

CRW 6130

**Graduate Fiction Workshop
Fall 2017**

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Office hours by appointment

Readings (titles and order to be finalized at first meeting):

W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (New Directions)

Grace Paley, *The Collected Stories* (FSG)

Grégoire Bouillier, *The Mystery Guest*, translated from the French by Lorin Stein
 (Mariner, originally published in 2004)*

Renata Adler, *Pitch Dark* (NYRB)

Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (FSG/Picador)

Rachel Cusk, *Transit* (FSG/Picador)

*There is also a hardcover edition of *The Mystery Guest*, published by FSG, however it does not include the photographs that are integral to Bouillier's conception of the book. I would therefore urge you to get hold of the Mariner paperback.

Recommended:

E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Mariner)

Scheduling:

The schedule for the rest of the semester will be finalized at the first meeting. Please note that I will be canceling our meeting of September 18th as I will be out of the country. We will arrange to meet another day to make up for this lost class.

DL's Workshop Methodology:

- In my experience, one learns to write by reading. Hence discussion of the books listed above will play a significant role in the workshop. In this class I want to explore two border territories: the territory where "the story" turns into "the

novel,” defined by E. M. Forster as a prose work of no fewer than 50,000 words, and the territory where the demarcation line between “autobiography” and “fiction” begins to resist definition.

- Were it up to me, the title of this course would be “Graduate Workshop in Imaginative Prose Writing.” As we learned in my forms course last spring, Anglo-American writers are increasingly challenging, ironizing, or just plain ignoring the supposedly rigid boundary that separates fiction from non-fiction. (The French, as we shall see, have never paid that boundary much attention.) Bring in the work that matters most to you, even if that work does not fit the traditional rubric of “story.”
- Except when holidays or unforeseen circumstances make it impossible, please deliver hard copies of your submission to your fellows one week before the class in which is to be discussed. Please double-space and use a 12-point legible font. (Times Roman, Times, Baskerville, Courier, Garamond, and Goudy Old Style are all good choices.) Please do not print on both sides of the page unless economic necessity makes it impossible to do otherwise. It is more important that you eat than that you print on only one side of the page.
- If circumstances require a member of the group to submit his work electronically, please print the manuscript out and write your comments in pen or pencil. If you have no choice but to read the work on your computer, use the “track changes” feature of Microsoft Word to make comments and editorial suggestions.
- 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 conversation.
- Although I am basically in favor of the rule (part of workshops since time immemorial) that the writer whose work is “up” must keep her mouth shut during its dissection 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 workshop I taught five or six years ago: Due to a typographical error, the group believes a certain character in a story to be the narrator’s mother when in fact she is his sister. Waylaid by this misapprehension, the group devotes most of the workshop to puzzling over the author’s portrayal of a mother/son bond. In a situation like this, the writer should interrupt to clarify. She should not interrupt in order to explain what she meant to say (but didn’t), to defend herself against a criticism, or to justify her 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 the writer will be handed the microphone and allowed to say anything she wants.

- If you are working on 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 workshopping novels at the first meeting.
- If the workshop is to work for you, you need to bear in mind what Padgett calls the 2/13 rule: of 13 sets of comments, two on average are actually likely to prove helpful. Invariably, as you go through the comments your colleagues have made, you will find that they are frequently at odds with each other. 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 regard myself as 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 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 a writer is to have a career as such, she must learn to balance two contradictory lives: the very private life of writing and the very public life of being read. This is something we will talk about 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*