Mona Awad, a second-year student in DU’s PhD creative writing program, has achieved a feat many young writers only dream about, signing with publishing giant Penguin for her debut novel, “13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl,” out in Feb.

The book has garnered online buzz: Elle magazine’s list of “16 Novels by Women Everyone Will Be Talking About in 2016” called it “honest, searing, and necessary” and praised it for peeling “back the curtain on the struggles of entering womanhood — from body image, to relationships to merely navigating the oh-so-cruel world.” Similar accolades came from Bustle.com, Marie Claire and Cosmo, and the book has received favorable reviews in Kirkus, Time Magazine and the Chicago Tribune.

Awad — who celebrated the book’s release with an appearance at the Tattered Cover in Denver — sat down with the University of Denver Magazine to talk about the book and her experiences in the DU program.

Q: You got your MFA from Brown in 2014; why did you decide to come to DU for your PhD?

A: I was almost done with [“13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl”], but I hadn’t sold it, and I hadn’t gotten an agent yet. The program was ending [at Brown], and I wanted to continue writing, so I applied to DU because I felt like I would have more aesthetic and creative freedom here. I was also interested in [creative writing faculty members] Laird Hunt and Selah Saterstrom and Brian Kiteley. I think they’re all great writers, and I wanted to work with them.

Q: Have you learned a lot about writing in the DU program, or is it more about having the time and space to write and being surrounded by a community of writers?

A: It was more about being in an environment where you’re surrounded by other writers who are really dedicated to their craft. Writers at this level — they’ve made a choice. This is what they’re doing for the rest of their lives. And that’s really inspiring. It’s great just on that basic level just to have that kind of support and to be around so many talented people. I came to DU more because I wanted the space to write a new [book], and also to continue studying. I have a master’s in English literature from the University of Edinburgh, so I wanted to take up that thread too. The beautiful thing about DU is that it allows you to do a creative dissertation but still take critical English lit classes, so I could do both.
Q: When did you make that choice to dedicate your life to writing? Have you always been interested in it, or is it something that came to you later in life?

A: I grew up in Montreal. My mother worked in a deli, and when I was a kid she would take me with her to work, and I would write stories for her and all the waitresses on the backs of placemats, just to entertain everybody. So I’ve been doing it since I was a kid. I love it. I think in terms of making a choice, it was when I went for the MFA. That’s when I said, “I’m going to really try to make this the priority in my life and actually try to make a living at it,” which is very hard to do.

Q: And you are making a living at it, signing with Penguin for “13 Ways of Looking at Fat Girl.” What was the origin of the book?

A: Body image is something I’ve always wanted to explore. It’s something that I’ve struggled with; it’s something I’ve observed other women dealing with who are very close to me, and I’ve observed, both in myself and others, just how deeply it can affect so many different aspects of our lives. Especially our relationships. The book was a way for me to take that up and really delve into how body-image struggles affect the way that we see ourselves, affect the way that we interact with our friends, with our lovers, with clothing, with food, and the way that we are in the world.

Q: The cover describes the book as “fiction” — is it a novel, or a collection of stories?

A: It’s a novel in stories. Each one operates as a story — it’s one discrete glimpse into the life of this woman who is dealing with these issues — but they all connect. It’s all the same woman, and it’s chronological, so she’s growing older. We start in her teens, and by the time the book is done she’s in middle adulthood. At first it was going to be different glimpses into the lives of different women, but I began realizing, the more I wrote, that this one woman is all of these women, and that we kind of carry that inside of us — on a certain day you’ll feel your body as something you just want to cloak, and there are other days where you don’t feel that way. She’s all of those.

Q: What was the hardest part about writing the book?

A: It was an emotionally charged subject for me, as someone who has dealt with this and gone up and down myself. And even though it’s fiction, I was really committed to it being honest. That meant really having to examine each story and asking myself the question, “Am I being honest?” If I wasn’t being honest, I had to put it aside and start again. I think just generally speaking, there’s a lot of shame, there’s a lot of taboo, there’s a lot of ugliness around fatness and body image stuff. We try to cloak how we really feel in language that to me sometimes rings kind of false or falsely positive. I really wanted to get away from that.

Q: What was your path to getting the book published?
A: When I graduated from Brown I had the manuscript, because that was my thesis. It was the summertime, and I started looking for an agent, and I got one pretty quickly. I was really lucky. We sent it out that fall, and a month later I had offers, and one of them was from Penguin. I think they connected with the stories. There’s a lot of emotion for a lot of people around this issue.

Q: And how does it feel now that it’s finally coming out?

A: Working on it for six years, there were many times when I felt like giving up, so just the idea that it actually came together in the end and that it could exist outside of my own head was so joyous and wonderful.

Q: What’s next?

A: I’m almost done with a new novel. I started it at DU, working with Selah Saterstrom — she was so great. By the end of that independent study I had 70 pages of my next book. It’s not at all like [“13 Ways”]; it’s completely different in terms of content. It’s drawing on my interest in fairy tales and the supernatural, but it’s still about female friendship. I’m definitely going to keep writing, and I’m definitely going to go on the market for teaching. I’ve enjoyed teaching writing at DU; the students here have been really great, so that’s given me a lot of hope. I really enjoyed interacting with the students and having discussions about how stories are actually very, very important. Storytelling is a crucial skill, no matter what discipline you go into. The ability to tell a story is important.