**AT**

I think it's a getting rid of the things—I think the things were already awake. There were so many other things dampening or drowning them, drowning out what was already happening.

**GDF**

Is there anything else that you want to share as part of this interview? A final wish or any recommended reading? Any poetry that you suggest we tune into?

**AT**

Anytime people ask, "What should I read?" I [say], "You should read Ross Gay." No matter what. If you're happy, read Ross Gay. If you're really sad, same thing.

I would say, [to the] kiddos and everyone else: whatever you're doing to get yourself through this is fine. As long as you are not harming anyone else, whatever you do is a fine thing.