"I only know that learning to believe in the power of my own words has been the most freeing experience of my life. It has brought me the most light. And isn’t that what a poem is? A lantern glowing in the dark.”

-Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Poet X*

Join us for a talk by author and poet, Elizabeth Acevedo. Sponsored by Brazos Valley Reads, on Feb. 25th at 7pm in the Annenberg Presidential Conference Center.

Acevedo is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Poet X* and *With the Fire on High*. *The Poet X* won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. She is also the recipient of the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Fiction, the CILIP Carnegie Medal, and the Boston Globe-Hornbook Award. Additionally, she was honored with the 2019 Pure Belpre Author Award for celebrating, affirming, and portraying Latinx culture and experience.

February 2020
I think the most important tip for writing romance is to make sure the story you’re telling is realistic. For me, the best kind of romance is a slow build towards it, not an instant relationship (unless they’re already in one, obviously). A slow build can be forbidden love, unlikely pairings, someone getting out of the friend zone, etc. When you create a slow build, it gives the readers a sense of anticipation. This anticipation is also what gets them hooked.

All the best stories have character development. Ever read Stephanie Meyer’s “Heartless”? It’s a backstory of how the infamous Queen of Hearts came to be the terror of Wonderland. Perfect example of character development (and also a tear jerker). We also love to see the characters grow and overcome obstacles, like their flaws. Having flawed characters, adds a realistic touch to the story (back to tip #1). Show how their backstories and personalities affect the story. Add some inner conflict. Their history doesn’t have to be explicit but just enough to build the character to be someone that the reader connects to.

There is definitely a fine line between having a few cliches and having too many. Having too many cliches will just bore your reader because they’ll know what to expect. The trick is to choose your romantic trope wisely and what’ll truly make the difference is how you tell your story. Research romance tropes, choose one that best fits your story, and create something that will undermine your reader’s expectations. For example, a strong, sassy heroine is a cliche. “She isn’t like other girls.” You know the type. To avoid this cliche, go back to tip #1 and make her more realistic by (tip #2) adding some flaws.

Mismatch: We are back to unlikely pairings. If you want a romantic comedy effect, unlikely pairings are one of the best routes to take.

Carefully construct intimate scenes. I’m not talking about those “mind in the gutter” scenes. I’m talking about those professions of love, first kisses, the moment they met, etc. Detail the encounters in a way that has your readers dying for more. Make them ship your characters harder with each interaction.

Add a piece of yourself into your writing. It makes the story easier to write and can make the character relatable, even to your readers.
No Valentine’s Day plans? Pick one of these romantic reads off the shelf.

**The Girl He Used To Know** by Tracey Garvis Graves

Annika Rose likes being alone. She feels lost in social situations, saying the wrong thing or acting the wrong way. She prefers the quiet solitude of books or playing chess to being around others. Apart from Jonathan. She liked being around him, but she hasn't seen him for ten years. Until now that is. And she's not sure he'll want to see her again after what happened all those years ago. Annika Rose likes being alone. Except that, actually, she doesn’t like being alone at all.

**The Queen’s Assassin** by Melissa De La Cruz

**Release Date:** February 4, 2020

Caledon Holt is the Kingdom of Renovia’s deadliest weapon. No one alive can best him in brawn or brains, which is why he’s the Guild’s most dangerous member and the Queen’s one and only assassin. He’s also bound to the Queen by an impossible vow—to find the missing Deian Scrolls, the fount of all magical history and knowledge, stolen years ago by a nefarious sect called the Aphrasians. Shadow has been training all her life to follow in the footsteps of her mother and aunts—to become skilled enough to join the ranks of the Guild. Though magic has been forbidden since the Aphrasian uprising, Shadow has been learning to control her powers in secret, hoping that one day she’ll become an assassin as feared and revered as Caledon Holt.

When a surprise attack brings Shadow and Cal together, they’re forced to team up as assassin and apprentice to hunt down a new sinister threat to Renovia. But as Cal and Shadow grow closer, they’ll uncover a shocking web of lies and secrets that may destroy everything they hold dear. With war on the horizon and true love at risk, they’ll stop at nothing to protect each other and their kingdom.

**You Were There Too** by Colleen Oakley

**Release Date:** January 7, 2020

Mia Graydon’s life looks picket-fence perfect; she has the house, her loving husband, and dreams of starting a family. But she has other dreams too—unexplained, recurring ones staring the same man. Still, she doesn’t think much of them, until a relocation to small-town Pennsylvania brings her face to face with the stranger she has been dreaming about for years. And this man harbors a jaw-dropping secret of his own—he’s been dreaming of her too.
Do you remember how old you were
When you took matches
And set that fire under your tongue?

Did you do it because you were cold, the winter night’s hold too strong on you
Kick away the fingers who reach and brush off the hands that touch

Did you need the light from the flames? Was the forest too menacing? Too dark and curious?
Those branches too black against the light sky?

Were the stars too far away?
Did the moonlight lead you astray?
Were you looking for a place to go?
But you got lost in all the snow?

I don’t remember how old I was when I traded away my teeth for fangs.
Don’t know when my tongue turned forked
Don’t recall how long I’ve only tasted venom.

I don’t remember the reason
Or if I even had one
Everything has floated off
Into just a smudge on the light sky

As acid drips and fire roars, who will now settle the score?

Maybe you’re what is meant for me
With your burning candor against my icy lies
Maybe it’s your blistering screams against my skin, and my cold murmurs against yours.

Is it you I see, when I close my eyes and the blinding gold flares?
Can you see me in any silver whispers that you hear?

Is this our endless circle?
Our Hades and Persephone?
Are you red and I’m blue?
Were you born my antithesis or was I made for you?
Am I your winter?

Why am I myself while you are you?
Are we meant to be this way?
Am I meant to slice with my words?
And you meant to stab with your roars?

This dichotomy of you and me
That branches out through centuries
Has always been our destiny
From today into eternity.

I hold out my hand from upon my bone chariot, and I know I'm different from you.
But your hand reaches for me
And I know you hate me
and you're pretty sure I hate you back.

And we fall deeper into the earth
You, the forest fire
And me, the viper.
And I can't live without you, but who could form those words?

You leave me burned and I leave you broken
And when I kiss you, I know you can taste poison on my lips.

Some words will never be the truth, but
You'll turn me to ashes if I don't shield myself with ice.

Some could call me honey coated
Some would call you passionate.
I'll call you by your name,
And you'll never call me by mine.

And with your fire,
Your very own seventh circle,
You leave me scorched
But I can hardly blame you.
I can approve from my stance in eight,

Because if I had come up with a sentence as painful as that, I'd have said it too.
Reaching
By Amira T. Mazzawy, '23

I wonder sometimes

Why do I reach?

Ever since I could remember I have been reaching for something that seems impossible to hold.

In the distance it glitters, catching my eye with its beauty.

Everything inside of me tells me to touch it.

So I reach.

At first, my fingers barely extended, trembling with anxiousness, before they were stung by a painful sensation.

My hand retreated back to my side, the hope and wonder gone, the object flickering quickly before it disappeared.

I felt defeated, lost, saddened by the loss of never knowing what the wonderful glowing object in the distance was.

But then another one appeared, this time in a different spot in the distance.

With this I still trembled, yet I reached, with other forces pushing behind me, lurching me farther.

And yet the pain came back, and the new object flickered to nothingness once more.
To this day the vicious cycle continues, only allowing me to get closer and closer as I yearn to find out what glows so bright in the distance.

The most recent one I’ve seen just flickered out once more, but this time I barely felt the pain. I looked at my hand to see that the scars from the past had made me almost numb to the pain.

I could almost feel this one brush against my fingertips, my hopes high that I would finally find out what this beautiful light was.

But no.

For I was not quick enough.

It irks me to my core to come so close yet to only be lost in the darkness once more.

And then I realize the reason why I reach.

Because somewhere inside me I have the faith to believe that this beautiful light will hold something so extortionary that the pain will be worth it.

The feeling of reaching it will make me feel so good that the past attempts will just fade away from my mind.

So for now I shall stand in the darkness, waiting for my next light to appear.
It’s Haiku Season!

Let’s make a fun collage of haiku poems for next month’s edition in honor of the coming season.

Submit your best Spring haiku poem to englishaggiestories@gmail.com

Multiple submissions are welcome!

Deadline: 24 February 2020

Be Creative and Have Fun!