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LAUREN REDNISS & WILL VARNER

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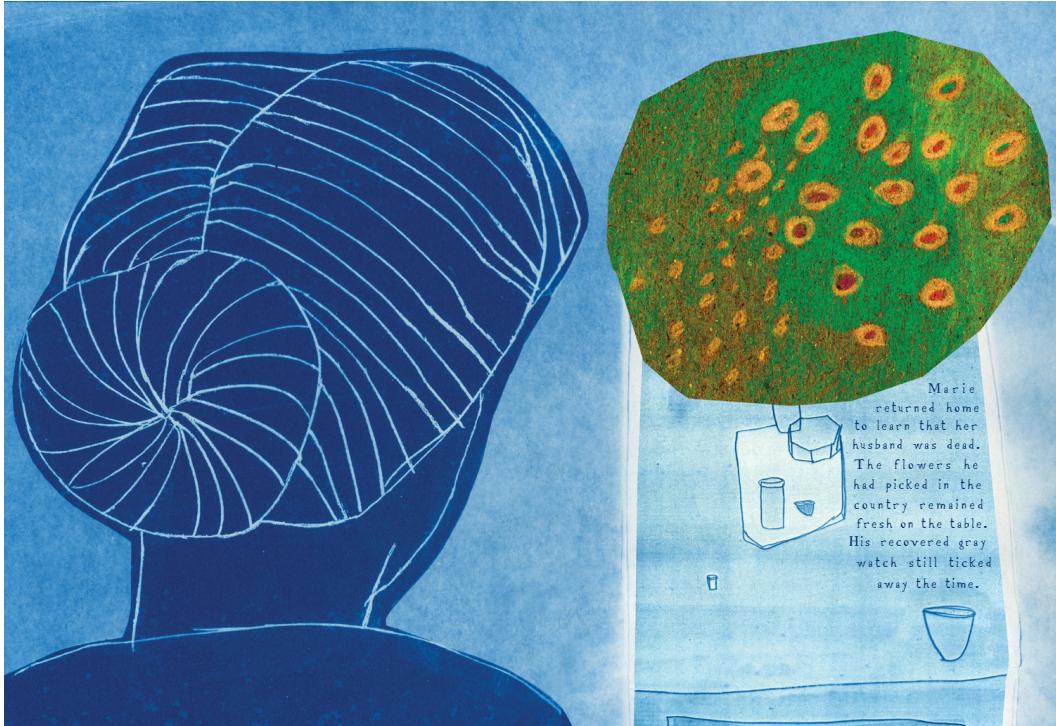
# Two Illustrators Take Different Paths

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The MFA Illustration as Visual Essay program aims to help students develop their own unique vision, and those personal paths lead our graduates to different places. We spoke to two of our successful alumni—one an author/illustrator and the other the illustration director at Buzzfeed—to see where their talent took them after getting their MFA.

Lauren Redniss (MFA 2000) blends words and images in innovative works of visual nonfiction. She has published three books on three very different ▶





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topics—a dancer from the Ziegfeld Follies, Marie and Pierre Curie, and weather—but each is connected by Redniss’ style and sensibilities in terms of illustration as well as writing. *Radioactive*, the book on the Curies, was nominated for a National Book Award for Nonfiction. What drew her to the topic? “I became intrigued with the idea of creating a visual book about invisible things. Marie Curie’s life is animated by two invisible forces: radioactivity and love. This book is a love story.”

From the time she was a child working at her grandfather’s store, drawing on cartons when things were

slow, Redniss has always been making art and writing. She found herself drawn to the MFA Illustration as Visual Essay program because she was hoping to make a living combining drawing and writing, and the philosophy of the program as well as the faculty were what she was looking for.

Will Varner (MFA 2011) said his artistic career began in first grade when a drawing he made won him a free taco at Taco Bell. But it was moving to New York City and eventually starting the MFA program that really sparked his career in art.

At BuzzFeed, Varner manages a team of illustrators and writers to



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meet the “drawn” content needs of the company. He and his team make original content for many platforms: website posts, illustrations to accompany articles, social media outlets and items to be sold in the BuzzFeed online store. Varner has many editorial and managerial responsibilities in his role. He explains: “When you’re working as an art director and managing other artists it can be easy to lose the space to make your own work and tell your own stories. It’s been my goal this year to refocus on really personal work.”

One such personal piece is a 2017 visual essay *A Love Letter to All My Gay Firsts*, which weaves a narrative of heartfelt, touching and sometimes funny personal moments. “I’ve known for a while that the world is hungry for gay stories that are told well and from a fresh perspective,” he says.

What advice do these alumni offer current students? Redniss: “Read history from multiple perspectives, read the newspaper, read fiction, go to museums, and talk to as many people outside your usual circle as you can.



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Travel, locally as well as far distances, if possible. Create a habit of self-education." Varner: "Open yourself up and honestly share what's inside you, the good, the bad, the ugly. Corny as this may sound, get comfortable with your 'bad' drawings because they may hold the key to that personal style you can build a career on." He continues: "That said, don't freak out if you get to the end and you still don't have a clear plan. Turns out that life is mostly about making it up as you go along. Who knew?"



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ABOVE AND RIGHT, ILLUSTRATIONS FROM WILL'S SERIES *A LOVE LETTER TO ALL MY GAY FIRSTS*.