

The Real World of Nonfiction Workshops: A Cautionary Tale

“Is it my imagination, or have we been seeing an awful lot of stories about humans having sex with animals?” - Francine Prose, *Blue Angel*

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Abstract:

The Real World of Nonfiction Workshops focuses on the unique character of creative writing classes in that genre. First, the essay takes the long view of the teaching of creative writing in the United States. Then it examines how nonfiction as a form fits within the academic creative writing culture. The article concludes with a few practical suggestions for those who teach nonfiction writing.

The light, a shade of purple slanting through the half-open blinds, falls like colored glass on the classroom tables that have been arranged into some figure not even a high school geometry teacher could define. Not a square or rectangle or parallelogram, more like a child’s version of the prow of a Viking ship. But the students don’t notice the architectural details. They’re focused on the pages of the essay strewn out before them.

A wide-eyed young woman wearing what appears to be an Easter bonnet with two peacock feathers drilled into it is talking fast and gesturing wildly, like a woman desperate to hail a cab in a New York City downpour.

“I think the narrator brings up the idea of using her harmonica as a sex toy a bit late in the essay,” she says. “That detail needs to be in the first paragraph, and the reader really wants to know what song she produces as she reaches orgasm.”

The other writers consider this insight, brows furrowed slightly with the myriad possibilities that such a revision could create. One, it seems, is humming a potential tune under his breath.

“The harmonica certainly becomes a symbol in the piece, especially since her first husband gave it to her as a 10th anniversary present,” a young man with a tattoo of Jim Morrison covering half his upper arm pipes in. He flexes his bicep as he speaks. Morrison winces.

The student whose story is being ‘workshopped,’ a raven-haired beauty in her early thirties, with doe-eyes and pouting lips, scribbles notes and appears unruffled by any talk of harmonicas as dildos or symbols of lost love. She has a calm, analytical glint in her dark eyes, and why shouldn’t she? After all, she’s the writer, the responsible party, the story is factual, and she offered the tale willingly for group dissection.

Because this is a piece of nonfiction, I have to admit to fibbing a bit here. For the past 20 years I’ve taught nonfiction workshops to undergraduate and graduate students, and I’ve never had one person write about harmonicas **and** orgasms. I’ve had stories about harmonicas and stories about orgasms, but never did the twain meet in the same narrative. But last semester alone, I had revelations about multiple abortions, serial affairs, repeated sexual abuse, alcoholism, chess games in which the players became the pieces, famous writers in love with hand puppets, and aliens who inhabited a narrator’s solar plexus.

According to D. G. Myers in *The Elephants Teach*, writing workshops have been around since the University of Iowa developed what must have seemed like a preposterous idea out in the American cornfields in the 1930’s. But, surely, creative writing workshops didn’t sprout like weeds. The idea for them evolved from the early nineteenth century study of philology and the late nineteenth century study of rhetoric and composition. From 1930 to 1944, Norman Foerster, a historian of literary criticism, re-shaped the newly formed School of Letters at the University of Iowa, making creative writing a part of the study of criticism. In the years that followed, critics and writers slipped like apparitions into the American academia, and by the mid-1940’s, when Paul Engle was appointed director, Foerster’s brainchild grew into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

By now, well enough into the 21st century to accept Tweets and IPADs, most acknowledge the writing workshop as an indigenous part of the modern landscape, like cell phones and internet porn. The workshop model –expert surrounded by starry-eyed novices – has prevailed for decades, although its efficacy has been recently called into question by some. For instance, in “Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy: History as Knowledge, Knowledge as History,” Joe Amato and H. Kassia Fleisher decry “the fact that a mere minority of scholars or (creative) writers seem to have given much thought to

their teaching.” Amato and Fleisher mean thought about the “cognitive complexities of the writing process” and seem, in their shuttling, hesitant, manner to be arguing for a critical and theoretical knowledge to structure all teaching of creative writing and to inform all instructors. They want a “radical reconfiguration of method and motive,” even if they don’t seem to be able to say exactly what that would be. For them, knowledge is not just a matter of understanding craft. Quoting Ron McFarland, they object to what they call the majority view on what can be taught in the creative writing classroom: “desire, drive, talent, vision, and craft...only craft can be taught.” That seems patently true until we examine the implications of the word *taught*. An instructor of creative writing can teach explicitly in statements in class or in line edits on the page. But teaching can come from example, as well, from how teachers live desire and drive and find ways of opening themselves to inspiration. Our creative writing students may learn as much about writing from our ability to listen for wisdom as they do from our pronouncing it.

Until the last few decades the writing workshop meant fiction or poetry.

Only in recent years has nonfiction become part of the creative writing academy, accepted as a literary art. And that makes sense: nonfiction can work the language like a poem, and it can tell a tale with the narrative depth of a short story or novel. What makes nonfiction different, of course, is that it’s not supposed to make things up. It’s meant to stick to what actually happened. Certainly, that places some limitations on the writer, as well as offering some opportunities for making a story immediate and compelling. Nonfiction workshops discuss many of the same issues that fiction workshops do, are interested in most of the same techniques, and focus on similar problems in shaping meaning. But there’s one issue that nonfiction workshops face alone: if the writer describes having sex with a harmonica, then he/she did it, saw it, or heard about it from a verifiable source. There’s no fictional persona for the writer to hide behind in the workshop. You can’t say, “I’m not Ishmael; I wouldn’t sleep with Queequeg.” If it’s a memoir, then you are Ishmael, and you were enjoying your romp in bed with the tattooed savage.

In nonfiction workshops, instructors and students alike examine structure, characterization, the balance of showing and telling, the relationship between scene and

exposition, the consistency of the voice and point of view, word choice and tone in pretty much the same way those in other genres would. Nonfiction workshops, like those in poetry and fiction, seek to examine a piece of writing from within, to see it as the writer had, to discover how a piece of prose means in order to assist it in meaning more honestly and powerfully. However, there is a crucial difference between a nonfiction workshop and its near cousins. At the end of the nonfiction class, that writer stands up as memoirist or reporter or essayist, declaring that the story is his or her experience or observation, be it first or second hand. The writer, in this sense, often becomes the large animal with a trunk full of psychological baggage standing unacknowledged in the room. For the instructor that can mean, he feels more like Sigmund Freud than Frank Conroy at times. And that's okay, I suppose, as long as the instructor doesn't take on a Viennese accent. In nonfiction workshops, we may not be able to suspend disbelief, but we have to distend our sense of how a story means, to forget for those hours of the class that the author is there, was there, and can never fully hide from the narrative. As long as the instructor recognizes the real plot of nonfiction courses, then he/she will not be taken off guard by any revelations that could transform the class from writing workshop into group therapy meeting.

The epigraph to D. G. Myers book on the history of the creative writing discipline, comes from the linguist Roman Jakobson's demurring when he heard Vladimir Nabokov was to receive a position teaching literature at Harvard. His seven-word objection: "Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?" The elephant in the nonfiction workshop is typically not the instructor but more often the revelatory writer. Whether the piece is reportage, essay, or memoir, to one degree or another, some secret is revealed about the narrator or a central character in the piece. In poetry and fiction workshops, D. H. Lawrence's wisdom can be invoked – "Trust the tale, not the teller." Or an instructor can murmur about intentional fallacies or untrustworthy narrators. It's difficult to mutter the same adages in nonfiction workshops. For the most part, nonfiction narrative is founded on trust. We believe the narrator or reporter is telling us what he saw, heard, researched, and believes to be true. There are many aesthetic nuances in nonfiction, but the one unbreakable ethical rule is *don't make it up*. At least not without revealing to the reader that there has been a narrative shift to speculation.

Because we are teachers of creative writing doesn't mean we shed our sympathies or deny our empathies for the problems our students face. But it does mean that our job in a workshop does not include psychological counseling or leading an AA session. Of course, this is not unique to creative writing courses or to nonfiction workshops, but the issue becomes more knotted in the world of nonfiction. When Samantha writes about her 12-year-old daughter downloading pornography on the school library computer in a story about the concentric circles of sexual abuse, the instructor's role is to address the writer's craft, to attend to how forcefully the story is told. How is the mother's tale of sexual abuse grafted on to the daughter's story of sexual awakening? What is the balance of scene and exposition? Is there a sense of an ending, a coming to terms with the questions the author raises? Are the characters developed? Do we hear them, see them act, feel we've gotten to know them as individuals? Is the structure of the memoir, essay, or reportage organic and logical? Is there a moment of revelation in the story and does the writer make that moment mean something to us? Creative writing workshops, in general, place students and teachers in an emotional landscape that is difficult to negotiate. All classrooms do that, but creative writing classes demand that secrets be told out loud. And in nonfiction workshops those secrets cannot be hidden behind the veil of the imagination – *after all, I'm just making this all up!* This may not make the nonfiction workshop different in kind from other forms of writing workshops, but it surely makes it different in degree, that is, the extent to which a teacher feels the difficulty of dealing – on a daily basis – with the relationship between truth and craft, between the world and words.

Surely, if one of your students is in pain, you should comfort him. If a student has a problem and seeks your advice, you should offer it – as a concerned citizen and admitted amateur. But this should happen after the class session is over. The three hours of writing workshop should be spent trying to negotiate the difficulties of craft. That's why the students paid tuition. And the best way to insure that the focus begins and ends on the work is to set the guidelines on the first day of class and to adhere to them. And since the nonfiction writing mantra is "show **and** tell," here's what I say to my students:

The Nonfiction Workshop: Methods, Motives, Goals, and

Golden Rules

- In the Workshop we leave the Romantic and Byronic writer behind; that person can appear in a hot tub at a writers' retreat at Sandbridge, at the karaoke mic at Cruzers, or on the dance floor at an AWP Conference. For the record, the actual writing life is about doubt, rejection, endless hours sitting in a chair staring at unimaginably blank pages and screens, and intermittent moments of grace and satisfaction and success that lead to more doubt, rejection, and sitting. In the Workshop, the writer disappears and his/her work takes center stage.
- Our focus: a close reading of the words on the page. Writing may ultimately be a test of character, but the only character we challenge in the classroom is the one made of words. For an hour or so the writer of those words is invisible.
- We are here to study the craft of making stories. As Joe Amatao and Kassie Fleisher suggest, we are in the business of producing writing, not writers. John Barth said that not even in America, the land of grandiose dreams, could one "major in Towering Literary Artistry." Let's keep our eyes on the specific, human landscape of storytelling and leave transcendence for now to the angels.
- Kierkegaard said, "If a man cannot forget, he will never amount to much." The Workshop should teach us not only how to write but how to read, how to think about our writing. Sometimes the most important lesson we can learn in Workshop is *what not to do*. In this respect, reading the stories of our peers is as important as listening to advice about our own work. Becoming a writer means becoming a more scrupulous reader, knowing what to listen to and what to resist.
- In terms of the creative act, keep in mind both Keats's notion of Negative Capability and Wordsworth's idea of "emotion recollected in tranquility." The writer must be of two minds – passionate, immersed, open-hearted AND analytical, distant, critical, all at the same time. But also remember this is a Nonfiction Workshop and Keats's definition of "Negative Capability" as the writer's ability to compose an imaginative work "without an irritable grasping after

fact” might not absolutely fit our purposes. We strive to be creative and seek Truth while staying within the boundaries of factual truth. Creativity in nonfiction comes *not* in making things up but in seeing the world clearly, in organizing the disparate details of experience, in re-creating character and scene, in reflecting with wisdom on the story we are expressing.

- At times the Workshop experience can seem to be one long thunderous NO. The most important element the Workshop offers is not praise but a critical reading, a questioning, of language, style, tone, plot, point of view. But the grace and beauty, the successes, of a story should not be lost in the inclination to offer constructive criticisms. Therefore, we will begin all discussions with a recounting of what works in the piece, and we will conclude – always – with a reiteration of what is excellent in a story and how that can be built on to make the story the writer seeks to create.
- We examine structure, point of view, tone, characterization, dialogue, scene, setting, exposition, the balance of showing and telling in a narrative, but what the Writing Workshop may teach, by implication, is the habit of writing – humility, patience, dedication, attentiveness, bravery.
- Keep in mind something John McPhee once said to me: “The most creative part of a piece of writing is the reader.” Write for what Salinger called the ideal reader, your best self. Make the same demands of your work that you make of your reader.

Seven Final Thoughts:

1. The imagination is a gift. There’s no way to teach it, but we may allow it to develop in us by placing ourselves in the right landscape. Richard Ford said that the first commandment for the writer is “*be at your post.*”

2. Writing, as O'Connor said, is a habit of being. We can encourage it in each other. But it comes from within, not without.
3. The best teacher of writing is great literature. We learn from all kinds of writing, good and bad. However, I advise that you to read until your head is swimming in an ocean of the best stories in the world. All writers work *within* a tradition. In nonfiction, that means the writer should know the landscape traveled by Augustine, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Annie Dillard, E.B. White, Mary Karr, David Foster Wallace, Gay Talese, John McPhee, Gretel Ehrlich, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote. It would be arrogant to start writing an epic poem without first reading Homer, Virgil, and Dante
4. By studying craft we become more astute readers and ever more careful practitioners. This might not make any of us geniuses -- William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, John McPhee, Susan Orlean, Annie Proulx, and Cormac McCarthy didn't attend MFA programs – but it will make us more attentive and skillful writers. Knowledge and skill could bring, if we're fortunate, the proper balance of humility, courage, discipline, and good luck necessary to write what Hemingway strove for: one true sentence.
5. Note: Homer and Tolstoy might have been born too early for the Workshop, but Flannery O'Connor, T.C. Boyle, Wallace Stegner, Denis Johnson, and many others have benefited from the experience. You may as well.
6. The Golden Rule of Workshop: give others what you would hope to get – tough-minded, honest thoughts phrased with compassion and the understanding that we are all, as William Stafford said, traveling through the dark. Technique is important. Heart is essential. Technique alone makes for a sterile tale, at best. Heart will allow for a maudlin one, perhaps. It's when technique and heart merge that a real story comes to life. We all know what constitutes a moving song, but if we have not learned guitar technique, all we will produce on that instrument is loud sound. Technique is Wordsworth's 'tranquility,' what is necessary to

recollect the emotion and make something of it. We are here as editors, not therapists; therefore, we'll keep our eyes on the words, not the writer.

7. Know this: break any rule that gets in the way of telling a story that is compelling and true. Listen to any advice that makes you a better writer.

I was taught by nuns and priests most of my early life, and for that reason the aforementioned rules and thoughts may seem reminiscent of the Catholic catechism. If a Catholic education taught me anything, though, it was the value of discipline, not an unworthy lesson to learn. It also taught me the importance, ultimately, of breaking free from commandments that didn't serve my purposes. By making it clear at the beginning of nonfiction workshops what the goals of the class might be, I hope to lessen the chances of students' losing track of the real purpose and trading their writer's identity for that of priest or psychiatrist. Next semester, though, I'll likely discover someone's passionate love for a musical instrument, probably a harmonica, but I'll try to remember the Golden Rule no matter what tune I hum as I read.

References:

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