

CRW 6130
Graduate Fiction (Mostly) Workshop
David Leavitt

Class meetings: Tuesday, Periods 9-11, Keene Flint Hall 0121

Office: 4101 Turlington

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2:30-4 pm, and by appointment

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Basics

- This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).
- **Attendance:** 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. **Major proviso:** Missing class on the day that your work is to be discussed is the cardinal sin of workshops.
- **Grading:** In a workshop, grading is necessarily subjective. I will not give grades to individual submissions 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 Merriam-Webster 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 *American Heritage* 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 will not be onerous.
- **UF Policy on Sexual Harassment:** The University of Florida is committed to providing a safe educational, working, and residential environment that is free from sexual harassment or misconduct directed towards any and all members of the community. More information on this policy can be found [here](#).
- **Late Papers/Assignments:** Email me in advance if you need an excused extension due to a medical, personal, or technical emergency.

DL's Workshop Methodology

- It's my belief that the best way to learn to write is to read. For this reason, over the course of the semester, I will be recommending a lot of books to you. I also welcome your recommendations. Many of my favorite books — Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, to name a few — I first read at the urging of my students.
- Were it up to me, the title of this course would be "Graduate Workshop in Imaginative Prose Writing." 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 discover 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.
- Except when holidays or unforeseen circumstances make it impossible, please deliver your submission to your fellows one week before the class in which it is to be discussed. Please double-space and use a 12-point legible font such as Times, Times New Roman, Cambria, Garamond, Palatino Linotype, or Baskerville. (The use of novelty fonts is punishable by imprisonment or fine.) Electronic submission via Canvas or email is fine, however I would encourage you to print out the submissions, since (mysteriously) prose reads differently on the printed page than on the screen.

- You are welcome but not required to give the writer whose work is up for discussion a response letter. Should you write such 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 workshop.
- 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 during its discussion by the group, I am not a drill sergeant by nature and recognize that sometimes this rule, like all rules, must be broken. An example of when it should be broken, taken from a past workshop: Due to a typographical error, the group believe 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 much of the workshop to puzzling over the author's portrayal of a mother/son bond. Should a situation like this arise, you should interrupt to clarify. You should *not* interrupt 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 to which someone else objects. Commentary of this sort should be withheld until after the discussion has concluded, at which point you will be handed the microphone and allowed to say anything you want.
- If you are writing a novel or other long work and would like to submit a chunk of it, let me know and I will arrange the schedule accordingly. We will discuss the logistics of workshoping novels at the first meeting.
- If the workshop 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 actually likely to prove helpful. Something else to bear in mind: as you go through the comments that your colleagues have made, you may 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 write *for* the workshop or to *please* the workshop. You will never be able to please everybody. You *must* please yourself.
- Along the same lines—don't write for me or to please me. That I am the teacher doesn't mean that I am infallible, or that I don't have biases or particular tastes. I try to wield only that authority which I believe I have earned. That said, I've been at this game a long time, and have probably

learned as much if not more from my failures as from my successes. In other words, take me seriously, but don't go against your own instincts to suit mine.

- I am assuming that 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 radically different lives: the excessively private life of writing and the excessively 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.

Reading

You will see on the Textbook Adoption page that I have listed three books as required: Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Beginning of Spring*, Yiyun Li's *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, and E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*. (The last of these is, IMHO, the best book yet written about the novel and one to which I shall doubtless refer many times over the course of the semester.) The other two we may read or we may not, and are also included in the list below of story collections, short novels, and works of imaginative nonfiction from which we will put together a reading plan at the first meeting. I am also open to suggestions from you as to books that we read as a group, with the proviso that these must be books that I myself have read. (UF requires me to make an attestation to that effect.)

Stories (Unless otherwise noted, from *Collected* or *Selected Stories* of)

- Jorge Luis Borges
- John Cheever
- Alan Gurganus
- Amy Hempel
- Denis Johnson (*Jesus' Son*)
- Flannery O'Connor
- Grace Paley
- Mary Robison

Short novels

- Solveg Balle, *On the Calculation of Volume* (Book 1) 🤖

- Maya Binyam, *Hangman*
- Stanley Crawford, *Log of the S. S. Mrs. Unguentine* 🦋 🤪
- Rachel Cusk, *Outline*
- Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Gate of Angels* and/or *The Beginning of Spring*
- Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*
- Alfred Hayes, *In Love* 🦋 and/or *The End of Me*
- Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*
- Katie Kitamura, *A Separation*
- Padgett Powell, *The Interrogative Mood* 🤪
- Jean Rhys, *Quartet*
- Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* 🦋
- Glenway Wescott, *The Pilgrim Hawk* 🦋
- Alejandro Zambra, *Multiple Choice* 🦋 🤪

Works of Imaginative Prose that Don't Qualify as Fiction

- Grégoire Bouillier, *The Mystery Guest* (almost fiction)
- Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath* and/or *Coventry*
- Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*
- Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*
- George W. S. Trow, *Within The Context of No Context* 🦋 🤪

🦋 = Under 100 pages

🤪 = Weird

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.

— Flannery 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.

—Joy Williams, "Why I Write"

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*

Learn to play your instruments, then get sexy.

—Debbie Harry