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Recommendation for: James Cavanaugh

Dear SCAD Admissions,

I am writing to recommend James Cavanaugh for your institution. James excelled as my student at Pima College during the Spring 2014 semester. The class he took with me, Writing for Film and TV, is a creative writing workshop with an emphasis on telling stories visually in the screenplay format. I awarded James an A because of, among other things, his aptitude for giving direct and diplomatic feedback to his peers. His feedback typically incorporated theory from the course lecture, showing that he was able to understand and employ the teachings of a variety of creative scholars, from Aristotle to William Goldman. He also wrote compelling scripts that were especially suitable for animation, such as one short physical farce about a man scrambling desperately to find a bathroom, or an eerie tone poem about a predatory hitchhiker that could easily be matched with the moody seasick style of a Koji Yamamura short.

Many of my best students struggle with perfectionism, and James was no exception. He found it a battle to maintain the weekly pace of our writing exercises and held himself to a higher standard than he felt he was capable, but he forced himself through this writer's block week after week. The result was often a condensed, but usually imaginative and always accurately crafted story or situation. One of my favorites was a story about a grown son who tries to convince his father, a retired bomber pilot, to attend an award reception in his honor. The father sees his past self as a "monster" [a killer], so he refuses to go. Instead, on the day of the reception, he slips off to the aviation museum. Alone, gazing at his old silver bomber on exhibit, we see him recognize that there is still beauty in it. "Quite the monster," he says. "But yes, pretty nonetheless."

This script was good because of how the son seems to fail to achieve his goal; he leaves his father to his misery. We, the audience, feel that hope is lost. But the dramatic irony at the climax reverses that. The son may not have gotten what he wanted – to honor his father – but he got what he needed – to restore his father's honor. Rarely has this basic storytelling principle been so effectively executed.

I rode the bus onto campus with James, so I got to know about his travails fairly well. He was very modest about them, often stopping himself mid-sentence in embarrassment. This phenomenon of "stopping himself" is his greatest challenge, but I feel like he made real progress against it in my class. His ambitious final script, about a child soldier torn between the culture of his upbringing and the chance to escape it, almost defeated him, but as always he pulled through. In the wake of his struggles with himself are these wonderful pieces of art. Isn't it so with every artist? I recognize in James the spirit and determination to become an artist of high quality.

Sincerely,

Drew Castalia  
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Pima Community College