<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Relatability factor and characterization: a brief analysis of two academic novels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Ettinger, Clint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>Ettinger, C. (2016). Relatability factor and characterization: a brief analysis of two academic novels (Outstanding Academic Papers by Students (OAPS)). Retrieved from City University of Hong Kong, CityU Institutional Repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8800">http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8800</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>This work is protected by copyright. Reproduction or distribution of the work in any format is prohibited without written permission of the copyright owner. Access is unrestricted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relatability Factor and Characterization: A Brief Analysis of Two Academic Novels

Critical Thesis

Clint Ettinger

Mentor: Tabish Khair

City University of Hong Kong

May 5, 2016
Abstract

This paper offers a brief introduction and analysis into the relatability factor and characterization of two academic novels—Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* and Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding*. The relatability factor has its roots in reader-response criticism and is a subjective measure whereby a reader relates to a fictional character or a fictional work. In this paper, the relatability factor is focused on the initial characterization of two central characters in the novels. In the first part, the character of Mitchell Grammaticus is looked at through an autobiographical and metafictional lens, as well as through the character of the *flaneur*. In the second part, the character of Mike Schwartz is analyzed through the role of the fallen mentor in relation to the hero’s journey. Both of these parts are then tied together in the end in connection with the author’s own thoughts about reading and writing.
Introduction

In 2011, two major novels were published. The first, *The Marriage Plot*, was a much anticipated novel from best-seller and Pulitzer Prize winner Jeffrey Eugenides; the other was the debut novel, *The Art of Fielding* from MFA graduate and editor Chad Harbach. I use the term major here to merely signify the hype and exposure that both novels received. On the one hand, Eugenides had already found mainstream exposure and success with his first two novels: *The Virgin Suicides*, which was turned into a movie by Sofia Coppola; and *Middlesex*, which became a best-seller and garnered Eugenides his Pulitzer. His third novel, *The Marriage Plot*, followed the same snail-like trajectory that his previous works took to be completed—nine years between each release. On the other hand, Harbach’s debut *The Art of Fielding* generated news around literary circles when it was discovered he received a cash advance of $665,000 for the novel which took him nearly ten years to finish. In both cases, each novel was greatly hyped and ended up becoming two of the most widely acclaimed fictional books of the year. At that time, when I first saw them in bookshops, I passed them by for that very reason: the publicity and the marketing was too aggressive and in your face. For me, the books I wanted to
read were hidden far away from the windows and storefronts, tucked away in the back and waiting to be discovered.

Fast forward a few years and I find myself in the middle of an MFA and in the midst of reading a handful of academic novels (primarily because, as an English lecturer in Hong Kong, I was looking to try my hand at my own version of one). While searching for myriad examples to read and perusing lists of best academic novels, I kept seeing these same two novels repeated. I decided this time to give them a shot. Upon receiving them, I realized that there was more to them than just their campus settings. Each novel interested me in different ways.

For the Eugenides novel, I was excited to read it because I was familiar with *Middlesex*, having read it years ago and finding myself engrossed in the story, particularly with the setting and his descriptions of 1960s Detroit. What I was also impressed with was how Eugenides blended fact and fiction into his story, liberally coating his fictitious intersex Bildungsroman with helpings of autobiographical elements. In regards to *The Marriage Plot*, what had initially turned me off about the novel (the title and the preconceived notions that come with that title) was quickly displaced by the possibility of something that I was very much interested in reading. The back cover blurb promised a “new kind of contemporary love story” and while that in itself was fine, it was what preceded it that piqued my interest: “It’s the early 1980s. In American colleges, the wised-up kids are inhaling Derrida and listening to the Talking Heads.” It was these two sentences which had me enthusiastically looking forward to the novel, for the early 1980s setting would take me back to my youth, while the Derrida and Talking Heads
references added metafictional context, which I hoped would imbue the story with multiple layers and meanings.

As for the Harbach novel, aside from its campus setting, the two things that interested me most about the book was that it was a debut novel (as an aspiring novelist it’s always intriguing—or deflating, depending on how you view it—to read an author’s first book) and that it was about the great American pastime: baseball. As a lifelong baseball—and sports in general—fan, I have always been fascinated in fiction which tackled the individual and team dynamics of sports, but which did so with a literary slant.

After reading them both, I noticed that, for as similar as they were, they were also fundamentally unique. While *The Marriage Plot* was a globetrotter novel which focused on a love triangle cloaked in semiotics, the great English novels, and depression, *The Art of Fielding* was stationed in the Midwest, cast with baseball as the central motif and inundated with plenty of Melvillean context and relationships gone wrong. Both are coming-of-age novels (as most academic fiction is wont to be), but the trials and tribulations that each fictional character experiences are disparate from one another. It is with some of these characters that the bulk of my analysis resides.

In the end, both books confirmed why I liked to read and why I want to write, and for someone who has aspirations of being a fiction writer, then it would only behoove me to dig deeper into both works to pick out what tickles the fancy and tugs at the heartstrings. The basis behind this stems from the deep-seated reasoning as to why fiction has always captivated me as a reader. I have always looked for connections between my own personal experiences and those incidences and events with which a fictional character finds themselves engaged. Subsequently, I have searched for the different ways
in which authors manage to convey the deep sense of humanity that literature affords, and to do so in a way in which the reader not only interprets that meaning, but also utilizes and understands it. The best fiction speaks to a reader in a language that they can decode and comprehend. The culmination of this is what I call the relatability factor of fiction. This can roughly be defined as the measure to which a reader relates to a fictional character or fictional work, and can be achieved in a multitude of ways. This relatability factor has roots in reader-response criticism. In this paper, the analysis will focus mainly on the initial characterization of two major characters, in this case Mitchell Grammaticus in *The Marriage Plot* and Mike Schwartz in *The Art of Fielding*, and show how, on a subjective level, the relatability factor of fiction operates in both novels.

In the following, I will avoid the use of the traditional term *point of view* and instead speak of *voice* and *perspective*. I borrow these terms from Jeremy Hawthorn’s *Studying the Novel* whereas voice refers to “Who speaks?” while perspective refers to “Who sees?” (Hawthorn 122).
The Marriage Plot: The Mysterious Mitchell Grammaticus

At its core, Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Marriage Plot has a simple structure. The novel follows three college students during their final year at Brown University, as well as their first year post-graduation. The three characters are locked in a love triangle, and Eugenides, through a semi-omniscient third-person voice, follows the trio as they attempt to navigate not only their love life, but also their lives as young adults trying to make sense of the world outside academia. The protagonist, Madeline Hanna, is an English major writing her senior thesis on the marriage plot found within the great English novels. As her research posits, the works of Austen, James, and Eliot were the last novels in which writers truly had something to write about: marriage. According to Madeline’s viewpoint, “Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel. And divorce had undone it completely” (Eugenides 27). Consequently, she believed that modern novels had nothing to talk about, and especially with the advent of separations and divorces, “Where could you find the marriage plot nowadays? You couldn’t. You had to read historical fiction . . . You had to go, literally speaking, back in time” (27). This sets the stage for Madeline to get involved in her own type of marriage plot, as she explores the real-world implications of love with two very different individuals: the brooding and philosophical Leonard Bankhead (who according to some critics, shares many similarities with David Foster Wallace) and the Religious Studies major, Greek-American Mitchell Grammaticus (who very much shares qualities with Eugenides). It is the initial characterization of Mitchell Grammaticus which interests me as a reader and teaches me as a writer, and through this characterization, the relatability with the novel is formed.
As mentioned, *The Marriage Plot* is told from a semi-omniscient third-person voice, but the perspective shifts between the three major characters. Madeline’s perspective starts off the novel as the reader follows her around Brown University and the surrounding environs on the day of her graduation ceremony. Her parents are in Providence for the festivities and take Madeline out for breakfast. It is this early scene where both of the men who will consume Madeline’s life are first mentioned. On the walk to breakfast, Madeline’s mother Phyllida is the first to mention Leonard, referring to him as Madeline’s new boyfriend Leonard (Eugenides 11). After sitting down to eat, Phyllida inquires as to whether they would meet Leonard that day, to which, through Madeline’s thoughts, the reader observes that she has broken up with Leonard three weeks prior. Madeline doesn’t tell her parents this, for she feels that reconciliation is still possible. It is directly after this moment when Phyllida mentions Mitchell, asking Madeline, “Isn’t that your friend Mitchell?” (16). While the mention of Leonard as a boyfriend was done through free indirect discourse, the mention of Mitchell as a friend was done using direct discourse. The difference here being that, just like the two different methods used for introducing the major male figures in Madeline’s life, there is an ambiguity between what is stated and what is really true. According to Phyllida’s utterance, Leonard is Madeline’s boyfriend, while according to Madeline’s they are broken up. Likewise, Phyllida directly refers to Mitchell as Madeline’s friend, where in response, and through a third-person free indirect perspective, the reader sees, “In the churchyard, sitting Indian-style in the freshly mown grass, Madeline’s ‘friend’ Mitchell Grammaticus was indeed there” (16). It is the word ‘friend’ in quotation marks which allows this sentence two possible implications: that Mitchell is something more than a
friend; or that Mitchell was a friend, and for reasons unknown, is no longer. Therefore, upon immediate introductions both male characters are still mysteries, however, Mitchell remains the more enigmatic of the two.

Upon her parent’s prodding, a reluctant Madeline approaches Mitchell to ask him for breakfast where they acknowledge each other with the following exchange:

“My parents are here,” she informed him.

“It’s graduation,” Mitchell replied evenly. Everyone’s parents are here.”

“They want to say hello to you.”

At this Mitchell smiled faintly. “They probably don’t realize you’re not speaking to me.”

“No, they don’t,” Madeline said. “And, anyway, I am. Now. Speaking to you.”

“Under duress or as a change of policy?” (17)

Here, Madeline’s lack of a greeting indicates not only her familiarity with Mitchell, but also hints towards an underlying problem between the two. Mitchell’s response confirms this idea, taking Madeline’s ill-conceived icebreaker and skewering it with sarcasm. On top of this, when Mitchell states that Madeline is not speaking to him, rather than they are not speaking to each other, this implies that she is the one in control of their relationship dynamics. When she tells him that she’s now speaking to him, his response of “under duress or change of policy?” signifies to the reader that Mitchell understands she has
either been forced to talk to him (by her parents) or has undergone some personal change in regards to the prior months of silence.

What precipitated their silence is revealed through flashback from Madeline’s perspective: a night of misguided flirting on Madeline’s behalf led to Mitchell smearing a dab of heating gel behind her ear. Using this as a pretext to kick him out of her apartment, she did so, and days passed before receiving a “highly detailed, cogently argued, psychologically astute, quietly hostile four page letter in which he called her a ‘cocktease’ and claimed that her behavior that night had been ‘the erotic equivalent of bread and circus, with just the circus’” (18). This short passage reveals much about Mitchell: firstly in the statements Madeline makes about him—the three compliments regarding his intellect and writing ability, while the “quietly hostile” revealing much about his tone and character; and secondly, the direct quotes attributed to Mitchell reinforce this idea of a young intellectual (‘bread and circus’) who has been spurned and is lashing out (‘cocktease’) in a quietly hostile manner.

As Mitchell sits down for breakfast, more is revealed through his interactions with Madeline and her parents. The reader finds that Mitchell is graduating with a degree in Religious Studies (which his own father scoffs at) and is planning to embark on a post-graduation gap year trip to India (which Madeline scoffs at) as a means to combat the recession that is blanketing the states. In response to Phyllida’s comments on Indian poverty, Mitchell responds positively, saying “I thrive in squalor” (20). Later, after Madeline’s parents depart, Mitchell is left alone with Madeline and more of their relationship is revealed through brief dialogue. In it, Madeline confesses that her post-graduation plans are in shambles after splitting up with Leonard, something she felt the
need to confess to Mitchell since they’re ‘friends.’ Mitchell’s response elaborates more on this term, as well as hearkens back to their earlier conversation, saying “Our wonderful friendship! Our ‘friendship’ isn’t a real friendship because it only works on your terms. You set the rules, Madeline . . . We’re friends when you want to be friends, and we’re never more than friends because you don’t want to be. And I have to go along with that” (23). Here, Mitchell reemphasizes that Madeline is in control of the relationship by referring to her rules. At this moment he is nothing more than a lonely participant in a one-sided romance. Madeline, feeling blindsided by this outburst tells Mitchell that she’s not interested in him in that way to which he replies, “You’re not attracted to me physically. O.K., fine. But who says I was ever attracted to you mentally?” (23). This brief snippet viewed from Madeline’s perspective shows how the different layers of connection between the two are revealed. Madeline’s unspoken assertion that there is no physical connection between them has been usurped by Mitchell’s quietly hostile claim that he is mentally and intellectually stronger than her.

At this point the two go their separate ways and the novel continues following Madeline. Up until now, Mitchell had acquired different characteristics through the use of direct discourse and free indirect discourse, but of all this was seen through Madeline’s perspective. However, towards the end of the first chapter, Eugenides circles back and picks up at the spot of their departure, but this time, casts a glance through Mitchell’s perspective.

By now, Mitchell’s character is only beginning to take shape. However, as the reader enters into this initial foray into Mitchell’s frame of reference, it is when the relatability factor begins to increase. As the novelist Will Self states in an article for the...
BBC, “The more sophisticated fictional characters become, the more their similarity to us is plainly evident” (Self). Mitchell becomes a more sophisticated and defined figure, and as such, becomes personally relatable. Firstly, while Mitchell is an overly-emotional and love-spurned undergraduate, my personal feelings for his plight are rooted in a nostalgic form of sympathy, and I can thereby empathize greater with his character. Secondly, while Mitchell spends time pondering what went wrong with Madeline, through flashback, the reader is transported back to their first meeting, and first major moment; and while Mitchell wonders, he begins employing metafictional references in order to organize his thoughts, and subsequently, allow the reader to gain a greater clarity of his characterization.

The passage has Mitchell sitting in stunned silence and knowing he has to make his way to the ceremony. Instead, he pulls his chair closer to the window, gazes out, and silently recites the Jesus Prayer. From this recitation of the Jesus Prayer, his metafictional train-of-consciousness embarks on a multi-stop journey: firstly, the prayer is the same one that Franny Glass quoted in *Franny and Zooey*, which leads to his admission that he admired the character of Fanny for her “religious desperation, her withdrawal from life, and her disdain for ‘section men.’” In addition, his admiration for Franny’s breakdown was “cathartic in a way Dostoyevsky was supposed to be but wasn’t” yet adding subtext that Tolstoy “was a different matter” (86). Here, his privileging of one Russian master over the other, as well of his approval of Salinger begins to showcase his own relatability factor to the literary canon.

Next, Mitchell leaves his place at the café and engages in what James Wood, in his book *How Fiction Works*, calls the classic post-Flaubertian novelistic activity:
walking along the street, looking about and thinking\(^1\) (Wood 28). During his walk home he flashes back to the first time he met Madeline, at a freshman orientation toga party, the kind of thing he instantly hated as it was a “capitulation to the mainstream” (Eugenides 87). That he hadn’t come to college to act like John Belushi, or had never seen *Animal House* is, again, quickly amended with the subtext that he was an Altman fan (87). The idea here being that his preference of the more serious and stylistic non-conformist director speaks to his film tastes being more refined than that of mainstream Hollywood fare and popular culture. At the party, Mitchell finds himself in the laundry room with Madeline when her toga falls loose and Mitchell catches a glimpse of her breast: “It was amazing how an image like that—of nothing really, just a few inches of epidermis—could persist in the mind with undiminished clarity” (89). It is this moment, this image of her “pale, quiet, Episcopalian breast” which is seared into Mitchell’s mind, and what becomes the foundation for his infatuation with Madeline, driving him forward throughout the course of the novel. That singular image of her breast is the moment that Mitchell keeps returning to throughout his four years of university, and concurrently, his friendship with Madeline.

As the scene progresses, Mitchell’s metafictional foray continues: he reminisces of Madeline’s thoughts on Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford; name drops Lao Tzu; calls a cousin of Madeline’s a “frosted blonde with late de Kooning teeth” (94); remembers moments involving a Lily Pulitzer bathrobe, Man Ray photographs, copies of Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and a night with

\(^1\)In the next chapter, while in Paris, this idea is further fleshed out, and Mitchell becomes a true *flaneur*, or as Wood defines it, “The loafer, usually a young man, who walks the streets with no great urgency, seeing, looking, reflecting” (Wood 48).
Madeline’s parents that involved Cole Porter songs, conversations about Kingsley Amis’s *On Drink*, Sandra Day O’Connor, Abscam, and a Scrabble game using the word *groszy*, one which greatly impresses Phyllida and causes Madeline’s father Alton to ask, “All are your new friends at college this worldly, Maddy?” (94). It is precisely this degree of worldliness that makes Mitchell’s characterization worth noting. While fence-sitter critics might teeter between Ivy League intelligence and uber-pretentiousness, I relate to his references in a way that speaks to his quest for knowledge of myriad topics, as well as his yearning to be accepted for knowing such topics. He is attracted to Madeline, and therefore is interested in the poets she admires. That he speaks of Ancient Chinese quotations on tea bags, knows who designed a particular bathrobe, can hold court on Supreme Court Justices and late 1970s FBI sting operations, and knows the Polish word for currency, all illustrate the idea of an inquisitive, well-versed student. The literary references again reflect upon Mitchell’s own connection with literature, but also beg the reader to find common ground between them, whether socially or thematically, while the de Kooning reference will satiate the abstract expressionist art history buff.

Yet what’s also more interesting is that throughout all of this, the idea of Mitchell being an unreliable narrator is called into question. As he recalls the incident with the breast and the toga, he mentions that “after their relationship became the intimate, unsatisfying thing it became, Madeline always disputed Mitchell’s memory of that night” (89). According to Madeline, she had never worn a toga that night, nor had any article of clothing slip off to reveal her naked breast. This counterclaim to Mitchell’s image of “undiminished clarity” raises an interesting aspect to Mitchell’s characterization, and for that matter, Madeline’s. This also shows one reason why Eugenides might have decided
to write the novel using multiple perspectives, as it allows all sides to tell their own versions of the story, and allows the reader to determine, on their own, which side speaks more truthfully or honestly, and therefore, to which degree the relatability factor functions at.

For me, as a former twenty-something university student, at the time obsessed with acquiring knowledge in different areas, reading books, impressing girls, and imbued with a strong sense of wanderlust, I can instantly relate to Mitchell’s characterization; therefore, as the novel continues on, I find myself more invested in his story. Eugenides has constructed him in a way which directly speaks to me, whether it’s through Mitchell’s snide, sarcastic method of dealing with his frustration over Madeline, or his relationship with literature, or his desire to experience different cultures, or to just be different. In this case, it’s all of the above. And after all, what is Mitchell if not just a vessel for Eugenides to get his ideas and thoughts out. Returning back to the concept of the flaneur, as Wood describes, “This figure is essentially a stand-in for the author, is the author’s porous scout, helplessly inundated with impressions. He goes out into the world like Noah’s dove, to bring a report back” (Wood 48). This connection between the flaneur, Mitchell’s characterization, and Eugenides is what increases the relatability factor of reading The Marriage Plot. I will get into how that informs me as a writer in the conclusion.
On the other end of the academic novel spectrum lies Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding*. When I initially encountered the novel in bookstores, with its overblown marketing campaign, I thought of the book as the literary equivalent of *Fever Pitch* (not the Nick Hornby novel about football in England, or film adaptation of the same name; but rather, the Farrelly brother’s romantic comedy about baseball in New England starring Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon). In other words, I expected it to be lighthearted and shallow, good for a laugh or two and a few memorable quotes, easily digested and forgotten. And while the novel is about baseball, and does deal with romantic themes, I found that there was far more substance in it than I had initially imagined.

The novel, according to the boldfaced, back cover blurb is about “A small American college. Five very different lives. One terrible mistake.” That small American college is the fictitious Westish College, situated in Wisconsin near the shores of Lake Michigan. The five very different lives are Henry Skrimshander, star shortstop of the Westish baseball team; his teammate and roommate Owen Dunne; the captain and catcher of the team Mike Schwartz; the president of Westish College Guert Affenlight; and his daughter Pella Affenlight. The one terrible mistake which binds all the characters together is an errant throw on the baseball field. That such a trivial thing like an error in a baseball game could become the catalyst for the upheaval of five people’s lives, is what, for me, initially ramped up the relatability factor of the novel.
Henry Skrimshander is the de facto central protagonist of the novel (it is his throw which upends everyone’s life) and it is very much his Bildungsroman. He’s the young boy from North Dakota who is recruited at a summer tournament to play baseball at Westish, and whose excellence on the field is at odds with his anonymity off it. However, it is the character of Mike Schwartz who I find to be more personally relatable, and as such, will focus most of my attention on.

If Henry is the hero of the novel, then Schwartz could be classified as the mentor figure. In Christopher Vogler’s book _The Writer’s Journey_, he borrows liberally from Joseph Campbell’s concept of the monomyth, and expands upon it to show how these inherent structures and archetypes are found in all forms of narrative. According to Vogler, the mentor is a wise old man or woman, and while Schwartz could hardly be construed as old (when the book starts he is entering his sophomore year at Westish), within the dynamic of his baseball team and environment, and in relation to his scouting and grooming of Henry, he very much fits the definition of the wise _older_ man.

The novel, much like _The Marriage Plot_, is told through a semi-omniscient third-person voice, which switches perspectives throughout among the five major characters. In the opening chapter, the action is seen through Schwartz’s perspective and shows the first encounter at the baseball tournament between himself and Henry. During the game, Schwartz got into Henry’s head while he was batting by softly calling him a “pussy,” but after the game, while watching Henry take extra fielding drills, he noticed his “lazy grace,” how the ball “seemed to explode off his fingertips,” and how he “sliced through the soup-thick air” (Harbach 6). Schwartz noticed in Henry what no one else had yet discovered: that the kid was a natural at shortstop, or as he notes that even at full speed
“his face looked bland, almost, bored, like that of a virtuoso practicing scales” (6). The simile here is apt, as Henry’s skill level at shortstop is what ends up being the catalyst for him to start on his heroic journey to Westish College. Two things follow shortly after which begin to establish Schwartz’s relatability factor: firstly, after watching Henry effortlessly field his position, Schwartz is reminded of a line of poetry from a class he took freshman year: “Expressionless, expresses God” (6). This unattributed line from a Robert Lowell poem is indicative of not only the feelings that Schwartz has for Henry’s incomparable baseball ability, but also forms a link between the athletic world and the aesthetic one. As the reader will come to find, Schwartz is very much a jock, but his connection with deeper matters—in this case literature—are antithesis to what jock mentality is about. Secondly, at the end of the chapter Schwartz notes something, which in essence, is what his own story represents: “All his life Schwartz had yearned to possess some single transcendent talent, some unique brilliance that the world would consent to call genius. Now that he’d seen that kind of talent up close, he couldn’t let it walk away” (7). It is here where Schwartz’s role as mentor to Henry is first hinted upon; but as the reader will come to find out, he is not just any type of mentor: he is a fallen mentor.

As Vogler indicates in his work, while the mentor is usually a positive figure who aids or trains the hero, the fallen mentor is still on their own heroic journey, one that is “experiencing a crisis of faith in their calling” or perhaps “dealing with problems of aging and approaching the threshold of death” (Vogler 44). For Schwartz, his crisis of faith becomes readily apparent as the novel wears on, and is inextricably tied into his problems with aging and death. However, this death is not literal, but is the metaphorical death of the athlete; the end of university, for many, becomes the end of their chances of playing
sports competitively. And while Schwartz is a solid player for Westish, he is not the transcendent, once-in-a-lifetime major league talent that Henry appears to be. While this is not revealed initially, it becomes clearer as the seasons and semesters pass.

Initially, Schwartz wants Henry to play baseball at Westish because “they had been crappy for too many years to count, but with Henry’s help they were going to turn it around” (Harbach 13). Schwartz gives Henry the pep talk about passion and sacrifice, which pleases Henry, who, as a farm boy from North Dakota, has never heard this talk directed at him before. But it takes more than appeasing Henry to get him to consider Westish, and Schwartz does well in that regard, driving five-hundred miles from Chicago to North Dakota to take Henry’s dad out for lunch, but more importantly, acquire his approval. Schwartz accomplishes his task as recruiter, and eventually, Henry enrolls at Westish, and looks up to the figure of Schwartz in the way that many young athletes look up to elder teammates. While Henry thinks of himself as “comic and idle, familiar and flawed,” he views Schwartz as “grand, grave, and essential” (28). Yet, most of these feelings are attributed to those early meetings with Schwartz, for as soon as Henry gets to campus, Schwartz is absent from the scene.

Schwartz’s disappearance coincides with the absence of his perspective in the novel, as the perspective switches over to Henry as he attempts to navigate his way around Westish. According to Vogler, the mentor represents the Self which “acts as a conscience to guide us on the road of life” (Vogler 40). Here, Henry is left mentor-less, rendering him homesick and lost while Schwartz, the recruiter and mentor, is a mystery. He remains a mystery for three months until he pops back into Henry’s life—right in time for pre-season training—during a weight room session on campus. It is during this
session that Schwartz’s characterization begins to take shape, aided in part by an interaction between the two of them and another Westish baseball player, Adam Starblind. In this locker-room scene, a discussion between Schwartz and Starblind over waxing and the aesthetics of manliness causes the more hirsute Schwartz to wax poetic on the benefits of his body hair:

Warmth. Survival. Evolutionary advantage. Back then, a man’s wife and children would burrow into his back hair and wait out the winter. Nymphs would braid it and praise it in song. God’s wrath waxed hot against the hairless tribes. Now all that’s forgotten. But I’ll tell you one thing: when the next ice age comes, the Schwartzes will be sitting pretty. Real pretty.

(Harbach 37)

Here, Schwartz accomplishes a few things: firstly, he takes a stance for his version of manliness, one which triumphs function over style; however, the flip side of this, as referenced by Starblind’s response that Schwartz is just “living from ice age to ice age” (37) shows that Schwartz maintains the more traditionalist approach to life. He’s more set in his ways and unwilling to easily accept new ideas. Secondly, the manner with which Schwartz responds—God’s wrath waxed hot against the hairless tribes—serves to challenge the dumb athlete stereotype, and reinforces his intelligence by way of poetic diction. In the former case, this inability to embrace a changing landscape is what causes Schwartz problems throughout the novel. However, the latter example speaks to his level of articulation and to his communication skills. It’s not surprising that Schwartz is the catcher for Westish, as the catcher’s position requires the most amount of communication from any player on the field. It is the catcher who must communicate to the entire team,
whether through words or signs, and who acts as the field general during every pitch of the game. The catcher also tends to be most familiar and knowledgeable regarding all rules of the game. Hence the reason why catchers are considered to be the smartest members of the team and why a large percentage of major league managers are former catchers.²

During this scene, two of the mentor’s dramatic functions are carried out: teaching and gift-giving. Firstly, Schwartz teaches Henry how to lift weights, something the gangly youth had never done before. As a result, thirty minutes later Henry throws up for the first time since boyhood, and in the process, earns a small degree of respect from Schwartz. Schwartz guides him on how to achieve proper form, “barking insults and instructions” (38). After the intense session, Schwartz is pleased with his young protégé, and as a result, segues into the act of gift-giving. According to Vogler, who in turn borrows from Vladimir Propp’s analysis of Russian fairy tales, giving gifts is an important function of the mentor archetype. Normally these gifts are presented after the heroes have passed a test of some kind, or as Vogler specifies, “The gift or help of the donor should be earned, by learning, sacrifice, or commitment” (Vogler 40-2). Here, the gift in question takes the form of a prize, as Schwartz tells Starblind to “tell the Skrimmer what he’s won” (Harbach 38). What’s produced is a gigantic black tub of SuperBoost Nine Thousand supplement powder, and here Schwartz’s message is clear: although Henry has the talent, he’ll need to improve upon and maximize his body’s potential if he’s to achieve success at this level. If the mentor’s role is to provide the heroes with

²At the start of the 2016 season, 13 out of 30 (43%) major league baseball teams were managed by a former catcher.
motivation, inspiration, guidance, training, and gifts for their journey, then Schwartz has already fulfilled the function of the mentor archetype.

As the novel progresses, the many facets of Schwartz’s characterization come into full view, all which further illustrate his role as the novel’s fallen mentor. The reader discovers that Schwartz is beyond tired of Westish losing baseball games, and as a result of this, is even more deeply invested in Henry as a player than he rightfully should be. In the midst of an early-season losing streak, Schwartz voices his displeasure with the state of the team, telling Henry that he respects Coach Cox but feels “he’s too loyal to guys just because they’ve been here awhile. Why be loyal to a bunch of losers? I’m sick of losing. This is America. Winners win. Losers get booted” (Harbach 51). Despite Henry’s protestations that he can wait until the starting shortstop graduates before he earns his spot, Schwartz tells him instead to wait until the following day. This ominous remark, and what follows, shows the length to which Schwartz will go to abandon the losing atmosphere at Westish and to get Henry playing time, as he intentionally starts a fight with the starting shortstop, allowing Henry to enter the game—and play his way into the starting lineup.

Aside from his non-traditional methods for doing what’s best for the team on the field, Schwartz is also dealing with personal problems off the field. For one, he is addicted to Vicoprofen as a result of the toil his body has taken through catching, as well as playing football. On top of this, his plans on attending law school, and thereby becoming the person he is supposed to become, diminish with each rejection letter he receives. What weighs heaviest on Schwartz’s mind is that the “myth of his own infallibility” would be shattered when people, especially Henry, find out that he’s not as
perfect as he appears to be (131). Finally, he also finds himself embroiled in a love
triangle with the Westish President’s daughter Pella: the third side of that triangle being,
of course, Henry. Hardly the type of behavior attributed to a mentor, but when viewed
through the framework of the fallen mentor, Schwartz begins to become a more relatable
character.
Reading and Writing: Writing and Reading

As briefly mentioned, the relatability factor of both these novels extends far beyond the opening characterizations of the work’s fictional characters. But while it was the enigmatic and personally recognizable character of Mitchell Grammaticus and the mentor archetype of Mike Schwartz that I related to as a reader, it was something else entirely that informed me as a writer.

In *The Marriage Plot*, one of my concerns as I was reading was whether my knowledge of Mitchell Grammaticus as an autobiographical construct would influence me in any way. It is not difficult to see the familiarities between Mitchell and Jeffrey Eugenides: Mitchell is a Greek-American from Michigan who attends Brown University and spends a gap year traveling across Europe and volunteering in Calcutta as a helper for Mother Teresa; Eugenides is a Greek-American from Michigan who attended Brown University and spent a gap year traveling across Europe before volunteering as a helper for Mother Teresa. Based on the mirror-imaging of both fictional character and its real-life author, it would be understandable if a reader questioned the validity of the character’s fictitiousness. Therefore, two questions are posed: How much of Mitchell is actually based on Eugenides? Does it matter?

This subject—and related questions—interest me as a writer because one of my problems is separating fact from fiction. When I compose characters and stories, I base them largely off of personal experience. And while that is by no means a groundbreaking or revealing statement, and is, in fact, something many writers do, there comes a
disconnect between the reading and writing aspect of such an undertaking. When I’m writing something based on personal experience, I constantly fluctuate between the impulse to tell it exactly as I remember it, so as to authentically situate it, and to changing just enough details so that the reader couldn’t trace it back and ascertain it as being factual. In other words, I don’t want the reader to think that I’m writing an autobiographical novel, or a fictional memoir, or any other combination of genre tags. I want all traces of the real erased because I want to write fiction. But when reading The Marriage Plot, I discovered I didn’t care at all about the bits of Eugenides that were scattered throughout the novel. I never stopped to question whether Eugenides was actually involved in a love triangle during his Brown days, or whether his episodes in Calcutta were in line with the ones Mitchell experiences. While reading, none of that mattered, because the focus of my attention was In what way am I relating to this as a piece of fiction? It started with Mitchell’s characterization and continued along because there was an interesting story to tell. From this book, I learned that while writing, one shouldn’t worry about what similarities a reader will infer between a character and its creator. The focus should be on crafting memorable characters and telling the story as it needs to be told. As Eugenides said in an article for Newsweek while talking about autobiographical elements in his work, “I think it’s innately fraudulent. When you try to describe your own life, you inevitably fictionalize it and change things. So it has always seemed more honest to me to write fiction than to write memoirs” (Schillinger). It started to seem useless to worry what potential readers might assume or think, because, for me, the main purpose for writing fiction was to tell stories, discover myself, and know more
about the world. It doesn’t matter whether other people want to be a part of that journey or not.

In *The Art of Fielding*, I became attached to Mike Schwartz’s character because he was instantly relatable to me on a humanistic level. Like Schwartz, I spend plenty of free time thinking about the future (in all forms), and baseball (whether it’s watching it, participating in fantasy leagues based on it, or playing the amateur, middle-aged version of it—softball). Over the last few years I have been entrenched within the local softball league. I started off as a player only, but over time gained the respect and trust of my teammates and ended up becoming the coach as well. Now I find myself the team captain, head coach, general manager, and member of the league commissioner’s board, all this highlighting the fact that while playing ball is a hobby, it’s one with which I’m passionately devoted. In a way, this ball-playing renaissance is an extension of the dreams and aspirations I had as a young boy of becoming a major league baseball player. And like my early fantasies of playing baseball in the big leagues, I’ve always wanted to be a writer as well. What *The Art of Fielding* showed me was that it was possible to write a novel about sports, but infuse it with a literary sensibility. I have long tried to figure out how to combine the very different worlds together, and upon reading Harbach, I have seen some of the ways in which that might be done. While not a perfect novel, Harbach does many things well. He tackles both baseball and university life gracefully, and to satisfy all the literary heads, inserts enough Moby Dick Easter eggs to satisfy all the Melvillean scholars. His book shows that it’s possible to write about all passions equally and with aplomb. For me, it is an affirmation to just write about what matters to me, not what I think matters for anyone else.
From these two novels, I was able to understand them, both as a reader and writer. When reading I looked for a relatability factor, one that would allow me to become completely involved in the story and follow it through until the end. As Jane Tompkins states in her introduction to *Reader-Response Criticism*, “Reading and writing join hands, change places, and finally become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity” (Tompkins x). For me, the act of reading these two works stimulated the desire to write. And so the reading sharpened my sensibilities about the shape my writing should take. Whether or not that was the intended effect is a question only the individual can ask of each work. For me, the two authors have communicated with me in a way that I could understand. Now, all that’s left to do is write.
Works Cited


