



## The Insider's Guide to Graduate Degrees in Creative Writing

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Review of

**Abramson, Seth. *The Insider's Guide to Graduate Degrees in Creative Writing*. Bloomsbury, 2018.**

Applying to MFA programs in Creative Writing is a somewhat daunting process. A writer can spend a lot of time poring over the details of programs without necessarily getting an understanding of what the experience of being in those programs will actually be like. In Seth Abramson's book, *The Insider's Guide to Graduate Degrees in Creative Writing*, the author tries to give an honest account of both what to look for when applying to an MFA program in Creative Writing, as well as what to expect from MFA programs in general. Abramson identifies and explores several different aspects of MFA programs to be taken into account by writers that are considering applying to them.

The author devotes each chapter of the book to one of the facets of MFA programs. Each chapter begins with an explanation of how the subject of the chapter is an important consideration when deciding between different programs. Abramson then includes a question-and-answer section at the end of each chapter where the author poses, and responds to, questions that he has frequently seen asked. The tone of these question-and-answer sections is informal, which adds to the notion of the book being an insider guide as the title suggests.

Several of the book's chapters identify details of MFA programs that might be overlooked or misunderstood by writers applying to them. The chapter on application requirements lists examples of mistakes that applicants make when writing their personal statements. This list by itself does a lot to help understand both what is expected in a personal statement and what might hurt applicants' chances of acceptance.

Other chapters profile programs that writers might not be considering. The section on low-residency programs offers a positive take on what some writers looking at MFA programs might consider to be an alternative type of program. Although Abramson doesn't devote a large portion of the book to low-residency programs, the author goes over them in enough detail for writers who may not have previously looked at them to understand their basic pros and cons. The section on creative writing doctoral programs offers similarly brief, yet helpful, insights into a type of program that writers may not have previously known about.

The author's tone is not always positive, for better or worse. Often, the author's cautious tone is paired with descriptions of the experiences of those who have gone through MFA programs and either didn't get what they wanted out of them, or had unrealistic expectations to begin with. One part of the book where Abramson does this is in the very short chapter on cost of living, where the author says that most MFA students' satisfaction with their MFA program was tied to either the people that they met, or the quality of their writing while enrolled. Those that said they were unsatisfied with the location of the program, Abramson says, were usually those struggling to create their best writing. This observation might not help those that are deciding between different programs based on their locations. Moreover, the book provides no substantive discussion of issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion—such as those raised conversations surrounding Junot Díaz's "MFA vs POC". I believe this is a significant limitation of the book.

The final sections of the book contain the results of polls of MFA applicants. One portrays popularity rankings of different programs; another ranks programs based on their features, such as founding date and curriculum. The first of these, based on the results of polls, pairs well with the rest of the book, in that it gives a somewhat more objective look into what other applicants were looking for in MFA programs. The popularity rankings also offer insight into applications, but it is somewhat difficult to navigate between them and keep track of how individual programs rank in multiple areas. A collated, comparative charting would have been helpful, to show where programs fall in relation to linked areas such as selectivity and funding.

Overall, *The Insider's Guide to Graduate Studies in Creative Writing* offers a comprehensive look at what writers should expect both when applying for MFA programs in creative writing, and while enrolled in them.