

CRW 3110 section 1D80 Imaginative Writing: Fiction Fall 2013
M 7-9 RNK 220

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Everyone enrolled is on this listserve and may post to it.

Tom thinks that the best method of teaching anything is to rely on discussion in class, which means letting twenty young blockheads and two cocky neurotics discuss for fifty minutes something that neither their teacher nor they know.

-from Pnin, Vladimir Nabokov

The objective of this course is to do something to you, by accident or deliberation, that makes you write fiction better in three months than you do today. You should also become a better critic. If you feel this objective has not been clearly stated at the outset, please raise your hand.

The route to this objective is variable, unknowable, and elusive. That which cannot be taught is not taught, and that which can be taught is sometimes also not taught. But sometimes we slip up and teach it.

The writing of fiction is an endeavor almost constantly plagued by the question, usually from the doubtful, Can it be taught? Curiously, or not, this question does not so plague the teaching of painting, or dancing, or violin playing, or even the composing of music, which one might think a not dissimilar endeavor. Why does the teaching of writing get so singularly bothered? Why would, say, Hemingway be moved to say no one worth his salt would go to writing school even as he took his stuff to Ms. Stein's salon and to Ezra Pound for the famous blue pencil?

Why does no one say that painting school, which Picasso attended for six months, could not possibly have been expected to make of Picasso Picasso?

The answer has to do with recognizing the parts of writing that can be taught and those that cannot, which for convenience we will call the low parts and the high parts. In here we try to teach the low parts, and we do not try to teach the high parts. The low parts comprise correct English usage and certain fundamental rules of narrative. On any given day, for example, we will try to rescue the objective case of our pronouns from extinction; a local university

president recently said in a press conference firing the university's football coach, at which a university president is not usually present, "I have met he and his wife." If you make the errors of university presidents in here you are in for some handling that will try to ensure the error is not made again. Rules of narrative--stories must begin with an apparent problem, characters in the heroic position must be investable with our emotions, a story must place itself unmurkily on the spectrum of credulity--are arguably somewhat more elevated in terms of an intellectual barometer, but they are still within the scope of what can be taught. A measure of rigor is used in these two spheres of insistence. I will try to frighten you into observing the fundamentals. The only effective two teachers of writing I had frightened me into line, and I still believe that it, fear, works, despite its desuetude today.

Moving up this intellectual barometer we come to things like vision, meaning, profundity, and so forth. This is the rarefied air of the not teachable. A student with sound fundamentals discovers he or she has something to say, or not. Something to say is not supplied. It is of course tangentially dealt with in the insistence on form: a story that must resolve necessarily says something where it might, did it not resolve, say nothing at all. An investable hero is a different vision from an uninvestable hero. But one does not directly meddle with what a young writer wants to say, only with how best to say it.

Grading: Your full efforts at writing and at criticizing for the benefit of others will earn a B in here. I am stingy with the A. Should a person prove excellent in his or her writing, or excellent in criticism, or in both, I can be moved to let go of an A. I do not like the invidious world of grading stories, but I like the world of inflated grades and the perception that creative-writing courses are easy even less. Less than full efforts to the best of your capacity--i.e., doing less than you are asked to do--and racking up excessive absences can get a person into the C range, but this is fairly hard to do if you apply yourself in here. If you do what you are expected to do--write and criticize as well as you can--it will be good and deserve a B. If you surprise in an excellent way you can get into an A range. The average grade is lower than an A and higher than a C. Attend religiously, speak cogently when asked, surround yourself with the mantle of intelligent reticence when not, write with vigor and surprise, and all will be well.

I do not put a grade on an individual piece of writing. The reasoning and want of reasoning behind this scheme will become clear.

Attendance: One absence is allowed, even expected, insofar as a good workshop can sometimes be a good thing to take a good break from. You may give notice of an impending absence or not. A second absence bothers me and should have a good reason for it. Absences beyond the allowed one may lower grade. This policy borders on mandatory attendance and I do not like mandating attendance. But for a number of reasons pertaining to the oblique and accidental way a

workshop may teach something, the policy prevails. Should a tree fall, you must be in your desk to hear it.

When attending, sit upright with no food and no active cell phone on your person. Exception to food rule: baked goods in quantity sufficient for the entire class to sate itself. If your cell phone rings, take it to the hall, answer it, and prosecute your voyage into the night (French system). We will see you next week. The greatest crime in here, beyond the above two, is not delivering a scheduled story. Avoid that. And when you are absent, you must procure the stories for the following week, or you in effect absent yourself twice. Arrange for someone you know to get stories for you if you are absent, or petition the listserve.

We will read and discuss two or three of our own pieces each week and one or two of the pieces by our professional(s). Prepare copies for classmates and for me and distribute them the week before you appear on the schedule.

We will read from The Collected Stories of William Trevor. We will not use the Flannery O'Connor heavily in class but it is a very good book at a very good price that you may want to own anyway. We will use the story "Greenleaf," which you may acquire from other sources if you desire.

The nature and direction of a fiction workshop is very much open, a function of the students' work and criticism. Workshops derive their content from the work brought in. A good workshop will develop a set of references internal and unique to itself, for which your attendance is necessary in order that you witness these otherwise obscure references. All this places a certain burden on you. If I encourage you to all chip in your opinions about what might make a given piece of fiction better, and I do--these opinions expressed in a way usable and palatable to the author (of which there is, I think, no harder thing to say right on Earth)--then we must perforce almost certainly live with at least the illusion of Disorgany, a word which I have made up but which seems to convey its meaning well enough. The course is highly organized--around the disorder that inheres in groping to learn to write. There is not a body of knowledge to be conveyed you about the writing of fiction in an orderly fashion, though there are hundreds of books that pretend that there is, and you are free to pursue them.

We will relieve the regular work of class--which is trying to determine what weakens the work brought in, and what might strengthen it--with various exercises of show and tell:

Sentences--bring in sentences that have struck you as worthy of notice, and be prepared to say why.

Surprises--passages that surprise. We will look to see how.*

Shorts--bring in a 250-word (max) story.*

Short shorts--bring in a 50-word (max) story.*

* copies for class

Seven things to consider, mostly about form:

1) My best stories come out of nowhere, with no concern for form at all.
--Barry Hannah

2) I can take a sentence apart and tell you why I did it; obviously that's the key to the whole thing, being able to write a sentence, and I've got a sense of what my sentences ought to do.
--Pete Dexter

3) Learn to play your instruments, then get sexy.
--Debbie Harry

4) Some people run to conceits or wisdom but I hold to the hard, brown, nut-like word. --Donald Barthelme (character)

5) Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult but because it wishes to be art. --Donald Barthelme

6) There is at the back of every artist's mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. The original quality in any man of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscape of his dreams; the sort of world he would like to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet; the sort of thing he likes to think about. This general atmosphere, and pattern or structure of growth, governs all his creations, however varied.

--G. K. Chesterton

Two things to consider, not really about form:

1) Did it happen? Could it happen? Should it happen? You do not want the first answer to be yes. The second should be a strained maybe. The third answer should be a resounding Yes! You must at all cost forestall "So what?"

2) The Doozie quotient: plausibility of account/probability of event. You want a high doozie quotient. Good fiction is implausibility rendered plausible by an accuracy of adult sentiment conveyed by precision of utterance. Fiction must be a doozie, and it must be a gratifying doozie. A good story is the author's private idea of what makes a very good day. It chronicles a heightened moment of his or her dreams.

Powell, CRW 3110, F13, schedule

Holidays to bear in mind:

Labor Day 9/2 HC 11/7-8 VD 11/11 TG 11/27-29

Aug 26 Introduction

Sep 02 no class _____
Sep 19 _____
Sep 16 _____
Sep 23 _____
Sep 30 _____
Oct 07 _____
Oct 14 _____
Oct 21 _____
Oct 28 _____
Nov 04 _____
Nov 07 _____
Nov 11 no class _____
Nov 18 _____
Nov 25 _____
Dec 02 _____

Here are two links to syllabus requirements for UF and the English Department, respectively. Anything I have not included above relative to the syllabus can be gleaned from these links:

the University of Florida Policy on Course Syllabi, via the Office of the Provost:

www.aa.ufl.edu/Data/Sites/18/media/policies/syllabi_policy.pdf

the English Department document:

www.english.ufl.edu/resources/grad/syllabus%20requirements.pdf