

CRW 6166
Fiction Forms: The Novel
David Leavitt

Meetings: Mondays, periods 9-11 (4:05-7:05 pm)
 Office hours: By appointment

Should you wish to contact me, please feel free to do so through Canvas, via email (dleavitt@ufl.edu), or by text or phone (352 871 8120). In keeping with UF FERPA policies, queries about grading and course policies should be sent through Canvas.

Required Readings*

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Penguin)
 Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (Picador)
 Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Gate of Angels* (Mariner)
 Alfred Hayes, *The End of Me* (NYRB)
 Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (New Directions)
 Glenway Wescott, *The Pilgrim Hawk* (NYRB)
 Alejandro Zambra, *Multiple Choice* (Penguin)

*Subject to change. As the course progresses, I may decide to replace one or two of these with other novels. If I do so, I will give you plenty of notice.

Recommended Readings

E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*
 Cynthia Ozick, “A Drugstore in Winter” and “The Lesson of the Master”
 Joy Williams, “Why I Write”

I had originally included *Seize the Day* in the syllabus to be read in conjunction with Alfred Hayes’s *The End of Me* and would encourage you to read this fine novel if you have the time and inclination.

Both *Seize the Day* and *Aspects of the Novel* are widely available as a paperback and e-books. The three essays, which I will post on Canvas, can also be found, respectively, in Ozick’s *Art & Ardor* and Williams’s *Ill Nature*. Both of these Ozick essays were originally published in *The New York Times Book Review* in virtually their final form. The version of Williams’s “Why I Write” that appeared in *The Oxford American* differs considerably from the final version.

A Note on the Novels

Why, out of all the novels in the world, have I chosen these seven?

- Because they're short (none longer than 210 pages). As I have learned over the years, short novels teach us more about the novel *as a form* than do long ones.
- Because I love them.
- Because they represent a wide range of approaches, perspectives, and methods.
- Because they take place in different places and at different times.
- Because they were *written* in different places and at different times.
- Because they matter.

Course Description

This course will focus on two basic but tricky questions. First, What is a novel? Second, How do you write one? By way of exploring these questions, we'll read and discuss seven short novels and some essays on novel writing. In addition, each of you will submit a proposal for a novel and then experiment with various approaches to starting it, each week looking at a different "aspect" of the process (pace Forster) in order to see how the *how* of the telling determines the *why* of the told and vice-versa. The idea is to treat the course as a laboratory in which we can experiment without having to worry about killing the patient, since the patient is hypothetical.

In structuring the course, I am following the lead of Jill Ciment, who introduced it into our curriculum and who has taught it many times. To begin with, each of you will write a proposal for your hypothetical novel of the sort that authors commonly send to prospective agents and publishers. (I will give you examples of these.) We'll then share these proposals and discuss them, focusing on these questions:

- If you were an editor or agent and received this proposal, would you want to read the manuscript?
- If yes, why? If no, why not?
- In each case, what about the proposal do you find intriguing? What about it puts you off? What about it gets your adrenaline pumping?
- If the proposal isn't, in your opinion, successful, what could the author do to make it better?

Following this practice plunge into the cold water of trying to sell yourself (something every writer must do now and then), we will get down to the nitty-gritty of *starting* the novel by testing out a variety of ways into what Henry James famously called "The House of Fiction." The idea is to replicate, in our laboratory, the hit-or-miss process by which a novel comes into focus for its author and to examine the relationship between *how* we write and *what* we write.

An important proviso: although I don't expect you to come out of this class with a novel on its way to completion, I certainly won't be displeased if you do.

Schedule

August 31 Introduction and a few games

September 7	Labor Day (no class)
September 14	Wescott, <i>The Pilgrim Hawk</i> Your proposals
September 21	First-person, past-tense narration
September 28	Cusk, <i>Outline</i> First-person, present-tense narration
October 5	Third-person, past-tense narration, single POV
October 12	Spark, <i>The Girls of Slender Means</i> Third-person, past-tense or present-tense narration, multiple POVs
October 19	The novel in the form of a fictitious letter to a friend (or friends), a series of diary entries, or a memoir
October 26	Achebe, <i>Things Fall Apart</i> The novel of the past
November 2	Second-person narration
November 9	Zambra, <i>Multiple Choice</i> An experimental method of storytelling
November 16	Since, by this point, most of you will have determined what is for you the best way into your novel, from here on in you'll work on refining your opening pages
November 23	Hayes, <i>The End of Me</i>
November 30	Fitzgerald, <i>The Gate of Angels</i> Final refinement of opening pages
December 7	Where Have We Ended Up? Amazon.com-type descriptive paragraph about your novel

DL's Workshop Methodology:

- It's my belief that the best way to learn to write is to read. For this reason, as the semester progresses, I will draw up, for each of you, a list of recommended readings based on the type of work you're doing.

- In recent years especially, writers have been challenging, ironizing, or just plain ignoring the supposedly rigid boundary that separates fiction from nonfiction. (The French have never paid that boundary much attention. Therefore it is no surprise to learn that the term *autofiction* is French.) Bring in the work that matters most to you, even if that work does not fit the traditional rubric of fiction.
- Please submit your weekly exercises via Canvas no later than the Saturday before each Monday meeting. Please double-space and use a 12-point legible font. (Times Roman, Times, Baskerville, Courier, Garamond, and Goudy Old Style are all good choices.) You may respond to one another's submissions by writing letters, putting comments and/or suggesting edits in the margins of the manuscript, or both.
- Should you choose to write a letter, you can, if you wish, read it aloud, but this is not obligatory. In my experience, one's original thoughts about a submission tend to refine and sometimes even reverse themselves in the course of the conversation. At the first meeting, we'll decide whether to keep these letters private or to make them available to the group.
- Although I am basically in favor of the rule (part of workshops since time immemorial) that when your work is "up" you should stay quiet for the duration of its discussion, I am not a drill sergeant by nature and recognize that sometimes this rule must be broken. An example of when it should be broken, taken from a workshop I taught five or six years ago: Due to a typographical error, the group believed a certain character in a story to be the narrator's mother when in fact she was his sister. Waylaid by this misapprehension, the group devoted most of its time to puzzling over the author's bizarre portrayal of a mother/son bond. The writer, gagged, could do nothing to stop the insanity.

Should a situation like this arise, you may interrupt to clarify. You may not interrupt in order to explain what you meant to say (but didn't), to defend yourself against a criticism, or to justify your use of a word or phrase with which someone else takes issue. Commentary of this sort should be withheld until after the discussion has concluded, at which point you will be given the opportunity to say anything you want.

- If the class is to work for you, you need to bear in mind what Padgett Powell calls the Two-Thirteenths Rule: of thirteen sets of comments, two on average are likely to prove helpful. As you go through the comments your colleagues have made, you may also find that they are at odds with one another. The line that one person exhorts you to cut another will tell you is the best thing you've ever written. Take these suggestions seriously but please, for God's sake, don't fall into the trap of writing *for* the workshop or to *please* the workshop. You will never be able to please everybody, so you might as well please yourself.

- That I am the teacher does not mean that I am infallible. Any authority I hope to wield I must earn. That said, I've been at this game a long time. About certain things I know a lot. I will try to bring to the workshop something of what I've learned over the past thirty-five years, the wisdom I've accrued as well as the mistakes I've made.
- I am assuming that most of you want to publish. Publishing is an entirely different sort of enterprise from writing. If you are to have a career as a writer, you must learn to balance two contradictory lives: the very private life of writing and the very public life of talking about what you've written. This is something we will discuss over the course of the course.
- Bottom line: Writers are rebels. Be disobedient.

Some Potentially Useful Remarks About 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

"The aim of literature," Baskerville replied grandly, "is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart."

—Donald Barthelme, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*

Learn to play your instruments, then get sexy.

—Debbie Harry

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

I might explain that when I write a novel wrong, eventually it breaks down and stops and won't be written any more, and I have to go back and look for the flaws in its design. The problem usually lies in the relationship between story and truth.

—Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath*