

Flash Fiction and Remediation: Ironing Out the Details

Eric Pitman

Eric Pitman recounts an experience involving the need to learn a better method of note-taking as a college freshman. The strategies he developed eventually came full circle when he encountered the concept of remediating larger stories into flash fictions. In this article, he explores what implications might arise in the shifting of one text into another.

I may not have been aware of it at the time, but looking back now, it makes sense that I'm a writer, and a fiction writer at that. I can't pinpoint exactly when it was, for certain, that I knew I wanted to write stories, or whether it was the worlds of Dr. Seuss or *The Berenstain Bears* that had the most influence. I can only say that during grade school, at any point during the year when the teacher would tell my class that we were going to have to write a story, I became very excited. This feeling stayed with me all the way up through my senior year; even though the stories and books that inspired me changed quite drastically. You might be able to imagine my discomfort upon entering community college, when I learned what sort of writing I had to look forward to in courses like English 101, Art History, and Psychology. Academic writing certainly doesn't come naturally for the majority of creative writers, so you could say the essays and notes (primarily for quizzes and tests) I was assigned to write in these classes were the first step in a long trend of writing assignments I hadn't dealt with before.

My undergraduate experience is a long story. No, no, trust me. It's a long, boring story. I'd certainly be weaving a tall tale if I claimed otherwise, and you might not like reading a lot of information, or boring, personal information

at that, so just take my word for it. The point of the matter is that while I had more time to plan out my essays for English 101, I didn't have enough money to afford a laptop, and electronic tablets hadn't been invented yet. My notes were handwritten, so I had to learn how to make quick decisions during my instructors' lectures about what information was crucial. I developed my own method of writing down what I felt was important. In doing so, I abandoned the sentence, wrote only key terms or phrases, and abbreviated so that I could write more quickly. I also arranged the information in a specific way on the page, in case I needed to revisit a point later to add more. I wasn't just writing what was said, word for word. I gave the information a new purpose, one that allowed me to study more effectively. I didn't know it at the time, but what I was doing had a name: remediation. This practice, I discovered much later, can be applied not only to lectures for the purpose of making crafty notes, but also to something I care a whole lot more about—fiction writing.

Some Important Details

Remediation is, simply put, the process of translating one text into another, and it tells us that how information is arranged has a great deal of impact on how it is perceived. Remediation can involve more than just translation, however. It can sometimes be used to take existing information and repurpose it to create a new text and a new meaning entirely. In regard to my own circumstances, I didn't have time to write down everything my professors said, word for word, and that wouldn't have been practical anyway. How would I have been able to study dozens of pages of notes? I just needed the details, and what I was doing in the act of remediating the professors' lectures into my own personalized notes seemed to be working, even though it worked only for myself.

I came up with a unique way of taking notes that only I would be able to read with ease, as it followed my own unique way of writing. I used a lot of abbreviation, slashes, and odd paragraphs to separate thoughts—it was a bit of a mess. I was OK with that because sometimes my fiction writing seemed like a mess. As I began practicing how to clean up some of those writing practices and create stories in an even shorter form called flash fiction, remediation eventually came back. Remediation was important for writing flash fiction, because, as you may have guessed, it required that I preserve only the information that was essential to the story I was working on, in order to seek a much shorter yet successful version of it.

My aim is to share some of these practices here, but first, there is an important distinction I should make between flash fiction and remediation:

remediation is a tool for writing practices, while flash fiction is a **genre** of writing, or, more simply, a type of text, such as one might consider a newspaper article a text, or an essay or poem. You might be thinking of horror, fantasy, or sci-fi now that I have mentioned the word “genre” (as in “literary genres”). However, in genre studies, through the use of **cultural-historical activity theory** (CHAT), “genre” has a different meaning that relates to specific types of literate activities, writing practices, and the types of texts those practices produce, whereas in the field of creative writing, the word “genre” summons into our minds broad categories that relate directly to the content of texts. For instance, the genre of a newspaper article is automatically going to cause us to think of a very distinct object, where to find it, what it is used for, as well as all the activities that went into making it. When we think of genres of fiction, we’re thinking about the content of the story. There’s a pretty big difference there. In using CHAT to examine genres and the various specific conditions, needs, and resources that produce specific texts, we can gauge the texts’ impact on society and we can observe how those relationships change over time. According to Joyce R. Walker, “For our purposes, CHAT isn’t really useful as a way of doing large writing-research projects . . . Instead, we use specific categories from the CHAT framework to help us understand a genre in practical ways that will impact our writing” (72). In other words, we might look at the way a text interacts with culture based on the history of things such as technology, different activities, and various norms or accepted standards. We don’t look at whether characters inside the text (if it’s written in the genre of a novel) are using broad swords, laser guns, or wooden stakes. Put another way, with CHAT we work from the outside in, with literary genre from the inside out.

From The Top Down

Like I mentioned earlier, I’m not talking about fantasy, sci-fi, or horror, although those happen to be some of my favorite literary genres. Again, the term “genre” is a bit more fluid within genre studies. More specifically, when it comes to writing fiction, there are many formats to choose from, but for the purpose of our question of remediation, let’s take a brief look at fiction genres that are determined by length or word count. You are likely thinking about books or novels at this point. These are works of forty thousand words or more, and they are typically divided into chapters. Sometimes novels are divided into fairly uniform chapters, as in the case of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, where four primary divisions are given five of their own chapters, all of which are roughly the same length, resulting in a total of twenty. The novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, however, is divided into only five chapters, and the lengths of these chapters vary quite a bit.

I'm sure you've heard of a novel before, but you may not be familiar with the novel's close cousin, the novella, which runs significantly shorter, clocking in, generally, at approximately 30,000 to 65,000 words. The novelette, an even briefer genre of formatting fiction, hovers in the 7,000 to 17,000 word range. There is also the short story, which falls under the length of the novelette, but is generally at least 1,000 words. As you might imagine, these genres of length are all somewhat variable. For instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is under 200 pages (about 47,000 words), while several novels in the *Harry Potter* series stretch far beyond 500 pages. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is well over 1,000 pages.

I'm getting off-topic. As a genre, the short story's **conventions**, or defining qualities, involve more than just word count. These conventions address the content of the story and speak to whether or not the story includes a protagonist, or main character, some kind of an agon¹ for the character to face, and finally, a dénouement². These are classical conventions of the short story, and how the information in a short story takes on these qualities might be thought of as crucial, in terms of how 'choosy' an author has to be when approaching the genre. In other words, authors may choose to place different emphases on how to define their conflicts and resolutions. It comes down to the details.

"What does this have to do with flash fiction, specifically?" you might be asking. More importantly, how do the different lengths of different genres of fiction tell me how to do research on remediating flash fiction? I have to admit, this is one of my favorite parts. We can take a look at how fiction writers have come up with even briefer ways of telling stories, of using just the essential components, in the genre of flash fiction. Don't worry though. If you're concerned about having to read a couple thousand words, I've got good news. As you might remember, I mentioned that flash fiction writers specialize in testing the limitations of the short story, so it's not necessary to read that much. The genre of flash fiction brings the word ceiling down well below 1,000. Here's an example:

Laundromat, by Eric Pitman

I hadn't done my laundry yet.

Granted, it wasn't because I'm a lazy person, a slob, or don't know how to work a washing machine. I had recently moved into a new apartment, and I just hadn't found the time. I'd stayed at two different complexes in the past year and a half, both of which

¹An ancient Greek term used to describe the conflict or test that a protagonist must face.

²The resolution of the central conflict. The conclusion.

weren't furnished with laundry appliances in the apartments, but there were laundromats provided on-site. You had to pay for them, of course. \$1.50 per load. Anything to make money, I suppose.

My apartment is spacious, but \$499 a month doesn't get me my own washer and dryer. It's fine. I'm accustomed to having to pay to do my laundry. Laundromats at apartment complexes usually have a quarter machine that you can just slip bills into, but this one doesn't, and with all the bustle of moving in, it took me a while to get over to the local grocery store to pick up a roll.

My laundry basket is made of wicker and the weeks of clothes made it squeak when I hefted it up to head out the door that day. My pocket clinked with coins on the three minute walk—the complex isn't tiny—between buildings and around bushes, and despite moving four hours north, the July sun ensured I'd work up a sweat. The jugs of Gain and lavender bleach didn't help. I don't know why I didn't drive.

I have to use a separate key to get into the laundromat. Four keys is too many. I have a key for the front door of my apartment, a bedroom key, a mailbox key, and then the laundromat key. My arms were aching by the time I got to the right one. Other tenants happened to be doing their laundry, and one of them opened the door for me, ending my struggle, preventing me from decorating the ground with my dirty laundry.

When I got inside, the washing machines confused me. They had the slots that you'd normally put the quarters into, but the slots were covered. The laundromat is free, I realized, wondering what to do with \$5 of quarters.

There are plenty of parking meters on campus.

After reading this text, we might ask ourselves, “What’s essential?” There’s no academic consensus on what constitutes flash fiction in terms of length as there are plenty of examples by professional authors and amateur writers in which even the thousand-word ceiling is busted. However, it’s generally considered that the typical flash fiction be of extreme brevity, and that it feature a protagonist, involve some kind of obstacle or complication, and conclude with some sort of clear ending, even if it is a simple wrap-up to the sequence of events set in motion. There are, however, purists (people who are a little more particular about the form of the genre) who argue that the flash fiction story should be limited even further. For this reason, flash fiction can be found in formats of 500 words, 250, or even 100 words and fewer. As a writer of fiction, I have my own bias to answer to, and my efforts to compose flash fictions typically involve me invoking a hundred-word limit. If we’re to be remediating this type of work, however, it will necessitate a push for even smaller, cleaner word counts.

For instance, along such strict guidelines, it could be argued that the following sentences complete a story: “Free ice cream. Going out of business.” The sentences imply the much larger story of an individual, or several, who used to own a business but are now losing it due to various reasons that aren’t apparent. However, it might be argued in various circles that these are essential details, and that’s really all you need.

Keep It Simple, Keep It Clean

With this understanding, a closer look at the example of flash fiction “Laundromat” might illustrate that many of the details present are certainly not essential. For instance, the entire third and fourth paragraphs, which describe the trip to the laundromat and the different keys the narrator is required to use, don’t change the central idea of the story if they are removed. They aren’t essential to the story line, and eliminating these entire paragraphs takes the word count of the piece from nearly 370 down to a cool 200, almost cutting the length of the piece in half. Even so, these cuts preserve the central idea, which involves the narrator realizing that the laundromat was free and that he didn’t need to get five dollars’ worth of quarters.

You might be starting to realize that not only does the skill of skimming the details provide some help in isolating central ideas within writing, but it removes quite a lot of unnecessary information that doesn’t affect the overall punch line of the story. Let’s see what the flash fiction “Laundromat” might look like if it gets cut down even further:

I still haven’t done my laundry. I just moved to this place, you see, and normally these apartment complexes have coin machines on-site at their laundromats to get quarters from, but not this one.

So I get in my car, get to the grocery just three miles up the road, get my quarters, rush back to my apartment and get my basket of dirty laundry, my detergent and bleach, and I get to the laundromat and discover it’s free to use the machines.

\$5 of quarters. Oh well.

Guess I got plenty of silver for the parking meters on campus.

Needs more chainmail, unicorns, and spaceships, I think. Regardless, this rendition of “Laundromat” provides the same story line as the previous example in precisely 100 words. Not too shabby. However, you might also notice that the tone and feel of the piece is entirely different. Why? This is a crucial piece of the puzzle when one makes a decision to remediate a text. This text in particular moves from one form, which attempts physical

and psychological humor, to a form which focuses on only the psychological. For instance, the information in the previous version that more physically locates the reader in the main character's environment is not present in the next version. The character's history with apartment complexes in the past is also absent in the second version. The second story opts for a tone that is more immediately humorous, one in which the reader knows less about the character, as opposed to building up historical information about the character. Knowing less about the character, one might argue, allows the reader to relate more to the character's experience. For instance, the absence of details might allow a reader to mentally project their own desired features onto the character. Regardless, even though the second example doesn't evoke the descriptive appeal of its former version, the author has shifted between forms and omitted information that is inessential to the humor of the piece.

This points to a genre of storytelling that we involve ourselves with every day, as the essential details of this piece are something that could, theoretically, happen to many different people. This, in turn, points to an important distinction, especially when we find ourselves researching a new type of writing situation. We've all experienced those moments where the information we think we have is not necessarily the information we need. Alternatively, we might not be using the information in the way we thought it was going to be used. We may be scouring through texts looking for the right details that define the genre we're researching, but once we identify those conventions and locate the details of those different conventions within the genre, they might tell us how to use them in a different way.

Know Your Tools, Spread the Word

To be a little more precise, the essential details of "Laundromat" might be something that you could find yourself sharing with a friend via a face-to-face conversation, text message, or even as a status on Facebook, if it happened to you. Each genre is going to have its own set of rules, its own conventions, based on how you choose to communicate the same information. For instance, see Figure 1 below:

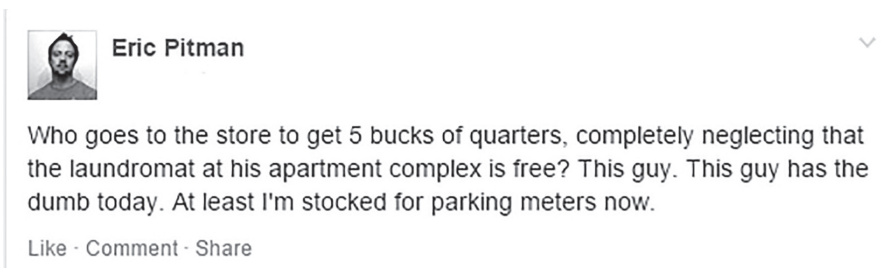


Figure 1: Oblivious male posts a Facebook status about his laundromat misconception.

The process of taking the details of the flash fiction *Laundromat* and transferring them to another genre, in this instance a Facebook status update, brings to our attention a different set of conventions from what the two flash fictions make use of. In terms of a Facebook status update, it becomes apparent that we're already dealing with a retelling of the details in an even briefer word count. In addition, the visual presentation is completely different and follows the rules for how information is communicated on this particular social media website. Granted, you could just as well retype the hundred-word version of "Laundromat" into a status update, but, in the end, you are still dealing with a different text altogether, in that there are additional visual components, such as a photo of the narrator. In addition, the different colors of text within the genre of Facebook indicate to the viewer the ways in which they are able to interact with the text, beyond simply reading it.

The transfer of the flash fiction's details from one genre to another, or its remediation, is a valuable tool in writing research. You might see how using this technique to move information from one text to another equips the writing researcher with the ability to marshal information toward different purposes. In other words, remediation better informs the writing researcher on how to go about using crucial information. It all comes down to a question of essential information—the details—and how authors make use of it. Understanding how the essential components of a brief story in a Facebook status update is communicated isn't all that different from understanding how the ideas of an essay, research article, journal, or any other piece of writing might be conveyed as well—and this isn't limited only to text on a page. Identifying essential structures or ideas comes in quite handy in different types of situations. Let's say you've procrastinated just a bit too much, and you don't have time to do all that reading for class tomorrow. Or maybe you want to summarize a large body of text, and there's just too much language taking up a lot of space to work through. Or maybe it's a rather ordinary situation: maybe you're trying to tell a friend about a movie or a song, and you only want them to "get the gist" of it. The ability to summarize a paragraph or an entire text, whether that text is a song, movie, or lecture, is a valuable skill to have as a writing researcher, and it's something you're already doing on an everyday basis. You just might not realize it.

Alternatively, let's say a friend asks you to take notes for her in Biology class. On any given day, the notes you take for yourself would remain handwritten. In addition, maybe your notes generally look a lot like the notes I described writing for myself, as unlikely as that might seem. Your friend needs the notes that particular evening, and the only way to deliver them is via some digital format, such as e-mail, so it becomes necessary that your notes be easily remediated into a format that your friend will be able to make use of. In this particular writing situation, it becomes clear that you need to

focus on capturing the essential details of your instructor’s lecture, so that when you begin the process of transferring that information into another text for your friend, those details remain intact.

Perhaps we might look at another example of how the details from the flash fiction might be remediated into another genre of writing. Figure 2 below features a type of Internet meme known as “advice animals,” in which the visual characters symbolize a particular social occurrence or situation. The two characters featured in the example are known as “Socially Awesome Penguin” (top half), who represents charisma, popularity, and attractiveness, while “Socially Awkward Penguin” (bottom half) represents the opposite. The pairing of these two characters together results in a new character, one in which an individual might tell a story that begins rather optimistically, but suddenly takes a turn for the opposite. In short, this particular meme works perfectly for the purpose of remediating the details of the flash fiction story “Laundromat.”



Figure 2: A meme created on memegenerator.net concisely communicates how the confident male determined to do laundry suddenly feels self-conscious. In color, the background on the top half of the image is red; on the bottom half, it’s blue.

Again, we are confronted with preserving the details of the idea, removing them from one genre, and molding them to fit the conventions of another, but you’ll notice that we are now interacting with a visual text.

Visual texts occur with much more immediacy than even a Facebook status update can muster, and they often make use of their imagery to evoke specific feelings in the viewer. For instance, this particular image has a clear division running through its center, in which the penguin's upper and lower halves are in opposition. In addition, this opposition might be interpreted through the coloring (with a red background on the top half and a blue background on the bottom half), as red and blue often signal "hot" and "cold," or in this instance, "awesomeness" and "awkwardness." These visual cues serve as a pretext to the words themselves. In other words, your brain is already aware of some sort of opposition before you read the words. It's a way of signaling that whatever was going right in the top half of the image is going to go wrong in the bottom half.

As you can see, this shift to a visual form has shortened the text once again, but the idea is essentially the same. However, in remediating the flash fiction into this particular genre, we have created something slightly different, in that the advice animal memes add their own distinctive qualities to the story, but without changing the basic idea. This is an example of how different activity systems work to shape the texts that are produced within them and how they can overlap to influence each other. It becomes clear that in some cases, a more drastic remediation of a text has to occur in order for it to move freely between genres. The advice animal version of the flash fiction was shaped by a need to be able to use it across various social media sites, so it took on the form of a visual text that is appropriate for movement from one genre to another. In its current form, the image and text can remain unchanged even as it moves from Facebook to Twitter to an image attachment in a text message.

Time to Wrap Things Up

To further bring things together, let's take another, final look at remediating the information contained within a flash fiction into some other form of narrative storytelling. For this particular example, we'll take a look at the work of Chicago author Christian Hayden:

Were They So Comely by Christian Hayden

Cast-iron stove on the sidewalk. Pans in the snow. I'm looking up at our balcony. How'd she get the stove over the railing?

She's throwing away my cooking supplies. My saffron's in the gutter. She took the caps off the turmeric and cayenne and waved the bottles like glow sticks. She must've, because the snow's stained red and yellow in arcs.

She used a lot of Elizabethan idioms. In bed she'd make me talk about other girls. After I gave her the rundown, she'd ask: Were they as apple-checked as I? Were they so comely?

How do you answer that?

Determining which particular elements of Hayden's flash fiction story to cut might seem a little tricky, considering there are numerous objects that the narrator interacts with as he observes the disarray that his significant other has left for him to see in the street. The humor in this piece is generated in the obvious reversal of stereotyped gender roles, as it is the male character who appears to treasure the items in the kitchen, which tend to be stereotypically associated with women. For these reasons, it may serve us well to get a visualization of what this flash fiction might look like in the genre of a three-panel comic strip. But what information should we include? We don't have a lot of room to play around with if we're talking about a comic strip, and the reversal of stereotyped gender roles isn't the only source of humor. The balcony is also needed, as the male character is dumbfounded by how the cast iron stove was lifted over it. Are there any more crucial pieces of information that will be required for the flash fiction's message to be successfully remediated into a new genre? It seems the stereotyped gender role reversal should be included, along with the male character's supplying of information about his previous love interests. Anything else? Let's turn to the title of the piece. The word 'comely,' as the story mentions, an Elizabethan-era idiom, or expression, seems distinct. The following comic I generated using *Stripcreator.com* (Figure 3) is one of many potential narrative ways in which this abundance of humorous information might be used. Pay close attention to how the defining characteristics of the flash fiction, and its humor, were translated into the genre.

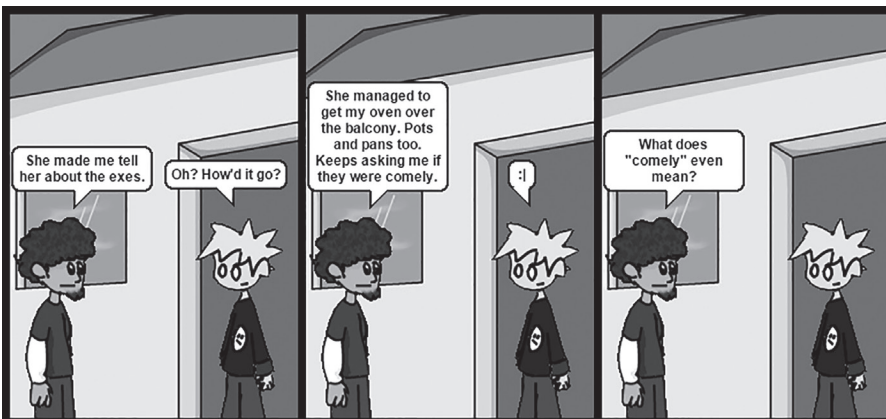


Figure 3: A three-panel comic strip created using *Stripcreator.com* depicts an oblivious male sharing the kitchen-destroying tendencies of his significant other.

While the comic strip preserves the components of the flash fiction that were highlighted, it does take some liberty in further contextualizing and expanding upon some information that is subtly implied by the story. For instance, it isn't being communicated that the male character has been unfaithful, but instead that his significant other is extremely jealous about his previous love interests and obviously reacted quite vengefully after the protagonist "gave her the rundown." As yet another example of a visual text, there are elements to the image to consider. With a comic strip comes the expectation of following the images in a specific ordering and taking note of changes made between them.

There are also spatial and temporal components to consider, or how the images make use of scenery, characters, and so on. The scenery in this comic strip could indicate several things, for instance. The narrator may have been kicked out, or he may simply be seeking comfort from a close friend. The characters are also cartoons, whereas when reading Hayden's piece, the reader is more likely to envision human characters. The bold black lines separating the comic strip's panels might indicate some passage of time; however, the poker-face emoticon does much of the work, as it represents an awkward, perhaps uncomfortable silence. The addition of a second male character in the comic, or in this case, the story being delivered to an audience that isn't specified in the original piece, is another liberty that has been taken with this remediation. However, it should be noted that the second character does not alter the nature of the primary bits of concern and importance from the original flash fiction piece. The original communicative intent has been preserved and used for another purpose, one that, much like Figure 2, with the socially awesome/awkward penguin, incorporates visual components that do a considerable portion of the work in terms of storytelling. These types of visual remediations, apart from those that remain in textual form, such as the Facebook post, offer a significantly different approach, in terms of how we might perceive the information that was initially presented to us.

Final Words

Taking notes, sharing notes with others, writing stories, sharing stories, making those stories smaller and smaller, changing them into self-humiliating jokes and comic strips—is it all linked? It seems like it all has to be, on some level of detail. In sharing my interest of remediating the genre of the flash fiction into smaller and smaller genres, we have been able to see how the development of my own method of note-taking many years ago in lecture courses led to my exploration of other concise methods of approaching fiction writing. These two writing activities are starkly different, but they are linked through the methods we might deploy to navigate their demands.

A brief look at flash fiction tells us a great deal about the vastness of writing and what types of genres we encounter on a daily basis as writing researchers. It also informs us of the minute moments of storytelling, or more simply, the transfer of information, that often goes unnoticed in our busy lives and world. We're telling stories all the time, and sometimes we're telling one story in many different ways, in the brief details that we let slip in conversation, in that Facebook post or advice animal, or maybe in the notes from our boring lecture class that we e-mail to our friend who decided to skip or was out sick.

As we've examined much lengthier texts of flash fiction and seen them through a series of variations, it should be clear now how the shape of a text does not always determine its quality, but that there are details within those texts that might be remediated in many different ways. In addition, training ourselves how to spot those details by becoming more familiar with different genres of writing only strengthens our ability to make use of that information. I can certainly attend to the conclusion, from my own experiences, that as I find myself in new writing situations, a twenty-page article might not be as helpful as a photograph, a blurb, or a quick video clip, and knowing how to make conclusive distinctions about which details are important in those different genres only makes me a better storyteller.

Works Cited

- Hayden, Christian. "Were They So Comely." *100wordstory.org*. 100 Word Story, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.
- Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* 1 (2010): 71–80. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.



Eric Pitman is a creative writing Master's student at Illinois State University. As a native Kentuckian, his creative pursuits are driven by the absence of genderqueer/gay protagonists in the worlds of fiction and film.