

## Meet the Author



Photos provided by Professor Grooms upon request, following our interview.

The world is full of creative minds guided by various unique experiences and forms of inspiration. [Anthony Grooms](#) is one such individual whose powerful writing made waves within the literary community. Professor Grooms was born and raised in rural Virginia, and grew up during a time when the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War were still radically changing society around him. He is the author behind the civil rights themed works such as [Bombingham](#), which was listed as a notable book by the *Washington Post*, and [The Vain Conversation](#), which made the list of 25 books all Georgians should read. Of particular interest are some of the characters and perspectives he brings to life through his stories. An excellent example would be how he wrote from the perspective of a Vietnam War Veteran for *Bombingham*, which made for a very deep and heavily impactful tale, grounded in the history of the bombings in Birmingham. Currently, Tony Grooms is a professor teaching creative writing to graduate students at Kennesaw State University. He was gracious enough to accept my interview request and provide his take on creative writing as a career. The interview was conducted on March 30th, 2021.

## Skills and Traits of Successful Writers.

The first questions we covered focused on what abilities and traits would benefit professionals in the field of creative writing. I started plain, asking Professor Grooms what he would say are some of the most valued skills in writing. His first answer was *observation*. “We tend to be the wallflowers at a party.” John Gardener’s *The Art of Fiction* was mentioned as a guide that stresses this. Writers are at their best when they are observant of the world around them, looking for ideas, inspiration, and stories. The second skill he listed was the ability to be a *careful reader*. Take things slow, don’t rush or skim. Careful readers learn a lot more than just content. They rhythm, sonics, and imagery of sentences. The last item he listed for this question was *patience*. The professor stressed that “it takes a long time for literary writers to produce a particular piece of writing.” This made sense. The best works take time to get right.

I then asked if traits such as “*team-oriented*” or “*willing to learn*” were considered valuable in this field. “Certainly, willing to learn is,” he replied. “I think part of what drives writers to tell stories is the idea of exploring ideas.” It took some time to consider those words, but they make a lot of sense in hindsight. My own early writing experiences always started and ended with ideas that I was playing around with in my mind. Of course, I wasn’t always alone in this, which drove my inclusion of “*team-oriented*” in the question. In that regard, he surprised me by saying that teamwork does not seem essential since writers are working by themselves most of the time. He did go on to say that teamwork was still important however, and spoke of “trusted readers,” typically other writers, who we ask to review our work for revision and editing. His answer led me to ask, “So would you say critical feedback is important?” “Oh yes, absolutely,” he replied without skipping a beat, and we launched into a discussion about the different types of people writers work with.

## Teamwork in Writing

To be clear, most of the time, the teamwork aspect seems to primarily reside in the publication process of a given work, according to the Professor. He listed three types of editors that often take part in the process. He listed acquisitions editors who primarily seek out written works and reach out to the writers, conceptual editors, who go over the general concept of a work, and copy editors, who review a work line by line to ensure professional consistency, spelling, punctuation, and structure. He listed translators as potential collaborators too, mentioning how they help prepare written works for distribution to foreign readers.

From there, our interview segued into my next query when I asked if Professor Grooms had ever taken part in a collaborative storytelling project, or considered doing so. He answered yes, and we discussed his part in a Swedish project called *The Distance Between*. The project involved a connected series of stories set in the commuter train system of Stockholm. His involvement in this project started with a friendship with one of the many other writers involved in the project. His friend’s name is *Kevin Frato*, and he

had invited Professor Grooms to take part in the project. This highlighted for me that teamwork of different forms from the usual publication process were possible in the world of creative writing, often in the form of collaborative projects between friends, peers, and colleagues.

## A Discussion of Salary

When we moved on to discussing this particular topic, I started with the following question. “Does the amount of time you dedicate to writing tend to fluctuate, or is it fairly consistent?” Given that his role as both parent and professor does demand much of his time, his reply didn’t surprise me. “I would like for it to be consistent,” he replied, “but it does in fact fluctuate.” He usually fits time for composition into openings in his schedule. I got the impression that it was common for novelists and other creative writers to work with a similar system for time allocation.

The next topic of discussion was the salary ranges for novelists, and I again wasn’t surprised when I was told, “It depends on reputation.” It was confirmed for me that initial salary is often pitiful for creative writers starting out. However, though it is rare, it was explained to me that, with the right contracts, a story’s copyrights can be sold to make movies or video games for additional income. That usually depends on reputation as well however. It’s not typical for most novelists.

## The Real Benefits

I was then led to ask what Professor Grooms would say is the greatest benefit of being a novelist? I included any and all types of reasons in the scope of the question, personal gain, psychological benefits, whatever he thought made the top.

***“It’s fun for me, because I like exploring ideas, and I’m a creative person... This is my creative outlet. It’s what attracted me from an early age and it’s what I trained to do... There’s great gratification in having readers. That can be enough.” – Professor Anthony Grooms (March 30th, 2021)***

His answer might seem whimsical to many, even illogical for the pragmatic thinker, but it made perfect sense to me when I gave it thought. Humans by their very nature seek companionship, acknowledgement, and gratification. His answer reinforced that one of the greatest benefits of being a writer lies in the realm of a writer’s psychology. It’s not a bad thing from my point of view. Perhaps one of the best ways to seek gratification and acknowledgement is to create and share unique stories for others to freely explore.

This segued nicely into my next question. “Would you consider novel writing fulfilling? Stressful? To what extent?” His answer was simple, but his explanation was a nice

summary of his reasoning. “Both,” he said. He affirmed that it’s fulfilling when it’s done for example, but the Professor’s best explanation of the fulfilling side was the following: “The composing process, making it up, dreaming it up, and even revising, that’s what’s enjoyable to me.” When talking about the stressful side, he said, “What’s stressful is the publishing process.” Finding an agent who would represent him in that process had once taken two years, and the agent still needs time to find a publisher that would accept the story.

## Why Do Writers Do It?

***“I would suggest this, that writing chose me.” – Professor Anthony Grooms (March 30th, 2021)***

I asked what the reason was for his choosing to become a writer. He explained that he had always been a reader, and got a lot of praise for his writing in school, poems, and plays. He attempted to pursue higher education in anthropology and theater, but it never felt right to him, and he discovered that his interest was creative writing.

Professor Grooms had gone through many of the early motions of pursuing higher education when he was approached by a mentor he met during his time at Northern Virginia Community College. Richard Bausch invited him to take part in the graduate writing program at George Mason University, where Mr. Bausch was moving to teach as a professor. It would be a masters of fine arts in creative writing. By his own admission, Professor Grooms had been floored, but his writing had clearly garnered attention. He told me that he had asked, “Why me?” Bausch’s response had been along the lines of, “But you are a writer.”

I next inquired about what notable reasons for writing he had heard from peers in the field. There were many examples ranging from facing psychological issues to changing the world. Some people write because they discovered stories that have gone untold and feel the compulsion to tell it. But what really hit me is when Professor Grooms stated what he thinks the main reason for all writers is:

***“It’s fun. It satisfies something in us.” – Professor Anthony Grooms (March 30th, 2021)***

## The Role and Journey of Education

We had already touched upon one aspect of the Professor’s education by the time we reached the questions that more directly related to it. The first focused on how well his education prepared him for a writing career. According to Professor Grooms, his early grade school education was not what what did it for him. Although he had a space to write

at home, he had grown up during the an age of segregation in the US. During his early college education, he did start setting groundwork for his literary education at the College of William & Mary. There, he met writing professor, playwright, and director Louis Catron, who was something of a mentor to Grooms. He encouraged Grooms to be a better writer, and was the first source of professional guidance. It was after that time that he met [Richard Bausch](#) at Northern Virginia Community College, was an encouraging literary mentor to him. He met [Susan Shreve](#) later at George Mason, who became yet another mentor. As mentioned earlier, it was Richard Bausch who invited Grooms to attend graduate school classes for a masters in fine arts at George Mason. The Professor specified that it was this late stage that played the largest role in preparing him for his writing career.

I next inquired as to what courses proved most valuable. The Professor told me that the playwriting courses he took early on did help. However, it was the fiction writing, prose writing, teaching, and literature courses he took at George Mason that had the largest impact, according to his earlier explanation. He studied Hemmingway and Faulkner, and even studied under [Ishmael Reed](#) during his college years, building upon his understanding and skill in creative literature expansively in so doing.

## Examining the Origins of Creative Vision

In the last segment of our interview, I sought to explore the source of Professor Grooms' vision. Why he chose to write the specific characters and stories he did. I could already guess that part of it was the influence of the time he grew up in, but that was a surface detail that lacked specifics. I was especially curious about his decision to write a war veteran character, so I opened with the following:

“Your novel *Bombingham* caught my attention in no small part due to how it is written in the perspective of a Vietnam War Veteran. Was it difficult writing the perspective of a war veteran?”

Professor Grooms replied, “Not too difficult, in large part because the character I wrote about [was] in my age range... I grew up during the Vietnam War.”

He explained that he had thought his next step would be the Army in his youth, but by now we know that did not happen. He had known people who served in the war, such as his barber's brother. Many stories from the media at the time played a large role too, but at the time of hearing them he had no idea they would influence his role as a novelist later on. Impactful images such as the forlorn soldier who came home to find his girlfriend had married someone else played their own significant role in shaping his literary vision. He explained that, at first, these influences impacted his decision to write from that perspective subconsciously. It evolved into a more conscious decision later on in the process.

I then inquired about what made him want to write with a focus on civil rights events. According to the Professor, it had been a part of his coming of age during the time of the Vietnam War. He lived his first years in de-facto segregation. He had been an observer of the movement from about 1963 on through the Birmingham Movement. When he came to Georgia in 1984, he met his wife, and as it turned out, she herself had grown up in Birmingham during the civil rights events that took place there. Her family had also observed those events. The details they provided to Grooms had played a notable role in shaping the deeper details of the *Bombingham* novel.

Based on the details provided by Professor Grooms, I'm able to conclude that real world events, as well as the specific environment of one's upbringing, can play a significant role in shaping the artistic vision of those who lived through those events. The influences can have a direct impact or an indirect one, but the end result is generally the same. The events that surrounded the Professor in his youth shaped his creative vision decades later.

Feature Photo:

