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Terra Firma: A novel in the making

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Terra Firma: A Novel in the Making

An Honors Program Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Art, Design, and Art History
James Madison University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By Samantha E. Logan

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Art, Design, and Art History, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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What Is *Terra Firma*?

I'm an art major. In fact, I used to want to work as an animator for Pixar, because I thought it was the animators who were responsible for the studio's fantastic movies. So how on earth did I end up writing the beginnings of a novel?

As it turns out, the reason I loved Pixar was not just for the animation, but for their masterful storytelling. So when it came down to picking a subject for my honors thesis, I quickly discovered that in spite of multiple attempts to focus on art, I just couldn't seem to find something I was interested in. It wasn't until the beginning of this semester that, in a desperate attempt to reignite my creative spirit, I decided to try writing a story. Apparently, that was all I needed. It didn't take long for me to remember how much I love the immediacy and control that writing gives me, and that tinkering with my creative ideas is so much easier when I can type them out instead of trying to draw them.

The particular story I've been working on originated in an art class I took last summer that was taught by Richard Hilliard, a graphic design professor who adores comics and *Godzilla* movies. (He ended up being my faculty advisor, which is one of the main reasons I took the class in the first place.) For our final assignment, we were to draw three pages of a graphic novel. As usual, I wanted to complete the task to the best of my ability, so I started to construct a story that would be fun to illustrate. I ended up creating *Terra Firma*. (That means "solid ground" in Latin.) The title is something I've stuck with from the very beginning, but the content was very different back then: Kanna, rather than being a regular human being, was able to shapeshift into a turtle. I completed the assignment and kept working on the story after the class was over, intending it to become the focus

of my honors thesis. But I had a lot of trouble figuring out how a mere turtle could be instrumental in saving the world from some dangerous martial and/or magical arts master without copying the main premise of *Kung Fu Panda*, in which anthropomorphic animals are able to move and fight like humans. Come fall semester, I was out of ideas, and I started grasping at straws for other possible options. Obviously, none of those panned out, but they did free up my mind to start thinking about *Terra Firma* again—and before I knew it, I was making huge revisions to the story.

Given my rediscovered love of writing and my growing attachment to *Terra Firma*, I'm planning on working on it for the next 10-15 years of my life. Working on a story seems to fill me up in a way I've never felt before, and I've found that writing fictional stories in particular can be a great way to express my ideas and beliefs about the world in a non-confrontational way. For a person like me who resists unnecessary confrontation, it's perfect. I've been going slowly, being careful to ensure my sustained interest and to craft something that others will want to read from cover to cover. As suggested by my use of a cast of characters for my 'evidence of creative work' document, I've primarily focused on developing the main characters. To me, they are the heart of the story, for without them I feel that I would have no story to tell.

Along those lines, then, I would like to show a small sample of my writing process by pulling two excerpts out of my reflective journal that feature the tangible act of developing a character. I want to illustrate that even though I've really just been solidifying the foundations of my story, I have come a long way from where I was a few months ago. While only a small portion of the many, many journaling sessions I've done over the course of this thesis have been submitted as my reflective journal, those sessions are really where the bulk of the creative work occurred. Without a way to write down my thoughts and ideas, the story and the characters would exist only in my head.

So, without further ado, here is my first excerpt. It will be readily apparent that it's written in an informal, almost shorthand style. That's because I tend to picture myself writing notes for my future self whenever I'm actively coming up with new ideas. (Hence the reason that the word "we" pops up a few times in the passage below, and the reason for the affective and often exclamatory nature of the writing. I get excited when a particular idea seems to make more sense than the others!) Normally, nobody would be seeing this part of the novel's development, and certainly not so early in the writing process. This particular excerpt is from a relatively short writing session that I had back in the first week of January, when I was making my first forays into revising *Terra Firma*. At the time, I knew very little about the story world or the characters, and I think it shows:

Kanna = candle maker ('s daughter). The family motif in their designs is mirrors... Or perhaps that is her personal motif. She reflects the state of the works as it is... Doesn't like grimy mirrors. Has a thing for cleaning... If she sees something dirty—a lone metal scrap on the table, corroded on one end and clean (though smudged) on the other... While thinking/daydreaming/zoning out, she'll pick it up and start cleaning it. There's always something to be polished in the candle shop... And she loves the way the wax can form one shape, then simply be melted down again to become something completely new. ...It's something she wishes her life could have... Change. Newness. Freshness. Cleanliness. She's sick of all this dirt...

Hub. I said 'candle SHOP.' They must have customers, then... Many of them. So a mysterious customer coming in and tasking her with some quest--much like in Treasure Island--could be a good way to go... Or maybe she leaves the shop/sees something outside and ventures into the darkness. ("Darkness" here bc land is all dark and 'cursed' and full of nasty beasties of all sorts. Not safe out there, and hasn't been for a while, so K is used to it.) Or is out doing chores--dumping their compost (OR toilet waste! Important to mention if it's based off medieval times) outdoors--when she notices something or encounters something... (Or something/someone encounters her... Maybe a beast of some sort that's dangerous? But then, maybe that's getting too

close to the plot of another favorite book of mine...) *Regardless, a dangerous encounter would be a good way to SHOW that she can handle herself in a fight/ a tense situation despite her blasé life! Bc for her, it's all normal... Beasts and/ or mysterious strangers = part of everyday life. Only if it's a beast, she probably can't eat all/ much/ any of the beast once she kills it bc it is toxic... Or parts of it are... Or maybe it's not toxic and is a lucky catch on her part, so that she can take it home to family and we can show what family life is like. Could be a good transition.

*Have this beginning scene feel quite a bit like the opening scenes of Interstellar (or, you know, thousands of other stories). Give it the feel of a very average day in the life of K's family... And SHOW. Don't tell.

But remember: her family DOES still have warm moments! Being cooped up like they are all day (minus maybe taking care of bees, which could be a way for them to get fancy beeswax for fancier candles) = they have all sorts of interactions... Generally no choice but to try and get along. Cause if they don't, they could all die from being attacked by the evil hell-spawn sort of creatures/ beasts that are common in the area... Or, if they stopped working, they could cause deaths of other citizens by no longer being able to make candles to keep the beasts at bay. Yikes!

Hm... Perhaps Kanna's father or mother is injured, and thus has passed the trade along to her... Let's trade gender roles! Dad cooks, cleans, keeps things tidy. Keeps to himself when not working--but usually has a warm smile or joke for Kanna when she comes out if shop to see/ visit him/ get something from rest if house. MOM is injured... (Not crippled--just had a recent accident with a nasty beast. Got patched up... Sits in wheelchair.) Not horribly so, but enough to keep her from being able to do ALL aspects of her job...

Why would father cook when mom does the trade...? We need a good reason to switch gender roles so that it doesn't upset the whole world or require me to create a whole new people that don't ascribe to the gender roles

that are most common in American/Medieval European history...

Well, father is strongest--and cooking/cleaning could actually take the most energy. He's a bit younger than Kanna's mom. And she is always do busy caring for the need and making candles to offset her depression/keep her faith intact... Father is just loyal and wanting to provide.

Yes... I do like the candle making thing quite a bit. Let's make that final. Maybe instead of beeswax, they can primarily use bayberry fruit... That way they maintain an orchard nearby. They could still, however, import beeswax from a distant town... Father/Mother goes out once a month to collect it and store it for the winter.

Kanna learns never to take life for granted... Especially not that of a bayberry tree. B/c if you neglect it, if you stop caring for it and doing the necessary work to keep it alive... It will die. (Same applies to yourself and your relationships... With your craft and the people you love.)

Parents are rather wise, at times... Especially father/mother. (Pick one!) But mostly just a normal family with problems of its own.

Oh--and the family could also benefit from hunting 'sperm whales' (think giant land version of sperm whales... A hybrid with anteater or rhino or dinosaur parts or something). They don't do the actual hunting--though Kanna may want to! OR her older/younger sister... Let's say younger... Could be brother, too... Or maybe she's an only child?

It's painfully obvious here that I had my work cut out for me. I didn't know who Kanna was beyond being a candle-maker's daughter, and I was casting about in the dark for what her home

environment might be like. At the time, I had no other perspective from which I could conceive of Kanna's existence—no real idea of where she would need to go, physically or developmentally, over the course of the story. Nor did I know anything about how she related to the other main characters. In fact, one of my characters (Oma) didn't even exist yet! But above all, the biggest missing piece at the time was Kanna's personality. When I originally created *Terra Firma* last summer, Kanna was such a flat character that she became one of the main reasons I stopped working on the story. When I returned to the story, I was so bored with her that I essentially had to rebuild her character from scratch. That was not an easy task, as it took several months of thinking and rethinking before I was able to make Kanna come alive as a multidimensional character in my own mind as well as on paper.

And thank goodness I was able to make her come alive that way, because she has added some delicious complexity to the story! My second excerpt below, which also focuses on Kanna, will show just how far I've come since those early days. Not only is it a longer passage, since the amount of writing I do tends to increase in proportion to my knowledge of the story, but all the deep thinking and research I've done is starting to show in subtle ways. And by far the most exciting change, at least for me, is that I've started thinking far more strategically about how I can play my characters off each other to create conflict that goes beyond and even interferes with their main quest. That sort of interpersonal conflict will likely affect each character, as well as my readers, on a far deeper level than the overarching "good vs. evil" plotline ever could. Here's the excerpt:

Kanna is good with animals, but less so with people... And this actually becomes an ISSUE with Riku! BECAUSE Riku is all about being a part of human society, even though she isn't able to thanks to being hidden away... So she wants to be treated like a human--BUT Kanna tends to default to treating her like an animal (brainless, mute, shouldn't have feelings/ shouldn't argue with people bc animals aren't meant to be

able to speak/ should NOT be BETTER AT BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE or BETTER WITH WORDS than K is...! YES. (And R is absolutely better with words and better at being socially acceptable/acquiring social status than K is. R also happens to be able to hold her own in an argument, which is something that Kanna is pretty bad at. There's gonna be some jealousy issues between these two!) That is the heart/peak of their major/overall story arc, I feel... The two values which seemingly bring them together (R valuing human society/company and K valuing the company of animals) are actually the ones that cause each other the most damage. AND WE CAN INCREASE THAT DAMAGE if we make Kanna especially awkward and not-so-good with words/dealing with people...! She is not shy, exactly (she absolutely has her moments due to the various types of shame she harbors beneath the surface as well as her dedication to work/to animals); but K is frequently confused, awkward, and clueless while desperately wanting to be suave/smooth talking and great at public speaking... K just likes animals so much better than people, because from her perspective, animals aren't quite capable of being cruel like humans are. (I.e. Yes, animals will misbehave and bite and try to attack or kill each other under certain circumstances, but K knows that it's usually instinctual, and that the only way they'll stop is if someone else intervenes. Humans, on the other hand, can think about their actions... So when they choose to be cruel, or are even just unconsciously cruel under certain circumstances, they're far more cruel than animals can ever be. Think torture and sadistic activities, but also even just social shaming or teasing or anything else that represents a lack of compassion or empathy on the offender's part. Humans are social beings, and that can be abused to cause harm to people in one's social circle. Animals, for the most part, just don't do that to the extent that humans do.)

OHHH. AND it may even be an issue with Terri as well...! BUT I think that K is actually more confident around Terri once she sees and understands the animal in her. Bc Terri DOES HAVE a legitimate animal side--she can be savage and primal, and she naturally has perceptive/acrobatic skills that

humans don't! But K also sees T as oppressed... And for that she wants to help T. Wants to help her as a person, though... Not an animal. B/C IT MAY BE FROM T THAT K LEARNS that animals can be almost as dangerous as people... And that while both have their ups and downs, both people and animals are worth loving... OR RATHER, that her love for animals can be extended to a love for humankind--bc as it turns out, humans essentially ARE animals! They're just social, intelligent ones that have a penchant for cruelty under the right conditions. Turn the conditions around and you just might see a cruel person develop a good side. (Or, you know, you could just find some lovely, compassionate people who avoid being cruel even in the worst conditions. That's probably closer to the path that Kanna will follow!)

So we do have the possibility for an "I don't like humans and I don't want to save them, let alone save the world for them" attitude in Kanna... BUT REMEMBER--she may seem overly whiny and weak at the start if this is how we introduce her. SO we need to give her some strength and depth that can help her seem less so/provide a lovely counterpoint to this socially-awkward, cynical, repressed side of her. And in the opening pages of the novel, we should focus on those strengths at first... While simultaneously introducing some immediate conflict and tension, of course, through whatever situation she's in/maybe through a prologue, so that readers are drawn in and get the sense that there is more to this world—and to Kanna—than meets the eye... ;)

So... I bet K is physically pretty strong, since she might be doing some heavy lifting of wax vats and large candles and--AH YES! Lifting and DIPPING AND POURING candles all day! It WILL give you sore arms within the first few times you try it... So yes, she has a fair amount of muscle on her--HENCE the reason she has wiry AND somewhat muscular arms! (Side note: look up child laborers from Industrial Revolution? Maybe doing hard labor [or rough/challenging sports] from an earlier age than 16 would change

the way that a child's muscles and bones grew... As in maybe K has unusually wiry/muscular arms compared to her otherwise soft and somewhat pudgy body B/C she started work so early in her life, as a way of keeping the family going. Maybe the distribution of body fat/baby fat is even altered by that sort of thing... Look it up!)

And of course, working all the time would result in her wearing that iconic, simple bun that I want her to have. ;) (Side note: people and the world they live in are rather complicated to her mind..! Animals are far simpler... Which if course isn't true, since she really only knows so much about husbandry/taming animals FROM A FRIENDLY WOMAN OUTSIDE THE FAMILY who raises them... B/c you see, she couldn't work with the candles and hot wax all day when she was younger--some of the equipment (read: stoves and fires and hot wax and height issues) was too dangerous for a child under 9 or 12 to use. (Like sitting in front seat of a car—just not a good idea to invite disaster like that. And of course, her mother probably errs on the side of being overly cautious... Hm. Well, that or she errs on the side of being overly demanding. We'll see.) Kanna could of course do some things in the workshop, since it was what her family (read: mother and father only, bc she has no siblings—children are expensive and mother can't afford to get pregnant again) did all day, and K was expected to help bc there was always work to be done and orders to be filled. (summer or other off seasons = cooking and prepping food and such, since it was too warm to work with candles—make sure that fits with the overall climate of her area, though--and the family did need food. Plus doing all the other household chores by hand, since there isn't electricity or anything... Not at this point in the story, at least, and likely not in this part of the world either. Electricity may well be in the process of being applied to domestic or industrial life as the novel begins...) SO, since parents were always busy with work... K would go to this animal woman, and that's where she learned most of what she knows and grew to love animals so much. (K has never been to school, which is yet another reason she's teased by the other kids

in her area. Her family's simply been too busy surviving, because her father wasn't the best at managing his business on his own... Wasn't until he met mom that the business stopped being bankrupt. So of course they're still struggling!) Maybe the animal woman is even her grandmother, which means that K likely loves her! B/c grandma is almost always less strict and more motherly/mentor-like/able to be nothing but affectionate with a child than child's actual parents... ;)

Mom especially focused on work over nourishment, being from a disciplined, very Protestant-like family--hence where K got her work ethic and a large slice of her emotional/ego complex. K wants her mom to be nourishing, but... Often only gets strict words or lack of understanding or gets brushed off altogether. She loves mom bc mom does have cheerful moments... Like when she "forgets" about her troubles/her ego/her family and just has fun with K and dad... She's lovely! A beautiful/graceful woman on the inside (it radiates out, making her seem more beautiful on the outside--be clear about showing that rarely-seen inner life to be the cause of her beauty, rather than having her beauty be based on "objective" measures of sexual attractiveness/having a body that conforms to beauty norms of the time and society they live in). Mom can be so warm and witty/funny/LOOSE and willing to dance/joke/make mischief/have fun... BUT she has to forget first. She has trouble being in the moment, you see. Their business is not a wealthy or very successful one, as I already mentioned.

Though I think it may grow to be that way (more successful) by consequence of the story's plot! Towards the middle or end when K returns to family and has to face the problems there... Something happens once they've already rebuilt their relationships through hard work, kind of like a serendipitous reward for going through all that grueling emotional crap with each other in order to wind up loving each other again... And it works! Likely because loving, happy people tend to feel more inspired, especially after a time of harsh resentment and

misery... So the resulting boom in business keeps mom much happier bc she can get other people [only friendly human workers, please, not slaves or servants who are mistreated!] to do the housework and food preparation, which frees her up to run the business to her liking!. Plus, something unexpectedly humorous and serendipitous happens in the town or city... With the change K brings to the land via being the Vessel/ being in the process of saving the world, trade is reopened or spirits/ channelers/ other sorts of magic-users can help people now... Materials are easier to access (no more traipsing in the bog for hard-to-find and hard-to-use bayberry/waxberry shrubs for candlemaking!), and trading finished candles is faster/farther reaching/ more successful/ safer, AND father was already a genius with candles so he is free to get more creative now..!

YAY GROWTH! Dad = always new ideas for better or prettier or more elaborate candles, but never had enough time to explore them bc there was always so much work to do--and maybe the tallow smell/ chemicals they used even made him sick every now and then or made him take breaks to air out the workshop or just plain get sick of working in there! Made him stressed/ MORE TIRED than he otherwise would have been... Yeah . Something like that . Yay! So--dad can do pretty candle sculpting now, just like that gorgeous shop down in Savannah, Georgia... He was really more of an artist than a steady, routine-loving worker anyway!! [Mom is the disciplined, routine-loving one. Rumor is that she used to be a soldier, but she has yet to confirm or deny it... Prefers to let people wonder, b/c her business is her business ;)] One or two or three hired workers keep up the pace with the regular candles while Dad's being artistic, of course. YAY! BUT KEEP IN MIND: Even with all these changes, what they end up with is A MODEST LIVING... NOT RICHES. Make that clear. Mom especially gets to play tennis or polo or badminton or racquetball [or some medieval/ renaissance/ Victorian equivalent of those] now... And drink tea in a small garden that she likely enjoys maintaining and organizing... Thanks to the extra time. She does love being organized and disciplined and having a routine, after all. I LOVE IT! AND... Of course... Above all, they can be a happy family again. (Love love love.) Relationships are already deep in the process of repairing thanks to earlier events in the story. (They're not perfect, but if course we'll end with an ideal image so that we get a

great sense of closure that's like 'a new journey is just beginning'. Affection displays, like hugs or tucking K's hair back, from mom and dad will be slightly awkward, but increasingly adorable and welcome to K's perspective as the story reaches its end. :) Cute!

**Btw... One last thing to keep in mind: parents may or may not learn about Riku and the quest that K is going on. Likely will, since I think K may just tell parents she's leaving to go to channeling/ magic school, but of course she might lie about it or something bc it's simpler/ likely more acceptable (given the stigma surrounding channelers) than explaining that it's a CHANNELER school... And then there's the whole journey of acceptance thing that the family will embark on once they discover/ realize that K is not just any channeler, but one of the best out there. THIS LIKELY MEANS that K HAS had a small affinity/ talent for channeling from the start...! Was averse to that before because it was something so standard to fantasy characters/ novels, and b/c I absolutely still want her to work HARD to earn her place as a great channeler/ savior of the world... Nonetheless, her being good with animals and taming them MIGHT be due to having an intuitive knack for channeling/ magic... Or, more likely, that she knows nothing about it at first b/c parents don't know any, but once, say, trade gets harder and the family business starts to struggle (forcing her to need to work even though she's a child), THEN she goes to spend time with grandma while parents work almost round the clock to turn those waxberries into candles... (See, beeswax and tallow and other candlemaking materials are traded to them—waxberries/ bayberries are reported to involve much longer, slower work, even though they're abundant and native to many areas. So decreased trade would = family needs to spend extra time gathering and preparing materials like bayberries... Wicks included, which means they better have a lot of string/ cotton fibers stored up.) ANYWAY—I think that once K goes to spend time with grandma, grandma sees her being shy around animals (and all people in general, since she's only a child) and teaches her not to fear them... Grandma helps K develop a confident, passionate side, which makes Grandma an invaluable influence in K's life. Ah, yes—AND Grandma teaches her channeling for*

the first time! BUT she does so in very subtle, quiet ways... not really telling K that it's magic, but treating it instead AS A FACT OF LIFE. B/c in this world, magic IS a fact of life!! THAT IS VITAL to communicate. It's also probably the best, most equal perspective on magic that K is exposed to throughout the entire story... And exposing her to it early on and having her internalize it is awesome, bc then she gets to go through hardship that makes her question it and leave it behind, only to return to it in the end with fuller understanding and complete appreciation for the peaceful perspective it brings to the whole channeling stigma issue. YES! Yes. ...Yay. :)

...Clearly, I am delighted with the direction my writing is going.

Working on this story has been quite a journey for me so far—and I'm not just talking about self-discovery. I'm also referring to the sheer amount of research and thought that goes into building a fictional world from the ground up. I never imagined that there would be so much work to do, and never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would fall in love with the process as much as I have. I've got a long way to go before I can even think about getting *Terra Firma* published, and there are still so many decisions to be made before I can truly begin "the writing process" as most people understand it. But I can say with great certainty that I will savor every step.