

CRW6130

Graduate Fiction Workshop

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Office hours by appointment

To read:

John Cheever, *Collected Stories* (Library of America)
Anton Chekhov, *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, ed. Richard Ford (Harper)
Grace Paley, *The Collected Stories* (FSG)
Joy Williams, "Why I Write" (handout)

Detailed reading plans TB A.

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