

Ringleader of the Tattoo Zoo

Julie Pounds

Writer's comment: To be perfectly honest, when I learned that I had to take English 103 in order to graduate, I was annoyed. To say the least, English classes were not my favorite. But all that has changed. John Boe's English 103A class has shed a new light on the way I view writing classes. He has introduced me to a style of writing that is not boring, dry, or traditionally academic, but rather exciting, captivating, and real. And I love it.

—Julie Pounds

Instructor's comment: I remember Julie Pounds bringing me a draft of a paper, then apologizing that it was boring. I told her I didn't particularly want to read a boring paper (even if my assignment seemed to call for it). She asked me if she could instead write a profile of a tattoo artist, and she seemed surprised when I said this was fine with me as long as she promised not to get tattooed as part of writing the paper. Her paper proved to be a memorable study of an artist and his art, filled with fascinating quotes and quirky humor. And I don't think she ended up with a tattoo as a result of taking English 103A.

—John Boe, English Department

Hanging in the window of the Tattoo Zoo is a red neon sign welcoming the public. When the lighted sign is on, the Tattoo Zoo is open for business and Slade Jackson Fiero is ready to explore any new possibilities in tattoo art.

Slade is thirty-four, about 5'8", medium build, with dark brown hair and a mustache. Undoubtedly, though, Slade's most striking feature (or features) are his own tattoos. His body is the product of 120 hours of artful expression. The colors and designs are bright and vivid; the detail is exquisite. Slade enjoys various artistic designs for tattooing, but he has a particular fondness for Japanese designs: "I don't know, man, I just love this," he said, pointing to his right leg, which brings to life a beautiful fish swimming in a whirlpool of pond water. "In my opinion *this* is beautiful. It's artwork, alive, on your body."

Slade's body is a mural of meticulous creativity. Few areas on Slade's body have not been exposed to tattoo needles. Slade was first introduced to the world of tattooing twelve years ago:

Tattooing changed my life forever. I was with my buddy Chaz—we were in Venice, partyin' all night long. And it just happened. I got a dragon right here, on my hip. You see, I'd been a body builder. I was always trying to change my

outer appearance. Drinking protein shakes and shit. I would devote so much energy to it and never saw any real results. But with a tattoo, your look changes. Boom. Instantly. Permanently.

After Slade's first experience with tattooing, he had an instant desire to learn the art form that now dominates his life.

Slade has always enjoyed drawing in his spare time. "I was one of those kids that pretended to take notes in class," Slade recalls, "but I was actually just drawing or doodling." After a friend encouraged him to give tattooing a try, he called the infamous Spaulding and Rogers Company and ordered his first tattoo kit. Slade laughs softly:

Yea, I remember calling Spaulding and Rogers. That place is such a joke. Any Tom, Dick, or Harry can call this 1-800 number and get a full starter kit. But I shouldn't really talk shit. I guess it's good for beginners, but once you know what you're doin' you know that place is just a big joke, so you feel like an asshole for ever calling.

Slade did, however, receive that kit and gave his first tattoo in a motel room in Los Angeles. "I was scared out of my ass," Slade admits. He confesses that it took at least two full years before he really felt comfortable tattooing:

It was one day. I remember everything about it. I was tattooing this young guy, probably twenty or so; then the shit just happened, everything clicked: the color, the design, my hand, the tattoo gun, his skin.

Slade loves his work. He enjoys the actual artwork, the interaction with different types of people, and the benefits of owning his own business.

Slade believes that tattoos are beautiful art, with meanings and symbols connected to particular images. There are, however, certain tattoos that Slade refuses to do. "Novelty or gag tattoos are not my style," he says firmly. Slade also prefers not to do names. He feels that marking the body with written language is pointless. "That's not really art. Most people wouldn't hang their lover's name over the fireplace, so why mark it on your body? Get artwork, not dictionary stuff."

But for Slade tattooing is more than just doing art. He understands that every tattoo he does is extremely significant in another person's life. On a serious note, Slade stresses the significance of tattooing:

Every time I do a tattoo, I have a real bond with the person I'm doing. I can't really explain it, but it's like a ritual or something and it's like I'm in a different realm for thirty or forty minutes. I make *my* mark on somebody and that mark is permanent.

With this comment, Slade is reminded of a story. His voice is soft:

I did this guy one time. He got the baddest tattoo. I was gonna send it to the magazines it was so good. Anyway, he was supposed to come back for a couple more hours when he had some more money so we could finish it. But I'll be damned he didn't get shot a week later. I felt sorry for the kid, but the

first thing that crossed my mind was what a waste. A damned shame. I felt like goin' to the morgue an' cuttin' his arm off.

Slade laughs nervously: it's clear that he feels saddened retelling this story. The room becomes quiet—a sign of respect that symbolizes the short yet meaningful bond that Slade and the young man shared.

As owner of the Tattoo Zoo, Slade appreciates the flexibility and diversity of his job. He meets different types of people, from all walks of life. And the work he does changes with each customer. Slade says, "Hell, I make a pretty good livin'. I love what I do, and I'm getting paid for it." He works four or five days a week, at various hours. Slade values his autonomy.

Slade Jackson Fiero is forthright and open about his beliefs. Life as a tattoo artist is his dream. He is constantly looking for innovative designs and encouraging people to understand and see the beauty of tattoo art. He knows that tattoo work is not revered like traditional artwork, but he has a great deal of pride in what he does:

Tattooing has been around for so long, it's tribal. Just because some tight-ass says it's not beautiful art doesn't mean I believe it. Tattoo work is art. It is beauty. It is a symbol of existence to the person wearing that permanent image. And it is my job to create that art, that beauty, that image.

When he considers what he might be doing if he were not tattooing, Slade says: "I'd die. This is heaven."