

Tolkien, Genre, and Uptake: The Process of Handwritten Letters

Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez and Ellen Sundermeier

In this interview—transcribed from an episode of the Writing Program's podcast series—Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez has a conversation with Ellen Sundermeier about her process in researching and writing her *Grassroots* article “The Magic of Handwritten Letters: Socialization in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*,” along with advice she'd give to future *Grassroots* authors.

From brainstorming ideas to performing different kinds of genre research to revising one's work, writing can be messy, “but in really fascinating ways,” as *Grassroots* author Ellen Sundermeier tells us. In this transcript of an interview from the podcast series *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author*—presented here in print but also available to listen to online (see Figure 1)—Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez interviews Ellen about her article-writing process. Her thoughtful and engaging responses highlight crucial elements of her article and its production: the role of genres, genre research, uptake, and activity systems, as well as the connective power of storytelling and, ultimately, the magic of handwritten letters.

Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez: Hello, and welcome to the podcast series *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author*. Today we're talking with Ellen Sundermeier about her article, “The Magic of Handwritten Letters: Socialization in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*.” So, let's talk about the genre of letter writing. In this article, Ellen examines how socialization, one of the elements of [the ISU Writing Program's version of pedagogical] cultural-historical activity theory [see the article

P-CHAT

Our take on **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT)** is developed from the work of Paul Prior (see the QR code in Figure 2 for a more detailed description). In our program, we use P-CHAT to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world. In traditional rhetorical models, one might describe the author, the audience, and perhaps some of the features of the genre. P-CHAT allows us to focus on any aspect of the myriad elements of textual production, so it is more robust than these other methods for investigating texts. The key terms in P-CHAT are:

- Ecology
- Production
- Representation
- Socialization
- Activity
- Reception
- Distribution

referenced in Figure 2], can be used as a tool to better understand the way shared stories are built through handwritten letters. Sundermeier primarily focuses on letters written by J. R. R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings* series) to his children, and also reflects on her own letter-writing practices. Ellen, thank you so much for being here.

Ellen Sundermeier: Thanks for having me.

Edcel: So, to get us started, how did you come up with the idea for your article?



Figure 1: You can listen to Ellen's *A Conversation with a Grassroots Author* podcast episode by scanning this QR code ("Episode 6: Ellen Sundermeier").



Figure 2: Scan this QR code to read an article explaining the ISU Writing Program's version of P-CHAT (Walker).

Ellen: So, I started by thinking about everyday writing genres that are important to me, and writing letters is something that I enjoy and that I tend to do often—my desk is always covered with stationery, and I often have a few letters sitting on my bedside table that I need to respond to. So, they're a really huge part of my life. And once I kind of settled on that genre, I started thinking about which of our ISU Writing Program learning outcomes would provide an interesting lens for that particular genre. Letters are really unique in the way they're written for a really specific audience. But they can also be heavily influenced by larger cultural and historical practices. So, I settled on socialization, which is an element of P-CHAT, as a main focus. And I really liked that bringing these things together allowed me to reflect on the way people build stories through letter writing.

Edcel: Wow, that's really fascinating. And I really like how you mentioned that you have like a bunch of stationery in your workspace, because it kind of reminds me of how I really enjoy like, you know, having different stationery or sticky notes around me and kind of like taking those quick notes.

Ellen: Yeah, I think having those tools around and easily available is really helpful for the writing process.

Edcel: Oh, yeah, I definitely agree. It's a really useful writing tool. So, to keep the conversation going, what did the writing process look like for your article?

Ellen: So, it's really fun for me, because I actually started the process of writing my article by writing a letter to a friend of mine and just really paying attention to the activity surrounding my letter writing. So, I actually did some uptake on my letter writing process and considered questions like, what does the environment look like when I write a letter? What steps do I take before I actually put pen to paper? What sort of memories and ideas do I tend to draw on as I write to this particular friend on this particular day? And all of these things are related to elements of P-CHAT, which was a really central part of my article. And I think that uptake kind of grounded me in the genre of handwritten letters and helped me think about what it means to me specifically. So, you'll see a lot of those thoughts from that uptake process in the introduction to my article, and that's kind of how it started.

Edcel: Wow, that's really interesting. And I'm glad you mentioned uptake, because the only time I ever get to write letters is during the holidays. Back home, I really didn't have a chance to like write Christmas

letters to anyone. But ever since I moved here to Illinois, also, my friends and colleagues would send me letters. And I'm like, "Oh, this is a fun little way to finally get involved in this genre."

Ellen: Yeah, I agree. I think it's such a special thing to receive something like that in the mail. And yeah, as you said, I think at the holidays, it's a really popular time to do it. But it's really special any time of year and kind of fun when it comes out of the blue like that.

Edcel: Oh, yeah, I do agree very much on that. We talked about the uptake aspects of your article, and you've mentioned how you were thinking about what other terms within the Writing Program best fit with your article, so I'm kind of curious, what did the genre research look like when you started writing this article?

Ellen: Yeah. So, once I decided on letter writing as my genre—handwritten letters—I started by researching letter collections from some of my favorite authors. I actually talked about this a little bit in the article itself. But I'd really encourage anyone to do this. If you're a big reader, I think you learn so much about a person through their correspondence. And there are historically a lot of letters available from authors. So that's a really fun research exercise, actually. But I study children's literature, and J. R. R. Tolkien has been a longtime favorite of mine. I grew up reading and watching *The Lord of the Rings*. And I just really love the worlds that he creates. So, I did some research into letters of his, and I actually found this collection of letters that he had written as Father Christmas to his children. And it was full of stories and illustrations, and he's actually responding to letters that his children had written to Father Christmas. So, they're part of this kind of ongoing correspondence they've had for many years. And they provided some really interesting material to focus on socialization. And then once I found that letter collection, that required some additional research into the genre of Father Christmas so I could better understand how he had changed over time and in different cultures, and also how he was appearing in Britain at the time that Tolkien was writing the letters. And then finally, I also looked back at some of the letters my friends had written to me. And I kind of started paying more attention to the patterns and the shared stories that we've created in those letters. And then I incorporated some of those ideas into the article as well.

Edcel: Wow, that's really fascinating. And I really liked the part where you mentioned that you also looked at letters you receive from your friends, for example; that makes it like really special in terms of like

thinking about the genre research and the kind of work that you did for the article.

Ellen: Yeah, it was something that was really, I mean, personal to me. So, it was fun to be able to incorporate those things that I've kind of had as artifacts in my own house.

Edcel: All right. So, can you talk a little bit about the review process of your article?

Ellen: Yeah, absolutely. So, I went through a few drafts with the editors of the journal. And it was actually a really fun process because I think they helped me really think through how to bring in different learning outcomes and make my article maybe richer in the way it delved into them. I didn't talk about activity systems initially, for example, but they helped me to kind of articulate how there were many activity systems in play while Tolkien was writing these letters and kind of helped me flesh that out more. And I think they really gave me a new appreciation for how closely connected our learning outcomes are and how messy writing can be, but in really fascinating ways, so that process was really fun for me.

Edcel: Wow, I'm really glad to hear that both the editor letters and the experience of like receiving that back and forth about your article was really positive.

Ellen: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it was a really positive process and moved pretty quickly and ended up being really fun for me to kind of look at my writing through new eyes, I think.

Edcel: Yeah, that's awesome. So, I wanted to ask, what kind of advice would you offer someone who maybe is thinking of writing a *Grassroots* article?

Ellen: Yeah, so, as I mentioned earlier, I really love that the journal can allow you to write about things that are really personal and meaningful to you. So, I think if you're considering writing an article, in your initial brainstorming, spend some time thinking about what you love about literate activity and what genres are really exciting for you, and then kind of run with those ideas. And I also think that the journal allows for a fairly informal tone. So, I think it's a really fun opportunity to explore your voice and allow your personality to



Figure 3: You can read Ellen's article, along with Edcel's work and other past articles of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, in our online archive (ISU Writing Program).

come through as you write. So, I think I'd encourage you to kind of think about how you want that to come through as well.

Edcel: Awesome sauce. Thank you so much, Ellen, for your time. And thank you for doing this interview.

Ellen: Yeah, thanks so much for having me.

Edcel: Thanks again to Ellen Sundermeier for participating in today's interview, and check out her article, "The Magic of Handwritten Letters: Socialization in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Letters from Father Christmas*," and the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* issue 12.1. Thank you for listening!

You can check out Ellen's article in issue 12.1 of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*. Edcel has also written for the journal, and you can find his work in issues 12.1, 12.2, and 13.1 (see the QR code in Figure 3).

Works Cited

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Edcel Javier Cintron-Gonzalez is a proud Puerto Rican, scholar, and graduate worker who is pursuing a PhD in English Studies with a focus in Children's and Young Adult Literature. When he is not working on academic things, he enjoys cooking, playing video games and writing about them for the website *Gamers with Glasses*, and writing his monthly children's picture book review in Spanish for the *Palabreadores Newsletter*. Edcel's creative work has been published in *Palabreando*, *Euphemism*, *Sabanas: Literary Magazine*, *Ediciones Enserio*, *El Vicio del Tintero*, *Abolition Dreaming: A Zine Project*, and *White Noise Zine*. Edcel has a forthcoming poetry chapbook titled *Irma, Maria, Fiona, and Me* to be published in May 2023 by PRESS 254.



Ellen Sundermeier is an instructor and English Studies PhD student at Illinois State University. She is currently focusing on children's literature and also has an interest in Renaissance literature, which was the focus of her MA. Her hobbies include baking, traveling, watching period dramas, and writing letters to her favorite people as often as possible.



Notes

