



Julia Pearse Smith lived out a fairy tale of her own making while studying abroad at Herstmonceux Castle in southern England.

# Moats, stars & ducks: My year in a castle

2008 Sylvia K. Burack Award winner

By Julia Pearse Smith

**T**HE EXPERIENCE that has changed my life the most so far is not a particularly concise one. It wasn't an epic moment on a windy day on a mountain's peak in the Himalayas. Neither was it backed by orchestral accompaniment, swelling and fading with the emotions I experienced. It certainly didn't have a narrator, lending weight to the scene and making me into an epic heroine. At the time, however, it kind of felt like all of these things together couldn't compare to what I was actually living.

When I was 18, I was accepted to study at a place

called Herstmonceux Castle in East Sussex, England. This international study center is run by Queen's University in Ontario and offered me the opportunity to study abroad—in my first year, no less—without having to worry about transferring credits. Truth be told, I couldn't have cared less about credits ... I was going to study in a castle. It had a moat. It had ducks, Canada geese, badgers, bunnies (by the thousands) and, delightfully, sheep. It had cantankerous English minibus drivers to bring us to Eastbourne and Brighton. It had official bus drivers to bring us to London and abroad. They wore suits but came home with

dozens of cases of beer from the ferry stowed away in the hold. In short, when I actually got there, it was more ridiculously amazing than I would ever have believed.

People at home said it sounded like Hogwarts—they asked me if I'd bought my wand and cape. When I got there, it actually felt like I might need both. The food turned out to live up to all the clichés about British cuisine, there were enormous “mansquitos” that swarmed our dormitory for a couple of months in the beginning, and the badgers turned out to be more terrifying than *Wind-in-the-Willows*-esque. But if I could give my own children one gift in life, I would send them to this place.

I had all the promised student experiences with my new best friends: the Roman Baths, Canterbury Cathedral and World War I trenches in Belgium, to name a few. What hadn't been in the brochure was the atmosphere in which I got to live for a year. When I looked out my window, I saw fields that would make Beatrix Potter yank out her pen and start writing. When I walked the castle grounds, there was a Shakespearean herb garden, a hidden Zen corner, a statue grove, and a grass bed with head and footboard. When I left the castle after dinner in the evening, the ducks that had come to know me well surrounded me by the dozen, vociferously demanding the bread they knew I had for them. They even sat on my knee sometimes, honking away, much to the amusement of the gardener.

At night, we lay out on the lawns and watched the stars. What made it particularly special was not only the vast unimpeded universe, only slightly polluted by the lights of London, but also the astronomical observatories sending up their green lasers into the night sky, making calculations as they came back through the atmosphere. The contrast of this mind-bending modern technology and the utterly beautiful night was both inspiring and humbling.

It would take me a whole book to explain everything

## Meet our award winner

**JULIA PEARSE** Smith is finishing up her degree in humanistic studies at McGill University in Montreal, her hometown. “After I graduate, I intend to open a destination hotel and vegetarian restaurant in Ireland, my mother’s place of birth, where I’ve spent a lot of time living and working over several summers,” she says. There she would like to offer cooking lessons and spa services. “I believe very firmly in the health benefits of relaxation and simple contentment,” she says.

Her interest in writing developed in secondary school, when her short story was chosen for publication in *The WIER Tap*.

“Whether it’s fiction or creative nonfiction, writing is a record of what’s banging around your mind, which can both surprise you later on, and remind you of parts of yourself that change and disappear with time,” she says.

She enjoys writing exercises because they “focus on the writing itself instead of the quest for originality.” For the winning essay, she explains, “I chose to write about my year in the castle because it was a life-changing experience in so many ways—personally, academically and emotionally. [The experience was] irreplaceable to me.”



**Julia Pearse Smith**

with any accuracy of emotion. The most important part, I think, would be to try to explain the love I feel for that year. It was the happiest I’ve ever been, and the freest I have ever felt. What it gave me was not only a year’s worth of experiences, however—it was the knowledge that my life could feel like that. I actually got to live and study in a castle on the most magnificent grounds I’ve ever seen, and feel like a character in a fantasy novel. I should have had a soundtrack and a narrator!

I didn’t stand on a mountain top in the Himalayas with the wind howling, but I did stand on a rickety metal observation tower in the middle of nowhere with my best friend, 30 feet in the air, the wind so loud we couldn’t hear each other even if we shouted. It was our last day in England before we came home for good. We stood next to each other, a little terrified and very cold, but needing to have one last epic moment together before we came home to Canada and had to go back to being regular people who didn’t live in a castle. A few hours later, they’d finally gotten around to wrapping the death trap with barbed wire so that no one could kill themselves on it—but we’d already had our time in the wind.

**Editor’s note:** *The Sylvia K. Burack Award is named for the former editor and publisher of The Writer. For 60 years she served the magazine and encouraged writers at all stages of their careers. We asked college students to write about the experience that most changed their lives, and Julia’s essay was picked from more than 400 entries. She received \$500 and a subscription to The Writer.*

 [www.WriterMag.com](http://www.WriterMag.com)

Guidelines and entry information for the 2009 Sylvia K. Burack Award are available on *The Writer* Web site. This year we are asking college students to write a personal essay on a subject they feel passionate about.