

**Creative Writing 4195
Spring 2019
The Art of Dialogue**

David Leavitt

Class meetings: Monday, 9-11, CBD 216

Office: Turlington 4101

Office hours: By appointment

E-mail: dleavitt@ufl.edu

Readings (we may not get to all of these):

Selections from Mary Robison, *Tell Me: 30 Stories* (Counterpoint)

Selected stories by Raymond Carver

Selected stories by Flannery O'Connor

Henry Green, *Party-Going* (NYRB)

Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (FSG)

Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party* (Grove)

Scott McPherson, *Marvin's Room* (Dramatists Play Services)

Selections from the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett

Elizabeth Bowen, "Notes on Dialogue"

Basics:

- **Attendance** is mandatory within reason. If you have legitimate cause for missing class, I ask that you let me know at least 24 hours in advance. I do not require you to supply a written excuse from a doctor should you have to miss class because you are sick. Honesty will be assumed. Missing class on the day that your work is to be discussed is the cardinal sin of workshops.
- **Format:** All submissions to the workshop must be double-spaced and typed in a legible 12-point font. Recommended fonts are Times, Times Roman, Cambria, Garamond, and Baskerville. (The use of novelty fonts is punishable by imprisonment or fine.) So long as print remains a semi-viable medium, I hold to the belief that fiction should be read on the page and not on the screen. Therefore I ask you to bring in photocopies of your submissions one week before they are scheduled to be discussed. If possible please do not print on both sides of the page.
- **Length:** Official length limit is 2500 words. Stories over this limit are feasible if a good reason can be provided.
- **Response:** We will devote the bulk of our time to a lively and frank discussion of the work at hand. You should also give one another written feedback in the form of marginal notes and a comment or letter to the writer. You do not need to turn

these comments in to me. During the workshop the writer whose work is being discussed should try not to speak but may interrupt should the workshop seem to be going off on an impractical tangent. In responding verbally please try to balance honesty and sensitivity.

- **Grading:** In a workshop grading is necessarily subjective. I will not give grades to individual stories because I do not believe that imaginative writing can be rated. Your final grade will be based on your informed participation in the workshop, your improvement, and the care with which you read and respond to the writing of your fellow workshop participants.
- **Grammar, Usage, and Spelling.** None of us wants to have to devote time or energy to correcting errors in grammar, usage, and spelling. The best way to spare your colleagues such an expenditure of effort is not to make any such errors. Please be sure, therefore, to have a good dictionary and style manual to hand. In the event of disputes, I am arbitrarily declaring the *American Heritage* to be our official dictionary and *The Chicago Manual of Style* to be our official style manual. Do not be put off if you prefer Merriam-Webster or Strunk & White. These volumes agree with one another more often than not.
- **Reading.** You are expected to have done the assigned reading for each class and to be prepared to discuss it. The reading load is not onerous.

Dialogue:

Although this class will be taught as a workshop, its focus will be on one crucial aspect of fiction—the writing of dialogue. Our goal will be to look at examples of dialogue in stories and novels, plays, and our actual lives and, by looking at them, to become better at using dialogue in our work. Points to be considered include—

- How to make a story move through dialogue
- How to convey, in writing, the particular qualities of a spoken voice
- How to convey the tone of dialogue (anger, sorrow, glee, defensiveness, etc)
- How to make dialogue sound real
- The differences (if there are any) between dialogue in fiction and dialogue in plays

Some Thoughts on the Workshop:

I've been teaching fiction workshops at the University of Florida for eighteen years, and, over the course of those years, my attitude toward the workshop as a method has become increasingly ambivalent. The great value of the workshop is that it gives the writer who is "up" the opportunity to hear how a group of sympathetic peers has responded to her work. The trouble is, while some writers benefit immensely from this experience, others emerge from the workshop overwhelmed, unable to make sense of the morass of contradictory and sometimes confusing reactions that their submissions have elicited. The

trick in any workshop is to learn how to weed out from this morass those responses that help and ignore those that hinder. Few of us find this easy. Some shut down.

Another problem: by its very nature the workshop teeters on the brink of anarchy. We value honesty, but the line between honesty and cruelty can be a blurry one. Rudeness, intentional or otherwise, is a not uncommon phenomenon in workshops, as is that one category of response that writers dread even more than rudeness: silence.

Finally, in workshops we are all susceptible to the tendency to be overly prescriptive: in effect, to try to bully the writer into writing her story the way *we* think it ought to be written rather than the way *she* thinks it ought to be written.

What's the solution? We'll see if we can figure one out as we go along. From the outset, though, I would ask the participants to consider a few basic rules of conduct:

1. Don't become overly attached to your opinions. The workshop is about the story, not about you. Be articulate and cogent. Try to be helpful. But don't use the workshop as an opportunity to show off.
2. Don't try to compel the writer to write the way *you* write or to write the story the way *you* think it ought to be written. Try instead to get inside her head, to help her be the best version of herself that she can be.
3. Respond to what's on the page (and what's not on the page). As much as possible, try not to give overly specific advice. It's one thing to say "I wonder if this story might work better in the first person," or "The ending feels flat"; another to say "Here's a great idea! Why don't you make the dog an alligator?" The risk in offering suggestions is that they might push other, more original, less predictable ideas out of the writer's mind; close his imagination down when our goal is to open it up to new possibilities.
4. Try as much as possible to leave movies out of the discussion.

Boilerplate

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

Information on current UF grading policies for assigning grade points can be found at <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>.

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.

Some Potentially Useful Remarks on the Writing of Imaginative Prose

“How can I know what I mean until I see what I say?”

—Anonymous old woman, quoted both by E. M. Forster and Flannery O’Connor

“Writing is about everything human, and we are made out of dust, so if you don’t like getting your hands dusty, you shouldn’t be a writer. It’s not a grand enough job for you.”

—O’Connor

When asked by an interviewer whether writing workshops discouraged young writers, O’Connor replied, “I don’t think they discourage enough of them.”

“Never put yourself in a position of moral superiority to your characters.”

—Notorious writing guru Gordon Lish

Lish’s law: “Enough is enough.”

“What are the realistic qualities to be imitated (or faked) in dialogue?—Spontaneity. Artless or hit-or-miss arrival at words used. Ambiguity (speaker not sure, himself, what he means.) Effect of choking (as in engine): more to be said than can come through. Irrelevance. Allusiveness. Erraticness: unpredictable course. Repercussion.”

—Elizabeth Bowen

“Now it fell to me to give advice to many authors which in at least two cases bore fruit. So I will repeat it here, free of charge. It proved helpful to the type of writer who has some imagination and wants to write fiction but doesn’t know how to start.

“‘You are writing a letter to a friend,’ was the sort of thing I used to say. ‘And this is a dear and close friend, real—or better—invented in your mind like a fixation. Write privately, not publicly; without fear or timidity, right to the end of the letter, as if it was never going to be published, so that your true friend will read it over and over, and then want more enchanting letters from you. Now, you are not writing about the relationship between your friend and yourself; you take that for granted. You are only confiding an experience that you think he will enjoy reading. What you have to say will come out more spontaneously and honestly than if you are thinking of numerous readers. Before starting the letter rehearse in your mind what you are going to tell; something interesting, your story. But don’t rehearse too much, the story will develop as you go along,

especially if you write to a special friend, man or woman, to make them smile or laugh or cry, or anything so long as you know it will interest. Remember not to think of the reading public, it will put you off.”

—Mrs. Hawkins, in Muriel Spark’s *A Far Cry from Kensington*

“In both theorems (and in theorems, of course, I include the proofs) there is a very high degree of *unexpectedness*, combined with *inevitability* and *economy*. The arguments take so odd and surprising a form; the weapons used seem so childishly simple when compared with the far-reaching results; but there is no escape from the conclusions...A mathematical proof should resemble a simple and clear-cut constellation, not a scattered cluster in the Milky Way.”

—G. H. Hardy, *A Mathematician’s Apology*

“Good writing never soothes or comforts. It is no prescription, neither is it diversionary, although it can and should enchant while it explodes in the reader’s face.”

—Joy Williams, “Why I Write”

“The writer doesn’t write for the reader. He doesn’t write for himself, either. He writes to serve...something. Somethingness. The somethingness that is sheltered by the wings of nothingness—those exquisite, protecting wings.”

—Williams

Schedule:

1/7

Introduction and Exercise

1/14

Robison: “Coach,” “Kite and Paint,” “The Wellman Twins”

1/21

Martin Luther King Day (no class)

1/28

Robison: “An Amateur’s Guide to the Night,” “Daughters,” “Sisters”

2/4

Stories by Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver

2/11

Henry Green: *Party-Going* (1)

2/18

Henry Green: *Party-Going* (2)

2/25

Alan Bennett: *The History Boys*

3/4

No class (spring break)

3/11

Pinter or McPherson

3/18

Selections from Ivy Compton-Burnett (1)

3/25

Selections from Ivy Compton-Burnett (2)

4/1

Selections from Ivy Compton-Burnett (3)

4/8

Performances (1)

4/15

Performances (2)

4/22

Last Class

