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# My Mentor and Midwife

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Despite being Jewish, I applied to a Catholic college for just one reason: I'd heard that Dr. Kristin Lauer was an amazing creative writing teacher, and I had dreamed of being a writer since second grade.

When I met her early one morning in a tiny windowless office at the bland, concrete tower of the Lincoln Center campus in mid-Manhattan, I stumbled over pretty much everything I said, even though she couldn't have been less threatening. Dr. Lauer was petite and Swedish-looking with bowl-cut blond hair and a gentle smile. I was terrified she wouldn't let me into her writing seminar since I was only a freshman. I don't remember anything we talked about, but whatever I said and whatever writing I brought along got me in.

I had no idea that she would change my life and that I would fall in love with writing itself, with the art of putting one word next to another and changing both of them by their closeness and opening up myriad possibilities.

I came from a family of teachers and wanted to teach as well, so while I enthusiastically absorbed everything she said about fiction and took all her literature classes, I was also studying her teaching style. She didn't believe in pointing out everything that was wrong with the work my peers brought in every week, in bullying us like a coach, in beating us down because we had to learn that life, and the writing life especially, was *hard hard hard*.

Born and raised in Michigan, she had a wry sense of humor that was always respectful, and I know we all found her encouraging—well, those of us who didn't think we were the next J.D. Salinger or Joyce Carol Oates.

I watched her do her best to approach the piece at hand from the inside, exploring its possibilities and helping the writer make it stronger, more itself. Unlike seminars I took for my MFA later on, nobody got slaughtered in her class, and she headed off anybody hostile who tried to show off their critical acumen. It was all done deftly and gracefully. Sometimes, a simple interruption of “What do the rest of you think?” was all she needed to stop a student bent on an attack.

For her, for us, the class was a community of learning, not a cage match. That made her my inspiration when I started teaching on my own. I've often asked myself in a class or when reading work at home, “What would Dr. Lauer say?”

It's because of her that I ventured into very murky territory in my fiction and launched my career.

Two years after graduating from Fordham, I called her to share a story idea I had about a teenage boy coping with his parents' trauma as Holocaust survivors. I had never really addressed this dark autobiographical material in my writing (which was mostly about romantic triangles of some kind).

“This story scares me,” I confessed.

“Write a page tonight,” she said over the phone, “and read it to me tomorrow.”

I did both. She asked questions and made suggestions, and this went on for a few days until it was done. Her generosity and her enthusiasm still amaze me decades later. She knew I was braving terra incognita and she was my confident and reassuring guide.

Her steadiness has been a touchstone for me in the classroom, in my office at Michigan State University, where I worked with students taking independent study, and now via my coaching and editing.

I was unable to attend her retirement party but did write something in her honor, and I've created a character in my mystery series based on her.

Without that phone call years ago, I doubt I would have published 27 books in so many different genres. But more than that, I doubt I would have been able to freely give so much to students and writers I've been working with.

She helped me give birth to much more than a story.

Lev Raphael (he/him) is a queer, first-generation American living his childhood dream of being a published author. His work has recently appeared in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Spellbinder*, *Visible*, *The Smart Set* and over 70 other online and print journals.