If Time Permits: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Popular Creative Writing Manual

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Abstract

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Creative writing manuals, often called craft books within the literary establishment, represent a genre with a significant place in print culture. These books not only offer advice on how to construct interesting, emotional, and experience-mimicking narrative prose but also suggest that creative writing is a practice available broadly to those who give themselves the permission to write. However, despite early creative writing manuals' democratic promise to level the playing fields of the intellectual and artistic economy by facilitating individuality in the writerly voice, popular creative writing manuals have failed to substantively engage the politics implicit in craft and have discouraged individuality in the case of writers of progressive political orientation. This dissertation looks at the ideological underpinnings of these guidebooks and the development of the genre in the United States, which is situated in an extended tradition that has wed iconoclasm and a sometimes exacting paradigm of self-making.

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Introduction

In September 2016, the week that the Man Booker Prize shortlist was announced, author Ottessa Moshfegh granted an interview to *The Guardian*. Her novel *Eileen* had just made the list of finalists. She was just thirty-five and had previously published a novella called *McGlue.* Speaking of *Eileen*'s composition, Moshfegh dropped a proverbial bomb: she had used a commercially available creative writing manual to write the book now nominated for the award meant to honor the best original novel written in English and published in the United Kingdom. Alternating between deprecating insouciance and high concept defense, she told the British newspaper, "It's ridiculous, claiming that anybody can write a great book, and quickly too. And I thought if *I* were to do this, what would happen, would my head explode? So I followed it for 60 days – it was so *boring*. But it ended up as an Oulipian thing, struggling with a limitation … it started out as a fuck-you joke, also I'm broke, also I want to be famous. It was that kind of a gesture.[1]

Moshfegh would not win the Man Booker, and two years later a profile of the author would note that "saying she started drafting *Eileen* using the rudimentary outline provided by *The 90-Day Novel* probably hurt her chances of winning."[2] Phillips, who wrote the profile that included the statement, suggested that the admission had offended the judging panel. Moshfegh, after all, had violated something of the code of titans of cultural capital, tearing unceremoniously through the aura of genius, and whether she had intended the interview to operate as a sort of middle finger-waving maneuver or not, the images of the Booker Prize and a

[1] Moshfegh, Ottessa. "Ottessa Moshfegh interview: 'Eileen started out as a joke – also I'm broke, also I want to be famous.'" By Paul Laity. *The Guardian* (February 16, 2016): https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/16/ottessa-moshfegh-interview-book-started-as-joke-man-booker-prize-shortlist.
[2] Kaitlin Phillips, "Ottessa Moshfegh Plays to Win," *The Cut*, July 19, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/07/profile-ottessa-moshfegh.html.

commercial self-help book were incongruous enough for Phillips to venture that Moshfegh's outing of her own process had been detrimental to the award bid. Creative writing guidebooks and self-help writ large, after all, suffer a rather laughable reputation, one distinctly not literary. A self-help book has never won the National Book Award. There are no professors of advice literature who hold posts in MFA programs. Summarizing the state of self-help, in 2013, the journalist and critic Kathryn Schulz wrote:

> I know people who wouldn't so much as walk through the self-help section of a bookstore without *The Paris Review* under one arm and a puzzled oh-I-thought-the-bathroom-was-over-here look on their face. I understand where they're coming from, since some of the genre's most persistent pitfalls—charlatanism, cheerleading, bad science, silver bullets, New Age hoo-ha—are my own personal peanut allergies: deadly even in tiny doses. And yet I don't share the contempt for self-help, not least because I have sought succor there myself. The first time was for writer's block.[3]

Schulz had hit on one paradox of the genre—self-help is today an $11 billion industry, its commercial success established despite a popular conception of it as a non-literary one ought to be mortified to read—but she also admitted to its allure specifically for writers. If writer's block can be understood as a problem within the self that the self wishes to solve, self-help might offer comfort where the *Paris Review* could not. The *Paris Review* makes no promises to help one help oneself, and it is outside the scope of the *Paris Review* to direct an aspirant in how to write or how to finish a creative work. Creative writing manuals that address the writing lifestyle or the psychology of the writer do.

Creative writing manuals, often called craft books within the literary establishment, represent a genre with a significant place in print culture—and the market. As of January 2019, Amazon.com included over 10,000 tiles under its fiction writing reference section.[4] While it is

[3] Kathryn Schulz, "The Self in Self-Help," *New York Magazine,* January 4, 2013. http://nymag.com/health/self-help/2013/schulz-self-searching/.
[4] "Fiction Writing Reference Books," Amazon, Accessed January 18, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Fiction-Writing-Reference/zgbs/books/12022.

unlikely each title in this collection precisely fits the bill as a creative writing guide— Amazon's cataloging algorithm is hardly perfect, after all—what is clear is that these books are enormously popular. Stephen King's *On Writing*, for example, had netted 19,940 Amazon customer reviews in January 2019,[5] the number of reviews for the fiction manual far outnumbering many works of literature that readers of the manual might aspire to write themselves; for example, the Pulitzer Prize winners in fiction and nonfiction of the same publication year, *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* by John W. Dower, had 1,303[6] and 135[7] respectively. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott was a national bestseller. And in 2007, the celebrated literary publishing house Graywolf Press began publishing The Art Of, a series dedicated to the craft of writing, reacting ostensibly to a perceived market hunger for creative writing instruction.

The immense popularity of instructional books on creative writing indicates a notional interest in storytelling or, at least, an interest in becoming a storyteller who has produced a book-length textual narrative that might be read by, or even be purchased by, others. Undergirding this impulse is the notion that lengthy narrative work is achievable to any reasonably functional, literate human being, that, as the axiom supposes, everyone has a novel in them. This axiom has, of course, attracted skeptics, however. In a baldly antagonistic 2002 editorial for the *New York Times*, "Think You Have a Book in You? Think Again," the writer Joseph Epstein alluded to a poll that found that 81% of Americans believed themselves to have a story they should work up into a book. "Certainly, it is a democratic notion, suggesting that everybody is as good as

[5] "On Writing," Amazon, Accessed January 25, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000FC0SIM/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1.
[6] "The Interpreter of Maladies," Amazon, Accessed January 25, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Interpreter-Maladies-Jhumpa-Lahiri-ebook/dp/B003K16PBE/ref=sr_1_1?crid=6KWBPIUOFLEU&keywords=interpreter+of+maladies&qid=1584975038&s=digital-text&sprefix=interpreter+of+%2Cdigital-text%2C150&sr=1-1.
[7] "Embracing Defeat," Amazon, Accessed January 25, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Embracing-Defeat-Japan-Wake-World-ebook/dp/B007X02T0E/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=embracing+defeat&qid=1584975061&s=digital-text&sr=1-1.

everybody else – and, by extension, one person's story or wisdom is as interesting as the next's," he began, before concluding, "Misjudging one's ability to knock out a book can only be a serious and time-consuming mistake. Save the typing, save the trees, save the high tax on your own vanity. Don't write that book, my advice is, don't even think about it. Keep it inside you, where it belongs."[8] Epstein's skepticism is not unusual amongst traditionally published writers, of course. Neither is his irritation nor the wide-spread cowboy stance at the boundary of his professional life. However, Epstein also raises the valid question of whether artistic success and democratically-inflected notions of inclusiveness are mutually exclusive. If creativity inheres in the subversion of convention, is it possible for *everyone* to be capable of creativity?

Yet part of the creative writing manual's success lies in the fact that they are situated in an extended tradition that has wed iconoclasm and a sometimes exacting paradigm of self-making, a history of self-education beginning in the colonial Americas and stretching to the present, encompassing iconic self-mythologizers, improvisational clandestine inquiry, library associations, mutual improvement societies, preacherly testimonial, periodical advice, and, of course, what would become known as self-help books. The American tradition of self-education and, more broadly, self-invention, has often been personified in the figures of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass, both of whom disseminated the discourse of upward mobility, self-determination, and self-improvement in their autobiographical writings. A once-aspiring poet, Franklin offered in his 1793 *Autobiography* a self-mythology, the mythology of the self-taught writer. In narrating his own writerly maturation, he copped to having read *The Spectator* and practiced the imitation of writing, reworking the sentiments expressed in the newspaper, creating word banks from which he might expediently draw vocabulary for the task of composition, and

[8] Joseph Epstein, "Think You Have a Book In You? Think Again," *New York Times*, September 28, 2002: https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/28/opinion/think-you-have-a-book-in-you-think-again.html

switching his writing between verse and prose to arrive at a final draft.[9] In configuring himself as the hero of autobiography, Franklin positioned his represented-self-in-text as primarily an agent of free will, and offered the myth of the self-made writer.

Douglass would rehearse this vision the writer as agent in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, refashioning it with a liberationist impulse. As early as 1740, when the South Carolina legislature passed a statute that outlawed the teaching or employing of slaves to write, black Americans were legally banned from obtaining literacy. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739, legislators imagined that the insurrection had been organized via written communiques between slaves and enacted a legal suppression of Black literacy education which other states would adopt in order to render slaves more manageable;[10] conversely, literacy, Douglass believed, carved a path from slavery to freedom. In the American context, the figure of the self-taught writer, then, became tied to the very notions of the individual under liberalism. And it was this notion of freedom, of democratic possibility that underpinned the creative writing manual's first explosion of popularity.

During the 1920s and 1930s, a small but significant set of creative writing manuals written primarily by women articulated a relationship between writing and defying social restriction. Excluded from or treated as second-class citizens within spheres of cultural production in the university, these women authored books that made the bold claim that writing was not only for male geniuses, not only for cosmopolitan elites. To be a writer was not something one was born into via talent or privilege. Writing was work. Writing was a craft. Therefore, what one needed to write was to give oneself the permission to write and to give

[9] Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. John Bigelow (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1904), 50-52.
[10] Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 13.

oneself time to do it. And later, the concomitant explosions of self-help and the sweeping storytelling movement beginning in the 1960s[11] would provide fecund ground for the genre.

Stories, of course, have always been told. But the storytelling movement marked an expansion of interest in narrative. It is represented by the proliferation of creative writing instruction in higher education, the three American university programs offering a creative writing major in 1975 ballooning to 163 by 2012 and MFA programs in the same period inflating from fifteen to 191.[12] And it is further evidenced by institutional support in newsrooms and professional journalism organizations.[13] However, what is most remarkable about this turn is the way in which interest in narrative spilled out beyond communities of writing practice. The storytelling movement not only engaged writer types but also consolidated interest in narrative in applications across a wide spectrum, from advertising to identity formation to journalism to mental therapeutic practices to nation branding to political strategy to truth-telling practices in restorative justice. Sujatha Fernandes has traced the way in which this narrative turn has meant, however, that increasingly storytelling has been entwined with the market and market values:

> In the new millennium, with broader shifts from productive capital to finance capital and the intensification of market values in guiding vast spheres of personhood and practices, storytelling has come to be configured more closely on the model of the market. Nonprofit storytelling and advocacy storytelling are increasingly defined by a business model that emphasizes stories as an investment that can increase competitive positioning, help to build the organization's portfolio, and activate target audiences. Social change organizations that work within nonprofit structures are encouraged by foundations to use stories as a way of driving their social impact through measurable goals such as legislative wins and voter registration. Narrating one's story is also a process of neoliberal subject-making, as actors learn how to be entrepreneurial, self-reliant actors who seek upward mobility rather than building class consciousness.[14]

[11] Thomas R. Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2019): 3.
[12] Robert Day, "Growth of Creative Writing Programs, 1975-2012," Association of Writers & Writing Programs, January 2012, https://d3fmgxfzuxge2.cloudfront.net/pdf/AWP_GrowthWritingPrograms.pdf.
[13] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*, 4.
[14] Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 18-19.

In a contemporary, narrative-rich society, stories, then, have generated interest not merely for entertainment but for the ends of varied social actors. Today, a perusal of the TED Talks website will reveal well over a hundred videos of talks related to storytelling with titles like "How video games turn players into storytellers," "The press trampled on my privacy. Here's how I took back my story," "How our stories cross over," and "How changing your story can change your life."

If stories are texts that organize time in order to produce meaning, the array of storying bodies and storytelling uses gestures toward three connected assumptions about the benefits of good storytelling: that good stories are interesting, that they recreate a sense of experience rather than simply transmitting information, and that they arouse emotions in the reader considered valuable by or to the storyteller. Roy Peter Clark, a prominent guidebook writer who was hired as a writing coach for journalists at the *St. Petersburg Times* in 1977 and by 1981 had led fifty narrative writing seminars across twenty-seven states, links story to the mimcry of the feeling of experience, rather than the information that might comprise it:

> Journalists use the word *story* with romantic promiscuity. They think of themselves as the wandering minstrels of the modern world, the tellers of tales, the spinners of yarns. And then, too often, they write dull reports. Reports need not be dull, nor stories interesting. But the difference between *story* and *report* is crucial to the reader's expectation and the writer's execution…A wonderful scholar named Louise Rosenblatt argued that readers read for two reasons: information and experience. There's the difference. Reports convey information. Stories create experience. Reports transfer knowledge. Stories transport the reader, crossing boundaries of time, space, and imagination. The report points us there. The story puts us there.[15]

Clark illuminates a view typical of the storytelling movement, that information and experience are inflected differently, the latter producing a sense of immediacy to the reader that is inherently powerful. Similarly, the novelist and guidebook writer Alice LaPlante offers, "story

[15] Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer 10th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Little, Brown & Company: 2006): 124.

has the obligation to be interesting… resist paraphrase, and end up providing some unit of satisfaction, or sense of completeness, to the reader."[16] In describing story as that which resists paraphrase, LaPlante alludes to the *feeling* of the story unfurling as it is read; a story might be summarized but in doing so some sense of experience or emotion will be lost. And the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jon Franklin, advocating for more narrative forms of journalism, argues, "Meaning is intrinsic to storytelling. That is one reason it's so difficult for those of us educated in newsrooms to understand storytelling. We're trained *not* to insert meaning in our news stories. But we mistake meaning for opinion. Journalism as we currently know it is relentlessly cognitive. We use facts; we prove things. Journalism has very little to do with meaning. Narrative writers can bring meaning to journalism."[17]

Indeed, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in craft discourse is more meager than one might anticipate. Though the verifiability of information might be understood as the primary distinction between fiction and nonfiction, the storytelling movement softened the boundaries between the two by positing that accomplished nonfiction writers also use the "tools of fiction," a phrase that mistakes a set of conventions and techniques aimed at evoking immediacy as belonging first to fiction writing. These conventions and techniques belong no more to fiction than nonfiction, however. As Bird and Dardenne have observed, narrative devices are used in all newswriting,[18] and the invocation of the "tools of fiction" is not a diktat to make up or deviate from verifiable fact but to use the subset of narrative devices considered most likely to elicit the reader's emotional response,[19] interest, and sense that they are somehow

[16] Alice LaPlante, *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007): 155.
[17] Jon Franklin, "A Story Structure," in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 109.
[18] Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, "Myth Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News" in *Media, Myths, and Narratives* ed. James Carey (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications): 69.
[19] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*, 8.

embedded into the experience. Do not simply write that Frank Sinatra hung out with some friends, filmed some scenes, and recorded some music, the storytelling movement advises. Include also facts like the size of the table at The Sands, the fact that Sinatra's mother demands that her husband rest his sore arm on a sponge, and the fact that the singer supervised the selection of silverware and linen for a friend's new home after the first home had been lost in a mudslide—factual elements thought more fascinating or provocative of feeling. Most simply, the storytelling movement has understood the creation of "more" narrative work to mean (1) the inclusion of detail and (2) the selection of forms, which are by their nature able to accommodate information that is either imagined or verifiable, both toward the end of prompting interest, emotion, and the sensation of immersive presentness.

Why interesting, emotional, and "experiential" or immersive texts matter is a question often answered by practitioners and scholars by foregrounding the power of stories to effect political and social change. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Schiller, pointing out destructive myths of wealth acquisition, argues in his *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Economic Events*, "Traditional economic approaches fail to examine the role of public beliefs in major economic events — that is, narrative. Economists can best advance their science by developing and incorporating into it the art of narrative economics."[20] The writer and activist Toi Scott has identified the storytelling of queer and trans people of color as a procedure for cultivating solidarity, sharing knowledge, healing trauma, developing a vision of liberation, and correcting misconceptions toward the end of self-determination. "Often in the media," Scott writes, "others tell our stories from their perspectives, taking liberties and making assumptions

[20] Robert Schiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Economic Events* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019): xv.

and omissions, many times without our knowledge or consent."[21] To tell their own stories is to speak back to misconstructions and misinterpretations of QTPOC life, and it is an act that Scott views as offering "inherent power and healing."[22] And, in an empirical investigation of the frequently repeated claim that storytelling can produce political change through empathic mechanisms, media scholars at Penn State who asked study participants to read either a more narrative or less narrative account of an undocumented immigrant's struggle to obtain healthcare found that more narrative texts result in increased empathy in readers for members of stigmatized groups, accompanied by changed attitudes and a willingness to seek more information or take political action.[23] Undergirding these varied treatments of storytelling lies the notion that emotion-inspiring writing holds the capacity to affect action and thought as much, or perhaps even more than, factuality and cognitive reasoning. Because, as the sociologist J.M. Barbalet proposes, "emotion is provoked by circumstances and is experienced as transformation of dispositions to act,"[24] emotion is understood to be an important resource of narrative, perhaps even its primary recommendation whether in the case of the economist, the journalist, the activist, or the fiction writer.

Though demographic data about creative writing manual readers is not systematically kept, writers like the esteemed journalist Beth Macy have spoken of finding craft literature useful, and there is anecdotal evidence that these books are used not only in creative writing classrooms and by creative writing enthusiasts but by individuals in several fields. Pastors have mused that Stephen King's *On Writing*, ostensibly a fiction writing manual, offers "parallels…to

[21] Toi Scott, "Foreword," in *Queer & Trans Artists of Color: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, ed. Jessica Glennon-Kukoff and Terra Mikalson (self-pub., 2014), ii-iii.
[22] Scott, "Foreword," iii.
[23] Mary Beth Oliver et. al., "The Effect of Narrative News Format on Empathy for Stigmatized Groups," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 89, no. 2 (June 2012): 215-217.
[24] J.M. Barbalet, *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 27.

sermon creation,"[25] has helped in imposing the notion that composing with an awareness of the flow of words can make messages more comprehensible,[26] and has inspired an approach in which the worship leader can "move out of the world of -ology" to "enhance understanding."[27] The book is recommended by the entrepreneur Kelly Hoey for better communication when business networking.[28] And it has been used as a tool to meet nonprofit fundraising objectives.[29]

Those specifically interested in constructing texts, of course, may have other objectives, ranging from honing skills to publication to obtaining wealth to attaining affective states. One manual reader with the Barnes & Noble user name BookJumper, for example, praised Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing: Essays on Creativity* not so much for its intelligent approach to composition but for providing a blueprint for happiness and inspiration:

> Ray (I cannot, after reading this, be so unfeeling and impersonal as to call him Bradbury) does not sit you down and spoon-feed you the elements of style. But then, that's what books like "The Elements of Style" are for. In an age when everyone seems to have a novel in their drawer, and when (as a direct consequence of the drawer situation) everybody who's published maybe half a book once feels qualified to tell you how to and how not to write, it is actually refreshing to bump into a book that does something else altogether: make you want to write. There is little talk about techniques (although there are a few invaluable practical pointers). What there is a lot of is the passion, exhuberance [sic], childlike joy of a man who tells stories because it is what makes him feel alive, real, sane.[30]

Such a desire for transformative *feeling*, whether to feel enough to be moved to act on one's curiosities about creative practice or to find a way to un-deaden oneself more generally or something else altogether, is not uncommon in consumer reviews of manuals. Nor is the desire to

[25] Yancey Arrington, "Stephen King, Preaching, and Killing Our Darlings," Yancey Arrington, June 29, 2016, https://blog.yanceyarrington.com/2016/06/29/stephen-king-preaching-and-killing-our-darlings/.
[26] Mark Batterson, interview with David Santistevan, Beyond Sunday Worship, podcast audio, October 23, 2015, https://www.davidsantistevan.com/105-mark-batterson/.
[27] Teddy Ray, "Theological Communications: A Cardinal Rules for Fiction and Theology," Seedbed, September 20, 2016, https://www.seedbed.com/theological-communications-a-cardinal-rule-for-fiction-and-theology/.
[28] Kelly Hoey, interview by DMZ, "Entrepreneur Kelly Hoey on how to network (and negotiate) like a pro," DMZ, Accessed January 5, 2020, https://dmz.ryerson.ca/networking-kelly-hoey/.
[29] Vanessa Chase Lockshin, "3 Books on Writing Every Fundraiser Should Read," The Storytelling Nonprofit, Accessed January 5, 2020, https://www.thestorytellingnonprofit.com/blog/3-books-on-writing-every-fundraiser-should-read/.
[30] Bookjumper, March 5, 2020, comment on Barnes & Noble, "Zen in the Art of Writing," Barnes & Noble, Accessed March 5, 2020, https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/zen-in-the-art-of-writing-ray-bradbury/1122986377.

feel *spoken to* personally—Barnes & Noble user NatoshaM celebrates that another manual writer Lisa Cron "explains the material like a real person"—which suggests that many aspiring writers want not only to acquire skills but to perceive a relationship between themselves and the manual writer, to feel that while the text might be offered to a mass market and for commercial gain, the writer across time and space has forged a connection of some intimacy with the reader, a connection that is, in spite it all, authentic.

If such a desire appears irrational, however, one might be reminded that creative writing manuals operate in a space of paradox. These books assert that one can become innovative by following instructions. These books assert that one can stick out from the crowd because everyone has a unique voice. These books assert that writing is a widely learnable craft gleaning exclusive benefits like publication. These books assert that it is in seizing writerly authority that one may learn to live— Judith Guest, the novelist best known for her *Ordinary People*, even suggests, "[W]riters do not write to impart knowledge to others; rather, they write to inform themselves"[31]—yet that knowing how to live provides the authority to write. And these books assert that in disciplining oneself in solitary, individual pursuit toward the end of differentiating oneself from others, one can move toward heightened belonging, which is to say acceptance into echelons of economic, intellectual, or artistic currency. Personal work ethic becomes a way to earn or prompt the emotional engagement of readers. In comparison to these outcomes, that a manual reader might gain a sense of inspiration, of being spoken to as someone who is valued is a relatively modest proposal. That audiences read narratives to feel is one premise, in fact, of craft manuals, and it is true, too, for craft readers. One central effect of creative writing guidebooks lies on the level of individual affect; they generate in some readers a sense of

[31] Judith Guest, "Foreword" in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* by Natalie Goldberg (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1986): xiv.

possibility: of being capable generally, capable of change, capable of finding connection with others through textual communication—and perhaps, even, becoming a person who is meaningful to others, meaningful to society.

The latter potentiality, however, is an undercooked and uninterrogated one in craft manuals, particularly in relationship to political meaning. Creative writing technique, or craft as it is often called, has frequently been aligned with formalism and misunderstood as apolitical. Its investment in emotionality and feeling, both supposed individually produced rather than mediated through social and political life, has further aided in its mischaracterization as being divorced from political considerations. However, if narrative can act as a political meaning-making tool to great effect, it stands to reason that *how* we talk about constructing stories matters too, that the life of the creative writing manual, regardless of how sheepish its readers might be or how little intellectual currency afforded the genre, holds powerful implications for the shaping of our cultural, social, and political spheres. The discourse of advice literature for aspiring writers isn't just important to those reading it. It's also important to those who read or encounter narratives, those whose stories are told in narratives, and those affected by actions premised upon narrative intervention—or narratives of the status quo. If narratives help us make sense of the world, how stories are told shapes what we understand to be reasonable, possible, real, and important. In other words, how we learn to shape narratives is not an issue only for those who consider themselves writers; it's one that potentially affects us on a larger sociocultural scale and one that illuminates our ideological assumptions.

I argue in this dissertation that despite early creative writing manuals' democratic promise to level the playing fields of the intellectual and artistic economy, thereby opening up a path for aspiring writers to tell the stories to matter them by "finding" their individual voices,

these books have failed to substantively engage the politics implicit in craft and have discouraged individuality in the case of aspiring writers of politically progressive orientations. Latching onto producing attention and *any* emotion in the reader as the primary objective of storytelling, creative writing guidebooks have neglected the political and ethical dimensions of artistic practice, often in fact proposing that storytellers avoid writing certain types of stories, about certain types of people and subjects, or disqualifying certain types of communication as stories at all. Story types, characters, and subjects considered inferior craft by these books are varied, including stories about non-human entities like structures or technology or climate, stories driven by ideas, victims, resigned people, and unequal power. Paradoxically, the manual's putative interest in advancing creativity is belied by an intolerance for and skepticism of the individuality of the writer and the reading public, reinforcing instead particular styles.[32]

Actors along a broad political spectrum use storytelling strategies, but the discourse around storytelling and empathy has proved particularly attractive to many practitioners and aspiring practitioners inclined toward progressive politics. Confusing the conventions a select group of published writers has employed for what could be employed by an aspiring writer, manuals err toward conservative or neoliberal narratives and conservative or neoliberal modes of narration. Though it might not be expected that manuals would specifically be produced to fulfill the needs of progressive narrative construction, it is also not intuitive that craft discourse would favor the construction of conservative or neoliberal narratives. I articulate, then, the way in which purportedly "universal" craft instruction swerves away from progressive narratives to reinforce neoliberal or conservative ideologies, and how the manual's celebration of the individuality of the writer is highly contingent or compromised.

[32] Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985): 203.

Several scholars have undertaken inquiry into other types of writing textbooks and writing instruction, particularly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Peter Elbow pioneered the practice of freewriting and is closely associated with democratizing writing pedagogy with books like *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) and *Everyone Can Write* (2000). In *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition* (2009), Tony Scott situates rhetorical writing instruction within the political economy of "fast-capitalism," bringing into view the relationship between instructors' professional and hierarchal statures, the textbook industry, writing pedagogy, and historical materialist constraints on student writing. Xin Liu Gale offered a striking takedown of *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*'s alarming framing as a "full toolbox" for the writer, and Peter Mortensen's historical analysis of the shift from managerial to shareholder control in publishing corporations during the 1980s has shown how the business operations of the industry reconfigured the popular definition, purpose, and production of composition textbooks. These works have tended to investigate the composition textbook's effect on rhetoric and rhetorical writing, rather than specifically aestheticized forms of narrative.

There is, too, a robust scholarship of journalism examining the role, function, and shifting attitudes toward narrative in media. Considering the moral function of news, Bird and Dardenne have argued that news ought to be understood as myths in which "themes are rearticulated and reinterpreted over time, themes that are derived from culture and that feed back into it. Stories are not reinvented every time the need arises."[33] Chris Peters has noted the varied degrees of emotional explicitness across media, and the crafting of news media through forms conveying

[33] S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, "Myth, Chronicle, and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News," *Sage Annual Reviews of Communications Research* 15 (January 1, 1988): 72.

"the feeling of truth."[34] One of the most thoughtful takes on the relationship between aesthetics and politics comes from Michael Lithgow. Aesthetic experience "extends well beyond traditional notions of beauty and emotion," Lithgow asserts, "to encompass rationally ambiguous categories of experience that emerge from both the relational and symbolic dimensions of communication…[O]verlooking these categories of meaningfulness, we overlook an important opportunity for understanding in clearer terms how power moves through, organizes, and is organized by communicative acts."[35] Such work has made apparent the way in which narrative forms convey meaning and contribute to ever-evolving popular conceptions of social, political, and moral values.

To date, however, there has been no analysis of the politics of aesthetics in mass market creative writing manuals. My own work builds upon extensive scholarship in the history of literary studies, media sociology, affect studies, and cultural studies to examine the implicit theoretical political investments of craft manuals and elaborate their ramifications for larger discourses in American political, social, and cultural life. This work does not engage questions of how manuals are used, viewed, or applied by its readers, focusing instead on textual analysis and manuals as tacit arbiters of ideology. It finds its footing in exploring the discourse of how meaning is made in the creative work through craft, who it is understood to be meaningful to, and in what way.

Where meaning locates and how it obtains is, after all, precisely the problem of the writer, and it is a problem which might be seen at different angles. The reader might consider something within the text meaningful in relationship to something else in the text. The reader

[34] Chris Peters, "Emotion aside or emotional side? Crafting an 'experience of involvement' in the news," *Journalism* 12, no. 3 (April 1, 2011): 311.
[35] Michael Lithgow, "Defying the News: New Aesthetics of 'Truth' in Popular Culture," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no. 2 (2012): 282.

might through the text newly view something in their own life as meaningful. The reader might have a meaningful response if they, through the influence of the text, decide to change something in their life outside it. The writer might consider a particular reaction of the reader meaningful. Or the writer might consider the reader's attention alone meaningful. Though the objectives of creative manual authors and the modalities that they believe best in service of meaning-making—immediacy of narration, heightened tension, or story arc, for example—differ, each offers meaning-making possibilities. The complexity of these possibilities and the difficulty in navigating them could be thought the raison d'etre of the creative writing manual, but manuals rarely investigate the meanings of texts, assuming that attention-holding and emotion-generating are functions that are intrinsically meaningful.

Method

My research is based on analysis of creative writing manuals; historical, theoretical, and critical texts related to writing and self-help; and documents of industry discourse such as practitioner interviews and accounts of conference proceedings. In this dissertation, I reflect upon the creative writing guidebook's position at the intersection of institutional and self-administered education. As such, my primary source text selection incorporates creative writing guidebooks that represent three consequential, and at times overlapping, modes of popular discovery: recommendation via syllabi and canon-making in higher education networks, recommendation via the supposed intelligence of the market, and recommendation via lending communities. This approach is aimed at centering, describing, and interpreting the popular.

The text selection for this dissertation is hardly perfect and its basis in quantitative reasoning is hardly scientific, limited in part by the publishing industry's imperfect systems of

inventory recording. Establishing a reasonable bank of the most popular creative writing manuals from which to draw conclusions is a slippery business because there is, in fact, no way to gain exact sales figures for books except through the publisher of an individual book, rather than the genre as a whole. Neilsen BookScan is the most frequently cited source for sales numbers. However, it is also terribly inaccurate and fails to capture how people consume texts in the digital age. BookScan does not incorporate data on audiobooks and ebooks. Nor does it track print book sales from libraries or "hand sales" via small brick and mortars, literary events or conferences, and direct sales from publishers. A relatively new instrument, BookScan does not include sales for books prior to 2001.[36] Furthermore, 36% of readers polled by the Pew Research Center reported preferring to borrow books—either from acquaintances or the library—to buying.[37] There are no statistics indicating what number of books read per year are borrowed rather than purchased, let alone for the specific genre of creative writing manuals. As such, an attempt to nail down the most popular writing books *read* can only be imprecise.

My primary sources are selected from lists of the 2,000 most-assigned English books in the Open Syllabus Project, a database holding over six million English-language syllabi from over eighty countries, which though impressive and useful could not be said to be representative since syllabi are voluntarily contributed;[38] the top 60 Best Sellers in Creative Writing & Composition section of Amazon, which holds a 65% share of the book market and whose recommendation engine generates 30% of its book sales[39]; and because there is no category specifically for creative writing manuals offered by the website, books referencing creative

[36] Lincoln Michel, "Everything You Wanted to Know About Book Sales (But Were Too Afraid to Ask)," *Electric Literature*, June 30, 2016, https://electricliterature.com/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-book-sales-but-were-afraid-to-ask/.
[37] "Libraries, Patrons, and E-Books," Pew Research Center, June 22, 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2012/06/22/libraries-patrons-and-e-books/.
[38] "About the Open Syllabus Project," Open Syllabus Project, Accessed January 15, 2019, https://blog.opensyllabus.org/about-the-open-syllabus-project/.
[39] Jean Paul Isson and Jesse S. Harriott, *People Analytics in the Era of Big Data: Changing the Way You Attract, Acquire, Develop, and Retain Talent* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016): 45.

writing that appear on the list of the "25 Books That Help Artists Unleash Creativity" in *Booklist*, a publication of the American Library Association which self-describes as being "widely viewed as offering the most reliable reviews to help libraries decide what to buy and to help library patrons and students decide what to read, view, or listen to."[40] In selecting these books, I have omitted workbooks, autobiographical texts, narrative anthologies, grammar guides, craft thesauruses and dictionaries, genre-specific manuals, books on the writing of poetry, and books gathering general—not specifically "creative"—writing and composition advice, such as *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. All of the books included are meant for adult writers writing for adults.

The authors of these books vary in their expertise. Of the titles included, two, *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* and *Writers Dreaming: Twenty-Six Writers Talk about Their Dreams and the Creative Process* are anthologies. Of the remaining twenty-four manuals, one title, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, was published by former book editors. One, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, is written by an agent and novelist. Five, *America's Foremost Creativity Coach*, *Steal Like an Artist*, *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel (Before You Waste Three Years Writing 327 Pages That Go Nowhere)*, and *The War of Art* are written by authors who do not write creative narrative or work in the literary economy, while the vast majority, twenty of twenty-four, are written by practitioners of creative narrative. The earliest, *Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster was published in 1927, while the most recent, *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel (Before*

[40] American Library Association, "FAQ," Booklist Online, Accessed August 18, 2019, https://www.booklistonline.com/faq?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1.

You Waste Three Years Writing 327 Pages That Go Nowhere) by Lisa Cron was published in 2016.

In culling a list of popular creative writing guidebooks, I have elected to include books meant to assist aspiring writers of both fiction and nonfiction. This choice was made in acknowledgment of the smearing of boundaries between the modes. The assimilation of narrative technique in journalism and creative nonfiction practices throughout roughly the last half-century is clear. As Thomas R. Schmidt suggests, the integration of narrative technique or "storytelling *like* in fiction"[41] in nonfiction writing, including journalism, has not been merely the prerogative of individuals. Rather, the use of narrative technique has been professionally and institutionally supported through re-education efforts at publications and through professional organizations, conference programming, the introduction of feature writing as a Pulitzer Prize category and other prizes for "literary" journalism, the publication of narrative nonfiction anthologies, and the discourse of trade publications. And the reverse is true too: nonfiction has been recognized as artistic within literary circles, as indicated by the growth of creative nonfiction concentrations in creative writing programs,[42] the introduction of the Best Creative Nonfiction anthologies in 2007, and the proliferation of the personal essay. Furthermore, because craft manuals take formal considerations like point of view and narrative structure—which exist in both fiction and nonfiction, factually-based and solely imagined events—as their primary node of inquiry, the delineation between novel, memoir, and other nonfiction narratives is of diminished importance.

[41] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper,* 65.
[42] Douglas Hesse, "Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?" in *Beyond Postprocess and Postmodernism: Essays on the Spaciousness of Rhetoric*, ed. Theresa Jarnagi Enos, Keith D. Miller, and Jill McCracken (New York: Routledge, 2003): 246.

Together, this bank of creative writing guides totals 26 books, 7 unique titles from the Open Syllabus Project, 7 unique titles from Booklist, and 11 unique titles from Amazon.

Repeated titles appear below highlighted.

From the Open Syllabus Project:
Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft by Janet Burroway
Aspects of the Novel by E.M. Forster
Making Shapely Fiction by Jerome Stern
The Writing Life by Annie Dillard
On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King
The Rhetoric of Fiction by Wayne C. Booth
What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers by Anne Bernays

From the "25 Books That Help Artists Unleash Creativity" at *Booklist*:
Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott
On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King
Coaching the Artist Within: Advice from Writers, Actors, Visual Artists & Musicians from America's Foremost Creativity Coach by Eric Maisel
Steal Like an Artist by Austin Kleon
The War of Art by Steven Pressfield
Writers Dreaming: Twenty-Six Writers Talk about Their Dreams and the Creative Process edited by Naomi Epel
Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg
The Writing Life by Annie Dillard
Zen in the Art of Writing by Ray Bradbury

From the March 27, 2019 Amazon "Best Sellers in Creative Writing & Composition" section:
#3 *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott
#17 *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel (Before You Waste Three Years Writing 327 Pages That Go Nowhere)* by Lisa Cron
#25 *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* by Roy Peter Clark
#30 *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing* by Alice LaPlante
#31 *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King
#33 *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between* by Lee Gutkind
#36 *Writing Fiction for Dummies* by Randall Ingermanson and Peter Economy
#39 *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue: The Fastest Way to Improve Any Manuscript* by James Scott Bell
#46 *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives* by Lajos Egri
#48 *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner
#51 *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass
#58 *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University* edited by Wendy Call and Mark Kramer

My method involves a hermeneutics attendant to ideology in the American context. In this dissertation I work at bringing into view neoliberal ideologies that serve as theoretical barriers to a literature of progressive politics, particularly notions of selfhood, meritocracy, agency, and group identification that serve to reify what is normative as legitimate, ethical, or natural implicit in the rhetoric of the creative writing books. This dissertation proceeds from the notion advanced by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who wrote in his "Discourse in the Novel," "Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon."[43] Bakhtin advocated what he called a "sociological stylistics," believing a study of style would necessarily be a study of the social, literary forms— and language itself— operating inextricably in a "verbal-ideological world."[44] If form and content in the discourse of narrative are one and verbal discourse is social, a study of craft will, too, study the social, will turn toward the ideology expressed in narrative forms.

I am also interested in drawing out manual discourse's contribution to what the media scholar James Carey refers to as "the symbolic production of reality," our representations of reality in communication which frequently obscure real events, figures, and processes,[45] as it relates to our political life. How do creative writing manuals influence what types of events are seen as the stuff of valuable stories, or stories at all? In what ways do guidebooks shape our understanding of the space for action and the degree to which individual agency can account for outcomes in our lives? How does the discourse on narrative strategy inform whose stories are considered politically significant? And how does the advice literature on writing contribute to what we imagine to be realistic or possible?

[43] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 257.
[44] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 270.
[45] James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989, 2009): 19-20.

In this inquiry, I err away from top-down determinism. Aspiring writers who read guidebooks and those who receive the narratives written by these manual users are not mere passive consumers. While a "hypodermic" theory of mass communication would posit that media messages are directly "injected" into the passive brains of receivers, this dissertation recognizes Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory as a more valuable model for understanding the creative writing guidebook. Hall theorizes communication as a four-stage process: production, in which meaning is encoded; circulation; use, in which meaning is decoded or interpreted by the audience; and reproduction, where the audience goes on to do something with this message made meaningful by the audience's interpretation. Hall offers three models of reception: the audience might in a dominant-hegemonic mode decode the meaning exactly as it is intended by its creator, might in a negotiated position understand or even mostly believe the encoded meaning but in their decoding also adapt and oppose it to varying degrees, or might take an oppositional position that "detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference."[46]

And as Bakhtin emphasized in his essay, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," the relationship between material realities tangential to the representation and the representation of the text is mutually informing. "The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it," he wrote, "and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers."[47] Bakhtin's interdependence was an interdependence of voices and meanings cutting across individuals and groups in time and

[46] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding" in *The Cultural Studies Reader 2nd ed.*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1999): 517.
[47] Bakhtin, 254.

space; rather than a single unitary language with static, given meanings, he observed a dialogue of social relations and languages within and without the form of the text.

Necessarily, the aspiring writer must reinterpret craft advice to suit their storytelling interests, decoding the meta-text of the manual to then encode their own creative work, which might in turn be decoded by readers staking out any of the three models of reception. That audiences may negotiate meaning—and do—is obvious and evidenced by evolving and varied storytelling, as well as manual adoption by non-writers like the pastors and nonprofit folk who have generated application beyond the intended use of these books. Nevertheless, the narrow manual view of how creative encoding ought to be accomplished does exert immense cultural pressure on both those who publish or broadcast narratives and aspiring storytellers who want their voices to be heard in an increasingly fragile, competitive, and crowded discursive landscape of shuttering publishing imprints, fractured and belt-tightening media, and rapid-fire telecommunications. This pressure is all the more potent for those who rely upon the manuals to derive a sense that their voices are valuable. Though some aspiring storytellers will surmount such pressure, other stories may be lost, particularly those of already marginalized voices facing disproportionate discouragement or exclusion from the literary, media, and publishing establishments; those requiring significant early financial investment for research; and those of a progressive politics aversive to presiding regimes.

It is vital that we identify as nonsequitur, against a cultural backdrop celebrating grit, the common belief that exceptions who surpass sociopolitical barriers disprove the presence of barriers. And that some writers overcome the rhetoric of craft manuals, which promotes an arty iteration of social adjustment, does not indicate that their work is superior, or that their overcoming ought to flatten the sociocultural contingencies that inform storytelling. Rather, this

dissertation seeks to recognize that though many types of stories are told and that while aspiring writers often are defiant, manual craft discourse is less easily adaptable to the needs of progressive and experimental writers, contradicting its supposed investment in assisting the cultivation of individual creativity.

My analysis roots within a larger historical context, looking closely at the parallels between the development of creative writing manuals and institutional changes in university English literary studies, the discourse of the therapeutic ethos, and problems of the self as social actor and citizen. In the first chapter, I trace the historical development of a key trope of creative writing manuals, the permission to write, emphasizing the way in which it has offered an intoxicating and populist view of the practice of creative writing while nevertheless reproducing a neoliberal fantasy of the equal distribution of time and energy resources in a meritocratic society that ignores the structural barriers to entry facing many aspiring writers. The permission to write took cues from English studies generalists, who moved to understand literary study in neohumanist terms as cultivating nonspecialized critical faculties associated with living well and appreciating life. While the permission to write was popularized as a corrective to gatekeeping that often excluded women and racial minorities, during the middle of the twentieth century as it combined with a therapeutic ethos that promised to solve the problem of individual selfhood, it was transformed into a permission extending to all who chose to write—and implicitly live—honestly, to all who chose to dedicate time. While the books themselves may have become quite available as consumer items, by casting creative achievement as morally-inflected achievements of assiduousness and honesty available equally because, in theory, all live actors have time, the effect was to position the failure to write as a failure to live the good life, whether or not the failure to write was derived from a classed or gendered lack of leisure time.

After setting up this historical context, chapter 2 delves into the guidebook treatment of two related craft considerations: characterization and point of view. I argue that manuals conflate arresting the reader's attention with narrative fulfillment and empathetic characterization. Even when empathy is invoked as a key to strong characterization, guidebooks tend to imagine a narrowly defined "protagonist," one not unlike that of self-help itself: an individual of robust desire, who exerts agency to self-improve, has clear intentions, and is unique enough without posing a threat to prevailing social orders. While literature has been touted for its ability to inspire empathy useful for political mobilization, these books instead offer advice on how to put characters to the page who will already be seen as empathetic figures, ossifying dominant conceptions of whose stories ought to be told and whose interests deserve attention in public life.

Chapter 4 looks at several modules of narrative structure: pacing, story type, plot shape, story subject, and the proportions of summarized action to scene. In each of these craft elements, I identify reality judgments and value judgments made by the authors of the craft manuals. These judgments reinforce values such as anti-intellectualism, provincialism, and moderatism. They naturalize incremental change and construe longstanding social ills as unbefitting forms of conflict. And they advise telling stories through structures that do not accommodate some of the most urgent political stories of our time, including stories about systemic or structural inequality, climate change, and violations occurring as a result of big data and digital surveillance.

This dissertation takes seriously the place of self-help literature in American life, but it does not claim that self-help literature is able to fully restrict the unruly minds of those who hope to write. Writers of every era have written against the grain, have considered the space of the page as a space to reimagine. In considering both the power of narrative and the political ramifications of the discourse on how to write, I hope also to clarify the way in which the

subversion of craft conventions may not only be aesthetically but also socially and politically meaningful. It is in the spirit of loosing, the spirit of experiment and play and unfettering narrative with ethical rigor, that the work of the creative writer may locate significant contributions to our political imaginations, and even our political realities.

Chapter 1: Selves With Permission

There is a story that Natalie Goldberg tells at the beginning of her book *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. The story is of an ordinary day when she, as a younger woman, was working at a natural foods co-op restaurant in Michigan she'd established with a friend. She was a college graduate who loved reading books, though mostly the European and American male writers she'd read as a student of literature did not write narratives that reflected her own experience, and she had named the restaurant Naked Lunch after the William S. Burroughs novel. On the ordinary day, she chopped vegetables to make an enormous vat of ratatouille. Later, while browsing a bookstore on the way home, she discovered a poetry collection by Erica Jong called *Fruits and Vegetables* which began with a poem about preparing an eggplant. It had not occurred to Goldberg until then that the stuff of her life might be the stuff of literature, that what one did with a courgette or any other part of ordinary existence might inform composition. "A synapse connected in my brain," she recalls. "I went home with the resolve to write what I knew and to trust my own thoughts and feeling and to not look outside myself. I was not in school anymore: I could say what I wanted."[48] To be outside of formalized education is to be liberated, in Goldberg's telling, liberated enough to be a writer.

Goldberg's story mobilizes some of the most common tropes of self-help. The stifling literary authorities of the college classroom attempt to impose a problematic norm, that a person such as Goldberg is not a writer. Goldberg accepts such an idea of herself and conforms initially. But then, Goldberg has a revelation that she is the expert on her own life story. Goldberg is no longer the "goody-two-shoes" who wrote "dull and boring" compositions[49]; her self-

[48] Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boston: Shabhala Publications, 1986): 1-4.
[49] Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, 1.

actualization as a writer operates as a model for the aspiring writer and is positioned in diametric opposition to the authorized space of improvement offered by the university, *Writing Down the Bones* presents itself as a guidebook to the journey away from socially-imposed stricture and toward creativity located in the writer's own biography. "I began to write about my family," Goldberg explains, "because nobody could say I was wrong."[50] Discovering a mode of writing free of criticism, seizing upon her worth as an expert on herself, and loosing her efforts from the false self foisted upon her by social forces, Goldberg is finally able to give herself the permission to write.

Unsurprisingly, the permission to write circulates widely in creative manuals. After all, the commercial success of the writer of the manual correlates with the book's ability to speak to as wide an audience as possible, and ostensibly, manual consumers do not purchase writing guidebooks to be told they ought to stick with their day jobs but to grasp the authority to write. Offered broadly, the permission to write is construed in this advice literature to rely upon conditions presumed available to anyone: the aspiring writer's willingness to write honestly and make and use a great deal of one's time for self-improvement. In this chapter, I trace the development of the creative manual and the permission to write. I contend that the permission to write became a powerful trope in creative writing manuals by drawing upon the university's early construction of literary practice as truth-seeing rather than specialized knowledge while still rejecting its culture of masculinized exclusivity. Later, its seemingly inclusive, barrier-breaking ethic became even more attractive as the popular conception of creative writing as a non-specialized artistic practice was aligned with the pursuit of healthy selfhood, but ultimately, the permission to write exacts a punishing gaze upon the aspiring writer by refusing to

[50] Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*, 4.

acknowledge the sociocultural forces that might constrain success, portraying failed writing as a failing self.

The first two sections of this chapter contextualize the rise of creative writing manuals against the backdrop of the development of university English studies, an elite endeavor, illuminating how manuals suggested that creative writing ought not be monopolized by elites. While it may seem peculiar that creative writing guidebooks would nevertheless incorporate theoretical ligatures and attitudes of the academy, the ethos of the creative writing manual and that of the writing workshop are not absolute in their diametric opposition, even if one originated in part as a response to the other's indifference to a substantial population of aspiring writers. Though books offering creative writing instruction offer an alternative or adjunct to institutionally sanctioned writing instruction, aesthetic principles characteristic of the workshop have been rehearsed in the genre, and the books are at times assigned in university classrooms. Moreover, some of the best known craft books today have been authored by practitioner-professors. Creative writing guidebooks sit at the uneasy nexus between self-help, textbook, and criticism. They are tangential to but not excluded from the institutional recommendations of the university program's creative writing workshop. They lack cultural currency but carry the authority of a long tradition of American self-improvement literature, dating back to the eighteenth century. They borrow from critical literature while urging independence and self-evaluation. And, artsy populism aside, the guidebooks assimilate the depoliticized and dehistoricized notion of the text from the New Critics, for it is in this approach to literary study that the aspiring writer's biography, history, and political situation are understood not to create a barrier to entry, that under the rubric of the work standing on its own, being read for what it was

not when or where or from whom, that an aspirant might locate a metaphor for the text of their own life as an aspiring writer.

The third section details the early creative writing manual's treatment of the permission to write as a way to break through gendered barriers, before the fourth turns to the mid-twentieth century history of conceptions of compromised selfhood and the normalization of pursuing mental health that made creative writing so attractive a possibility to many Americans. Finally, in the fifth section, I examine the permission to write in creative writing manuals popular today, attending to the way in which the permission to write functions as an agreement with the reader in which the permission to write is granted liberally but its conditions are that the reader accepts failure only as a function of the failure to dedicate adequate time to the craft, a familiar myth of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, adding one additional dimension: the failure to write as the failure of self-honesty.

1.1 The Professionalization of English Studies: Self as Critic 1880s-1950s

English studies as a discipline was not professionalized until the period roughly between 1880 and 1920 in the university, a relatively new institution that can be classified in contradistinction to the earlier preprofessional era colleges, in part, through the departmentalization of their courses. English and other modern languages were not listed at Harvard, for example, as departments until the 1870s. Yet I argue it was in the history of professionalization of English studies within the university that the seeds of the permission to write were sown; in a battle over whether English departments would be governed by the study of specialized knowledge or a humanist and critical approach won by the latter, literary

knowledge came to be aligned with the critical perception of truth and true beauty, rather than narrow expertise.

The push for professionalization in early literary studies in the new American university system was frequently led by German-educated scholars of philology who advanced it as a science of sort, associating philology variously with anatomy, chemistry, and evolutionary biology.[51] From the beginning, the objective of these self-proclaimed "investigators" to root literary studies within a rigorous, model of historical linguistics study construed as a "science" was contested by scholars who advocated for English and modern language departments to act as sites of continuity with the humanist, neoclassical liberal studies of the college system.[52] The latter camp of generalists included amongst their number Charles Eliot Norton, Barrett Wendell, Brander Matthews, Briggs, Katharine Lee Bates, George Edward Woodberry, William Rolfe, Vida Dutton Scudder, Hiram Corson, Irving Babbitt, and Henry Austin Clapp.[53] Several of these figures also wrote criticism in popular periodicals, and their aim was that criticism itself would become synonymous with the project of literary study.

The generalists framed their intellectual currency as their critical abilities, rather than specialized philological knowledge, and were greatly influenced by a handful of English writers, including most prominently, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. In 1865, Arnold had famously advanced a manifesto, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," proposing that the critic's role was to find and share the best texts in the world and in criticism offer "true and fresh ideas."[54] In Arnold's view, the value of criticism existed outside of the political, and conflating

[51] Haruko Momma, *From Philology to English Studies: Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 61.
[52] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 77.
[53] Gere, *Intimate Practices*, 212.
[54] Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism," in *The function of criticism at the present time, by Matthew Arnold (reprinted from "Essays in criticism") and An essay on style, by Walter Pater (reprinted from "Appreciations")* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 39-40.

beauty with godliness, he pronounced that criticism's "best spiritual work"[55] might be found in correcting the pride of man by urging it to muse on "the absolute beauty and fitness of things."[56]

This absolute beauty, this truth that Arnold held up was ahistorical and apolitical, and American humanist generalists like Woodrow Wilson would follow suit, knocking down research and methodology in favor of the apprehension of abstract "higher" qualities in literary study. Wilson drew an analogy between life and literature. If life was important not because it was useful but because it was an orgy of perception and feeling beyond the scope of empiricism, the same might be said of literature:

> It is obvious that you cannot have universal education without restricting your teaching to such things as can be universally understood. It is plain that you cannot impart "university methods" to thousands, or create "investigators" by the score, unless you confine your university education to matters which dull men can investigate, your laboratory training to tasks which mere plodding diligence and submissive patience can compass. Yet, if you do so limit and constrain what you teach, you thrust taste and insight and delicacy of perception out of the schools, exalt the obvious and the merely useful above the things which are only imaginatively or spiritually conceived, make education an affair of tasting and handling and smelling, and so create Philistia, that country in which they speak of "mere literature." I suppose that in Nirvana one would speak in like wise [sic] of "mere life."[57]

The linkage between understanding life and understanding literature proved durable throughout the twentieth century and would later animate the permission to write. If to understand literature was to understand something of life, the conflation of life and literature made the practice of writing nearly inherently rightful. Life was not a collection of facts to be studied by elites. Life was feeling. Life was tastes and sensations. To Wilson and the other generalists, the danger presented by philology was a quasi-scientific discourse in which only what might be empirically proven was important. Literature itself was in danger of being

[55] Arnold, "The Function of Criticism," 44.
[56] Arnold, "The Function of Criticism," 44.
[57] Woodrow Wilson, "Mere Literature," *The Atlantic*, December 1893, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1893/12/mere-literature/519705/.

trivialized, and with it sensitivities to what was not empirically observable. Throughout the period of the 1880s and 1890s, the American generalists published several essays criticizing a philological approach to literary study in the pages of *The Dial*, a magazine dedicated to criticism that had once operated as the de facto mouthpiece of the Transcendentalists. They argued to be a true appreciator of literature was to be a true appreciator of the feeling of feeling offered by the text. It was to, in some sense, grasp the value of life. Within the university, the critic-generalists, then, solidified their claim on English studies through offering themselves as men of sensitivities, the true seers and feelers of literature.

In their bid for legitimacy within the university, however, generalist-critics were apt to distinguish themselves, the true seers, from the non-true seers among the masses. As battles over whether literary studies should adhere to the narrow expertise of philologists or the wider interests of generalists, generalists frequently engaged in boundary work that delineated their work from the study of literature in improvement societies and social clubs, particularly women's clubs. As Anne Ruggles Gere observes, "Gendering those responsible for the vulgarization of literature as female aided the professionalization project because academics could enhance their own standing by contrasting themselves with a feminized and uncritical readership."[58] The text was now an object requiring the discriminating eye, moving the bar for legitimate literary engagement away from "amateurism" to the "professionalization" available in the university.

Despite these anti-populist maneuverings, within the university, generalist-critics were often some of the most popular professors. Viewing their teaching as, in part, vitally distancing

[58] Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in the U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1997): 215.

literature from the methodological slog of philology, they adopted an "inspirational"[59] lecturing style revolving around the revelation of the text's dazzle, a counterpoint to philologists who were often criticized for their bankruptcy of engaging teaching and an attitude that they ought not *need* to be inviting or skilled educators because their depth of knowledge qualified them for university work. During the 1880s, academics became increasingly aware that most undergraduates would not pursue scholarship, that in order to reach what one MLA convention speaker, Morton W. Easton of the University of Pennsylvania, referred to as "the other 95 percent,"[60] professors would need to adopt methods of teaching literature that focused more attention on literature itself. Concomitantly, the demand for an education that would winnow a path to a career took hold in universities, challenging both the philosophy of the liberal education[61] and the "research fetish"[62] which bore very little practical value for students who did not intend to pursue careers as scholars. If a student was unable to latch onto any practical use of the study of English (philology or English literature), a professor known for their passionate appreciation of literature and the stylings of an entertainer might appeal to a student more than one who considered their own research the prima facie justification for their post.

As part of the generalist push and the decline of the classics as the basis for a liberal education, the study of rhetoric, long a facet of the liberal education, assumed in the 1880s and 1890s a new focus on writing, dispensing with the persuasive strategies, memorization techniques, and delivery practices of polemical speech to embrace more freewheeling creativity. In these New English composition courses, students were now sometimes given the opportunity to select their own subjects of writing.[63] Composition was not viewed as distinct from creative

[59] Graff 107-108.
[60] Graff, 100.
[61] Graff, 129-130.
[62] Graff, 131.
[63] D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 36-38.

writing. At Harvard, for example, poems and stories might satisfy the requirements of English studies courses.[64] And as early as 1895, writing instructors at Columbia University taught writing through critical discourse, Brander Matthews describing a process in which "essays are criticized by the instructors in private talks with every individual student. The…aim of the instructors is to show him how to express himself easily and vigorously."[65] As such, D.G. Myers asserts, "As much as anything, creative writing owes its existence to antischolarly animus that was originally directed against philology."[66] In response, adversaries of the generalist-critics sometimes feminized the assimilation of creative writing practices in the English literature classroom in their rhetoric, calling it "geisha girl drivel" and dismissing it as the stuff of finishing schools.[67]

Women, however, were not always allowed to participate in these creative endeavors in coeducational institutions, sometimes restricted from study wholly and other times facing limitations such as the prohibition against women reading their compositions aloud.[68] In 1890, only 4% of American journalists were women, and the percentage of those writing other forms of published texts was lower,[69] in great part because of educational limitations. Some prominent male writers would go on to attack coeducational literature and writing courses, the University of Chicago's Robert Herrick claiming, for example, that the presence of women in English classrooms ought to be stymied, convinced that these female bodies silenced men and tamped down the male ability to self-express.[70] Women's colleges, which attracted fewer German-

[64] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 40.
[65] Brander Matthews, "English at Columbia College," in *English in American Universities*, ed. William Morton Payne (Boston: Heath & Company, 1895): 40.
[66] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 16.
[67] Katherine H. Adams, *A Group of Their Own: College Writing Courses and American Women Writers, 1880-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001): 42.
[68] Gere, *Intimate Practices*, 213.
[69] Adams, *A Group of Their Own*, 26.
[70] Adams, *A Group of Their Own*, 38.

trained philologists, would incorporate creative writing assignments and, to some extent offer greater opportunities for women's creative writing. At Vassar College, the professor Gertrude Buck, who was hired in 1897, encouraged female students to write toward an imagined audience. Buck would go on to publish a book in 1906, *A Course in Narrative Writing,* in which she critiqued "the presupposition…that story-writing is an occult art, due to the direct inspiration of genius, inscrutable in its processes and unassailable in its results"[71] That female students might write for public consumption was not necessarily the aspiration, however, so much work toward "appreciative reading."[72] And though at Barnard, Minor W. Latham assigned students to write pastiches of 14th century plays in 1919, and a visiting professor, Dr. Caroline Spurgeon, allowed students to write poetry for their assignments, the objective of these assignments was not to create writers. It was to cultivate appreciation for literature.[73]

By the end of the nineteenth century, philology had begun to lose its iron grip on the English literature department writ large, and eventually comparative philology would be refashioned into what we now know as linguistics, while the work of understanding histories and genealogies would be folded within English studies under the rubric of literary history.[74] This did not erase the problem of defining English studies, however. As early as the 1890s, scholars like Martin W. Sampson at the University of Indiana had called for a more systematic approach to criticism within the university, one less subject to personal impressions and yet not so procedural as philology. Though such an approach did not achieve momentum until the 1930s, the influence of critics within English departments was further solidified during World War I, as a patriotic "view of criticism as therapy for ideologically based miscommunication and

[71] Gertrude Buck, *A Course in Narrative Writing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1906): v.
[72] Buck, *A Course in Narrative Writing,* vi.
[73] Adams, *A Group of Their Own*, 43.
[74] Graff, *Professing Literature,* 118.

misunderstanding"[75] gained force, alongside an insidious vein of xenophobia that drew suspicion around German-trained philologists, nailing shut the doors of the university from non-Americans.

The second world war also proved a pivotal time for psychocultural analysis that would reinforce the importance of literary study. "When confronted with the full extent of the atrocities of war, Americans strained for understanding," writes Edward J.K. Gitre. "What would lead a modern, ostensibly civilized nation to engage in the barbaric extermination of an entire ethnos, an ethnos that lived not in a distant land, not in some dark, forgotten corner of the globe, but next door and around the block? What in the German psyche could have inspired such aggression?"[76] In 1936, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues was founded to answer just that question,[77] and four years later, a presidential advisory group, the Committee for National Morale, was established to parse Axis propaganda and generate strategic American responses, including morale propaganda. The committee drew an interdisciplinary cadre of sixty, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Erich Fromm, Gordon Allport, and George Gallup. Many subscribed to the culture and personality school of anthropology and in their work forcefully argued that America must be a country of the "democratic personality," rather than succumbing to the putatively authority-embracing personality of Germany which the group believed had led to Hitler's rise. If "Americans were more open, individualistic, expressive, collaborative, and tolerant, and so more at home in loose coalitions,"[78] a critical approach to language and writing

[75] Graff, *Professing Literature*, 154.
[76] Edward J.K. Gitre, "The Great Escape: World War II, Neo-Freudianism, and the Origins of U.S. Psychocultural Analysis," *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 47, no. 1 (January, 1 2011): 18.
[77] Cathy Faye, "Education for Democracy: SPSSI and the Study of Morale in WWII," *Journal of Social Issues* 67, no. 1 (March, 1, 2011): 14.
[78] Fred Turner, "Machine Politics," *Harper's* (January 2019), Accessed October 4, 2019, https://harpers.org/archive/2019/01/machine-politics-facebook-political-polarization/.

might constitute a practice that corresponded with and even encouraged the democratic personality type.

And that exposure to stories might serve an important purpose to the nation was assumed in the establishment of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal initiative that aimed to put unemployed writers to work. Sara Rutkowski observes that the Federal Writers' Project stories were meant to both cohere national identity and reconstitute the national imaginary as one of coordinated, if different individuals:

> The FWP's documentary form was another reification of Roosevelt's desire to project the nation through its individual voices. In its attempt to conceptualize a pluralist collective identity, the Project stridently avoided scientific or scholarly appraisals of American society, opting instead for literary renderings and first-person accounts of individual experiences. These slices of life and selections of regional folklore would not only offer Americans a record of their culture, but would also, ideally, help foster mutual appreciation and expand previously narrow concepts of who qualified as American.[79]

Such an investment in narrative is indicative of the period's sense that texts and stories could have powerful implications for the nation's health. Narratives were not trivial. Narratives were receptacles of meaning.

Amidst social and political upheaval, developing a critical heuristic was, then, seen as a panacea to destructive strains of dogma and propaganda, and the study of American literature was construed as fulfilling a unifying, patriotic function. Canonization of American literature was thought to provide a bedrock of shared texts that would form a cultural repertoire and worldview, solidifying a sense of citizenship—and manifesting a sense of American superiority contrasted with a Soviet way of life, a tactic that would eventually become central to the CIA's soft power campaigns, which included strategic and clandestine partnerships with literary journals like the *Paris Review*. Anthologies were critical to this canon formation, and in the 1922

[79] Sara Rutkowski, *Literary Legacies of the Federal Writers' Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 18.

anthology *Literature and Life,* its editor Edwin Greenlaw even wrote that "the story of American literature [is] a powerful adjunct to training for citizenship."[80]

That literature might satisfy a civic function connected to the project of liberal democracy would prove a durable hypothesis. In 1945, when the Harvard Redbook, *General Education in a Free Society*, was published, Wilson's biting imitation of non-humanists viewing life as "mere life" because they thought literature "mere literature" was inverted by the report's author, James Bryant Conant, so that the instructor of literature was understood to "explore the great arts and literatures in order to bring out the ideals toward which man has been groping, confusedly yet stubbornly."[81] The literary figure was, then, conflated with the liver of the well-lived and ethical life, the good citizen. What's more, the development of the student's critical faculties was aligned with teaching the student to live. Conant theorized: "Learning is also for the sake of cultivating basic mental abilities; in short, to foster the powers of reason in man. The ability to think in accordance with the facts and with the laws of inference, to choose wisely, to feel with discrimination is what distinguishes man from the animals and endows him with intrinsic worth. Yet reason, while an end, is a means as well—a means to the mastery of life."[82]

It was against this backdrop that New Criticism gained a foothold in American literary culture, beginning with the New Critics' ur-text, John Crowe Ransom's 1937 "Critics, Inc." Though today the method of close reading espoused by the New Critics has become so dominant in English literary studies that it may be difficult to imagine literary study prior to it, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan observe that prior to the early twentieth century, literary criticism oriented around everything but language.[83] The turn was transformative. The New Critics found their

[80] Graff, *Professing Literature,* 153.
[81] James Bryant Conant, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945): 60.
[82] Conant, *General Education,* 168.
[83] Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3.

critical investments in the crafting of literary, connotative language, as opposed to ordinary, denotative language, locating the literary in how language situated within the text, rather than—at least in theory—adhering aesthetic to meanings mediated through extrinsic factors like biography, political affiliation, or historical context.[84] Conversely, New Criticism's bête noir was the search for political implication, which was cast as an ideological orientation falsely shaping human history in a narrative of progress leading toward the nowhere of utopia.[85] New Critics were not interested in projecting how a work might function as a sociocultural artifact or part of extratextual discursive formations, and the constellation of New Critics rejected much of the scholarly literary knowledge production that had dominated the academy, with special animosity directed toward its attendance to history and philology at the expense of form.[86]

Furthermore, in equating literary form with meaning and segregating literary language from ordinary language, the New Critical perspective siloed itself from the political scrutiny of the Cold War years. Years later, Brooks, recalling the development of New Criticism, suggested that it was a democratic and American approach, characterizing himself and Robert Penn Warren as un-cosmopolitan everymen: "Warren and I were not out to corrupt innocent youth with heretical views. Our aims were limited, practical, and even grubby. We had nothing highfalutin or esoteric in mind. We were not a pair of young art-for-art's sake aesthetes, just back from Oxford and out of touch with American reality."[87] On its face, then, New Criticism was politically safe, a mode with its own built-in protection of putative ideological hygiene.

As Vincent B. Leitch notes, New Criticism became the modus operandi of literary study after the 1950s.[88] Instrumental to this dominance was the installation of New Critics in university

[84] Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory,* 5.
[85] Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory,* 5.
[86] René Wellek, "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no 4, (July 1978): 614.
[87] Cleanth Brooks, "The New Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 87, no. 4 (Fall 1979): 593.
[88] Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism Since the 1930s* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 22.

posts, founding of publications, and the popularization of their methodology and axiology through textbooks including *Modern Poetry and the Tradition, Understanding Poetry, Understanding Drama,* and *Understanding Fiction*,[89] which were used frequently to teach literature. Many of their seminal critical manifestos were published in literary journals, not academic journals, such as *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review,* and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, which provided a wider, more populist distribution network for their textual heuristic. *The Kenyon* Review, the *Southern Review*, and the *Partisan Review* were all founded by New Critics, allowing the bypass of editors unsympathetic to their work.

Perhaps even more importantly, because New Criticism was "concerned primarily with the work itself,"[90] it was easily assimilable within university classrooms, where a new rush of students whose knowledge of literary history could not be relied upon uniformly became prevalent following the Second Great War. The GI Bill had exploded the number of higher education students, 51% of GIs using their education and training benefits,[91] conferring upon college education cultural currency enough that the president of the University of New Hampshire, Harold Stoke, would remark that it was GIs who constructed the notion that college education was compulsory in the United States.[92] While it had been predicted that GIs would show a preference for vocational or "practical" training, the liberal arts proved popular, 61.7% of the veteran students majoring in the liberal arts, while only 51% of non-veterans chose a similar academic course,[93] a phenomenon that Glenn C. Althuschuler and Stuart M. Blumin attribute to the perception that the liberal arts might provide the knowledge of how and why international diplomacy might work. By casting aside historical knowledge and positing that literary study

[89] Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 33.
[90] Brooks, "The New Criticism," 74.
[91] Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blum, *The GI Bill: A New Deal for Veterans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 83.
[92] Altschuler and Blum, *The GI Bill*, 87.
[93] Altschuler and Blum, *The GI Bill*, 92-93.

rooted in critical skill, universities were able to offer education to a wider array of educational consumers without developing remedial or prerequisite literary history courses. Still, it was assumed that English studies might provide a gathering function. As Gerald Graff asserts, "Critical pedagogy answered the needs of general education by providing access to the unified cultural tradition that was felt to be latent in the great literary texts beneath or above the merely fragmentary and incoherent flux of history and historical knowledge. Through the new pedagogy of explication, it was felt, tradition and cultural unity could thus be inculcated without providing elaborate historical contexts."[94] By the middle of the twentieth century, the turn away from research and specialized knowledge in English departments had settled a division. For the most part, rigorous study of narrow interests was restricted to graduate students. Undergraduates, who made up the vast majority of university students, were introduced to a critical approach.

However, the influence of this approach to English studies also reached over the walls of the university. If understanding literature no longer required deep historical knowledge or specialized study, literary expertise might be said to have been democratized so that it could now belong to anyone with critical faculties. In mass market creative writing manuals, the notion that writing, like literary study writ large, did not require formalized training gained traction; literary humanist truth-seeing required only taking time for self-improvement and the audacity to grant oneself the permission to write. Such a view of literary knowledge would create a pathway to literary amateurism and self-education via the consultation of manuals that assured that everyone did have the permission to write.

1.2 Creative Writing Education: Self-Expression & Criticism Make the Man 1920s-present

[94] Graff, *Professing Literature*, 185.

Throughout the early twentieth century, the number of Americans attending university rose rapidly, and in response to the demand for professionally useful educational opportunities, university leadership was apt to construe a university education as a road to both civic engagement and personal development. "There is no honorable calling in life," said Stanford University's first president David Starr Jordan, "that cannot be made a learned profession."[95] The teachable calling was a powerfully democratic and attractive notion that was picked up, troubled, and caused much irritation in English studies departments, particularly in the subdivision of creative writing education. A sense of writing as spiritually significant, rather than vocational alone, would fortify creative writing as a worthy course of study. Against this cultural backdrop, creative writing gained force because of its supposed role in the development of selfhood, its construction as self-expression, honed through the truth-seeing of criticism, to build the self of character. Yet creative writing education sometimes failed to make creative writing reconcilable with the myriad types of selves amongst aspiring writers, and this would eventually contribute to the creative writing manual's success.

University creative writing workshops outside of the University of Iowa first cropped up in American graduate schools during the 1940s.[96] The workshop practice generally took the form of the distribution of a creative work produced by a workshop member, followed by an evaluation and discussion of the work's successes and frailties by peer writers as the producer of the creative work listened silently. The pedagogic use of peer criticism predated the workshop, harkening back to Benjamin Franklin's gatherings of Junto, a mutual improvement club. Franklin had believed the worth of these debates obtained in the discussion of the writing's faults, recalling in his *Autobiography*:

[95] Charles Dorn, *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017): 119-122.
[96] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 146.

> Our debates were to be under the direction of a president, and to be conducted in the sincere spirit of inquiry after truth, without fondness for dispute, or a desire of victory; and to prevent warmth, all expressions of positiveness in opinions, or direct contradiction, were after some time made contraband, and prohibited under small pecuniary penalties.[97]

Not only was praise suspect at the Junto gatherings, it was suspected to be both sufficiently tempting and detrimental to intellectual gain to make it an offense worth fine. The pedagogical and intellectual worth of distributing work toward the end of constructive criticism that would define the creating writing workshop is, then, hardly a twentieth century phenomenon.

What *was* novel, however, was the understanding of creative writing as its own discipline. In the 1920s, progressive educators had begun using the term "creative writing" to refer to compositions produced by students that whose objectives were not primarily persuasive or informative but were instead assigned in the hopes that students would contribute some work of originality. Such a progressive orientation did not stop at the body of text however. Following from the notion of self-expression as self-development, Mark McGurl suggests, it was assumed that writing and selfhood might act in mutual reinforcement:

> Foremost among the original entities created by creative writing, it was assumed, would be the personality of the student [him or] herself, who in a circular process of literary-existential autopoiesis would find and fashion a self—call it a realist fiction of self—in the very act of creative self-expression. While this imaginative writing practice was understood to be based on personal experience, it might be more accurate to say that it completed the process of "experience" as theorized by John Dewey, for whom "mere activity" in the world does not count as authentic experience until it is "connected with the return wave of consequences" that load "mere flux . . . with significance." Intensifying the feedback loop that transforms actions into meaningful experiences, creative writing contributes to the "continuous formation" of the individual who is the sum of these experiences. It thus took the traditional concern for "character building."[98]

[97] Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. John Bigelow and Bruce Rogers (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, & Company, 1906), 61.
[98] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009): 85-86.

Marxist criticism had advanced the proposition that "aesthetic phenomena are to be regarded as a cultural activity of *homo sapiens* in his slow progress to self-realization within the matrix of socio-historical processes."[99] In the broader American context, however, neither aesthetics nor self-realization were substantively tied to historical materialism in the discourse on education. Fixated on the possibilities of the culturally and historically unmoored notions of the natural and universal, the progressive writer-educator Stanwood Cobb, for example, asserted that genius obtained through "submerging the self in the Ocean of Life."[100] If experience itself was universally accessible, so too, was its genius expression in the written word. For others, the rationale for creative education was less gentle. Henry Fairfield Osborn, a paleontologist and rabid eugenicist, who at the time headed the American Museum of Natural History, tied self-discovery to the cultivation of survivalist problem-solving and construed the lack of creative education as a feminizing of pedagogy that had stripped American students of their ability fortify to themselves in man's war of the will against nature.[101]

Primarily, though, early creative writing education, beginning in middle schools and high schools, was carried along by the tide of the student-centered approach borne out by figures in the progressive education movement like Cobb. This approach foregrounded creativity, originality, and expressions that deviated from authorized modes of communication. Cobb, whose prominent New England family included another well-known progressive educator, his cousin Ernest Cobb, knit self-expression with personal development, and viewed this development as closely related to durable temporality, an enduring time for self-improvement. Cobb theorized:

[99] Stefan Morawski, "The Aesthetic Views of Marx and Engels," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28, no. 3 (1970): 303.
[100] Stanwood Cobb, *The New Leaven: Progressive Education & Its Effect Upon the Child and Society* (New York: John Day & Co., 1928): 134.
[101] Henry Fairfield Osborn, *Creative Education in School, College, University, and Museum: Personal Observation and Experience of the Half-Century 1877-1927* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1927): 26-28.

> There is a time-factor in the development of character which is important. Lack of recognition of this pregnant fact may cause confusion. In other words, there is a definite progress and sequence in the growth of character—a sequence which follows natural laws. This growth, like that of a seed, begins from within and expands outward. As the seed first absorbs and expands, so the life of the individual, in its early stages, is chiefly an absorptive and expansive process. Self-expression is the keynote of character at this stage.[102]

Cobb believed that the logical consequence of self-expression was that the individual would become dutiful and then progress even further in character development to operate by the "rule of love," acting with altruism and a turn outward to the service of others. This was a teleology of selfhood animated by *making public* the self-in-process.

If early creative writing instruction situated itself in the humanism of the liberal education tradition and in diametric opposition to the early twentieth century push for professionally practical education, this making-public of the self and experience was nonetheless understood as socially significant. One educator, John T. Frederick, appealed to the notion that enfolding experience in the practice of writing represented a good beyond the market:

> Creative writing occurs when the pupil recognizes the dignity and value of his own experiences, and when he imposes upon that experience the discipline necessary to an attempt to transfer it to others. Creative writing is differentiated from other forms of composition by the absence of an external or utilitarian motive—by the fact that it is done for its own sake alone, and proceeds from experience which is recognizes as possessing intrinsic rather than practical or utilitarian value.[103]

This was not exactly art for art's sake alone. Frederick suggested that the transmission of experience brought weight to the experience itself. It was in making social the individual experience that experience accrued value. Cobb, for one, agreed, asserting, "gifted children of to-day should have the most abundant opportunity for rich, cultural experience and for creative expression, to the end that their fullest possible genius quality may be developed for the benefit

[102] Stanwood Cobb, *Character: A Sequence in Spiritual Psychology* (Washington: Avalon Press, 1938): 32.
[103] John T. Frederick, "The Place of Creative Writing in American Schools," *The English Journal* 22, no. 1 (1933): 9.

of themselves and of society."[104] For education to be "creative instead of acquisitive"[105] was for it to act as a corrective, in part, to consumer culture. Creative writing was part of a program for revising a mass culture prerogative seen as too commercially-driven.

At the University of Iowa, the generalist-critic Norman Foerster enfolded creative writing into the Iowa's new School of Letters during the 1930s, a major development in the discipline's institutional acceptance.[106] Foerster had studied under Willa Cather in high school and imagined that creative writing study would further distance English departments from philology in favor of grounding English literary study in criticism.[107] As such criticism became an important practice in creative writing study and creative writing was seen as a way to gain critical understanding from the inside out. The Iowa Writers' Workshop was officially created in 1936 under the direction of Wilbur Schramm—often credited with founding the study of mass communications—who believed "a (writer) teaches himself to write by a process of constant self-criticism."[108]

If criticism was the mode of the writer's education, the Progressive ethic, too, could be seen in the edict to "write what you know." This often repeated suggestion was one buttressed, according to Mark McGurl, by the regionalist character of the program which rejected both the alienated and fractured aesthetics of mass culture and cosmopolitan high culture in favor of the local and individual.[109] And despite the centrality of selfhood to this discourse, the postwar

[104] Stanwood Cobb, *The New Leaven,* 135.
[105] Cobb, *The New Leaven,* 136.
[106] Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005): 99.
[107] Myers, *The Elephants Teach,* 124-126.
[108] John C. Gerber, "The Emergence of the Writers' Workshop," in *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999): 226.
[109] McGurl, *The Program Era,* 148-149.

American writing workshop was animated by a "spirit of communal endeavor"[110] that drew upon the progressive education movement's interest in the transfer of experience and insight.

It is perhaps unsurprising given the genealogical tie between creative writing programs and the generalist-critic turn that mid-twentieth century creative writing instructors developed a notion that they did not teach creative writing at all, that "writing itself cannot be taught, but a discipline of criticism that is associated with it can be."[111] What they were referring to were two fundamental protocols: (1) the praxis of "reading as a writer," that is, reading analytically with an attention to technical choices and (2) the workshop method, which was itself a ritual of live collective criticism. If in the late nineteenth century English generalist-critics had offered university writing as "a determinate study, in however humble way, of literature in the making,"[112] the creative writing instructors of the postwar years conceived of critical reading as the closest approximation to teaching the task of creative writing, which they considered impossible. A critical reading might familiarize students with forms that they could then use in their own creative output, but the success of this output was held at a degree of remove from the critical instruction of the university. Emerson in 1832 had recommended "creative reading as well as creative writing" be employed in literary study to maintain individual autonomy of mind;[113] the wide humanist English department now might be said to have followed Emerson's instruction.

Creative writing as a practice was also proximal to New Criticism. Several of the New Critics, including Ransom and his disciples Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, were

[110] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 5.
[111] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 158.
[112] John F. Genung, "English at Amherst College," in *English in American American Universities*, ed. William Morton Payne (Boston: Heath & Co., 1895): 113.
[113] Seth Abramson, "From Modernism to Metamodernism," in *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017): 240.

themselves poets, and through a grant disbursed by the Rockefeller Foundation, Ransom's *Kenyon Review* provided three-year funding packages to a fiction writer, a poet, and a critic in each cycle.[114] More importantly, New Criticism furnished creative writing study with theoretical mechanisms compatible with the work of the aspiring writer. Despite the emphasis on formal description and analysis, New Criticism did understand its objective to be in some sense *toward* both the reader and the writer. On one hand, the critic ought to act as a sieve through which texts would catch or pass away in service of the goal to amend the canon.[115] On the other, Brooks suggested, without any substantive elaboration, that New Criticism offered a benefit to authors, writing, "Healthy criticism and healthy creation do tend to go hand in hand."[116]

Amongst some of the most theoretically vital work to creative writing study was that on the intentional fallacy. In their seminal essay on the topic, Monroe Beardsley and William K. Wimsatt posited that authorial intent is neither a tenable nor adequate basis of criticism.[117] The author's intention must be extricated from the author's success. Drawing on a bizarre paired metaphor, they elaborated, "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work…Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention."[118] Such a view offered an aesthetics of compulsory pervasive meaning. More importantly, though, if the creative work must "work" through these elements, it mattered not what the author's impulse had been, only whether the work could meet such

[114] Eric Bennett, "Flannery O'Connor, the Cold War, and the Canon," in *After the Program Era: The Past, Present, and Future of Creative Writing in the University*, ed. Loren Glass (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017): 87.
[115] Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 24.
[116] Brooks, "The New Criticism," 77.
[117] William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (July-September 1946): 468.
[118] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," 469-470.

standards, an assumption that motivated the critical discourse of the workshop and the rule that the writer might not speak. "The evaluation of the work of art remains public; the work is measured against something outside the author,"[119] Wimsatt and Beardsley asserted. And beyond the intentional fallacy ethic, many questions that occupied the New Critic—"Why does the poem begin here? What's the development at this point? Is this or is this not a fitting ending? What's the tone that's being set? Does that tone ever change? Is the poem, say, over-solemn or is it downright frivolous?"[120]—might be adapted for critical interpretations of workshop material. If the writer's intentions did not matter to the public, what the writer might learn from listening to the workshop critique was whether or not the intention had been conveyed.

The power of the writing workshop was bolstered by an influx of famed writers into teaching positions,[121] the rise of mass education under the GI Bill, and the success of early creative writing program graduates like Robert Lowell, E.L. Doctorow, Robert Penn Warren, and Flannery O'Connor, who had worked on her 1952 novel *Wise Blood* while studying at Iowa under Andrew Lytle—who eventually established the program at the University of Florida.[122] Wallace Stegner would further propose an idea that would gain influence and circulate for many years: that beyond the development of the critical eye, what creative writing programs offered was the *time* to write, a dedicated zone protected from financial anxieties and social pressures.[123]

And though Brooks would later state that New Criticism did not eschew literary history but simply assumed literary history would already be a part of English studies, these interpretations, by divorcing critical method from historical analysis, tacitly conveyed that

[119] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," 469-477.
[120] Cleanth Brooks, "Because Richness is the Point," interview by Joseph M. Ditta and Ronald S. Librach, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 49.
[121] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 153.
[122] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 154.
[123] Myers, *The Elephants Teach*, 162.

meaning and history could be separated; the workshop writer might produce meaning, therefore, with little concern for history or historical circumstance. This allowed for the method to be easily reproduced across universities. Following World War II, there were only five university creative programs in the entire country, a number that would balloon to approximately 400 within fifty years.[124] Perhaps the workshop's most stable recommendation, however, has been its ability to confer the decorations of accreditation legible to higher educational job markets as late in the twentieth century, the creative writing graduate degree did become a professional requirement in higher education and the go-to qualification for writers not bankrolled by legacy wealth and hoping to maintain time for their own creative production.

Yet the Iowa Writers' Workshop had, under Paul Engle, created a workshop culture of "masculinist logic" and "aggressive masculinity" that continued a "a literary history in which women's voices have been discouraged, ignored, or suppressed."[125] O'Connor, while workshopping her story "The Geranium," had to cease reading it during class. The men in the room had all begun groaning and claimed that her voice was difficult to listen to.[126] It was typical that men in the classroom would dismiss her fiction, veterans believing their own work better because based in personal experiences of war.[127] The program's location was, too, provincial and often backward; until the 1960s if a Black student was admitted, a haircut would require a trip to Cedar Rapids because no local barbers would cut black hair. When she attended the program in the 1970s, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley recalls, "the teachers tended to be men of a certain age, with the idea that competition was somehow the key, the Norman Mailer period.

[124] James B. Hall, "Recollections of the Iowa Writers' Workshop," in *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999): 14.
[125] Maggie Doherty, "Unfinished Work: How Sexism and Machismo Shaped a Prestigious Writing Program," *The New Republic* (April 24, 2019): https://newrepublic.com/article/153487/sexism-machismo-iowa-writers-workshop.
[126] David O. Dowling, *A Delicate Aggression: Savagery and Survival in the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019): 41.
[127] Dowling, *A Delicate Aggression*, 45.

The story was that if you disagreed with Norman, or gave him a bad review, he'd punch you in the nose. You were supposed to get in fights in restaurants."[128] Engle flamboyantly displayed a whip by his own typewriter[129] and constructed the workshop "to replicate the ruthless, often savage, rigors of editorial and critical scrutiny…throwing each student 'into competition with those around him'"[130] in a "creative writing equivalent of the *Hunger Games*,"[131] that would trouble even some of the most successful in the Iowa community, like Robert Lowell. O'Connor, for her part, would later refer to Engle as her "ex-mentor" while receiving the O. Henry Award.

As the workshop, also known as the "studio" approach, has ossified into the dominant mode of creative writing education in the United States,[132] its critical stance itself has become the object of criticism more and more frequently, however, the creative writing workshop once described by the writer Madison Smartt Bell as "a fault-finding mechanism."[133] Michael Lloyd Gray has observed that "workshop members can easily become arbiters/censors, dispensing verdicts on what is good writing and even on what should be written."[134] Still others have posited that "the workshop model seems designed to terrorize writers into quiescently writing the same poem or story over and over, thus bleaching the literary landscape to desert."[135] Does the workshop teach students how to write, goes the criticism, or does it simply build up resources for emotional regulation in the face of excoriation? Does it make great writers, or does it simply confer the decorations of accreditation legible to higher educational job markets?

[128] Doherty, "Unfinished Work.
[129] Dowling, *A Delicate Aggression*, 6.
[130] Dowling, *A Delicate Aggression*, 9.
[131] Dowling, *A Delicate Aggression*, 21.
[132] Michael Lloyd Gray, "Method and Madness in the Creative Writing Workshop," *English Journal* 89, no. 1 (Sep. 1999): 17.
[133] Madison Smartt Bell, *A Writer's Guide to Structure* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997): 6.
[134] Gray, "Method and Madness," 17.
[135] Lori Howe, "A Blossoming of Oranges: Dueling Houses of Criticism and the Creative Writing Workshop Model—An Existential Phenomenological Response," *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 6 (July 2016): 491.

More recently, the politics of traditional workshop values have been foregrounded and contested, particularly by writers at the margins. Although his moral authority has since been somewhat compromised by #MeToo Era allegations about his own abusive behavior toward female graduate students, Junot Diaz levied one of the most notable critiques of the workshop model in the introduction to an anthology called *Dismantle*, which was republished in the *New Yorker* in 2014 under the title "MFA vs. POC." In it, Diaz, the 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction and a MacArthur Fellow, decried the MFA as a site "too white":

> Too white as in my workshop reproduced exactly the dominant culture's blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc). In my workshop there was an almost lunatical belief that race was no longer a major social force (it's class!). In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing—at all. Never got any kind of instruction in that area—at all. Shit, in my workshop we never talked about race except on the rare occasion someone wanted to argue that "race discussions" were exactly the discussion a serious writer should *not* be having… In my workshop the default subject position of reading and writing—of Literature with a capital L—was white, straight and male. This white straight male default was of course not biased in any way by its white straight maleness—no way! Race was the unfortunate condition of nonwhite people that had nothing to do with white people and as such was not a natural part of the Universal of Literature, and anyone that tried to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature would be seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature.[136]

Central to Diaz's critique is the notion of "universality" as aesthetic commendation, and his is a critique that describes the universal as grounded in whiteness, which is to say, not universal at all. In remarking upon universality as tacitly a site of whiteness and the workshop as a factory upholding and sustaining coded whiteness as the bedrock of aesthetic value, Diaz called for the creative writing workshop to become "a fix to a past that can never be altered" and asked for an acknowledgment that aesthetics are themselves politically situated. To be a "fix" of such a nature would entail reconfiguring the assumptions of the aesthetic judgments embedded in an

[136] Junot Diaz, "MFA vs. POCs," *The New Yorker* (April 30, 2014), https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mfa-vs-poc.

education in the craft of writing. Though he did not explicitly mention New Criticism, his objections to the reification of universal aesthetics understood to operate in a sociopolitical vacuum was in large part a legacy of the influential critical school.

Such exclusionary problems in the workshop have made creative writing manuals a preferred method to learn to write for some. Nevertheless, several aspects of creative writing programs would reappear in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century popular creative manuals: the progressive notion that self-expression and self-development were intertwined, the idea that writing was learned not through acquisition of historical knowledge but investment in self-criticism and the deployment of forms, and the notion that finding the time to write was vital to creative production.

1.3 The Excluded Self Writing: The 1930s

Creative writing how-to books do not enjoy the same cultural capital or professional benefits afforded by institutionally approved workshop practices. However, beginning in the late nineteenth century during the turns toward professionalization and industrialization, American creative writing manuals developed into a veritable force which, Dennis Tenen argues, not only anticipated major structural studies of narrative like those of Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss but also evidence a "*longue durée* trend in the automation of creative labor."[137] This trajectory toward automation, toward standardization of narrative conventions, did include attempts to reimagine labor, however, specifically that of women. Amongst early creative writing manuals ran a notable fever of creative writing manuals composed in part as a response

[137] Dennis Yi Tenen, "The Emergence of American Formalism," *Modern Philology* vol. 117, no. 2 (November 2019): 257-258.

to the circumscribed access to formalized writing education for women during the 1930s, of which the recommendations were often informed by gendered exclusion.[138]

One of the most notable contribution of these books outside formal analysis has been an idea around which one might organize creative production. Indeed, one of the most vital features of creative writing manuals, the permission to write, gained currency in books written by women skeptical of academic and gendered gatekeeping. The permission to write was not merely the gravitation toward framing creative production as a craft which might be learned. It was not simply a claim of widespread writerly capability. Rather, the permission to write was imbued with a tension defined by two poles with one representing social forces and institutions directly or tacitly discouraging creative writing composition, the other the possibility of the individual allowing herself to endeavor for her pursuits because her potential for creativity was bolstered precisely by her outsider-ness from the established routes of accomplishment. In these books, it was not only that everyone could write but that writing was contingent upon a psychological action; the excluded self, specially equipped to stand out as creative, must bestow the self with license to write. Though some, like *Short Story Writing* by Blanche Colton Williams, were written by trained scholars, many were not, and while someone like Williams wished to think through literary shapes, many titles were more interested in drawing up a picture of how to achieve a writing lifestyle. Features that have remained characteristic of writerly self-help books such as the genre's demystification of genius, the notion of democratic access, and the celebration of individualistic effort are partially a function of the genre's inception as a reaction to gender-based exclusion from a supposed location for genius, higher education, even if the books have found wider audiences in the several decades since.

[138] Myers, *The Elephants Teach,* 141-142.

Early manual authors needed to stake out their authority. Their efforts to do so often took the form of distinguishing themselves from the university and sometimes chipped away at the authority of institutions of higher learning in the process. One writer of a 1939 creative writing guidebook even openly took swipes at academia, writing:

> English teachers and all short story courses put the cart before the horse. (So they do in art schools too, I hear.) In English courses, you study plot-construction and sharpen your anxious brows as the tailor does on the needle's eye, over all these necessities, before you begin your story. But you should tell the story first. Everybody can tell a story. If you have ever told a story to a child so that he would listen, you can tell a story. That is why I don't like critics, whether they are English professors, or friends, or members of one's family, or men of letters on literary views.[139]

The invocation of the act of oral storytelling evokes the social character of creative writing advice. When creative writing guidebooks gained force in the early twentieth century, communication had long been an important topic in advice literature. *A Help to Young Writers*, published in 1836, had explicitly critiqued writing instruction in schools, advocating instead for a view of composition as "conversation put on paper."[140] Some writing advice literature was seen as an alternative to formalized education. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American periodicals were important sources of advice reaching numbers of magazine readers that exceeded the number of students attending college. Though the advice dispensed in magazines was not specified for creative production, it promoted self-administered education in writing, depicting improvements in writing as foundational to improving social relations, for example *Harper's Bazaar* "emphasiz[ing] how letters enter into women's social lives… and recommend[ing] that writers spend more time reflecting on the content of their letters and that they consider the relationships they are building with others in their writing."[141] In advancing

[139] Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write: A Book About Art, Independence, and Spirit* (New Delhi: General Press, 2019): 216.
[140] President of a College, *A Help to Young Writers* (Albany: Packard and Van Buysen, 1836), 34.
[141] Alicia Brazeau, *Circulating Literacy: Writing Instruction in American Periodicals, 1880-1910* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016): 89.

relationship-building as a benefit of good writing, this advice literature knit together the idea that writing well was part of the good life.

Yet these didactic texts also suggested that if women were to cultivate their writing, it likely would not be assisted by their social relations with men. The advice writer Florence Hartley advised that men could not be relied upon for knowledge acquisition. "In conversing with professional gentlemen, never question them upon matters connected with their employment," she wrote "An author may communicate, voluntarily, information interesting to you, upon the subject of his works, but ... Professional or business men, when with ladies, generally wish for miscellaneous subjects of conversation, and as their visits are for recreation, they will feel excessively annoyed if obliged to "talk shop."[142] A woman seeking professional cultivation, then, could not rely upon social life to pursue knowledge. She could not depend on men or the institutions men depended upon. Rather, she must find a way into knowledge on her own, perhaps in texts like Hartley's conduct book itself.

For some early manual writers, being a woman was itself a special qualification for authorship. Esther L. Schwartz considered the traditional role of the woman to be perfectly suited to writing both in terms of psychology and in the experiences from which one might draw for composition. Mothers are creators, after all, and she took the term "brain child" to be quite poignant. Comparing the creation of the writer with the creation of the mother, she wrote, "There's no trick to writing, if you aren't all hedged around with worries about it. You just sit down with about the same amount of abandon you'd display if you decided to have a real baby. You just go ahead and have it, and no questions asked."[143] In fact, the experience of womanhood

[142] Florence Hartley, *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness: A Complete Handbook for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873):15.
[143] Esther L. Schwartz, *How to Become a Professional Writer* (Crompond, NY: Marstin Press, 1939): 8.

could prove even more instrumental than craft in a writing career, she believed: "If you are a woman, you can capitalize on every phase of your womanly activities, from having a baby to bringing one up, from wiping the children's noses to moulding the children's characters. You can be an Angelo Patri or a Dorothy Dix, an Anne Hirst or a Dorothy Bromley. You can make quite a lot of money without being a top-notch writer at all."[144] As a mother, too, Schwartz would have likely been familiar with the progressive education movement's promulgation of creative expression as a mode of self development.

To Schwartz, knowledge of motherhood, cooking, and housekeeping had enabled her own writing by providing her with a topical focus. "If I weren't such a good housewife, I wouldn't have anything to write about!" she declared. "Therefore, we become a professional writer, God willing, (and us working) BUT we hold onto our job. We don't gallivant, at the first finished script to Greenwich Village, with a long bob and a slim purse. No indeedy, we don't. We sit right at home and work like the dickens, and when I say work, I mean WORK."[145] Cosmopolitanism and bohemianism were not prerequisites to writing for Schwartz. Instead, experience provided the writing subject, and writing ought to be understood as sustained labor as regular and perpetually urgent as housework. Indeed, her sneering tone suggested that she considered an attachment to the romantic idea of writing was rather vapid and ought to be replaced with an attachment to writing as labor. Such an attachment to work ethic was also the key engine of Mary Roberts Rinehart's *Writing is Work*. In the 1939 book, Rinehart described her own career as a writer primarily as one of enduring labor in pockets of time in which she was free from her duties as a mother. Holding up her own example, she suggested that becoming a

[144] Schwartz, *How to Become a Professional Writer,* 86.
[145] Schwartz, *How to Become a Professional Writer,*10.

writer was not a matter of professional connections or industry knowledge but finding time to work and then persisting in the practice of writing:

> One day I went out and bought a large flat-topped desk, moved enough of the children's toys to find space for it, and closed the little wall desk forever. Things, of course, became easier later on. The boys began to go to school, and I had more time, for one thing. But they were not easy. I knew no one who wrote. I lived far away from New York. I had never heard of a literary agent. The name of my first book publisher was achieved by the simple method of taking a book from the bookcase. And the letter they wrote me accepting the book was read to me over the telephone while I was at the butcher's…I have little or no patience with those writers who use temperament as an excuse for not working, and no belief at all in inspiration. I write now as I always have, when I can find the time for it.[146]

In Rinehart's estimation, there was little room to make excuses. She had allowed her weight to drop to ninety-six pounds as she attempted to forge a career. She had little help around the house. Someone in the house was always sick. Her life has not been "the usual picture of the professional writer…sit[ting] calmly and with dignity at his desk or his typewriter."[147] But her life had been one of writing because she had willing to work in whatever little folds of time she could find.

Of these books, perhaps the best known today and most subversive is Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, a 1936 book with chapter titles like "You Do Not Know What Is in You—an Inexhaustible Fountain of Ideas," "The Tigers of Wrath Are Wiser Than the Horses of Instruction," "Know That There Is Often Hidden In Us a Dormant Poet Always Young and Alive," "Imagination is the Divine Body in Every Man," and "Everybody is Talented, Original, and Has Something Important to Say" that indicate the inclusive, inspirational, and democratic ethic of its author—if not a rigorous engagement with literary technique. To Ueland, like Progressive educators, all individuals were talented because all individuals had something to

[146] Mary Roberts Rinehart, *Writing is Work* (Boston: The Writer Inc., 1939): 11-12.
[147] Rinehart, *Writing is Work*, 13.

express. “Everybody is Original, if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself. But it must be from his *true* self and not from the self he thinks he *should* be…[I]f you speak or write from *yourself* you cannot help being original,”[148] she wrote. She believed the problem was not that creativity was unevenly distributed but that “murderers of the creative impulse” like critics and mean-spirited family members too often were victorious.[149] While Ueland did not directly critique men, she codes creative suppression as male. Amongst the worst murderers are husbands and older brothers. Ueland further offered advice meant to address what she viewed as problems specific to women, advocating for an adherence to one’s own voice, which she linked to one’s childhood self, over the self approved of by others and bound by duty. In one passage, she described a woman who is a gifted comic writer but barely writes:

> Like many of the most talented and funniest people, she is too nice and unconceited to work from mere ambition, or the far-away hope of making money, and she has not become convinced (as I have) that there are other reasons for working, that a person like herself who cannot write a sentence that is not delightful and a circus, should give some time to it instead of always doily-carrying, recipe-experimenting, child-admonishing, husband-ministering, to the complete neglect of her Imagination and creative power. In fact that is why the lives of most women are so vaguely unsatisfactory. They are always doing secondary and menial things (that do not require all their gifts and ability) for *others* and never anything for themselves. Society and husbands praise them for it (when they get too miserable or have nervous breakdowns) though always a little perplexedly and half-heartedly and just to be consoling. The poor wives are reminded that that is just why women are so splendid—because they are so unselfish and self-sacrificing and that is the wonderful thing about them! But inwardly women know that something is wrong.[150]

To Ueland, good writing was a product of subverting gendered duty and gendered unhappiness, giving oneself the permission to write, rather than submitting to the prescribed tasks of women’s domestic life. The permission to write could be granted because, though women might be excluded from various spheres of cultural influence, there was an inherent

[148] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 12.
[149] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 15.
[150] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 128-129.

creative power in all individuals, perhaps especially women, and she suggested that mothers close their doors for an hour each day, telling their children, "Mother is working on her five-act tragedy in blank verse."[151] The permission to write was, then, very much the permission to act not as a woman *should* according to others. It was the permission to take time beyond the family.

Ueland's rhetoric grounded further in the "therapeutic ethos" that T.J. Jackson Lears has posited was a key development of the early twentieth century. "For the educated bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century, reality itself began to seem problematic, something to be sought rather than merely lived. A dread of unreality, a yearning to experience intense 'real life' in all its forms…energized the spread of the therapeutic ethos."[152] To Lears, this psychology replaced a previous paradigm of Protestant self-denial and was spurred both by the professionalization of medical labor and technological advances that had precipitated a new form of life for privileged Americans, differentiated from the "reality" of agrarian life and labor. The result was a new seeking of vitality to fix a growing sense that the self was incoherent, fractured, falling away:

> The worship of growth and process in the therapeutic ethos was closely allied with other transformations in American culture… At the most obvious level, the therapeutic injunction to "let go" eased adjustment to the rhythms of life under corporate capitalism. [G. Stanley] Hall, for example, assumed that modern work would be degrading and that workers therefore needed regular bouts of revitalizing leisure. "Everyone, especially those who lead the drab life of the modern toiler, needs and craves an occasional 'good time,'" he acknowledged. "Indeed we all need to glow, tingle, and feel life intensely now and then." According to therapists like Hall (and social theorists like Lippmann), liberation should occur in homeopathic doses. Even self-styled "philosophers of play" like Gulick argued that play impulses should be organized and channeled in "healthy" directions.[153]

Ueland's self-improvement time was not irresponsible time, then. Rather, Ueland gestured toward a pervasive feeling of wrongness amongst women. Women were unwell,

[151] Ueland, *If You Want to Write,* 130.
[152] T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," *Advertising & Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000).
[153] Lears, "From Salvation to Self Realization."

malaised by a lack of imaginative recreation. Yet Ueland emphasized the necessity of discipline, too, as she advocated for sustained bouts of self-improvement time: "[I]f you would only persist. If you would continue to be alone for a long time…you will be rewarded: thoughts, good ideas, plots for novels, longings, decisions, revelations will come to you."[154] If Rinehart and Schwartz had, in fact, given themselves such permission, they were less interested in it as stealing time for the self as in elaborating such time as working time, recasting the practice of writing around family obligations as legitimate. Nevertheless, each of these writers was intent upon recommending how one might fit artistic practice into the seemingly impenetrable schedules of a woman's life.

Throughout *If You Want to Write* Ueland returns to the notion that one ought to seize time for self-improvement. Often, this time takes on an outlaw quality, as when she observes that great artists "dare to be idle."[155] Within this framework, the permission to write is also the permission not to follow the pace of ideal productivity but to enact "moodling—long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering."[156] Similarly, one early writer of creative writing manuals, Dorothea Brande, suggested that writing well required entering into an "artistic coma," a "strange, aloof, detached period" that is "time to dream, to sit idle" in which "something is at work, but so deeply and wordlessly that it hardly gives a sign of its activity till it is ready to externalize its vision."[157] Brande provided anecdotes of those who had found "time-fillers" through which they might reach the artistic coma, and many included feminized activities like those of the "woman novelist [who] found, during the war years, that she spun stories as fast as she knitted, and turned herself into a Penelope of the knitting needle, raveling a square of scarlet

[154] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 59.
[155] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 41.
[156] Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 43.
[157] Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (Midwest Journal Press, 1934): 76.

wool and starting on it again whenever she had a story 'simmering'" or the one that "said that she embroidered initials on everything she could lay hands on."[158] Other artistic coma inducers were taking baths and lying in a room with the lights turned off. Tacitly, Brande suggested that women might invert gendered conventions, using the activities expected of them to generate a fecund creative mental state. She suggested that women make self-improvement time out of the feminized schedules of their lives, construct something for the public sphere with what was afforded by the private sphere.

Despite her focus on the artistic coma, Brande construed the writer as binary, two parts with different temperaments, one willing and one willful. To be a writer was to cultivate a harmonious unity between the two. One "is adult, discriminating, temperate, and just," she wrote. "It is the side of the artisan, the workman, and the critic rather than the artist. It must work continually with and through the emotional and childlike side, or we have no work of art. If either element of the artist's character gets too far out of hand the result will be bad work, or no work at all. The writer's first task is to get these two elements of his nature into balance, to combine their aspects into one integrated character."[159] The writer was someone, in this view, who had calibrated her selfhood, and writing well was not merely an issue of acquiring and correctly applying techniques. It was, instead, thoroughly entangled with the project of self development. Knowing that a balanced self had been attained provided the aspiring writer was one way to imbue oneself with the permission to write. What's more, like Ueland, Brande believed in the pervasive originality of individuals and construed honesty—that Arnoldian quality of the beauty-seeing critic-academic—as overlapping with the permission to write:

> It is well to understand as early as possible in one's writing life that there is just one contribution which every one of us can make: we can give into the common pool of

[158] Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, 66.
[159] Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, 12.

> experience some comprehension of the world as it looks to each of us. There is one sense in which everyone is unique... If you can come to such friendly terms with yourself that you are able and willing to say precisely what you think of any given situation or character, if you can tell a story as it can appear only to you of all the people on earth, you will inevitably have a piece of work which is original.[160]

Once more, a body of specialized or formalized knowledge gleaned through institutional resources was not what qualified one to write. Rather, it was a relationship to the self, a willingness to be most oneself and most express oneself that made one a writer.

1.4 Why Didn't Creative Writing Manuals Disappear?: The Selfhood Question

One might question why creative writing manuals didn't turn out to be a passing fad. The success of creative writing guidebooks was not guaranteed by its early authors, and guidebooks might have floundered after the 1930s. Following the explosion of creative writing guidebooks, World War II interrupted business-as-usual, and in mid-century American culture, the work of fashioning oneself as a writer could be understood as dangerously subversive or an indulgent neglect of one's other responsibilities such as childcare or work tied to steady compensation. Through the long middle of the twentieth century, creative writing was seen in somewhat schizoid terms—what could either land you an unfortunate sitting with the House of Un-American Activities or a role as a countercultural hero—in an America where the question of *how to be* was troubled, pulled between two poles: one representing an investment in conformity and the other one of freedom, self-expression, and autonomy. The books' survival required two things: that creative writing be seen as an attractive activity to potential readers and that the manuals be understood as viable and useful resources for the task of becoming a writer.

[160] Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, 57.

Creative writing guidebooks were helped along by a new therapeutic ethos that buoyed the self-help genre, and in combination with a notion that writing and narrative held therapeutic possibilities, positioned creative writing as a valuable practice. In 1994, Arlie Hochschild would argue of the preceding twenty years, "[A]dvice books, like other commercial and professional conveyors of guidance, are becoming more important while traditional spheres of authority, families and to a degree churches, are becoming less so."[161] This fracturing of traditional spheres of influence and the amplification of self-help books as a viable way to understand oneself as an individual and social actor paved the way for creative writing manuals to gain traction. Ossifying the permission to write as a characteristic feature of the genre, guidebook writers offered an antidote to the potential ambivalence of aspiring writers. The permission to write offered a paradigm for the aspiring writer to see the self as independent, defiant enough to see through unjust systems and "the man," yet nevertheless socially valuable and not at risk of becoming a social pariah.

The manual's permission to write, with its dimensions of discipline and artistry, could then operate, I'd argue, as the permission to rebel *safely*. Writing was not understood merely as an activity but as a way to organize selfhood at a time when anxieties around how precisely a person should be troubled the American zeitgeist. To some extent, writers have often rebelled safely—the critic Harold Bloom, for one, forcefully argues in his *The Anxiety of Influence* that "poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness,"[162] a reading that theorizes the work of literature as fundamentally a radical "misreading" of one's artistic forbears, even as one might be "imprisoned"[163] by the historical influences through which the writer

[161] Arlie Hochschild, "The Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life and the Abduction of Feminism: Signs from Women's Advice Books," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 11, no. 2 (May 1, 1994): 2.
[162] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 95.
[163] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, xiii.

understands what literature is and how it is made—but the permission to write answered American anxieties of the long mid-twentieth century regarding the selfhood and conformity that might have threatened writing practices. By adapting and emphasizing a notion that appeared in *Self-Help* by the Scottish doctor Samuel Smiles, the 1859 book called the "bible of mid-Victorian liberalism," manuals suggested that self-help was a way to manage peer opinions of oneself.

Throughout the book, which was reprinted three times in the first month after its sale alone and enjoyed geographical reach as a bestseller,[164] Smiles emphasizes the need to nurture a self-culture, a term he'd borrowed from the Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing. The preacher had defined it in an 1838 speech as "the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature."[165] The term denoted some degree of self-esteem and self-care but also insinuated that there were metacognitive functions aimed at self-improvement such as "watching" passions, impelling one's personal power, administering one's faculties on the problem of growing one's faculties, and shifting one's thoughts and concentrations. In Smiles's book, the need for the management of self-culture, which he used roughly interchangeably with self-respect, pointed, in part, outward. Combining Channing's notion with Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, in *Self-Help,* self-respect was a way to manage the responses of others to the individual since "to think meanly of one's self, [sic] is to sink in one's own estimation as well as in the estimation of others. And as the thoughts are, so will the acts be. Man can not aspire if he look down; if he will rise, he must look up."[166] Thus, managing self-culture was a technique not only applied to the self; the self was nearly a proxy of one's peers, so that

[164] Jeffrey Richards, "Spreading the Gospel of Self-Help: G.A. Henty and Samuel Smiles," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 2 (1982): 52.
[165] William Ellery Channing, *The Complete Works: With an Introduction* (London: Routledge): 12.
[166] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: Ward Lock, & Co, 1859): 362.

self-regard would transfer to peer regard. The paradigm of the permission to write is a practice-specific iteration of this notion. One must have self-culture enough to write, and believing oneself of consequence enough to write is precisely how one seizes a place in one's society or peer respect. Writing becomes a way to write one's destiny as a social actor, an appealing, if perhaps false, offering from guidebook writers.

Such a trope was important because during the postwar years, the problem of the self as social actor became increasingly defined as a negotiation between individuality and consensus or conformist culture. While many scholars have defined the postwar years as a time of national ideological unity, stemming from a "centripetal impulse" following the war, Wendy Wall dates the construction of a consensus culture back to the 1930s and argues that it was an effort sustained over three decades by diverse coalitions including business and advertising executives, governmental leaders, interfaith activists, and cultural elites who believed consensus could both prop up the American economy and define an American culture that included newly enfranchised Black Americans and immigrants.[167] The demand for a unity that would bolster war efforts during the Second Great War, contribute to a healthy American economy, and define an American Way was apt, however, to also produce a troubling valorization of conformity.

Across varying degrees, the mid-century consensus culture marked plenty of expression taboo, from the inquiries of the House Un-American Activities Committee to more localized disciplining of perceived deviant behavior. Much of this disciplining rooted in cultural production. The peculiar nature of the Cold War was, after all, its accumulation of ideological proxies, real or imagined. If it was on one hand a war of oppositional political economies and nuclear tensions, it was also a war in which US-Soviet antagonism often flowed *through* culture

[167] Wendy Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 5-7.

or, in the case of domestic witch hunts, in which cultural milieus were understood as potential containers for enemies within. Authors blacklisted under McCarthyism included the likes of Lillian Hellman, W.E.B. DuBois, Dashiell Hammett, and Orson Welles. And in 1955, the scholar Warren Breed articulated forms of social control in newsrooms that led to "slanting," the omission of discussion of particular topics or orientations towards subjects. Though Breed's study centered around conventional journalists, not writers of "more narrative" stories, what was clear was that writing could be seen as a risky endeavor that subjected one to scrutiny.

One explanation of the attractiveness of creative writing situates in precisely the conflict between conformity and individualism. To sociologist David Riesman, author of the 1950 text *The Lonely Crowd*, character types like those studied by the Committee for National Morale were a useful conceptual canister for describing the relationship between society and individual. He described a character type of his contemporaries, the outer-directed person "whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others."[168] In essence, Riesman defined the midcentury problem of the self as one of the individual's relationship to conformity, which produced a sense of alienation amongst the crowd. "If the other-directed people should discover how much needless work they do, discover that their own thoughts and their own lives are quite as interesting as other people's, that, indeed, they no more assuage their loneliness in a crowd of peers than one can assuage one's thirst by drinking sea water, then we might expect them to become more attentive to their own feelings and aspirations."[169] Writing in 1950, Riesman noted that the outer-directed person of the moment had become enamored of craftsmanship and older forms of play like folk dancing.[170] To

[168] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character*, with Foreword by Todd Gitlin, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001): 8.
[169] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 307.
[170] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 295.

Reisman, autonomous play had been compromised by outer-direction, but craft hobbyists looked to the craft for a sense of the inner-directed person's stable ideology and identity.[171] While Riesman spoke specifically of material crafting, creative writing shared in its idiom a notion of itself as a craft. If the conformity of outer-direction prompted a desire for more inner-directed play, creative writing was an activity that combined aspects of both characters to meet the individual's perceived needs. And manuals were especially suited to offering the outer-directed person's desire to have his life modeled.

In the years after World War II, the critic Malcolm Cowley observed what he believed to be a new phenomenon in letters typified by writers like Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, and Ralph Ellison, that he called "personalism." Cowley believed that these writers had seized upon a new approach to narrative voice. The personalist novelist "seem[ed] to believe that the author himself should be a personality instead of a recording instrument, and therefore he ke[pt] trying to find a personal approach and a personal manner of writing."[172] The personalist, to Cowley, made his own subjectivity emphatic in the narrative. He did not bow to the conventional artifice in which the narrative proceeds as though relayed from a "neutral" vantage, the author seemingly air. Cowley did not consider that the persona of the narrator might still be a representation separate from the author's identity. Rather, his essay revealed a fascination with the promise of the realness, a realness intertwined with the author's singular voice. This sense that the real voice, the authentic voice was the key feature of creative writing would bolster the permission to write's ethos that one's authority was defined by one's truthfulness to the self, and that literature might be a locus of realness also explains its broad appeal.

[171] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 292.
[172] Malcolm Cowley, "Personalism: A New School of Fiction," *The New Republic* (October 18, 1954): 17-18.

The attraction to perceived authenticity has been described by Arlie Hochschild in her seminal work, *The Managed Heart* in which the sociologist elaborates the commercialization of emotion and affect in the second half of the twentieth century. If emotion itself had been enveloped by business, if emotional labor was now omnipresent and instances of it understood to be motivated by professional interests rather than personal ones, one result was a widening of the appeal of authenticity. "[A]s a culture, we have begun to place an unprecedented value on spontaneous, 'natural' feeling," she wrote. "We are intrigued by the unmanaged heart and what it can tell us. The more our activities as individual emotion managers are managed by organizations, the more we tend to celebrate the life of unmanaged feeling."[173] In Hochschild's estimation, the amplified interest in authenticity was a cultural response to corporate guile,[174] but it also might be tracked back to anxieties around the sense of unrealness in conformist culture as well. This authenticity hunger made the idea of self-expression appealing, even to aspiring writers of little or no training. Deliberate, sophisticated composition was not the only object. Unabashed realness was welcome to those put off by a sense of pervasive phoniness. And literary knowledge had been primed as the locus of truth-seeing or a seeing of the real, by the literary humanists of English studies departments at the beginning of the century.

During the 1950s, a countercultural ideal "hold[ing] that the paramount ailment of our society is conformity, a malady that has variously been described as over-organization, bureaucracy, homogeneity, hierarchy, logocentrism, technocracy, the Combine, the Apollonion"[175] came into being in the United States. To Thomas Frank, the countercultural ideal was personified in the Beats. The writer was not simply cloistered in a closet with a desk. The

[173] Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1983): 190.
[174] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 192.
[175] Thomas Frank, "Why Johnny Can't Dissent," in *Cultural Resistance Reader* ed. Stephen Duncombe (New York: Verso, 2002): 317.

writer was louche, druggy, promiscuous, making Dionysian grabs at the vitality, the "real" life that had been, as Lears suggests, understood missing from bourgeois life since the beginning of the twentieth century. Such an image of the writer was not entirely new. As Andie Tucher has observed, journalists began writing about themselves, the job of writing and what it did, during the Civil War[176], and the image of the journalist was, in their hands, one of beer-guzzling Bohemianism. According to Tucher, the construction of the Bohemian writer took hold at a New York pub called Pfaff's established in 1856:

> What distinguished the Pfaff's group was the same trait that characterizes Bohemian bands in general: their shared conviction that they were different from everyone else around them. Taken together, their insouciance about money, their devotion to their art, their unconventionality, and of course their talent made them feel radically, irremediably *not like* other people even as they were like each other, a community apart, exclusive and close-knit and special, enjoying a "sentiment of fraternity," recalled one years later, "such as I have not since observed." It was their membership in a small, gifted, unorthodox, and borborygmic band that gave them their deepest sense of *themselves.*[177] (Emphasis added.)

During the war, journalists published memoirs that evidenced their commitment to identities as "rakish, raffish, irreverent adventurers."[178] If the mid-twentieth century was a time in which the relationship between conformity and selfhood was confused, such an image was intoxicating. To enter a community of writers, even one not gathered by space but practice alone, was to both belong and to be subversive. It was through inclusion in the group that one might attain self-knowledge. By the time of the Beats, the writer figure enjoyed a modicum of countercultural currency, and, just as importantly, appeared to be having a wild time doing it. The desirability of writing may be, to some aspiring writers, the countercultural currency with its promise of anti-establishment pleasure and experiential carnival.

[176] Andie Tucher, "Reporting for Duty: The Bohemian Brigade, the Civil War, and the Social Construction of the Reporter," *Book History* 9 (2006): 132.
[177] Tucher, "Reporting for Duty," 137-138.
[178] Tucher, "Reporting for Duty," 142.

However, that writing appealed to a desire for the real, the wild, and the playful was not enough to ensure the long life of creative writing manuals. More practically, the writer hero needed very little, requiring neither the space of the dancer, the materials of the painter, the instrument of the musician, or even, if the New Critics had much to say about, significant training in literary history or specialized literary knowledge to voice the countercultural truth. Creative writing also needed to be positioned as relatively safe, a tall order in the wake of McCarthyism—some writers were "driven," in the words of Arthur Miller, to leave the country in de facto "political exile" by the paranoid atmosphere and attendant "sense of impotence, which seemed to deepen with each week, of being unable to speak accurately of the very recent past"[179]—and guidebooks needed to be positioned as reasonable aids.

This object was accomplished through the discourse of therapeutic writing and narrative, which conferred to creative writing an aura of hygiene and propped up the self-help genre as one that was practical and socially beneficial. Following World War II, the perceived social benefits of selves made healthy through communicative therapeutic processes became more a part of public discourse with the passage of the National Mental Health Act in 1946. This legislation provided federal funding for the National Institute of Mental Health. Following World War II, it was increasingly clear that mental illness affected many Americans, including military personnel, and the NIMH would suggest that treatment might stave off acute mental pathologies. In 1955, the Mental Health Study Act proposed "an objective, thorough, nationwide analysis and reevaluation of the human and economic problems of mental health."[180] If the therapeutic ethos had been, as Lears suggests, developing since the early twentieth century, the significance of

[179] Arthur Miller, "Are you now or were you ever…?," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jun/17/history.politics.
[180] National Institute of Health, "National Institute of Mental Health." National Institute of Health. February 17, 2017. https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/nih-almanac/national-institute-mental-health-nimh.

therapeutic practice was now reinforced through policy measures that construed mental health as in the interest of the public good, a public good that included economic vitality. During this period, psychotherapy, once limited to those with acute mental illnesses, was increasingly normalized. The first half of the twentieth century had been one of prevailing trauma for the entire country, one in which dizzying modernity indexed by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement had succumbed to war of a scale previously unimaginable. These traumas helped to usher in psychotherapy as a middle class and relatively normative practice. As middle class Americans were introduced to talk therapy processes, autobiographical narration was foregrounded as a path to health, and the healthy mind was aligned with the notion of true selfhood in psychological theories influential through this period, including those of Karen Horney and William James.

Throughout the century, narrative as a therapeutic resource shimmered with possibility. Beyond the narration of patient to psychologist in individual therapy sessions, one of the most culturally significant events in the history of therapeutic narrative in America was the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935 by Bill Wilson. Amongst the AA steps, narrative was king, particularly in Step 4, "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves"; Step 5, "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs"; and Step 12, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."[181] Wilson had himself quit drinking by chaining himself to a bed while receiving the belladonna cure, a hallucinatory cocktail of deadly nightshade, prickly ash, and henbane.[182] Yet the protocols of Alcoholics

[181] Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001): 59-60.
[182] Howard Markel, "An Alcoholic's Savior: God, Belladona, or Both?", *The New York Times* (April 19, 2010): https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/health/20drunk.html?auth=login-email.

Anonymous gained national attention following the 1941 publication of an article on the group in *The Saturday Evening Post* by Jack Alexander. In 1939, there were 500 members of AA.[183] Following Alexander's article, AA membership surged to 6,000. By 1950, there were 100,000 members,[184] and that year Alexander returned to the group for a *Saturday Evening Post* cover story. "Once a community of language and experience has been established, it acts as a bridge over which the rest of the AA message can be conveyed,"[185] Alexander wrote.

In the 1970s, the idea that narrative as instantiated in creative writing might serve broader therapeutic applications took root. Raymond Luber Jr., a social worker, described implementing poetry writing therapy with patients "to organize their feelings."[186] Nicholas Mazza suggested the usefulness of poetry writing to alcohol rehabilitation therapies.[187] And Ellen J. Dehouske wrote of her work with adolescents suffering psychiatric illness, "Original writing is inherently therapeutic…Creative writing can be a disguise for self revelation."[188] Then, in 1986, James W. Pennebaker and Sandra Klihr Beall published the first major study on creative writing for therapeutic purposes and found that there were long-term health benefits to writing;[189] participants reported feeling "better," understanding their true feelings more, or not feeling pain when recalling a traumatic event.[190] The interest in therapeutic writing would become so prevalent that by 2016, 14, 284 studies on the topic were identified by a group of researchers at the National Center for Biotechnology Information.[191] Indeed, the relationship between narration

[183] "AA Fact File," Alcoholics Anonymous, 2018, https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/m-24_aafactfile.pdf
[184] "AA Fact File," 12.
[185] Jack Alexander, "The Drunk's Best Friend," *The Saturday Evening Post* (May 1, 1950): 75.
[186] Raymond F. Luber Jr., "Poetry Helps Patients Express Feelings," *Hospital Community Psychiatry* 24, no. 6 (June 6, 1973): 387.
[187] Nicholas Mazza, "Poetry: A Therapeutic Tool in the Early Stages of Alcoholism Treatment," *Journal of the Study of Alcohol* 40, no. 1 (1979): 125-126.
[188] Ellen J. Dehouske, "Original Writing: A therapeutic Tool in Working with Disturbed Adolescents," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 11, no. 2 (January 1, 1979): 66.
[189] James W. Pennebaker and Sandra Klihr Beall, "Confronting a Traumatic Event: Toward an Understanding of Inhibition and Disease," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 95, no. 3 (1986): 280.
[190] Pennabaker and Beall, 279.
[191] Olga P. Nyssen, et. al., "Does therapeutic writing help people with long-term conditions? Systematic review, realist synthesis and economic considerations," *Health Technology Assessment* 20, no. 27 (2016).

and therapizing has become so inextricable that the psychologist Jeffrey Kottler theorizes therapy as a collaborative drafting of a life narrative:

> In one sense the job of a therapist is serving as an "assistant biographer" in that our role is to help people to tell their stories (Holmes, 1999). We also help them to shape these narratives in such a way that they become heroic protagonists rather than helpless victims… The client begins the process by relating a version of events that are believed to be at the root of suffering. The therapist, in turn, responds with a reframed story designed to provide hope or a possible solution. The client then presents a different story that hopefully reflects new facets of the experience—and so continues a collaboration and coauthorship that eventually leads to a consensus.[192]

Meanwhile, narratives of "the writing cure" had circulated throughout the twentieth century. Authors, for example, were not inured to responding—arguably, inaccurately—that yes, writing was therapeutic. Ernest Hemingway, asked if he had a therapist, responded, "Sure I have. Portable Corona number three. That's my therapist."[193] Anne Sexton repeatedly said that poetry saved her life.[194] Virginia Woolf claimed, "Melancholy diminishes as I write."[195] Hemingway, Sexton, and Woolf each eventually committed suicide. However, glamorization has often muddied reception to their claims about writing's saving grace. If the writing cure somehow does not work, the social value, at least, will have been a worthy enterprise for pursuit. The mad writer figure in popular culture is also nevertheless the romantic hero. The mad writer figure is not simply weird or out of place; some quality of otherness might even be what is alchemized into brilliance—and the regard of others—through creative composition. Such images could be captivating. Creative output redeemed the psychic wound, in part by conferring the rewards of positive cultural reception. If writing operated as a form of salvation attractive to those nostalgic for inner-directed society, it also conferred the possibility of peer approval desirable to outer-

[192] Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 3-4.
[193] A.E. Hotchner, *Papa Hemingway* (New York: Random House, 1996): 152.
[194] Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters* eds. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977): 59.
[195] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf vol.2* (San Diego: Harcourt-Brace, 1977-1984): 98.

directed individuals. In offering the permission to write, then, creative writing guidebooks offer the chance to see the self healed, unified, redeemed.

When reviewed by the *New York Times* in 1995, the manual *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott was praised less for its orientation toward craft than its confirmation of what the review writer, Carol Muske Dukes, believed to be true about the identity of the writer. Lamott had assembled a "bag of tricks, which are not so much exercises as attitudes" that left Dukes "nodding in agreement." Dukes approved of Lamott's vision of what it was to be a self who writes:

> Writing, she makes clear, is not for the fainthearted, the easily bored, the fame-seeking. It is not for individuals who cannot face up to their own madness. "Then your mental illnesses arrive at the desk like your sickest, most secretive relatives," she writes. "And they pull up chairs in a semicircle around the computer, and they try to be quiet but you know they are there with their weird coppery breath, leering at you behind your back." Writers are outsiders, observers, recorders of weird coppery breath.[196]

The review suggested that what manuals offered their readers was not only a set of technical procedures for composition. Rather, a reader might be offered by the manual a paradigm for the writer's identity, and this identity was one in which qualities that might otherwise be pathologized, denigrated, sneered at, or dismissed could be alchemized into precisely what was meaningful and generated social bonds. Outsiderness or even mental illness could be vindicated by understanding oneself to be a writer.

If the self of mid-to-late twentieth century America might lie anywhere on a spectrum between the epitomic citizen to the outlaw, the ruined self in pieces to the instantiation of humanist ideals, writing was an appealing way to construct a self that was dangerous and yet palatable—perhaps even admirable. The storyteller could be the redeemed self of psychotherapy, the countercultural icon, the nonconformist conformist, and the bastion of realness perceived as

[196] Carol Muske Dukes, "Just Do It," *New York Times*, March 5, 1995, http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/08/17/reviews/lamott-bird.html.

missing from the twentieth century world. Storytelling was understood as a solution to the modern self.

1.5 Your Truth: Permission to Write in Contemporary Popular Creative Writing Books

Popular creative writing manuals vary widely, some focusing on a single craft element like dialogue, while others attempt a comprehensive overview of craft and others still take as their topic the writing life. Nearly all, however, invest to some degree in the notion that the writer must give themselves the permission to write, an idea that draws heavily upon the humanist and generalist-critic turn in English studies, the marriage between writing and self-development prevalent in literary studies discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and progressive education discourse, the democratizing ethos of 1930s creative writing books written by women that evidenced the ability to publish even without specialized knowledge and institutional support, and the therapeutic ethos that answered mid-twentieth century America's troubling of the relationship between individual expression and conformity. In a culture in which individual expression might be construed as anything between patriotic, rock 'n' roll, a threat to national security, a challenge to a narrow view of intellectual or artistic currency, a facet of health, and a feminist or anti-racist smashing down of barriers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the permission to write became a central feature of creative writing manuals.

In creative writing guidebooks, the tradition of self-education's self-improvement time is fortified by a reaction against the imagined space of the gate-keeping institution and against the spatialization of study within university walls in that restrictions on university study prompted the demand for writing texts to be used in self-improvement time outside of the geography of the university. Creative writing manuals' permission to write combines the notion that life itself

might serve as qualification to write, that dedicating oneself to practice in grand swaths of self-improvement time can compensate for a lack of training or genius, and even that writing one's story might form a healthier self and better citizen. The novelist Judith Guest, in her introduction to *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, explains of the text, "[W]hat this book does best and what it is all about—giving people permission to think the thoughts that come and to write them down and make sense of them in any way they wish—I don't know why this approach to writing should be so revolutionary; I only know that it is."[197] The permission to write was not revolutionary in 1998, or at least not novel; it had been posited by women writers since the 1930s.

However, the permission to write gained a new aura of credibility and possibility in the late twentieth century, bolstered by two important developments: the second-wave feminist movement and the canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminist Mystique*, in which she offered a diagnosis for women: "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother,"[198] precisely the problem that Ueland had hoped to help her readers avert. That same year, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, promising equitable wages for the same work, regardless of the race, color, religion, national origin or sex of the worker, and further legitimizing women's labor beyond the private sphere. From 1973 to 2000, labor participation skyrocketed for married women with children aged 20-44; the housewife-mothers with few options for fulfillment at the time of *The Feminine Mystique*'s publication was now three times as likely to work.[199] And that work, manuals posited, might be creative labor.

[197] Judith Guest, "Foreward," in *Writing Down the Bones* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998): xiii.
[198] Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963): 92.
[199] Claudia Goldin, "The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family," Lecture, American Economic Association Annual Meeting, Boston, MA., January 2006.

During the 1960s and 1970s, university ethnic studies spun out of the civil rights movement, and increasingly the American canon, which had been formed in the university, was critiqued for its lack of diversity. Alternative canons were proposed directly and indirectly by scholars, cultural groups like the Black Arts Movement, and writers like Samuel Delaney and Maxine Hong Kingston, whose landmark works were celebrated. If the canon had failed to value many voices, it followed that the new, wider canon might be filled with writers who looked very different than those who had been considered the bearers of genius until then, recuperating a broken literary system that had consolidated power around a small group of predominantly white, male, heterosexual writers. Both the feminist movement and the civil rights movement, then, conferred additional rungs of legitimacy to the notion that great writing might be produced outside the institutions and identities commonly associated with producing great books.

In the late twentieth century, a tension between the exclusiveness of publishing and the wide availability of literacy had been brought into view; most American adults could write *something*, though few published. Creative writing manuals dwell at the meeting point of these two phenomena, smearing the boundary through the suggestion that the time for self-improvement is pervasive and that what is not is personal confidence—a strain of self-education discourse stretching back at least as far as the 19th century self-education advocate Reverend Bela B. Edwards' *Biographies of Self-Taught Men*—so that successful creative writing is partially a matter of the time for self-improvement through the permission to write. For some writers, this permission to write may offer liberationist hope or a sense of empowerment that is badly needed.

However, the permission to write is also in part a commercial strategy; by constructing a paradigm of hope for the aspiring writer, the manual writer solidifies the manual's consumption

for a wide audience. One might surmise that the manual writer realizes very few people purchase how-to books to in order to be told not how-to but to-not; aspiring writers do not want to be told they cannot write well, write professionally, or write in a way that gives others pleasure and therefore ought to stick with selling health insurance. If the permission to write offers its readers optimism, its optimism is nevertheless one underwritten by the manual writer's objectives in the marketplace which may not be in the aspiring writer's best interests.

I suggest that even when the permission to write is positioned as a force against the unequal terrain of cultural currency, it rarely acknowledges the systemic and structural barriers facing many writers. In doing so, it construes the failure of the aspiring writer as the responsibility of the aspiring writer alone, even as creative writing books position their advice as authoritative. While the paradigm of the permission to write has opened up the possibility of hearing some voices that badly need to be heard, it has often done so at the expense of attending carefully to the political implications of craft or exploring new forms and has ignored the material realities that might make writing a far more distant goal for some than others, rehearsing the myth of self-help that time for self-improvement is omnipresent for those daring enough to take it. I do not wish to suggest that everyone can become a published, famous, or well-compensated writer. Yet aspiring writers who do not receive recognition are not only those who lack talent and discipline; some are talented and disciplined—and are not able to overcome substantial barriers that make becoming a writer, an already difficult task, that much more difficult.

Not all creative writing books articulate what they believe a writer reads guidebooks for. In one of the more modest treatments of the aspiring writer's possible goals, Janet Burroway suggests that writing should "hold a position in our society more or less like playing tennis. A

passable amateur tennis player may exercise her skill often, even obsessively, can involve some few others as partners and spectators, can struggle to improve and feel exhilarated by the struggle. It's impressive if she turns pro, but no one despises her for devoting a portion of most days to the game, even if no one will ever pay money to watch her play."[200] Such directness about the prognosis of the aspiring writer, such an acknowledgment that the aspiring writer likely ought not count on becoming a professional writer, is an exception though.

More common is the allusion to naysers, gatekeeping, or silencing mechanisms that have prevented the aspiring writer from becoming a writer previously. Lamott declares in a chapter called "Find Your Voice" that she frequently asks her students why they write, "and over and over, they say in effect, 'I will not be silenced again.' They were good children, who often felt invisible and who saw some awful stuff. But at some point they stopped telling what they saw because when they did, they were punished. Now…it is very hard to find their own voice."[201] It is unclear whether Lamott believes the aspiring writer writes because they want to express or want to be heard, want to give voice to their inner life or do so without incurring negative response, write what others have not wanted to acknowledge or be understood, or some combination of these hardly mutually exclusive impulses. Rather than elaborating the significance of the manual in the disruption of silencing, Lamott offers a neat narrative in which the wounded and silenced child learns to "write to expose the unexposed."[202]

What *is* clear, however, is the correctness of Lamott's sense that many people, having seen "awful stuff," wish to write about it and find a prominent strain of gatekeeping publishing professionals and writing instructors to whom the attitude that writing is therapeutic is anathema.

[200] Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996): xv.
[201] Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996): 196.
[202] Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 198.

In 2007, a fed-up literary agent named Kristin Nelson published a brief piece on the "Pub Rants" section of her agency's website that is representative of the anti-therapeutic view. Nelson wrote in the post that she was pleased to have obtained blurbs from *New York Times* bestsellers for one of her authors. She was listening to Kate Bush. These things she liked. But there was something irking her. Aspiring writers kept sending query letters gushing about how therapeutic and cathartic they had found writing their manuscript:

> This is a big mistake. Why? Because writing a memoir is not therapy or shouldn't be, so this is not a positive thing to spotlight. The truly terrific memoirists (ANGELA'S ASHES and THE GLASS CASTLE come to mind) understand that the writing of the work is an art form and only a certain amount of distance to the subject material can create that necessary objectivity so that the story can be crafted. Key word here is "crafted."
>
> Now, I'm not suggesting that some of these writers didn't experience a positive benefit from taking what were harsh and extraordinary childhoods and putting those stories on paper. They probably did but that's not therapy and what these memoirists actually understood is that readers aren't interesting [sic] in any one person's therapeutic story; these readers are interested in an inside look to a world they've never seen or have never imagined. A world that is unbelievable but true. A world that is unique but resonates with us. A story that captures a universal feeling and the reader senses the connection.
>
> That's what makes the memoir powerful. And if a writer doesn't understand the difference of what I'm trying to explain here, he/she will probably never have a memoir published.[203]

Nevertheless, Lamott declares it is in truthiness tied to the individual voice that authority inheres. "You need to put yourself at their center, you and what you believe to be true or right,"[204] advises Lamott. And this attitude in "Finding Your Voice" is not only appealing but contagious. One reader of *Bird by Bird* who claimed to have read the book wishing to learn not only about the pragmatic concerns of writing but also "what is means to be a writer," N.A. Turner, declared that one thing he learned from the book was "If you write about a subject you

[203] Kristin Nelson, "Writing a Memoir is Not Therapy," Nelson Literary Agency website, June 13, 2007, https://nelsonagency.com/2007/06/writing-a-memoir-is-not-therapy/.
[204] Lamott, *Bird by Bird,* 103.

are interested in, something about which you care passionately, chances are you have a lot to say and you're more likely to finish the story. Your reader will notice when you write about a subject matter you care about and he or she will likely be able to recognize pieces of his or her own life in what you have to say. So, be emotional in your writing, not subtle. Chances are you hit more nerves."[205] Turner had self-published his own creative writing manual *How to Write a Short Story: Everything You Need to Successfully Write and Publish Your Short Stories* a month before writing about *Bird by Bird*.

Lamott and Turner are not alone. Several creative writing books, marrying the humanist and progressive education legacies, locate the permission to write in truth-telling via self-expression. The novelist Ray Bradbury even suggests that if truth to oneself is the key to writing well, the writer must set aside conscious thinking, conscious crafting in order to be more honest. "The faster you blurt," he argues, "the more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the *only* style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping."[206] While one might presume that delegitimizing craft would render a manual useless, Bradbury mobilizes a seductive, if false, vision that offers recognition to the aspiring writer's emotional life. Without grappling with specific feelings about specific phenomena, Bradbury suggests that the aspiring writer's feelings are valid because these feelings are exactly the bedrock of truthful—therefore good—writing. In a florid passage, Bradbury conflates self-honesty with both a lack of interest in writing as a commercial endeavor and a lack of interest in experimentalism—which he codes as equivalent to highbrow elites—writing, "[I]f you are writing without zest, without gusto, without love, without

[205] N.A. Turner, "7 Lessons Learned About Writing from Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott," Medium, July 20, 2018, https://medium.com/publishous/lessons-learned-about-writing-from-bird-by-bird-by-anne-lamott-7ec93912902c.
[206] Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions, 1996): 13.

fun, you are only half a writer. It means you are so busy keeping one eye on the commercial market, or one ear peeled for the avant-garde coterie, that you are not being yourself. You don't even know yourself."[207] Why self-knowledge might be mutually exclusive from a desire for commercial success or the esteem of an avant-garde coterie is never expounded upon. Bradbury's interest isn't in advancing a logical appeal, after all, but in launching an emotional one. Be yourself, Bradbury declares; never mind those who have disregarded the feelings that make you an artist.

Like Bradbury, Stephen King finds honesty the constitutive characteristic of writing well; aesthetics are less important. In one of the more inane passages of *On Writing*, King supposes that honesty—a quality he never interrogates or describes with any thickness—can fulfill a compensatory function for the writer, a supposition he believes to be evidenced by, of all people, Ayn Rand. "Honesty in story-telling makes up for a great many stylistic faults, as the work of wooden-prose writers like Theodore Dreiser and Ayn Rand shows," King writes, "but lying is the great unrepairable fault.[208] To some extent, then, the permission to write becomes in King's hands the permission to write with little regard for poetics. While of course form and content are tied, this paradigm divorces the two, considering content king; how information is expressed becomes less important than what is. By focusing on honesty over literary style, King evades offending particular taste cultures, making his book a consumer item for a mass audience.

To King, honesty is a professional practice, but it is also a writerly priority taking precedence over craft, though he does indeed offer craft advice throughout the book. "The job boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave," he writes, "and then telling the truth about what you see. You may notice that your next-door neighbor

[207] Bradbury, *Zen in the Art*, 4.
[208] Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2000): 201.

picks his nose when he thinks no one is looking. This is a great detail, but noting it does you no good as a writer unless you're willing to dump it into a story at some point."[209] King's permission to write specifies the permission to include the crude, vulgar, so on, as long as it is honest. He addresses fears of reader reception, normalizing criticism through his own autobiographical example: "Not a week goes by that I don't receive at least one pissed-off letter (most weeks there are more) accusing me of being foul-mouthed, bigoted, homophobic, murderous, frivolous, or downright psychopathic."[210] King never considers whether these charges ought to prompt self-reflection. Rather, he conflates the inevitability of critique with the inevitability of specific criticisms. The regularity of these charges do not imply their validity but are an aspect of the job that the aspiring writer must, like King, learn to understand as the outcome of conveying inconvenient truths to those un-observant of reality. He implies that this is collateral damage of the successful writer.

In contrast, Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter argue the writer's true feeling is the vehicle to positive reader reception, asserting that work that is not found by the reader to be powerful is work that has failed a test of the author's emotional intelligence and ability to connect with what true feeling:

> Too many writers avoid their own strongest feelings because they are afraid of them, or because they are afraid of being sentimental. Yet these are the very things that will make beginning work ring true and affect us. Your stories have to matter to you the writer before they can matter to the reader; your story has to affect you before it can affect us. William Kittredge says, "If you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self."[211]

Though ostensibly Bernays and Painter recommend truth to oneself, in fact their advice is oriented toward an imagined aspiring writer who is not happy with self-regard alone, desirous of

[209] King, *On Writing*, 222-223.
[210] King, *On Writing*, 217-218.
[211] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 23.

approval. Bernays's and Painter's aspiring writer hopes that rendering the inner emotions of the self will confer social benefits. Bernays's and Painter's formulation is an attractive fantasy that rewards audacity and legitimizes emotional expression, emotional expression which in other contexts might be categorized as unprofessional, inappropriate, unwarranted, or dysfunctional.

Other guidebook writers are somewhat more subdued in their vision of the permission to write, construing literary technique as a craft to be learned, regardless of whether one fits a vague image of an intellectual elite. Conjuring the paradox of common literacy and the rare acknowledgment of the individual's writing, Roy Peter Clark observes in his *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* that the cultural economy may convey that writing is the work of the elect through exclusion. If this cultural economy has allowed reading to belong to the masses, it has retained custody of writing. His book, however, is meant to restore the binary. He, after all, understands that writing might be discussed as an art but is also a craft, not unlike blue collar labor. "Reading is a democratic craft," he argues, "Writing, in contrast, is considered a fine art. Our culture taps only a privileged few on the shoulder…If you feel left behind, this book invites you to imagine the act of writing less as a special talent and more as a purposeful craft. Think of writing as carpentry, and consider this book your toolbox."[212]

Like Brooks and Schwartz, Clark conveys his trustworthiness by juxtaposing himself with cosmopolitan elites. His persona is a guy looking out for the other guy, neighborly, American. "Our culture" is an object of some suspicion, maneuvering through stealthy and arbitrary processes of approval. Implicit in Clark's book is a distrust of gatekeepers, or what Morris Stein identified in the 1960s: "intermediaries of the field that legitimize certain works as creative and deny that status to others."[213] Such intermediaries or gatekeepers might include

[212] Clark, *Writing Tools*, 3-4.
[213] R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 215.

creative writing instructors, of course. Clark draws on distrust of intermediaries, and in temporalizing gatekeeping as an act of leaving behind, he positioned the time of creation as a time outside or after the academic calendar. His permission to write serves as a prototypical creative writing manual in this sense; its permission is the permission to slow down, to allow self-improvement time to drag out.

In contrast, John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* suggests that a vague world of readers is not particularly demanding, eschewing the demands of the gatekeeper, and even declares that his acquaintances have found a career in letters incredibly available. The permission to write is, then, less about ignoring the machinations of a greasy culture industry than about cultivating a writing practice and mobilizing sheer desire:

> I assume from the outset that the would-be writer using this book can become a successful writer if he wants to, since most of the people I've known who wanted to become writers, knowing what it meant, did become writers. About all that is required is that the would-be writer understand clearly what it is that he wants to become and what he must do to become it… [T]he truth is that, though the ability to write well is partly a gift—like the ability to play basketball well, or to outguess the stock market—writing ability is mainly a product of good teaching supported by a deep-down love of writing. Though learning to write takes time and a great deal of practice, writing up to the world's ordinary standards is fairly easy."[214]

Whether or not Gardner moved in rarefied circles, his conception of the aspiring writer's prognosis revealed an unresolved orientation toward genius. Some might have special faculties. Everyone requires a clear-eyed goal and labor. It would seem that the comparison between writing and basketball is rather different than comparing writing and the stock market. Each example, however, introduces an element of chance: the chance of genetics, the chance of the market's vicissitudes. These chances are weighted against a breezy, nearly disdainful view of industry and reader reception. Yet Gardner suggests that good teaching in combination with a

[214] John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991): ix.

love of writing can provide the primary propulsion to push past the blank, unpublished page or to establish his authority. In part, the permission to write serves a practical purpose for the writer of the contemporary creative writing guidebook, after all. The permission to write is a theoretical tool that justifies the aspiring writer's reading of the self-help book. Because Gardner was himself a teacher, the book acts as connective tissue between the reader at home and the school, erasing spatial limits. In this sense, he characterized his book as an unauthorized access point to higher education. The aspiring writer did not need to pay tuition. The writer needed self-honesty, love of composition, and to take the time to read the book.

While Gardner essentially suggested what aspiring writers needed was an education from *him*, other writers have offered a more capacious view of self-education. Austin Kleon, author of *Steal Like An Artist*, suggests that self-education is a function of following natural affinities, curiosities, and passions, writing, "School is one thing. Education is another… You have to be curious about the world in which you live. Look things up. Chase down every reference. Go deeper than anybody else—that's how you'll get ahead."[215] Again, self-education is despatialized. Self-education is practice. But most of all, self-education is a form of attentiveness to life itself. If, as William James wrote, "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos,"[216] Kleon suggested that the aspiring writer who focuses on what has meaning to them chisels life, filtering out what is not meaningful. Living in mindful truth to oneself becomes the prerequisite of writing well.

Bradbury also ascribes to a view of artistic production as a consequence of curiosity and experience, though his conception grounds not in selective but in *wandering* attention. Bradbury

[215] Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2012): 19.
[216] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1918): 402.

even more forcefully positions writing along a continuous line of general appreciation of the textures of life, however, arguing that *all* time, *all* life prepares the writer because life itself is how one builds the selfhood required of the writer:

> The Feeding of the Muse then, which we have spent most of our time on here, seems to me to be the continual running after loves…Nothing is ever lost. If you have moved over vast territories and dared to love silly things, you will have learned even from the most primitive items collected and put aside in your life. From an ever-roaming curiosity in all the arts, from bad radio to good theatre, from nursery rhyme to symphony, from jungle compound to Kafka's *Castle*, there is basic excellence to be winnowed out, truths found, kept, savored, and used on some later day. To be a child of one's time is to do all these things…By living well, by observing as you live, by reading well and observing as you read, you have fed Your Most Original Self.[217]

Stephen King echoes this sentiment that life itself provides qualification to write, even when life does not look as though it is preparatory work. Like many writers of creative writing manuals, King favors a narrative mode, and he tells a story of a young boy. In the story, the boy lived eleven years of his life without television, and when, finally, the box was turned on what he saw was a man dressed in an ape suit, running madly, murderously, a goldfish bowl plunked over his head. What he saw, too, were advertisements that struck his ears as poetry. He saw terrifying eyes and he saw Wild Bill, saw a friend trying to keep up. He saw on his television art. And now he is very grateful not to have always had that art. Had he, he might never have become Stephen King, because being deprived of television drew him to books first, or such is the story he tells.[218]

Across several creative writing manuals, the permission to write includes the permission to take time. "Take your lunch hour. Take your sick time. Sit in the bathroom and think about your writing. Take *all* the time you are entitled to at your job,"[219] suggests Stewart O'Nan. "Most

[217] Bradbury, *Zen in the Art,* 41-43.
[218] King, *On Writing,* 25.
[219] Stewart O'Nan, "Not Stopping: Time Management for Writers" in *Telling true Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide form the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007): 269.

people aren't as creative as they wish they were because they haven't mastered strategies for creating while life is going on around them,"[220] argues Eric Maisel. And Steven Pressfield implies that those who rationalize the failure to spend time on their craft because of personal dramas have even created the dramas because it is a form of attention-seeking more quickly satisfied, writing, "Creating soap opera in our lives is a symptom of Resistance. Why put in years of work designing a new software interface when you can get just as much attention by bringing home a boyfriend with a prison record?"[221] To these writers, the problem is not a dearth of time for, especially working class, writers. The problem is not taking time the time to write, misspending time, or failing to organize time around appropriate self conduct.

Amongst the genre's writers, time for self-improvement can sometimes include not writing, however. Like Brande who advocated for falling into an artistic coma through non-writing activities, Kleon suggests that the writer must view practice as viscous, spilling into other facets of life where its ideas take form: "Practice productive procrastination. Take time to get bored... Creative people need time to just sit around and nothing. I get some of my best ideas when I'm bored, which is why I never take my shirts to the cleaners. I love ironing my shirts—it's so boring, I almost always get good ideas…Take time to mess around. Get lost. Wander. You never know where it's going to lead you."[222] His permission to write is one that takes seriously the notion that the mind may be at work below consciousness.

Whether or not unconscious processes *are* effective mechanisms in the creation of the literary work, his advice supposes some privilege. Kleon presumes that the writer *can* take time to get bored, that not being busy is a choice available to his reader. It is assumed that the aspiring

[220] Eric Maisel, *Coaching the Artist Within: Advice for Writers, Actors, Visual Artists & Musicians from America's Foremost Creativity Coach* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2005): 95.
[221] Steven Pressfield, *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Writing Battles* (New York: Black Irish Entertainment, 2002): 25.
[222] Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, 65-67.

writer has free time, since self-improvement time is always available. Kleon's closest approximation of an acknowledgment of temporal constraints driven by the material conditions of life under capitalism occurs in his reflection on day jobs: "The worst thing a day job does is take time away from you, but it makes up for that by giving you a daily routine in which you can schedule a regular time for your creative pursuits…Figure out what time you can carve out, what time you can steal, and stick to your routine. Do [creative] work every day, no matter what. No holidays, no sick days. Don't stop."[223] In this framework, there is always still time and financial constraints are an afterthought. The quantity of time might appear scarce, but there are always ways of creating time. If there isn't, it can be "stolen." It is indicative of his blind positivity, a positivity that motivates fatuous, feel-good decrees like "[I]f you're not into the world you live in, you can build your own world around you"[224] and "write the story you want to read. The same principle applies to your life and your career: Whenever you're at a loss for what move to make next, just ask yourself, 'What would make a better story?'"[225]

For other creative writing manual writers, the temporal aspect of the permission to write is more specifically grounded in the permission for early drafts to fail. *Writing Fiction for Dummies* suggests that self-improvement time differs from the time of the reader. It is this disparity that provides for the permission to fail in the advice: "Give yourself permission to be bad on the first draft…Later on, when you go into editing mode, you can worry about making it pretty. After you finish editing, everyone will think that you were brilliant all along. Only you'll know the truth."[226] In this suggestion, the writers of the book gesture toward the text as process and processed. It is one that mattered very much to Esther L. Schwartz, who had written in 1939,

[223] Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, 124-125.
[224] Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, 90.
[225] Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, 90.
[226] Randall Ingermanson and Peter Economy, *Writing Fiction for Dummies* (Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, 2010: 60.

"Many brain children should be buried in silence, in the bottom of nice big waste baskets. But they should have their chance to be born hale and hearty."[227] This chance to first write what is not perfect is sufficiently important enough to Lamott that she even includes in *Bird by Bird* a chapter called "Shitty First Drafts," which is widely circulated in writing classrooms. Invoking the true self as child trope of Brande, Lamott configures the first draft as the "child's draft":

> You let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions some through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?," you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by a more rational, grown-up means.[228]

Of course, an aspiring writer might only produce garbage, but in homing in on truth as the constitutive quality of good writing, many creative writing manuals chalk up writing ability to a far simpler ability that requires little training, the ability to be frank. Here lies a paradox. On the one hand, truth-telling should be quick enough to perform. On the other, the aspiring must take the time to fail before he or she can succeed.

The time of bad writing is not always seen as one in which the aspiring writer produces some good writing. To Bradbury, writing badly is important because it is pedagogically useful. Writing badly teaches one how to write well. And, what's more, one ought to keep writing through the impoverished text because doing so creates the self-perpetuating habit. Once on the roll, one stays on it. An automation of writing flips on in the individual, so that effort itself is made easier:

> Work then, hard work, prepares the way for the first stages of relaxation, when one begins to approach what Orwell might call *Not Think!* As in learning to typewrite, a day comes when the single letters a-s-d-f and j-k-l; give way to a flow of words. So we should not look down on work not look down on the forty-five out of fifty-two stories written in

[227] Schwartz, *How to Become a Professional Writer*, 7.
[228] Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 22-23.

> our first year as failures. To fail is to give up. But you are in the midst of a moving process. Nothing fails then. All goes on. Work is done. If good, you learn from it. If bad, you learn even more. Work done and behind you is a lesson to be studied. There is no failure unless one stops.[229]

Don't quit, Bradbury argues, because if you quit you will never become the person who never quits. Managing a construction both tautological and teleological in his zen stance, he assumes that lessons learned will compound, that the work becomes easier, and that not continuing is necessarily failing because failure is failing to continue. None of these writers is particularly concerned about the potential cost to the reader of inspirational literature, that, for example, in the process of demystifying writing and inscribing it as a craft that is widely accessible, they may be misleading aspiring writers about the probability of their success. Though obsessed with seizing self-improvement time, they do not anticipate barriers to its appropriation for the development of craft.

In some guidebooks, the discussion of process is a matter of the aspiring writer's emotional orientation. Eric Maisel, a psychotherapist who trains creativity coaches and runs support groups for writers, describes the writing process as one governed by natural laws, and the natural laws determine a period of distaste for the work in progress. He propounds an acceptance of these "natural laws":

> Sometimes hating your novel is part of the process. That is not a cosmic joke to rail against. It just is. You will sometimes actually hate the process of writing your novel even as you fully understand that there can be no other process, no way around it. This disliking, this worrying, this fearing the worst, this plodding rather than soaring, all this is sometimes part of the process. You must accept this truth…You can try to speed up natural laws, reverse natural laws, manipulate the natural course of events. But first you must understand and embrace the reality of process.[230]

[229] Bradbury, *Zen in the Art,* 146.
[230] Maisel, *Coaching the Artist,* 128-129.

By distinguishing negative affect as part of a natural process, Maisel suggests that the permission to write includes the permission to be sometimes unhappy with the work. Passion for writing need not express itself in positive affect at all times. It is as though Maisel seeks to answer an interlocutor asking, why write if you hate it so much so often? At another point in the book, Maisel narrates what he presumes to be the prototypical embittered writer's life, through which he attempts to manifest an argument about self-defeatism:

> You hear nothing. You are actually happy to be spared another rejection, and also devastated. You would kill someone if that didn't mean prison. Hating the marketplace, you decide to write a 'difficult' novel, a sly, convoluted affair that you know for dead certain will be wanted by no one. 'Ha, ha!' you laugh. 'I'll show them!' You spend a year writing your revenge novel and don't bother to send it out to agents or editors. Or if you do, it is with a vitriolic cover letter about the state of culture in America. 'If you are looking for a bestseller, you won't find it here!' you proclaim. While your cover letter pleases you enormously, the subsequent silence is not quite so delicious. This is what happens to a person with no self-coaching persona in place.[231]

Such a writer has given themselves an inappropriate permission to write, in Maisel's view. By deciding to write a book without popular appeal, by eschewing the commercial, and by critiquing American culture, the writer has undermined a central premise to the permission to write. To reject American popular culture is to cede the privilege to be a part of American culture, in Maisel's anecdote; it is wanting too much to disrupt conventions, rather than to gain individual acceptance. Following from this paradigm of the individual's alignment with the machinations of cultural systems, those creative writing manuals that allude to the market's selective rewards often collapse industry gatekeeping and commercial success with self-expression. Those who are successful are successful because they are true to themselves.

"Each of you, curious about creativity, wants to make contact with that thing in yourself that is truly original," writes Bradbury. "You want fame and fortune, yes, but only as rewards for

[231] Maisel, *Coaching the Artist,* 199.

work well and truly done."[232] Couched in the gauzy language of self-actualization literature, Bradbury's imagined reader does not write for financial incentives but for the uncovering of the true aspect of selfhood that happens to glean material rewards. Randall Ingermanson and Peter Economy, authors of *Writing Fiction for Dummies*, imply that *everyone* has a consumer base, if only they can manage the self-knowledge to ascertain it. "The early marketing has to focus on *somebody*…What small niche of readers can you interest better than any other author in the world?"[233] In this advice literature, the exclusionary mechanisms of publishing gatekeepers and the market exclude those who do not cultivate an honesty of self sufficient for seeing their true target demographics. Failure is a result of not comprehending the self, a failure of vision.

Such an understanding of failure roots firmly in the therapeutic narrative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one Illouz believes has failed to offer substantive, effective guidance and that was reconfigured in advice literature. Since "in the injunction that we become our most 'complete' or 'self-realized' selves, no guideline was provided to help determine what differentiated a complete from an incomplete self,"[234] the therapeutic narrative made the onus for self salvation revolved around individual choice and investment. Illouz troubles the therapeutic narrative of writing:

> As in religious narratives, everything in the therapeutic narrative has hidden meaning and purpose…It is here that narratives of self-help and suffering connect for, if we secretly desire our misery, then the self can be made directly responsible for alleviating it. A woman who persistently falls in love with elusive or unloving men has thus only herself, if not to blame, at least to transform. The narrative of self-help is thus not only closely entwined with a narrative of psychic failure and misery, but is actually put into motion by it. The contemporary Freudian legacy is, and ironically so, that we are the full masters in our own house, even when, or perhaps especially when, it is on fire.[235]

[232] Bradbury, *Zen in the Art*, 141.
[233] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies*, 41.
[234] Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2013): 46.
[235] Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 47.

What the aspiring writer does when the house is on fire, or when it is uncertain that the aspiring writer can be master of the house, is a worthy question. Yet the distinct chance of failure is rarely treated with much depth in advice literature for writers. Love and work are hung up as the operative instruments of success. Such an orientation is characteristic of the philosopher Byung-Chul Han's theory of eros under capitalism, or what he calls "the achievement society," in which the prevailing belief that "everything is possible and everything occurs as an initiative and a project"[236] prevents the subject from feeling true love, which he understands to be contingent upon absence, inability, or nonrequital. Han imagines this closing of distances between the lover and love object as temporally inflected, marked by a narcotic presentism. "Today, the future is shedding the negativity of the Other and positivizing itself into an optimized present that excludes all disaster,"[237] he writes. While Han's subject is erotic love, the sense that love for a *doing* must, too, be marked by achievement, progress, optimization of time, and access suffuses creative writing manuals. Through the inviting trappings of inspirational literature, such advice literature reifies a physics of attainment, and elaborates failure in a structure of gaslighting. The aspiring writer who does not self-help has been failed the self. As Han asserts:

> The neoliberal regime conceals its compulsive structure behind the seeming freedom of the single individual, who no longer understand him- or herself as a subjugated subject ("subject to"), but as a project in the process of realizing itself (*entwerfendes Projekt*). That is its ruse: now, whoever fails is at fault and personally bears the guilt. No one else can be made responsible for failure.

Under these conditions, vital factors such as access to education, the uneven distribution of leisure time, and the cultural values of both consumers and the publishing industry are subsumed under the ethos of omnipresent achievement potential, and that potential negative

[236] Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. Erik Butler, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2017): 14.
[237] Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 15.

consequences of the writing process ought to be weighed against the creative endeavor is a somewhat more rare consideration in the genre. Creative writing manual writers offer conflicting views of the gamble on ambition, but the dominant perception is that achievement is a matter of choice, and that choice regards a willingness to concede social time. To Maisel, the problem is that many writers do not organize their lives with moderation. "Some creators and would-be creators slam the door on life. They manage to create in their hiding place, but at the very high cost of alienation, loneliness, and unhappiness,"[238] he writes, while others only work sporadically. King supposes: "When you write, you want to get rid of the world, do you not? Of course you do."[239] A more nuanced treatment is offered by the agent Geri Thoma who, referencing her professional experience, frames the question as a calculus of balancing the story's urgency with deprivations adjacent to composition:

> After completing their first book, many nonfiction writers describe themselves as having gone through a very particular form of hell. In the midst of it they have ceased talking with their friends, family members, and, most of all, their spouses. For far too long they have done nothing but eat, breathe, and sleep their book…Before you decide to write a book, you must have a powerful sense that no matter what the cost of time and energy, you have a story that must be told at book length.[240]

But how might a writer knows if a story must be told at book length? This question finds a place in *The Writing Life,* as Annie Dillard addresses the insecurity and uncertainty of the writing process, emphasizing that writing requires a leap of faith in the potential of the book, a potential that will not be evidenced for a great deal of time. "Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject?" she asks. "You will know tomorrow, or this time next year."[241] Dillard makes no guarantees, and hers is the rare writing manual that acknowledges the distinct possibility of

[238] Maisel, *Coaching the Artist,* 95.
[239] King, *On Writing,* 179.
[240] Geri Thoma, "Your Book and the Marketplace" in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide form the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University,* eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007): 279.
[241] Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989): 3.

failure. Dillard acknowledges that to write requires risking using time without achieving the desired result.

In fact, Dillard's book foregrounds an ambivalence toward the writing life. Unlike many of her peers who conflate life experience and writing, Dillard views the writer's life as a thin one, a bare bones existence shrunk down to small spaces. "The mind of the writer does indeed do something before it dies, and so does its owner," she muses, "but I would be hard put to call it living. It should surprise no one that the life of the writer—such as it is—is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in small rooms recalling the real world."[242] As such, Dillard is one of the few writers of creative writing guidebooks who questions the worth of the permission to write. If writing shrinks the writer away from experience, what could recommend it? Freedom is Dillard's answer, though it is an attenuated freedom defined not by free-wheeling character but carefulness, one perhaps suspicious of self-expression as a categorical imperative:

> Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all your intelligence. It is life at its most free. Your freedom as a writer is not freedom of expression in the sense of wild blurting; you may not let rip. It is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself…The obverse of this freedom, of course is that your work is so meaningless, so fully for yourself alone, and so worthless to the world, that no one except you cares whether you do it well, or ever. You are free to make several thousand close judgment calls a day. Your freedom is a by-product of your days' triviality…Why not shoot yourself, actually, rather than finish one more excellent manuscript on which to gag the world?[243]

Dillard, a Pulitzer Prize winner, troubles the value of even a literary work of excellence. Implicit is a doubt about what the literary work *does*. What is so important about inventing your work? Who could call the minute extravaganza of craft choices the writer makes on a given day

[242] Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 44.
[243] Dillard, *The Writing Life*, 11-12.

an exigency? And is the withdrawal of the writer to compose the text a worthy use of time for the writer or others? Dillard recognizes that giving oneself the permission to write may be self-indulgent, that the permission to write might be time spent in ways more socially useful. It is an exception within the genre, and indeed, Dillard's book is not positioned specifically as a didactic text. Taking an essayistic approach, Dillard's reflections on writing advance through thick description and questioning, rather than offering solutions or directing the aspiring writer. If Dillard problematizes the permission to write, considering the relationship between individual freedom and social value, the reflexive popular proposition that the pursuit of writing matters because it is a pursuit of individualism and thus reinforces the nation's democratic personality as one of individualism takes on the appearance of a closed-system feedback loop.

Heavily investing in a narrative of a single, stable self, healed and made a social actor of good character by exercising the permission to write, however, most manuals circumvent discussion of the social value of writing. The aspiring writer instantiates humanist ideals not by virtue of mastering a body of literary knowledge but through following the manual's declarations to write honestly, write from the heart, write the child's voice that has been silenced. It is in doing so that the fantasy of the therapeutic narrative of the aspiring writer can be realized, and with it, the fantasy of a self recovered from the fractures incurred by modernity, no longer confused by competing desires in a society in which counterculture has been coopted and the deserved primacy of individualism goes virtually uncontested, where a century of nearly ongoing war means that trauma is not unusual but pervasive, and where an increasingly pluralized society has fractured traditional authorities.

If the permission to write makes writing available to all through their willing dedication of self-improvement time and dedication to self-honesty, it is in discussion of craft that manual

writers promise to teach the aspiring writer how their own self-improvement time might transform into a mechanism of control over the reader's time, that is, how to control the reader's attention. It is where the outer-directed individual might be told how to write toward a normative reader and where the creative writing manual writer establishes themselves as the expert on the psychology of the reader. This is the focus of the following two chapters.

Chapter 2: Point of View, Character, and the Feels

It was 1961. The previous year had ended with France testing the A-bomb in Algeria, with Soviet dogs launched into space incinerating upon re-entry, with the United States committing missiles and nuclear submarines to NATO countries. It had ended with the first annual telecast of *The Wizard of Oz* and the airing of the soap opera *Coronation Street*, which would become the most watched British television program. As January pivoted, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch levied in her essay "Against Dryness" a brief and forceful literary call to arms that married humanist sensibilities with the distinct political requirements of the twentieth century. In Murdoch's diagnosis, religious belief had become tabescent; suffering still the aftershocks of two world wars and the horrors of the Holocaust; and dragged down by impoverished theories of the Romanticism, the Enlightenment, and utilitarianism; the twentieth century lacked a vision of the free man that could form the basis of a superior liberal democracy. "What we have never had, of course," she wrote, "is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn. We have bought the Liberal theory as it stands, because we have wished to encourage people to think of themselves as free, at the cost of surrendering the background."[244] This conceptual dearth had consequences. Without an idea of liberal man, there could be no satisfactory liberalism. There could be no satisfactory liberalism without an idea of freedom amidst sociohistorical contingency.

The origins of the crisis to Murdoch were manifold. Philosophers, from Kant to Mill to Sartre, had indulged too much in a mythology of rational, free wills. The seeking of "desirable

[244] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," *Encounter* 16, no. 1 (January 1961): 18.

but limited ends,"[245] she thought, had resulted in a welfare state of restricted progress. And Romanticism had left twentieth century literature with reduced representations of inner life. Murdoch believed what was needed was a "post-Kantian unromantic Liberalism with a different image of freedom":

> We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world…We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.

Murdoch's notion of transcending reality was not one of fairies or angels but of advancing an intervention that might alter reality through attention to a world more complex than the picture of reality she rationalism and empiricism had offered, and she believed this vocabulary of attention might be developed by literature itself, specifically through rethinking the craft of character. Prose writers had, Murdoch suspected, submitted to the temptation to offer in art comfortably reductive symbols in place of naturalistic characters. Like the philosophers and empiricists, they had refused to look evil in the eye, Murdoch emphasizing that somehow, despite the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century, despite Hitler, the twentieth century subject seemed unable to imagine evil truly. But through rich characterization, Murdoch suggested, a more useful conceptual basis for freedom and morality might be formed. If religious dogma no longer prevailed, if philosophy had failed to imagine freedom fully, literature might offer a panacea:

[245] Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 17.

> Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character. Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination.[246]

If Romanticism had offered crude characters operating like symbols—characters we might call too neat, too simple—rather than intellectually, emotionally, and complex human figures, the job of the narrative prose writer was to not to offer cozy art but to hold off the pleasant delusions that permitted the perpetuation of the status quo and its evils, its illusion of absolutely free rational wills, instead creating a vision of the individual that was real, dense, and complicated enough to assist in envisioning true freedom. Murdoch believed that if one could only learn how to write the Liberal man, a true freedom might follow.

Were she alive today, however, Murdoch would be disappointed by craft manuals, though many are written by creative writing practitioners. By and large, manuals foreground craft issues related to either character and the closely related consideration of point of view or plot and narrative structure as the linchpins of successful storytelling. But rather than offering a theory of how to construct characters made complex by contingency, characters who might enrich our ability to make interventions for moral progress, creative writing manual authors who center character in their recommendations for good storytelling largely prioritize seizing and sustaining the reader's attention. The relationship between appropriating the reader's time and attention and character is generally explicit. Many of these books posit that the aspiring writer is able to, through the art of empathetic characterization in the creative work, occupy the reader's attention; the time of learning and practicing writing becomes an investment whose dividend is

[246] Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 20.

that of the reader. The significance of this act of transmutation differs across creative writing manuals, attention acting as either means or ends, so that in some, holding attention is conflated with meaningful storytelling while in others, it is treated more like a symptom of effective narration. And whether or not it is acknowledged, there is a simple reason for attention's centrality in creative writing manuals: a reader whose attention has not been engaged may not finish reading the book.

The frequency with which memorability, the ability to claim time beyond the moment of experience, is invoked to mark the success of the narrative is just one indicator of the interest in the writer grasping and sustaining a hold on the reader's time. So are the stated purposes of some craft manual writers like Wayne C. Booth, who seemingly without awareness of any insidious tone declares of his intentions in writing *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

> My subject is the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers—the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader…I am aware that in pursuing the author's means of controlling his reader I have arbitrarily isolated techniques from all of the social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers."[247]

Few are so bald in stating their intentions as Booth, though, of course, and the objective of transposing the author's interests onto those of the reader is indexed by several formulations of the writer's job: to create what is or appears real or true in the fictional text, to conjure in the reader the feeling of feeling, to render the reader "lost" in the text or to make the reader "forget" his life, and, most of all, to instantiate empathy in the reader through characterization. Ingermanson and Economy argue, for example, "Your reader can't have a powerful emotional experience without at least one character [and t]hat powerful emotional experience comes when

[247] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): xiii-xiv.

you weave such a convincing account of a character that your reader actually becomes that character,"[248] combining these indices in mutually reinforcing formulations.

Beyond operating as a mechanism of attention-holding, empathy has been pointed to as a primary benefit of literature, particularly in the years since the rise of narrative television's artistic credibility has prompted an industry-wide existential crisis of which desperate editorials declaring that the novel is, in fact, not dead are symptomatic. Literary patron saint David Foster Wallace famously claimed when asked about the distinction between television-watching and book-reading, "We all suffer alone in the real world. True empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple." To Wallace, literature could not achieve absolute empathy, but it could approximate empathy so that we might become more able to stave off a sense of alienation.

More recently, the putative empathic powers of literary narrative have been aligned with the project of liberal resistance to governmental violence and inhumane policy under the Donald Trump presidency. Speaking to *Rolling Stone* about his children's book *What Can a Citizen Do?* and his International Congress for Youth Voices, a conference for student leaders committed to social justice, the writer Dave Eggers declared:

> One of the most important things we can teach young kids is to think about how someone else feels and to not turn that off. I know it's so easy for kids to want to and to turn that off because it's too hard to keep it open, to keep that aperture open for feeling what it might be to be one of those kids in a Texas detention center. I know for sure the way I grew up was to turn yourself off to that because it's so foreign, it's so hard to even fathom. The easiest thing for all of these kids that live in relative comfort to do is to write these other families off as statistics, or as criminals, or as less-than or as somehow deserving of this treatment for trying to come here in the first place. But if you can teach empathy and a permanent state of curiosity and open-heartedness, then you have a society

[248] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies*, 28.

> that's infinitely less likely to do harm on a mass level, whether it's starting unnecessary wars or throwing people into a system of mass incarceration or deporting people…That's why we teach writing and reading. By nature, it's reading about living another life, living in the skin of other people and by necessity, without exception, it creates more empathetic people [sic]. Readers are invariably more empathetic people than non-readers because you have occupied the minds and souls of other characters, of other humans.[249]

Eggers' explanation tacitly implies that his audience will not operate as stakeholders ideologically, emotionally, or psychologically, positioning the political power of literature as its ability to confer the knowledge of remote injustice or injustice to the Other. It presumes an audience that is not victimized by instances of the "mass harm" he indicates. As such, Eggers proposes that teaching certain children not to choose "turn[ing] off" empathy might elevate the child's morality, leading the child to become an adult unwilling to ignore the human costs of policies, law enforcement protocols, and military action. If empathy is a resource of moral potential, however, Eggers had also inadvertently summoned the possibility of empathizing *in spite of ourselves*, identifying with those characters or values which we might not otherwise. The empathy offered by literature might be the panacea for a narcotizing dysfunction, blindly hawkish militancy, or general moral failings attached to apathy, but it might also mean overidentification with individuals or groups acting to the detriment of the rights, freedom, and safety of Murdoch's Liberal man. The enactment of empathy is not in and of itself a political victory. Empathy for *whom*, under which conditions, in what shape, and toward what end matter.

Recently, in an essay on the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar, a black, single mother who was charged with a felony and imprisoned for sending her daughters to a predominantly white school without satisfying the town's residency requirements, Africana Studies scholar Tricia Rose has emphasized the challenges of telling stories of structural racism. Because "[c]ritical

[249] Dave Eggers, "A Conversation With Dave Eggers About Trump and the American Empathy Void**,"** interview by Ryan Bort, *Rolling Stone*, Sep. 12, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/dave-eggers-trump-720729/.

race theorists have consistently highlighted the potential of alternative narrative, new stories, and the importance of broken silences to illuminate and transform social relations and assignments of power,"[250] she attempts to unravel how stories that configure racial imaginaries are powerful political tools. In doing so, she points to how colorblindness, which might be construed as underpinned by empathy, in fact amplifies the difficulty in telling these stories:

> The triumph over mainstream advocacy of Jim Crow racism, the development of a widespread belief in the idea of racial equality, and a visible symbolic brand of racial integration in mass media have worked to obscure the complex, intersectional, and entrenched reproduction of post-civil rights era colorblind structural racism. This creates a profound conundrum: how does one tell an efficient and compelling story that illuminates the intersecting structural forces that work to maintain high levels of poverty and deep disadvantage for Black people in a world where very few profess to believe in maintaining racial inequality?[251]

Craft guidebooks, however, have mostly neglected a robust critical framework to think through the political implications and uses of empathy in their treatment of point of view and character. Manuals vary widely in their diversity of rhetorical modes, the degree of their investment in writing toward commercial success, and personal reflection, and the guides themselves contradict and undercut each other on various specificities of craft.

However, it is my thesis that in reductively foregrounding the seizure of the reader's time and attention as an objective—even, or especially, when the moral valence of empathy is invoked—the discussion of character and point of view often rehearses and reinforces investment not in a conception of a character that offers a way to imagine richer freedoms, as Murdoch would have it, but in precisely the fantasy of the "protagonist" of the genre of self-help itself: the individual who wants, exerts willpower to self-improve, and transmutes. This figure does not account for the ragged topography of social milieus, of course, and as such, the advice on

[250] Tricia Rose, "Public Tales Wag the Dog: Telling Stories About Structural Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era," *Du Bois Review* 10, no. 2 (2013): 448.
[251] Rose, "Public Tales," 448.

characterization offered in creative writing manuals brings into view one mechanism undergirding the uneven distribution of what and who is elaborated as empathetic enough for their story to be told. In looking at manuals, we can identify how advice on characterization reveals a failure to articulate the dimensions of narrating the interests and lives of those at the margins and, consequently, one mode of deterring many stories and voices from entering the public sphere in our discussion of Liberal man. We can see how craft discourse has contributed to the impoverishing of our public sphere of stories that conceive of social justice and inclusive freedoms.

This argument follows theoretically from the work of Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana who have advanced the concept of epistemologies of ignorance. The term epistemologies of ignorance acknowledges that if knowledge is produced, so too, is ignorance. It views ignorance as a result of both direct, conscious refusals and unconscious neglect, each markers and causes of social injustice:

> Sometimes what we do not know is not a mere gap in knowledge, the accidental result of an epistemological oversight. Especially in the case of racial oppression, a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation. At times…it can take the form of the center's own ignorance of injustice, cruelty, and suffering, such as contemporary white people's obliviousness to racism and white domination. Sometimes these "unknowledges" are consciously produced, while at other times they are unconsciously generated and supported.[252]

In turning to craft manuals, I turn to one modality through which epistemologies of ignorance thrive, considering how such epistemologies have contributed to a communications ecosystem that lags behind robust liberationist narratives.

[252] Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, "Introduction" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007): 1-2.

2.1 Point of View

In creative writing manuals, the agency of the aspiring writer is instantiated through craft choices, amongst which point of view, the perspective from which the story is told, is often discussed as the controlling mechanism of information flow in the narrative—and empathy. Point of view denotes the position in relationship to the events narrated of a figure relaying them. Of the eighteen creative writing guidebooks in which technical craft, as opposed to more general writing lifestyle or creative lifestyle advice, is offered, fifteen mention point of view (Figure 1) and twelve discuss point of view strategies (Figure 2).

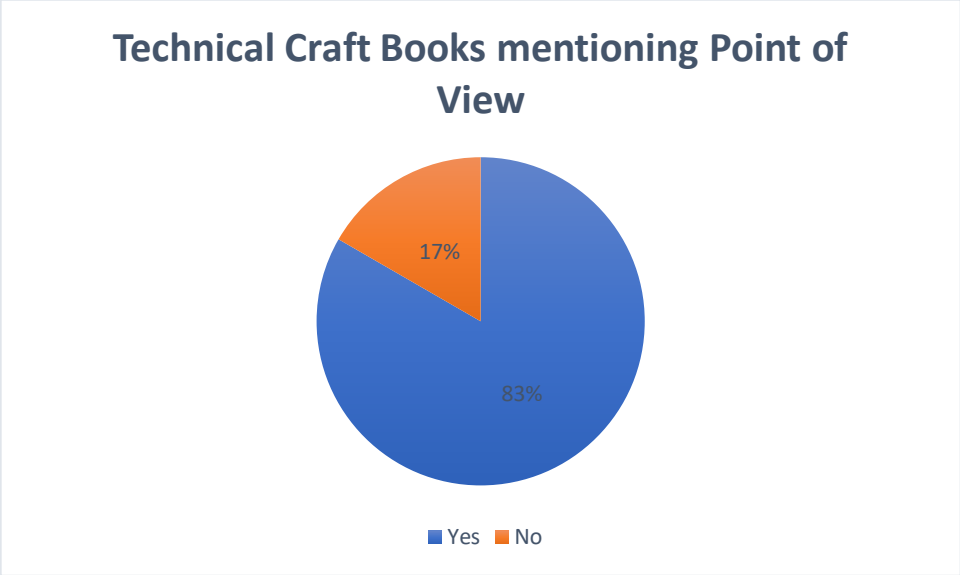

Figure 1. Technical Craft Books Mentioning Point of View

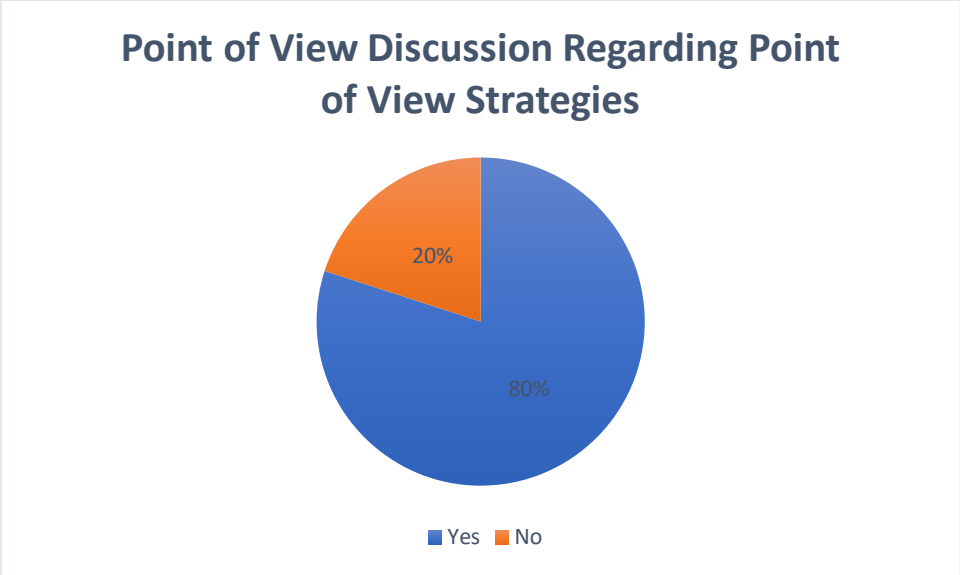

Figure 2. Point of View Strategies Discussed in Books Mentioning of Point of View

Point of view is comprised of several factors. The point of view "person" will be either the first person singular, an *I* narrator; the first person plural, *we;* the second person singular and the second person plural (a distinction rarely made because of the shared pronoun use), *you*; or the third person, *he/she/it/they*. What I call the narrative temporal distance refers to the time between the events narrated and the implied moment of narration, e.g. the narration might issue as the events unfold, soon after, at a time undefined after, or emphatically much later so that the retrospective glance of the narrator is foregrounded. Point of view will also include the degree of access to the interior lives of characters, particularly in the third person, which has commonly been understood to be categorizable as being "omniscient" or limited, the limited point of view normally associated with a single character through which the writer narrates in a "close third" or "free indirect discourse," that is, a third person narration in which the character's perspective collapses into that of the authorial figure. What I call narrator participation, that is, whether the narrator or narrators are actors in the plot or peripheral to the unfolding of the narrative's primary events, as well as the "reliability" of the narrator or narrators, the degree to which the reader is to

understand that the narrator's telling matches the fictional facts of the fictional world, is part of point of view. A notable point of view consideration regards whether the narration is framed as an address to anyone, and, if so, how robust the character of the implied addressee is and whether we regard the addressee as fictional or actual. Does Ishmael want a person in his fictional world to call him Ishmael? To whom does Jane Eyre confess she married Mr. Rochester? Similarly, point of view might include the speech act—confession, complaint, accusation, vow, so on—or whether the point of view adopts the form of a particular type of text—an epistolary, a fictional biography— or its intratextuality, the use of fictional or actual texts within the text. Finally, point of view can include the positionality of the writer, a craft and sociocultural consideration which has in recent years been brought to the forefront of popular literary criticism. These considerations can yield wide-ranging effects. Yet the theories of point of view presented in guidebooks ramify in a discourse of narrative that often limits politically-inflected discourse.

By far the most discussed perspectival craft element is the point of view "person." While all but one of the books discussing point of view strategies in this study—Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, which does not address point of view "person"— discusses the first person plural and the third person (Figure 3), it is notable that only five out of twelve discuss the second person (Figure 4) and, the first person plural is afforded even less attention. Of the twelve books discussing point of view strategies, only three discuss it (Figure 5). Perhaps even more preposterously, each one that does offers as an illustrative example, with little or no interpretation, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," a short story in which the story is narrated by a chorus of townspeople, suggesting a degree of disturbing conformity, likely attributable to the compounding effects of canonization or manual writers' attempts to appeal to their readership's probable recognition of Faulkner.

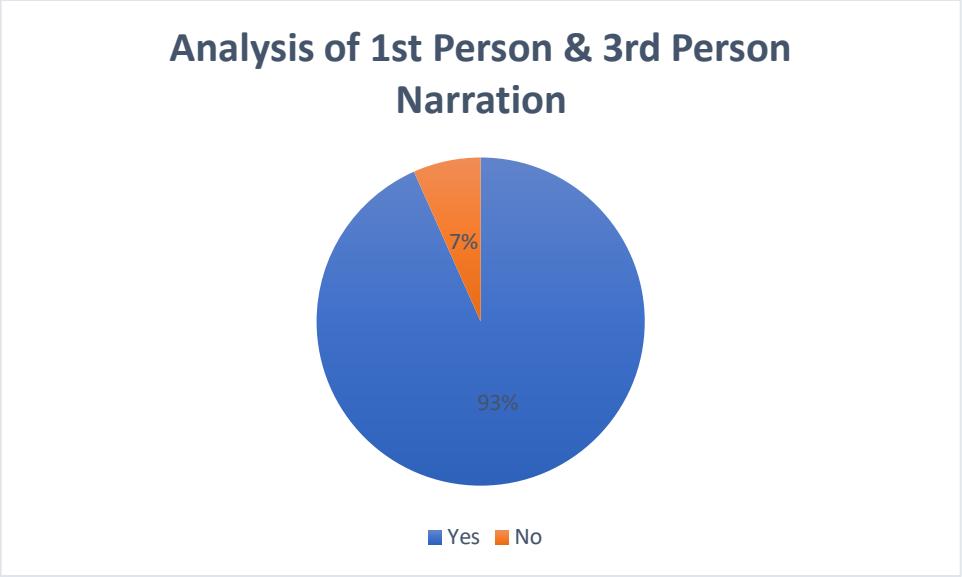

Figure 3. Analysis of 1st & 3rd Person Narration in Craft Books Discussing Point of View

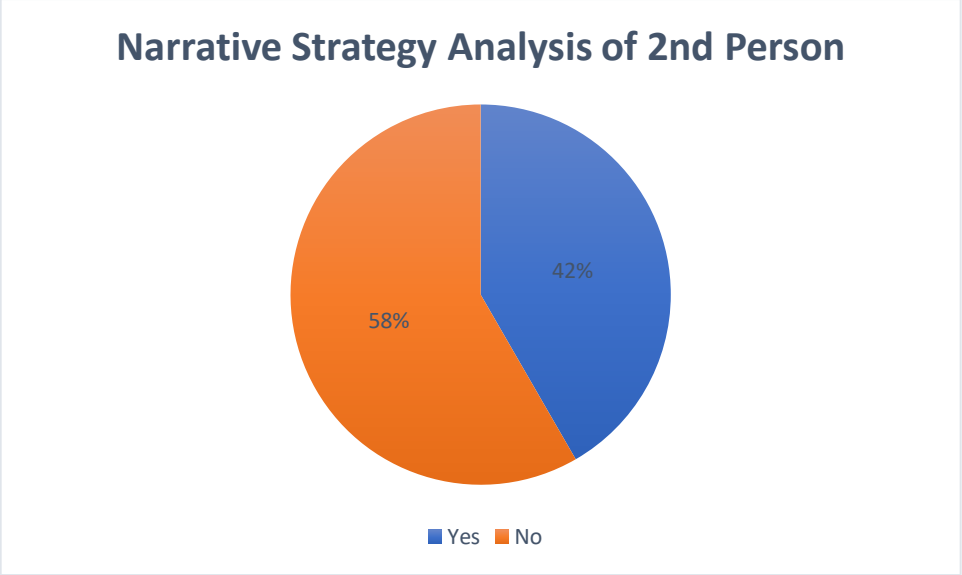

Figure 4. Analysis of 2nd Person Narration in Craft Books Discussing Point of View

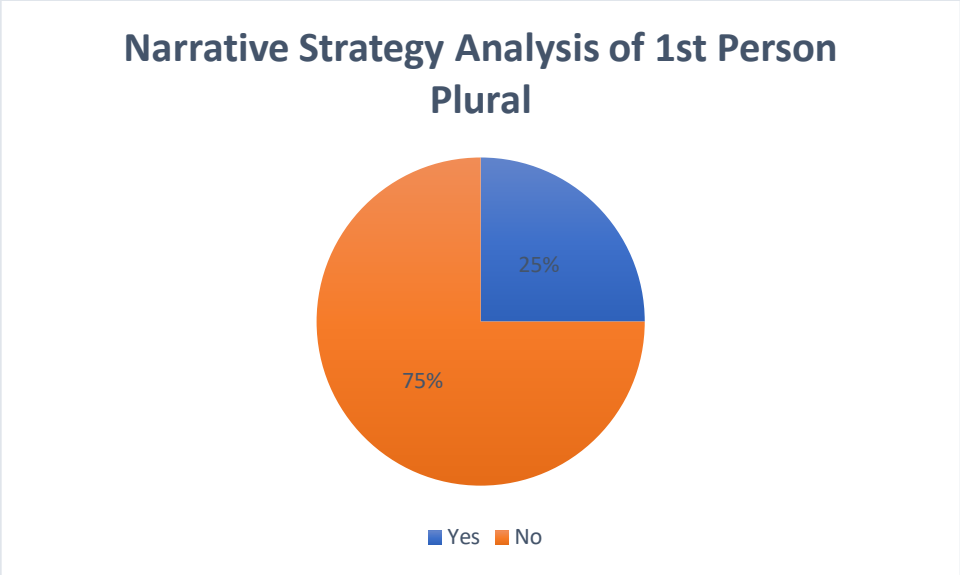

Figure 5. Analysis of 1st Person Plural Narration in Craft Books Discussing Point of View

The eliding of first person plural and second person suggests creative writing manual authors' preference for localization of the point of view to an individual and distinct character. In this, I presume, as well, that a group, community, or collective is considered less characterizable, that identity is flattened in a group and that the reader's identification with a group is less likely than identification with a single character or that individual identity supersedes that of the group in emotional and/or psychological weight. The actions of an individual are emphasized as more meaningful than those of the group. In the discourse of creative writing manuals, effects in the reader's reception, particularly that of the reader's attention, are tied to the reader's ability to identify with— or even in certain circumstances "become"—the protagonist. As such, it is sometimes estimated in craft manuals that the reader will not identify with or will not wish to identify with a group in the case of the first person plural. Focus on the individual as the locus of characterization discounts that groups have characters too, and that some of the most politically significant narratives we tell may follow the arc of a group, rather than an individual. It is in group membership, after all, in the sense of belonging, that individuals often may conceive of

effecting social and political change that scales through collective action. The writer Samuel Delany has even described his own political awakening, his "first direct sense of political power com[ing] from the apprehension of massed bodies."[253] Telling these stories is vital to constructing a reality in which collective action can be understood as a viable political strategy. Moreover, in harnessing plural point of views, writers can demonstrate that what might otherwise be understood as disconnected, individual experiences represent the interests of groups, communities, and societies, thus providing a mobilizing discourse.

Ironically given their own form, manual writers further predict that the reader will "rebel at the notion of reading a story in second person,"[254] presumably, because either (1) accustomed to being addressed as "you," the reader will be distracted by the disparity between what they know to be true of themselves and what is told of the "you" narrator in the text, (2) because in the case of the false imperative form of the second person—narratives likes Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* or Junot Diaz's "How to Date a Black Girl, Brown Girl, White Girl"—the reader will bristle at the authority of the text issuing commands, (3) because unaccustomed to reading narrative in this form, it will be read as a foolish gimmick or simply jarring, or (4) because the illusion of the text as universally "overheard" rather than addressed will be shattered.

Universal appeal is, of course, a fallacy, and writing for specific audiences has been advanced as an important political practice, particularly since many purportedly universal texts and discourses do not engage the needs, interests, and cultures of groups at the margins. Recently, Mychal Denzel Smith, tracing the discourse around the political repercussions of black writers writing for white audiences wrote:

[253] Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988): 174.
[254] Ingermanson and Economy, 230.

> [T]he black public intellectual, so defined, is largely responsible for defenses and explanations of black culture, or for arguing in favor of black people's humanity and right to life, for a white audience. This necessarily constricts the questions we are able to ask and degrades the level of discourse. Consider the amount of energy expended by black writers and pundits defending the character of victims of police violence. To participate in this dialogue requires an excavation of black pain for the consumption of a white public; it takes up space that could otherwise be used to consider the function of policing or the root causes of racist violence. It leaves no room for new ideas or even real debate.[255]

For Smith, too often writing for a white audience has meant explaining fundamentals, rather than advancing a more sophisticated conversation around structures of inequity. To write for specific audiences, then, enables the writer to assume knowledge that is cursory within the group and contribute to its political interests. Creative writing guidebooks, however, imagine that the aspiring writer's desires are simply to scale the audience up, the creative practice's end aligning with the logic of business in which the most populous consumer base is consummate. While recent craft books like David Mura's *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing* or Alexander Chee's writerly autobiography in essays, *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* have offered more inclusive and capacious notions of craft, most popular craft advice reveals the manual writer's sense that the preferences of the imagined reader, one who belongs to a dominant group that might be coded as universal, must be written *toward*. The aspiring writer's success, in these books, relies upon an ability to provide what the reader already wants, and the reader's appetites are generally thought to be aversive to literary experimentation.

If it is not already evident, creative writing manuals frequently reify the "predictable" effects on the reader's reception. This differs from the effects produced within the text, that is,

[255] Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Gatekeepers," *Harper's* (December 2018): https://harpers.org/archive/2018/12/the-burden-of-the-black-public-intellectual/.

how a point of view choice might determine what information a character might know or what the character's knowledge might motivate within the plot, which is also discussed. The "predictable" effects on the reader's reception rest on the false expertise on the psychology of the reader's mind of creative writing manual authors and an outsized belief that effects outside of the symbiotic narrative element economy of the text on the reader can be attributed to the text.

Of these "predictable" effects on the reader's reception, one of the most common in creative writing manuals is the reader's anticipated rejection of narration in which the author's presence is *felt,* and as a result, several advocate for the use of a third person narrator with limited analysis, interpretation, philosophizing, or otherwise "editorializing" gestures not tied to a character. E.M. Forster advises that a writer never reveal to the reader the writer's thoughts on the characters since it "beckon[s] the reader away from the people to an examination of the author's mind."[256] Ingermanson and Economy propose that the third person "has the advantage of being simple and natural"[257] and operates "as if you're showing the story with a movie camera."[258] Janet Burroway proposes that the third person omniscient makes it possible for the writer to "objectively report."[259] And, invoking one of the more common craft manual tropes of the third person, John Gardner proposes that the omniscient third allows the narration to operate in a God-like manner, "touching on morality only by implication. When he intrudes with moral heavy-handedness, as Tolstoy does in *Resurrection*, the effect is likely to be a disaster."[260] One might suspect that much of Gardner's interest in sparing expression of the author's moral judgment grounds in the desire to distinguish narrative prose from other textual forms like the essay or didactic literature, and he does indeed criticize "essayistic" writing through the text.

[256] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1927): 82.
[257] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies*,124.
[258] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 125.
[259] Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 201.
[260] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 157.

However, Gardner also assumes that the reader will respond more favorably if they sense that the text has been offered with objectivity, even if, in fact, the text can in no way offer objectivity and in the case of fiction it is questionable what objectivity would mean.

The effacement of the author in nonfiction operates as the modus operandi, and Lee Gutkind regards the choice as one honoring the reading consumer's desires. If the reader has likely not purchased the book because of an interest in the author, the author should not impose themselves in the book. The book's prose may belong to the author, but the reading consumer has not purchased the book for its prose, in Gutkind's view, and that consumer rationale ought to be honored:

> Memoir is your story, so of course you're a major character. But the public idea/issue story is usually not about you—or at the least you're not a major character. It's somebody else's story. You may become part of the story because of your immersion, and then the story will not work without you. So, as a rule of thumb, if your presence as a character in the work is required to keep the action going, you should include yourself…If it's not a memoir, the reader has probably not purchased your book or decided to read your essay because you've written it; it's most often because the subject intrigues him or he has been seduced by the power of your opening narrative. (That would be excellent.) So stay focused on your subject. The idea or issue is more important than you are.[261]

While these writers disagree on various aspects of third person narration, such as whether the omniscient third person narration or close third person narration (often referred to simply as close third) is the best way to achieve the desired effect, each views the author's seeming transparency or objectivity to be a valuable resource in maintaining readerly attention, though the work is, of course, not objectively produced and cannot be given its fictionality. Each proposition is, too, underwritten by the sense that readers are more willing to receive a fiction of artificial objectivity than one which foregrounds the subjectivity of the author.

[261] Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction From Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012).

There are two notable exceptions to the creative writing manual ethic of burying the textuality and the author's subjectivity: Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction* and Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Stern makes the case that the act of narration may in fact drive the theme and plotting of the narrative, particularly in instances in which the first person narrator narrates at a temporal distance from the events narrated:

> The story that is told at some remove from the event implies two *I*'s: the person who experienced the anecdote when it happened some time ago and the person who now tells the story… [T]he first-person narrator might call attention to herself, point out how time and experience have made her who she is, who she was, and reflect on the relationship between past and present. The story might even be as much about the difficulties of recalling the past, or the way feelings and understandings change, as it is about the long-ago event itself."[262]

Booth's tone is one of greater disappointment, for he is greatly invested in the submerging of the author's consciousness. Much of his advice is, in fact, tailored around how the aspiring writer might fade his presence from the text. Yet, he admits that such a task is impossible since, "as Sartre woefully admits, even with all these forms of the author's voice expunged, what we have left will reveal to us a shameful artificiality…[H]is very choice of what he tells will betray him to the reader… [W]e must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear."[263]

If, as Kenneth Burke famously declared, "Seeing is also a way of not seeing,"[264] however, the focus on invisibilizing the author *in* the text has neglected the issue of the aspiring writer's positionality outside of it—and the politics of representation the text enacts. Positionality offers another way of mapping point of view, and in recent years, it has become the focus of much debate in literary and media publics, spurred in large part by the growth of social

[262] Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1991): 179.
[263] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* 20.
[264] Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (New York: New Republic Inc., 1936): 70.

media, which has allowed those outside of the traditional publishing industry a public platform from which to critique, evaluate, and debate narrative. Against this backdrop of online discourse, the issue of writing across identity has been foregrounded. When the journalist Jesse Singal wrote an article called "When Children Say They're Transgender" for *The Atlantic*, which operated as a warning about the potential danger of young trans people transitioning and later regretting the choice, he was critiqued for his cisnormative approach, for example. One trans journalist, who was contacted by Singal as a potential source for the article, in a Medium post cautioned other trans people against speaking with Singal , "Jesse Singal, Please Leave Me Alone," in which they wrote, "[A]ny trans people considering being a source for Singal… proceed with your guard up, as he will likely treat you more like a science experiment he's observing instead of an actual human being worthy of dignity and privacy."[265] Responding to Singal's article, the writer Samantha Riedel wrote of the importance of trans people being hired to write trans stories.

> What we emphatically do not need are scaremongering cis people to continue misrepresenting us, nor for their cis media colleagues to enable them. Although plenty of questions about long-term trans health care do exist, the answer is not to stifle our communication and that of our youth, but to create more opportunities for truth to be spoken. Our authentic, unfiltered voices are needed now more than ever to combat misinformation and prejudice peddled through mass media. Trusting trans people to tell our own stories may not come easy for a society whose members have been conditioned to believe we are liars. But after Singal's shameful display of bias and innuendo, any cis person interested in the full spectrum of truth about transness — especially those in the media — need to take a long look in the mirror and ask themselves: Am I finally ready to listen?[266]

[265] Samantha Riedel, "When Will Cis Media Finally Hire Trans Reporters to Cover Trans Issues?" *Them*, June 28, 2018, https://www.them.us/story/cis-media-trans-reporters-trans-issues.
[266] Riedel, "When Will Cis Media."

To Riedel, too often cisgender writers lacked the knowledge to accurately represent trans life, concerns, and history and had not taken the time to examine how their positionality and privilege might occlude understanding.

Similar sentiments have emerged repeatedly over the past decade, with writers like Kathryn Stockett, Lionel Shriver, and, most recently, Jeanine Cummins—who included an afterword to her *American Dirt* in which she wrung her hands over the question of writing across identity: "I wished someone slightly browner than me would write it"—critiqued for their portrayals of racial, gendered, or sexual others. Writing of *American Dirt*, *The New York Times*'s Parul Sehgal repeated the often-stated stance that writers can of course write across identity but that they must "do this work of representation responsibly, and well,"[267] before eviscerating the novelist's prose style. Sehgal's review carefully qualified the takedown. "The real failures of the book, however," she suggested, "have little to do with the writer's identity and everything to do with her abilities as a novelist." These meager abilities included failures of point of view, like that the Mexican characters seemed always to be noticing what would be normal to them, varieties of brown skin. "In all my years of hugging my own sister, I don't think I've ever thought, 'Here I am, hugging your brown neck.' Am I missing out?" Sehgal wrote.

The question of whether writers hold sufficient knowledge to perform their craft well, which involves rich characterization, has often been misrepresented as a censoring or constraint on free speech issuing from an angry creative underclass at the margins. However, books like *Writing the Other*, edited by Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward have attempted to grapple with what writing well and responsibly across identity might mean for the writer's craft. And in the issue's hot-button trajectory, *Vulture* published a special feature "Who Gave You the Right to Tell That

[267] Parul Sehgal, "A Mother and Son, Fleeing for Their Lives Over Treacherous Terrain," *The New York Times* January 17, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/books/review-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins.html.

Story?" in which ten writers contributed essays on writing across identity. The novelist Kaitlyn Greenridge noted that writing white characters may be easier for writers of color than writing characters of color for white writers. "The thing about whiteness is, of course, if you're not white, you know whiteness and the rules of whiteness better than white people do," she wrote, "because you have to survive." The writer Nell Freudenberger related asking the permission of a Bangladeshi woman to write a novel based on her life.

While the writers differed in their sensibilities about writing across identity, each considered craft to include an adequate reckoning with the politics of writing the other. Point of view decision-making was not to them, as in the case of manual writers, an opportunity merely to make the author's presence unfelt by the reader. It was an opportunity to think about intertextuality, the research required of realism, and the ethics of representation. Ben H. Winters, the white author of *Underground Airlines*, a speculative fiction retelling the story of the Underground Railroad, identified one reason authors ought to consider positionality: "I was constantly aware not only that he is different from me, but also about the very ugly history of black characters being portrayed in fiction in gross ways. I tried to make sure my book was not of that tradition." Consciousness of positionality, to Winters, meant acknowledging a responsibility to represent black life responsibly. Winters was not interested in the seeming objectivity of narration advocated for by manual writers but in how black subjectivity had historically been mangled. This responsibility is one of consequence. Drawing upon the work of Marshall Ganz and Imani Perry, Rose understands narratives about identity, especially racial narratives, to be both instructive and explanatory in contexts in which contact with diverse

bodies is not available and to be important practices for converting values into affect that in turn prompts action, shifting our political and legal discourses.[268]

By advocating that the author's presence be minimized from the text, craft manuals necessarily diminish identity as a point of view consideration. But in contrast to the false objectivity conferred by the vanishing of the author's traces, in several craft manuals the primary advantage of the first person narrator is described as the "immediacy and a clear, singular voice."[269] The close third person offers a similar single track of consciousness, but this near equivalence is sometimes ignored. Instead, the benefit of the first person is, in creative writing manuals, frequently accompanied by a warning about the inverse relationship between immediacy gained and (1) the requirement within the text that the narrator be present for events narrated and (2) the possibility that the narrator's character will prove a roadblock to the reader's investment in the narrative. Immediacy, in this context, refers to audience reception, a sense that what is happening in the narration is proximal to the reader. Browne and King offer such a warning:

> [I]n order to write from the first person point of view, you have to be able to create a character strong enough and interesting enough to keep your readers going for an entire novel—yet not so eccentric or bizarre that your readers feel trapped inside his or her head. And what you gain in intimacy with the first person, you lose in perspective. You can't write about anything your main character couldn't know, which means you have to have your main character on the spot whenever you want to write an immediate scene.[270]

Ironically, it is assumed that a degree of narrator conventionality is requisite for the reader's interest to be sustained, the stance positioning eccentricity as a disruption between readerly attention and the text. While other print discourses, such as that of newswriting, have portrayed anomaly as precisely what might attract attention, craft manuals' treatment of

[268] Rose, "Public Tales," 463-464.
[269] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 60.
[270] Renni Browne and Dave King, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself Into Print*, 31.

character and point of view—in the case of the first person, one and the same—is rife with discourse privileging normativity and positioning representation of social deviation and difference as potential engines of *craft* failures.

But what is so eccentric or bizarre that it might make a reader feel trapped enough to disengage from a story, as Browne and King suggest? Lamott, for one, strikes out against one form of narrator deviance. Proceeding from her sense of the perceived truth-value preferences of the reader, Lamott recommends that the aspiring writer veer away from unreliable narrators:

> [W]e want a sense that an important character, like a narrator, is reliable. We want to believe that a character is not playing games or being coy or manipulative, but is telling the truth to the best of his or her ability. (Unless a major characteristic of his or hers is coyness or manipulation or lying.) We do not wish to be crudely manipulated. Of course, we enter into a work of fiction to be manipulated, but I a pleasurable way. We want to be massaged by a masseur, not whapped by a carpet beater.[271]

In the case of fictional narrators, to which Lamott refers, nothing issued from their narration is verifiable fact, of course. Her position is one that remarks upon a need for the narrator to be a spokesperson for the "facts" of the world within the fictional system of the novel and is filtered through a projected readerly moral lens. It is her belief that the reader will reject the entire fictional system if it is mediated through a narrator whose relay of it inconsistently can be said to match the fictional world's truth conditions. The narrator may tell what is not true, but the narrator must not allow the reader to be excluded from knowledge of such transgressions.

Yet authors may, in fact, use their narrator's supposed unreliability in strategies in which the author's critical gaze envelopes the reader. That the narrator "lies" in their fictional world may operate as a plot enacted upon the reader so that the discovery of the "lie" illuminates assumptions the reader has held. The eventual revelation of a narrator's lie may act as a lever in which all of what has been narrated up until that point must now be reinterpreted. The reader's

[271] Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 52.

identification with the narrator might then be questioned, and in this questioning, the reader asked to reevaluate whether sympathies have been misplaced, whether perhaps the reader's identification with the narrator indicates an ethical or political failing, whether the reader has bought into familiar and flawed narratives. Such a strategy may be particularly useful for aspiring writers attempting to show the insufficiency, incorrectness, dishonesty, or theoretical inhospitability of accepted narratives, tropes, attitudes, euphemisms, and designations. By delaying the moment of enacting criticism, delaying the moment in which the reader must consider their complicity, the aspiring writer can articulate an arc of misunderstanding. At the same time, because the reader, too, has been "betrayed" by the narrator, the author can form an associative linkage between the reader's sense of being misled personally and how the accepted if problematic phenomena misleads a larger public.

In her manual, LaPlante offers a more pointed reading of which qualities of nonconformity are too repellant to her imagined reader, namely the first person narrator focusing on and relaying her own suffering:

> [E]specially when you are writing about a very emotionally charged situation, putting it in first person can work against you. You can risk losing your reader. Victim stories fall into this category. Sometimes, if you are trying to garner sympathy or understanding for a character, the last thing you want to do is put it in first person. The narrator can be seen as self-serving, pitying, or whining. You risk it becoming maudlin. Nothing will eliminate sympathy faster than having to listen to a character whine—even if he or she really has been victimized in some horrifying way.[272]

Whether or not LaPlante's understanding of the reader is accurate, the formulation holds serious sociocultural consequences. Writers of fiction and narrative nonfiction might be stifled in their attempts to represent the lives of those facing sustained hardship. And in particular, the advice poses a problem for aspiring writers of memoir from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ought

[272] LaPlante, *The Making of a Story*, 277.

they not tell their stories if readers supposedly will respond to their first person accounts as anathema? One might further extrapolate that LaPlante's advice unevenly deposits limitations on the aspiring memoir writer, that it is aspiring memoir writers at the margins who are most likely to be told their stories do not have a place in literary culture. Such advice contributes to a discourse which silences voices at the margins who wish to share stories of victimization, whether that is sexual harassment, racism, transphobia, poverty, or sexual orientation discrimination. Their unbearable stories, the logic goes, can be told only under the condition that they are not construed as unbearable.

The direction to not write through the point of view of a victim is one of the most obvious detriments to the project of writing a literature of politically useful empathy, casting victims as repellant to empathy implies that a reader's sense, real or imagined, that victimhood is earned. It ignores the way in which, for example, as Frantz Fanon has noted the black body is invested with danger and violence "prior to any gesture." It casts the subjectivity of those who have experienced harm as beyond the scope of narrative. And it imagines narrative to be a discursive space for giving readers only what does not challenge neoliberal, meritocratic belief systems, that is, it specifically positions story as non-critical and compliant to the ideological status quo. This position acts as a reactionary stalwart, too, against aspiring writers at the margins writing the stories of themselves and their communities.

For those interested in writing about social justice, some of the problems of point of view discourse lies in the presumption that the reader of the creative work will fail to remain attentive to the text through point of view shifts which may be necessary to telling narratives of structural inequality. Justifications center around the speculation that a reader will find a point of view shift "jarring" or "distracting." Even in their treatment of what they consider a successfully executed

point of view shift within a short untitled manuscript written by a "talented" writer, Renni Browne and Dave King, land on precaution: "The transition from one point of view to the other is gradual, with several paragraphs of dialogue between. But still, the readers have adjusted to being in Markey's head (they were in his head for most of the previous page), so the shift to Mrs. Blake's head is jarring even though it's not abrupt. Enough of these shifts, and readers lose their involvement in the story."[273]

Though the writer has enacted a strategy of transition, Browne and King fixate on the danger of the technique, implying that adjustment will precipitate a loss of attention. Their fear locates in the sense that adjustment requires *time*. Rather than fluidly continuing in one point of view, the reader needs time to understand whose perspective the narrative has shifted to. One might reason that this time is time in which the reader focuses *more*, attending more closely to the language in order to navigate the movement between characters. Or, the diversity of narrative perspectives might be construed as a move enriching the psychological plane of the novel. Yet to Browne and King, the point of view shift does not create psychological dynamism but a risk that the reader's pace will not match that of the semantic unfurling of words, a risk that the speed of the reader will not match that of the writer conveying information. They presume that attention is less an issue of degree than of synchronizing the speed of the reader's processing and the writer's provision of information. The writer has lost temporal control of the reader who may require the time to re-read, thinking more carefully, or analyze the differences in point of view.

More generally, this understanding stems from a sense that readers have a low tolerance for unfamiliarity. Guidebook writers anticipate that *change* will prove intolerable to the reader.

[273] Browne and King, *Self-Editing*, 36.

What the reader has become accustomed to will be what the reader prefers. The reader has been drawn into a rhythm, a pattern, and habit, and this ought not be disturbed. An even finer distinction about craft iterates this belief once more in Browne and King's advice about *when* to introduce the point of view of the narrator: "It's usually a good idea to establish the point of view in the first paragraph of a scene—even the first sentence—in order to orient the reader…When you make the point of view clear at the beginning of a scene you get your readers involved early—and your scene off to a quick, sharp start."[274] Browne and King suspect that readers prefer to be moored immediately, that to be untethered from a defined point of view is a problem the reader will not enjoy or be willing to solve. If the reader does not know whose perspective the story is relayed from, their logic supposes, the reader will not feel engaged and therefore the pace will *feel* slow to the reader.

However, point of view shifts enable multi-perspectival storytelling, which storytelling permits the writer to crack open the tension between what is said and what is felt or thought by more than one character which can lead to complex effects such as the reader 1) gaining a sense that an interaction is tragic because two or more characters want something similar from each other but choose not reveal so 2) perceiving a tension that one or more characters does not because they are not privy to another character's point of view 3) exploring different interpretations of events unfolding that a single point of character does not and so on. More specifically, multi-perspectival can be a particularly valuable asset for the aspiring writer interested in structural inequality in which there are several stakeholders since, as K. Sabeel Rahman suggests, "where conventionally we might view power disparities and domination in terms of specific actors that can act arbitrarily, asserting his or her will against another, diffuse

[274] Browne and King, *Self-Editing*, 40.

systems in the aggregate can create similar disparities, even without a single consolidated intentionality, arising instead from the aggregation of many individual decisions and background policies, each of which operates within the bounds of conventional legal rules and norms."[275]

Telling stories of structural inequality is vital for understanding levers and pulleys of social harm beyond moments of affective spectacle and for scaling equity; yet, even those putatively interested in projects of diversity, equity, and inclusion, frequently fail to account for structural injustices, ignoring the way in which policies, funding and resource mechanisms, and other structural considerations solidify, concentrate, and stratify distributions of power and the ease with which self-determination is possible. While craft discourse alone does not account for the emergence of such incomplete narratives, the limited discourse around narrative compounds the power of the flawed existing narratives that place disproportionate blame for problems of social justice on individual actors, just as manuals understand failures of authorship to reside in the efforts of the aspiring author alone. Advancing narrative discourse on multi-perspectival narrative is one key to developing counternarratives that make visible the machinations of structural inequality.

While there are many formulations of the effects of point of view choices across craft manuals, what they share is a belief that the point of view forms themselves offer specific effects *within the reader*, that, in deploying a particular form, the author may exert agency to control the reader's time of reading. Manuals are interested, after all, in how point of view putatively "locks the reader inside the character's mind."[276] And, in each, the reader, too, becomes a character suggested at the edges. This reader character, it is assumed, is averse to change, prizes the sense that a narrative is objective, must know the source of information to know whether the

[275] K. Sabeel Rahman, "Constructing and Contesting Structural Inequality," *Critical Analysis of Law* 5, no. 1 (2018): 140.
[276] Gardner, 156.

information is worth their attention, can be made to surrender their time to the desires of the writer, is turned off by victimhood, dislikes being told what to think but longs for a view from on high where one might believe that the fate of a narrative already determined is still unspecified, still open to be inscribed with meaning.

2.2 Character

In 1986, Stephen King published what would become one of his most well-known novels, *It*, the story of an evil spirit named Mr. Bob Gray or, alternatively, Pennywise the Dancing Clown, with glowing yellow eyes who fatally tears the arm off a child before later manifesting as a mummy, a blood fountain, a leper, drowned corpses, a phantom, an amphibious man creature with ungodly strength, a flesh-eating bird, a werewolf, and a Frankenstein who terrorizes a group of young boys. Nevertheless, in his *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, King advocates for writers to include in their writing characters who will be familiar to a reader:

> Book-buyers aren't attracted, by and large, by the literary merits of a novel; book-buyers want… something that will first fascinate them, then pull them in and keep them turning the pages. This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in a book, their behaviors, their surroundings, and their talk. When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story.[277]

In King's estimation, a reader's recognition of themselves in the text is the cornerstone of interest. The reader moves through the text *because* the narrative reflects an image of them back. Characters like the reader propel the reader through the time of the book, a time that accumulates a rung of significance in its refraction of the reader, its ability to show the reader what they believe they know of themselves.

[277] King, *On Writing*, 184.

The call for the writer to offer familiar characters, however, should not be understood as a mechanism of the expansion of empathic faculty. Expanding empathy requires a grappling with alterity. Empathy, after all, derives from the Greek *empatheia*, a word turning on the prepositional *em*, or into, and *pathos*, feeling. To empathize, then, requires a movement "into" that suggests a degree of original distance. If, as Byung-Chul Han suggests, "[p]rimal distance brings forth the transcendental dignity and propriety that frees—that is, distances—the Other into his or her Otherness…is precisely what makes it possible to address the Other properly,"[278] the imperative for familiarity is an imperative to assimilate into sameness, not to acknowledge the distance through which empathy is mediated. Texts that position familiarity as the throughway to empathy fail to *extend* familiarity and instead propose a reflexive mode of self-substantiation, and they fail to articulate who exactly this imagined reader is and therefore whose experiences will merit inclusion in narrative.

Should the author of the craft manual aim direct the aspiring writer to write toward the largest potential audience, it is likely that the manual writer tacitly recommends writing toward members of dominant groups. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has noted, the presumption of default whiteness is a part of the "racial grammar" of American life, where "[n]ormative whiteness is still the not-so-hidden standard—the cultural essence of 500 years of 'racist culture' (Sala-Molins, 2006), a culture that since Kant, Voltaire, Hume, and all the other enlightened white men of Europe and America, has depicted nonwhites as ugly and particular and whites as beautiful and universal."[279] To call for the familiar, then, may operate as a coded imperative to contribute

[278] Han, *The Agony of Eros,* 12.
[279] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The Invisible Weight of Whiteness: The Racial Grammar of Everyday Life in America," in *Michigan Sociological Review* 26 (Fall 2012): 5.

to a racial grammar that "normalize[s] the standards of white supremacy as the standard for all sorts of everyday transactions rendering domination almost invisible."[280]

To manual writers, though, the "familiar" and likely white-coded character, cast as the hero of the prose narrative, is justified as good craft, whether or not the contents and movements of their interior life could be said to contribute to a politics motivated by empathy. Yet as Wahneema Lubiano writes, "The media, along with other public and private entities (including institutions, churches, schools, families, and civic organizations, among others), constantly make available particular narratives and not others. In turn, such consistently reinforced presences reproduce the world in particular ways: what we see becomes what we 'get,' what we believe.'"[281] In constraining character types to the "familiar"—and familiar *to whom* is a vital consideration here—manual writers contribute to a discourse that makes the stories of certain people more legitimate, more urgent, and more worth attention.

The unequal depositing of legitimacy and the uneven investment into human subjects across social terrains may be concealed by discourses ostensibly about literary craft alone, such as when craft manuals largely conceive of narrative practices as scaling down or focusing attention to meet the perceived limited attention spans of readers, not as expanding a repertoire of attention; some manuals suggest that a work of narrative must have one sole protagonist. Adopting a Darwinian stance, Cron claims it is a requirement born of neurobiology. The brain, bombarded with stimulus, needs a figure to follow, needs to know what in all the noise is important:

> The world is teeming with things that happen, and on most days, especially before that first cup of coffee, it sure looks like chaos out there. Our survival depends on making sense of the particular chaos we call home—not in the general 'objective' sense we hear

[280] Bonilla-Silva, "The Invisible Weight," 2.
[281] Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Ladies, Welfare Wueens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narratives Means" in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992): 329-330.

> so much about, but in the much more practical, subjective, how-will-this-affect-me-personally sense. Thus the evolutionary job of story is to funnel said chaos through one very grounding filter: the specific effect that chaos has on the protagonist, who becomes our avatar. The events themselves mean nothing; it's what those events *mean* to someone that has us compulsively turning pages. Remember, when we're lost in a story, we're not passively reading about something that's happening to someone else. We're actively experiencing it on a neural level is if it were happening to us.[282]

To Cron, the brain has evolved to sort reality. In the categorization of sense data, the brain is involved in processing what might affect the individual, separating it from the chaff of the everything of the world. Then, she concludes that stories themselves provide a process which answers this stimulus sorting need. Thus, the writer ought to produce stories homed in on a single character with whom the reader will identify so that the reader can experience an already-sorted fictional reality in which it is clear what might affect the object of identification and the reader might simultaneously experience the fictional data as sharpened with apparent potential effects on the self as opposed to the "general." The stance, as in the case of craft manuals' disinterest in the first person plural, situates meaning in individual interests—and rather simplistic ones at that—over collective or societal interests; characterization becomes a series of techniques through which the precedence of individualism is disguised beneath the categorical imperative of holding the reader's attention and obtaining what will *seem* meaningful in a socially normative perspective. What is important is not one's role in society but one's role in optimizing selfhood. However, "[r]acialized assumptions about the worth and capacities of human individuals run parallel to and reinforce racialized habits of regard and disregard. The result is that we circumscribe our networks of care, concern, and goodwill in ways that allow us to mistreat others and ignore their suffering,"[283] observes Paul C. Taylor, and it is this

[282] Lisa Cron, *Story Genius: How to Use Brain Science to Go Beyond Outlining and Write a Riveting Novel* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2016): 55.
[283] Paul C. Taylor, "Race Problems, Unknown Publics, Paralysis, and Faith," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007): 137.

circumscription gesture that Cron points to in narrative. Rather than considering how narrative might be used to subvert or contest this sorting of reality into what is worth care and what is not, who is worth care and who is not, how narrative might operate not as a way of humanizing individuals but offering a way to imagine more robust notions of care, Cron suggests that significance pools around the individual, indexing and reinforcing the naturalization of self-interest.

Because of the presumed empathic function of literature, because "the writer must enable us to see and feel vividly what his characters see and feel; that is, enable us to experience as directly and intensely as possible, though vicariously, what his characters experience,"[284] it is frequently repeated that the aspiring writer must get to know the characters being created.[285] The dictum for the author to teach himself the contours of the character is not simply a matter of knowing who the character is or what the character does in the present of the primary narrative, however. The character, it is said, must have a *past* that shapes the present. Egri explains, "It is not enough, in your study of a man, to know if he is rude, polite, religious, atheistic, moral, degenerate. You must know why. We want to know why man is as he is, why his character is constantly changing, and why it must change whether he wishes it or no."[286] What Egri describes is a view of the reader's demand for character legibility that permeates the creative writing guidebook genre. Ingermanson and Economy similarly assert, "A character's past determines what sort of person you have coming into the story. The past is only an imperfect guide to the future, though. Your character has free will and can choose to break loose from his past and pursue a new future."[287] And within this logic, it follows, Cron believes, that "[u]nless you create

[284] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 44.
[285] Lamott, *Bird by Bird,* 45.
[286] Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946): 33.
[287] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 109.

a protagonist whose every action is driven by an underlying, evolving 'why,' then even big, externally dramatic events will fall resoundingly flat."[288] These theories are premised on the notion that selfhood is constituted by an autobiography of clear cause and effect, the past a cause of the present, and that it is bringing into view the causal relationship between past and present in the individual psychology of a character which infuses the text's primary timeline with meaning. What happens is not arbitrary. It is part of the physics of action begetting action through time, but in combination with the recommendation to closely focus the narration on a single protagonist, this physics is constrained to the individual. This view is underpinned by a sense that these causal chains are a constitutive element of realist narratives and key features of real psychological mechanisms.

Forster is a key proponent of presenting the character's motivations and interiority, transmitting and clarifying them to the reader. For Forster, the prerogative grounds in Skepticism. Rather than offering his views as craft advice, he meditates on the use of literature for readers. It is in literature that readers might resolve the baffling problem of the Other Mind. He supposes, "In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed."[289] Part of the function of literature is to exteriorize the interiority, to bring into the public sphere the private. The Other Mind need not be an occluded mystery. The imperative to make legible characters' interiority operates at two levels. It makes manageable—at least psychologically—the existential problem of connection and it circulates a rationalized form of

[288] Cron, *Story Genius*, 71-72.
[289] Forster, *Aspects*, 47.

selfhood determined by cause and effect. This self is rationally constructed and, therefore, governable. "[N]ovels," Forster summarizes, "even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race."[290]

Yet it is questionable whether solace is an affect aspiring writers wish to bring forth. Murdoch, after all, lamented consolation as narrative's failure, believed that Forster's manageable human race was not what was needed so much as a confrontation with the complexity of evil. A reader might crave the comforts Forster spoke of, but the reader's comfort might, too, be grounded in the reader's complicity in unjust systems and practices, in failures of morality, in the violence of neglecting to attend to harms experienced by the most vulnerable members of society. To be solaced may link to not-having-to-do, to comfort in the status quo. "Whites," for example, argues Bonilla-Silva, "express theoretical (or, in Schuman's terminology, *normative*) support for the principles of integration in contemporary American yet maintain systemic privilege by failing to do *anything* about racial inequality. This amounts to telling people of color, 'I believe you should have the same life chances as I, but disagree with all the policies that would make this reality possible."[291] It is likely Bonilla was referring not to all white people but to a logical structure through which white privilege is premised upon the maintenance of systems of inequality, and it is precisely this anti-solacing nonsensical which a literature of social justice requires making apparent. The common sense machinations of individual cause-and-effect celebrated by manual writers are not character structures that accommodate the irrational logics belying systems sustaining social inequity.

[290] Forster, *Aspects,* 64.
[291] Eduardo Bonilla Silva and Tukufu Zuberi, "Toward a Definition of White Logic and White Methods," in *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008): 14.

If the character of prose narrative is meant to be legible and legibly motivated, however, craft manuals suggest that character ought to be signified through action rather than directly explicated. The adage to "show not tell" appears throughout these books. Roy Peter Clark even includes a chapter titled, "Show characteristics through scenes, details, and dialogue."[292] Booth glosses and historicizes the craft orthodoxy on "showing vs. telling," or dramatizing action or providing information in exposition:

> Since Flaubert, many authors and critics have been convinced that 'objective' or 'impersonal' or 'dramatic' modes of narration are naturally superior to any mode that allows for direct appearances by the author or his reliable spokesman. Sometimes…the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between 'showing,' which is artistic, and 'telling,' which is inartistic.[293]

Squarely in the camp described by Booth, Gardner describes the two modes in different language, coding exegetic writing as "essayist's style" and diegetic prose as "rendered." Beyond the obvious boundary work, Gardner's argument relies upon imagining the reader reception of the two modes, writing, "The essayist's style is by nature slow-moving and laborious, more wide than deep. It tends toward abstraction and precision without much power, as we see instantly when we compare any two descriptions, one discursive, one poetic."[294] To Gardner, the possibility of a poetics of ideas, a poetics of the essayistic mode of writing is quite limited. In the specific time and place of a scene, specific details are offered, and these details are what are poignant. But his argument is also one of time. He believes that expository writing drags. It is an issue of pace. This sensibility is echoed by Lamott, who invokes such a notion within the figure of the reader, specifically her sense of the reader's scarcity of time or scarcity of attention to be sustained in time. "Pages and pages of straight description… will probably wear us out," she

[292] Clark, *Writing Tools,* 133.
[293] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* 8.
[294] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 44.

writes. “See if you can hear what they would say and how they would say it. One line of dialogue that rings true reveals character in a way that pages of description can’t.”[295] Gutkind echoes the sentiment, offering the strategy of diegetic intrusions into exegesis to prevent readers from disengagement and excessive mental labor: “Sooner or later, a reader will get distracted or overloaded with information, and you will lose him. But before you allow that to happen you go back to the scene—or introduce a new scene—and reengage.”[296] In each of these constructions, telling prose carries the danger of the text’s abandonment. The author’s job is to lighten the load of the reader, offering briskness and the possibility of efficient reading.

If showing as a mode of characterization has been afforded greater artistic currency, it is, to David Riesman, a move anticipated by the inner-directed individual’s understanding that life itself is constituted in materiality. Arguing that Defoe typifies this worldview’s fictional manifestation, he elaborates that realism “is connected in subtle ways with the handling of life experiences generally for the inner-directed middle-class Protestant. For him life is lived in its detailed externals; its symbolic meaning seeks richness of expression in the strenuously concrete.”[297] While Forster is less amenable to the notion of the visibility of the interior, the Protestant ethic glossed by Riesman views interiority as expressed in concrete and exteriorized phenomena. Both of these orientations toward the perceptibility of the self’s inner workings contribute to a view that character’s actions should stand as signs of emotion, personality, and motivation in prose narratives. While one is based on providing what reality cannot, the other obtains in a desire to mirror reality.

[295] Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 47.
[296] Gutkind, *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up,* 139.
[297] Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 299.

Perhaps the most nuanced view of showing and telling appears in Burroway's *Writing Fiction*. Burroway offers the thought that characterization occurs not simply in what the characters do but also in how they view others, explaining, "Carefully chosen details can reveal character in fascinating and different ways. Sometimes details tell something about the character described and also something different about the character making the observation."[298] In other words, it is in showing the character's interpretation of others through which we might come to understand how the character thinks, feels, and weighs the data of the world, thereby constructing a worldview.

To evidence character, though, through diegetic means over exegetic, even in the technique Burroway describes, presupposes that the reader shares a semiotic understanding, that the signifiers of dramatized action hold an ostensive function. Such a position ignores the possibility of the reader's interpretation, assumes the writer's interest in normative ways of demonstrating character, and further makes operant the notion that signs show *character* as opposed to structural forces and the invisible inertia of ideology. In dismissing the powerful force ideology exerts upon the reading of signs, the aesthetic investment in diegetic characterization misses the way that power works upon the subject through naturalization, how individual actions result not only from temperament or choice but also from structures which shape the potential space of action. It ignores that epistemic authority has often been denied women, queer folk, those with disabilities, people of color, and any number of individuals who swerve from normative affect, and that what might be inferred from given moments of characterization are culturally situated.

[298] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 44.

Manual discussion of legibility bypasses the processes of audience reception. However, John T. Kirby's theorization of audience reception in the interplay of the author and narrator as rhetor is useful for thinking through whether legibility is a useful tool for thinking about craft. Motivated by concepts originally outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Kirby writes of the "indirect" rhetoric between author and audience, which works to convince through the realistic representation of life. It is in mirroring reality, not *referring* to reality, that literature creates an effect outside the text. Kirby describes the "indirect" rhetoric of reading as a four-part process. First the author creates a *muthos*, or narrative text. Then the reader engages in cognitive intake, wherein the *muthos* prompts a set of reactions from the audience that the audience must process on a cognitive as well as an affective level. The third step "is a cognitive act of evaluation on the part of the audience," he writes. "They form an *ennoia*, a notion of what the *muthos* means to them. This will be highly subjective and distinct."[299] In this formulation, the reader is not merely at the mercy of the text, receiving it and reacting reflexively; she also engages with it, tests it, questions it. That the reader assesses means that she may reject, accept, or question the text, and in so doing, perhaps segue into the final step in Kirby's reading cycle: forming a notion of the author.

Manuals, in ignoring the final two steps of Kirby's audience reception, miss the way in which the reader's historical, cultural, and social situation contribute to what the reader finds or is willing to understand to be legible. Legibility itself, after all, occupies a knotted, contingent, and politicized space, and to be illegible is a designation frequently administered to mark an otherness beyond the realm of understanding. As Yuh Ji-Yeon has written, for example, "[D]escriptions of North Korea as a 'kaleidoscope' or as 'unknowable,' and of North Korean

[299] John T. Kirby, "Toward a Rhetoric of Poetics: Rhetor as Author and Narrator," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 22, no. 1 (1992): 5.

leaders as ‘ciphers’ or as ‘secretive,’ fall into the ‘inscrutable Oriental’ category well-known in American history. Characterizing the nation as inscrutable allows the United States to pursue a guilt-free dominance over North Korea. It prevents Americans from feeling any kinship or connection to North Korea.”[300] Should aspiring writers follow the advice to “show, don’t tell,” they will reproduce stories of legibility which are apt to be stories of individuals who are *already* understood to be comprehensible, already assimilated into the interpretive bounds of a culture, already not-other, rather than through the work of telling expanding what or who might be legible to a reading public.

The prevailing sense in manuals that legibility can be conferred by making appropriate choices alone might also partly be imputed to guidebook writers attempting to satisfy the desires of guidebook readers. If aspiring writers are presumed to fit the narrative of Lamott’s silenced child who is punished for speaking certain truths, who long to be heard, the manual writer’s fixation on legibility offers an answer—if perhaps one that is untrue—to this deeply human craving. Who has not hoped, at some point, that if one were to find precisely the right words, some misunderstanding would finally resolve, some aspect of the self would finally be understood, some emotion would finally be recognized after all? Nevertheless, by asserting a physics of universal psychology underpinning legibility, manual writers tend to situate their sense of rich characterization within a constrained sociocultural milieu and reduce psychological and emotional complexities greatly.

The manual writer is apt, however, to mythologize themselves as an expert of psychological norms. James Scott Bell, in his book on dialogue, alludes to a theory from the 1964 book *Games People Play* by Dr. Eric Berne that includes three personality types: the

[300] Yuh Ji-Yeon, “Dangerous communists, inscrutable Orientals, Starving Masses,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 11, no. 2 (1999): 321-322.

Parent, an authoritative figure; the Adult, a rational and even-tempered person; and the Child, someone emotional, irrational, whiny, and trusting. Bell warns that writers ought to avoid dialogue between two Adult characters because "if they are both operating as they should, they would not have much conflict between them."[301] Though ostensibly advice on craft, Bell's formulation relies upon pathologizes emotionality, traditionally associated with femininity, while aligning rationality and stoicism, traditionally considered male attributes, with correct social behavior. Bell does not consider the way in which emotions might be rational or how an even temper might not be. Nor does he consider the way in which the signification of emotionality and rationality are produced within particular cultural contexts so that two Adult figures might enter into conflict not because of pathology but because of differing cultural systems of signification.

Within the psychological structure posited in guidebooks, to many creative writing manual writers, what is most important about character is desire. You are what you want. Desire is even construed as constitutive of character, as in the case of LaPlante, who writes, "[Y]ou could say that this is the basis of all characterization: what a character desires is what drives him or her to act (or react, or not act), and therefore what determines the heart of a story of a nonfiction piece"[302] and Cron who supposes ""[Y]our novel isn't about the external change… [you] put your protagonist through; it's about *why* that change matters to her."[303] Such views are, of course, tied to plot. It is not that actions speak louder than words alone but that actions speak desire and that desire is understood as the engine of meaning. Gardner proposes, "We care how things turn out because the character cares—our interest comes from empathy—and… to some degree sympathize with the character's desire, approving what the character approves (what the

[301] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 35.
[302] LaPlante, *The Making of A Story*, 431.
[303] Cron, *Story Genius*, 67.

character values), even if we sense that the character's ideal is impractical or insufficient."[304] By giving the character desires, it is thought, the author affects audience reception. In order for the reader to invest in a character, it is estimated, the character must have wants. Desire, then, is seen as tied to identification. The same reader who wishes for familiarity, to see someone like himself on the page gives their attention because like the reader, the character wants. "Your character's purpose—that is, the desire that impels her or him to action—will determine our degree of identification and sympathy on the one hand," Burroway claims, "or judgment on another."[305]

The focus on desire is tied to another craft orthodoxy, namely, that the compelling character is the character who rigorously exerts agency. Desire, after all, is one engine of action, and in these books, a character should not be passive, should not be like the victim narrator LaPlante describes. Rather, the compelling character identifies desire and reaches for it. In Gardner's estimation, "No fiction can have real interest if the central character is not an agent struggling for his or her own goals but a victim, subject to the will of others. (Failure to recognize that the central character must act, not simply be acted upon, is the single most common mistake in the fiction of beginners.)"[306] Egri imagines the character as a pugilist of sorts, conjuring tropes of the brawler, both in physical and archetypal terms. He admits that the character may lose in his fight for his desires, but, offering the qualification that the character can lose but not be spiritually beaten, he declares, "The dramatist needs not only characters who are willing to put up a fight for their convictions. He needs characters who have the strength, the stamina to carry this fight to its logical conclusion…[W]e may start with a strong man who weakens through conflict, but even as he weakens he must have the stamina to bear his

[304] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 65
[305] Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 105.
[306] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 65.

humiliation."[307] It is unclear why a character cannot be humiliated and fulfill the function of character. However, Egri's insistence upon such Olympian idiom does suggest a popular attachment to the heroics of agency, and indeed, he defines the protagonist in terms of the individual who galvanizes, the purposive one who prompts even further action by others: "The pivotal character is the *protagonist*. According to Webster's dictionary, protagonist is—'one who takes the lead in any movement or cause.'"[308]

Like the self-help hero, the character of the prose narrative is supposed to help themselves. Since the will is cast as a resource for self-help, according to Ahmed, since to strengthen the will is understood as a way to mobilize upward, it follows the lack of will to will rightly or unwillingness to will is seen as a perversion. It is to be divorced from "will alignment."[309] The aversion to characters who renounce agency can, then, be understood as part of the larger, longer discourse of the will in which self-help situates. The character of the prose narrative is supposed to strive. The character of the prose narrative is not supposed to resign themselves, not supposed to be satisfied with less or to be trampled in spirit, not supposed to reject familiar structures of desire-striving-satisfaction. In this view, several vital types of stories, such as the literature of exhaustion in existentialism and the literature of Afropessimism, would be considered poorly crafted.

To Bernays and Painter, agency is vital because it provides a richer sense of temporality. The character obtains verisimilitude when the character is believed to have a future he or she is enacting in the present of the narrative: "[H]ow your characters act in a given situation—will determine your character's future (as she is further revealed through action) and shape the

[307] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* 75.
[308] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* 104.
[309] Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014): 81.

forward movement and final resolution of your story. As Heracleitus said, "Character is destiny."[310] Such a view makes an ideological investment in the notion that individual choice is the primary determinant of our fates, rather than other sociohistorical factors, that the world is fundamentally meritocratic, and it is this sense of meritocracy's realness that suffuses creative writing advice literature on character. For a character to refuse agency is to refuse futurity, to opt out of the race in a notionally meritocratic world reframed in fiction. It is to question the earning ethic. And, following from Ahmed's analysis of how "weak willed becomes in very stark terms a social distinction"[311] applied to people at the margins, such an investment in agency ignores the systemic reasons which structure will itself, the "compromised conditions of possibility" that Lauren Berlant identifies as of the object of attachment in her naming of the "cruel optimism" central to neoliberalism.[312] The aesthetic investment in cruel optimism is precisely what self-help literature writ large and the craft manual charge to imbue characters with agency manifest.

The impulse to make characters agents is construed as a useful engine of plot. However, in privileging character agency, craft manuals can obscure the way in which the space to act is constrained unevenly across social groups. That the ability, for example, to reject unfair labor conditions, to address sexual harassment, or even to express selfhood in particular ways is delimited by the unequal distribution of power is not addressed. Ignoring these social realities and upholding action as the linchpin of successful characterization can shrink the scope of stories about people at the margins, for whom certain actions may already be foreclosed by virtue of their positionality. Perhaps agency's greatest defender, Gardner, frames agency as merely a

[310] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 35.
[311] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 94.
[312] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (2006): 21.

philosophical question of free will and in so doing reveals a mindless resistance to understanding individuals as historically and socially situated:

> The writer who denies that human beings have free will (the writer who really denies it, not jokingly or ironically pretends to deny it) is one who can write nothing of interest…For the writer who views his characters as helpless biological organisms, *mere units in a mindless social structure,* or cogs in a mechanistic universe, whatever values those characters may hold must necessarily be illusions, since none of the characters can do anything about them, and the usual interplay of value against value that makes for an interesting exploration of theme must here be a cynical and academic exercise.[313]

It is nearly unbearable for Gardner to imagine the self as part of this organism of the system, his aesthetic is so deeply tuned to cruel optimism. Individuation means nothing without the power of mobility. His aesthetic advice is, then, an elaboration of the romance of meritocracy, individualism, and capitalist potentiality, an aesthetic of personal transformation through achievement. It is this aesthetic of achievement which lends cultural currency enough to make the common distinction recalled by Stern, "Some people feel a short story is a narrative that shows a change in a character. Without that change, the story is merely an incident or an anecdote."[314] Without this sense that the human figure exerts agency into action into meaning, a series of events is simply anecdote, a trivialized form.

Though agency might be thought satisfied by the decision to-not, the decision to declare, "I prefer not to," manual writers suggest that some actions are not-actions, that agency is acting *in a particular way*. This way is linked to achievement, improvement, and the self-help ethic. And it fails to see the way in which there are vital stories to be told that center around a different action type, namely, enduring. Berlant mobilizes the concept of "slow death," a biopolitical term that names the conditions under which certain populations are physically worn out, a term that, for example, indexes that historically poor people live shorter lives. She writes of violence

[313] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 43.
[314] Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991): 99.

"seen" or "endured"[315] on the bodies of underprivileged subjects. Povinelli adds that too often "rather than understand this kind of lethality within its own terms (its dailiness, ordinariness, livedness), we demand that it conform to the spectacular event and its ethical dictates of empathic identification. As a result, nothing new happens. No alternative ethical formations are initiated."[316] By pulling away from the paradigm of agentic characters, however, we might do so. In narrating not achievements or satisfactions of desire but practices of endurance, we might understand the contingency Murdoch believed we desperately needed to conceptualize true freedom.

If craft literature has often tacitly upheld conservative narratives, despite the promise of offering craft advice to a more politically base of aspiring writers, those seeking to write stories underpinned by progressive ideology must also dispense with the common craft manual notion that character empathy is attached to the watery notion of likability, one which often disproportionately discounts female characters and people at the margins at worthy characters to revolve stories around. Likability appears as a facet of craft promiscuously in craft manuals. Gurganus, for example, explains of his character development process for *Oldest Living Confederate Widow*, "I wanted to create the ideal companion, the best company in the world."[317] The trope of companionability is rehearsed by Lamott, too, who grounds likability in flaws—at least flaws like her own, as she offers, "[A] person's faults are largely what make him or her likable. I like for narrators to be like the people I choose for friends, which is to say that they have a lot of the same flaws as I. Preoccupation with self is good."[318] In a more elaborate treatment of likability, she continues the buddy trope, imagining a likable character as a friend to

[315] Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," in *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (June 2007): 766
[316] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): 153.
[317] Alan Gurganus, "Alan Gurganus" in *Writers Dreaming,* ed. Naomi Epel (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993): 100.
[318] Lamott, *Bird by Bird,* 50.

the writer, as she writes, "I once asked Ethan Canin to tell me the most valuable thing he knew about writing, and without hesitation he said, 'Nothing is as important as a likable narrator. Nothing holds a story together better.' I think he's right…Having a likable narrator is like having a great friend whose company you love."[319]

Yet the invocation of character likability in assessments of the quality of literary work has been critiqued in recent years, particularly by women writers who have noted the way in which the question of likability most often falls upon female characters and female writers. In 2013, for example, when the novelist Claire Messud was interviewed about her novel *The Woman Upstairs* by *Publishers Weekly* she was told by the interviewer that her protagonist Nora was not someone the interviewer would like to be friends with. Messud was aghast, responding:

> Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? Any of the characters in *The Corrections*? Any of the characters in *Infinite Jest*? Any of the characters in anything Pynchon has ever written? Or Martin Amis? Or Orhan Pamuk? Or Alice Munro, for that matter? If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question isn't "is this a potential friend for me?" but "is this character alive?" Nora's outlook isn't "unbearably grim" at all. Nora is telling her story in the immediate wake of an enormous betrayal by a friend she has loved dearly. She is deeply upset and angry... Her rage corresponds to the immensity of what she has lost.[320]

Later, Messud would reflect on the *Publishers Weekly* incident in an interview with the *New York Times*. "I couldn't help but feel that it was a gendered question," she said, "I don't think we as readers expect to identify with or admire male protagonists, and I suddenly had a feeling that there was this expectation of a woman protagonist by a woman reader."[321] Three years later during the presidential election, the sexism embedded in notions of female likability

[319] Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 49-50.
[320] Claire Messud, "An Unseemly Emotion: PW Talks to Claire Messud," interviewed by Annasue McCleave Wilson, *Publishers Weekly*, April 29, 2013, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/56848-an-unseemly-emotion-pw-talks-with-claire-messud.html.
[321] Claire Messud interviewed by Pamela Paul, *The New York Times Book Review Podcast*, May 3, 2013, https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/book-review-podcast-an-invisible-woman/.

and the so-called likability trap, in which women must negotiate receptions of powerful and assertive women as unlikable, would become so much a part of the political and cultural zeitgeist that the comedian Michelle Wolfe would joke on *The Daily Show*, "People always complain that Hillary [Clinton] doesn't seem like a candidate you can get a beer with. Maybe she doesn't want to get a beer with you."[322] The joke critiqued the logic of narratives in which women must be likable to be given opportunities to advance in their careers, be good at their jobs, or be otherwise worth investing in politically. Craft manuals, in dispensing advice that characters must be likable miss that likability has operated as a dog whistle for excluding the experiences of women from narrative or portraying their experiences as badly crafted.

Indeed, other manual authors have described the likable character as situated within particular cultural norms. Stephen King's likable character, for example, is the chaste, silly, psychic killer who has bought in wholesale to the ideal of the traditional family and acts as the reader's friend. Describing his process for writing *The Dead Zone*, King discusses what he considered the linchpin of the premise. If he wanted to write a story about a political assassin who, using his paranormal capabilities, comes to the conclusion that the only way to prevent World War III is to kill a presidential candidate, the character would need to be "genuinely a decent guy":

> When we first meet the potential assassin, he's taking his girl to the county fair, riding the rides and playing the games. What could be more normal or likable? The fact that he's on the verge of proposing to Sarah makes us like him even more. Later, when Sarah suggests they cap a perfect date by sleeping together for the first time, Johnny tells her he wants to wait until they're married. I felt I was walking a fine line on that one—I wanted readers to see Johnny as sincere and sincerely in love, a straight shooter but not a tight-assed prude. I was able to cut his principled behavior a bit by giving him a childish sense of humor…Ever since John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas, the great American bogeyman has been the guy with the rifle in a high place. I wanted to make this guy into the reader's

[322] Jason Zinoman, "Hating Hillary Clinton: Female Comics Skewer the Sexism of the Likability Trap," *New York Times* (October 9, 2016), https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/arts/hating-hillary-clinton-female-comics-skewer-the-sexism-of-the-likability-trap.html.

friend."[323]

King links likability with restraint, honesty, and normativity. The assassin, Johnny Smith, is likable to King because he does not permit himself premarital sex, even when it is offered, which somehow positions him as a man who loves honestly. His sexual discipline and restraint are the markers of his willing subjecthood. He will himself orient to goodness, rather than accepting sexual temptation, and evidence of his commitment to such ideals is evidenced by his proposal. In King's mind, putting a ring on it is the action of a likable character, and Johnny's putative likability obtains in a temporal register; Johnny does not indulge in the moment but rather takes a long view. His denial in the present is understood as an investment in the durable categorical goodness of lifelong commitment and possibly even the eternal future of the saved. In selecting the enduring zone of temporality over that of the quick and dirty present, Johnny becomes amiable enough to forgive him his spectacular bloodshed.

King is not alone in invoking Judeo-Christian moralism as an axis of likability. In a thoroughly prescriptive mode, Donald Maass articulates qualities that a writer might attach to a character in order to construct likability. Inner conflict, self-regard, wit and spontaneity are likable.[324] But the qualities he confides most strike readers are forgiveness and self-sacrifice.[325] In a particularly outlandish passage, Maass reasons that the biblical tale of the prodigal son has persisted two thousand years, much longer than most novels can expect to; thus, it is because of the powerful characterization of the father's forgiveness. A proponent of characters of a Christian ethic, he, in a section dedicated to dark characters, once more invokes the Bible,

[323] King, *On Writing,* 227-228.
[324] Donald Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel: Insider Advice for Taking Your Fiction to the Next* Level (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2001): 105-116.
[325] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 122.

advising that if the darkness is non-negotiable, the aspiring author must attenuate it with the volition to be good:

> The problem with redemption is that it happens only at the end. It ignores the hundreds of pages of wearisome middle in which the flawed protagonist may refuse to see the light…Dark protagonists are wearisome. How can one forestall that reaction and keep readers engaged by a flawed character? In a nutshell, it is this: A character in trouble is engaging if he has sympathetic qualities; e.g. he is aware that he is in trouble and tries to change. We can forgive anyone who is trying to be good, even seventy-times-seven like the Bible says. What we cannot tolerate is willful self-destructiveness. There is little sympathy for that behavior.[326]

Such a vision is not only moralistic, however. Maass advances the image of a sympathetic, if imperfect, character as one who holds a modicum of mental health. Willful self-destructiveness, the volition to truncate or not bother to exert wild toward extending the time of health, is drawn as patently unlikable. The dismantling of the self, even if an act of agency, operates as the opposite pole to the protagonist agent moving toward the sacralized goal, the nihilist turn to the believer's progressive line of trajectory. To choose disease, to choose the moment over the sustained healthful self, makes the character one with whom Maass cannot imagine the reader identifying.

The problem of characters with no claim to moral legitimacy is one that Burroway picks up. Drawing a distinction between the reception of a handful of iconic antiheroes as read and what she speculates their reception would be off the page, that is, in reality, Burroway suggests that the pleasure of deviant characters it that they permit a foray into transgression that is safe, bracketed, and without residue:

> If you met McMurphy in real life, you'd probably say he was crazy and you'd hope he would be locked up. If you encountered the Neanderthals of William Golding's *The Inheritors* on your evening walk, you'd run. If you were forced to live with the visionaries of Doris Lessing's *Four-Gated City* or the prisoners of Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, you would live in skepticism and fear. But while you read you expand your mental scope by identifying with, temporarily 'becoming' a character who

[326] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 117.

> convinces you that the inmates of the asylum are saner than the staff, that the apemen are more human than *Homo sapiens,* that mental breakdown is mental breakthrough, that perversion is purer than the sexual code by which you live…In our own minds each of us is fundamentally justified, however conscious we are of our flaws—indeed, the more conscious of our flaws, the more commendable we are. As readers we are allowed to borrow a different mind."[327]

Since the self cannot be surpassed, narrative prose in which the inner lives of characters spread in lush elaboration may allow for safe trespass into deviance. The character offers a channel through which fantasies might be contained. In this container, evil, willfulness, barbarism, and perversion are demystified. They lose their viscosity, bounded in the prose figure. They can be briefly identified with and then left behind. Like other manual writers, Burroway assumes that the reader "becoming" the character is an important function for the writer to fulfill. Though it is not quite Murdoch's call to look evil in the eye, this framework at least invests in the notion, if never elaborated fully, of the writer attempting to participate in an *expansion* of the reader's mental scope, rather than constraining the writing practice to that presume to fit through the eye of the needle.

2.3 Conclusion

Whether creative writing influences political life is puzzled over enough that in 2015, the *New York Times* posed a question to the novelists Mohsin Hamid and Francine Prose: does fiction have the power to sway politics? Prose, for her part, was reticent. She responded that while books like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* had helped ferry along the passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act, the history of books like *The Turner Diaries*— as well as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and various spiritual texts, which she considered fiction— suggested that it was simpler to identify how literature had caused regressive,

[327] Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 105.

reactionary, and all-around negative political effects than positive or progressive ones. "It's difficult," she wrote, "to trace the direct — the quid pro quo — impact of literature on politics,"[328] before leaning on the notion that fiction can inspire deeper empathy which might inform one's politics. But Hamid was more optimistic, his answer centering around the way in which precisely *because* fiction might not appear political it might offer important counternarratives:

> Fiction can say publicly what might otherwise appear unsayable, combating the coerced silence that is a favored weapon of those who have power. In Pakistan, for example, where numerous hatreds — including of Hindus, of atheists, of supposed sexual transgressors — have been actively promoted by the state for purposes of social control, we have seen Hindu characters, nonbelieving characters, sexually transgressive characters being humanized in fiction… Politics is shaped by people. And people, sometimes, are shaped by the fiction they read. After Manto, I was more aware of the dangerous social desiccation being imposed in the name of religion around me in Pakistan. After Achebe, I was more concerned with agency, the notion that we Pakistanis needed to take responsibility for solving our own problems, because blaming the outside world, even when partly justified, served only to perpetuate our own sense of powerlessness.[329]

Writers interested in producing the kind of literature Hamid recounted having once shifted his own politics will find little craft advice in popular creative writing manuals up to the task. "An absent character can also be a powerful figure in a story. She'd be created by the effects she's had on others. The other characters seem to be under her influence—their conversation keeps returning to her, and their mosaic of impressions makes her present though she never appears…But with such an extended fanfare, the character had better live up to the advance publicity,"[330] Stern writes. In creative writing manuals, the absent characters, those who do not appear in dramatized scene, are generally the readers. In shaping advice around this

[328] Mohsin Hamid and Francine Prose, "Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?," *The New York Times,* April 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/does-fiction-have-the-power-to-sway-politics.html.
[329] Hamid and Prose.
[330] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,* 98.

figure's likely reception, the advice often falls short of ideals espoused by those who believe in empathy's power to compel political change.

Creative writing manuals that suggest that familiarity is the touchstone of compelling characterization, that valorize agency and reject centering point of view around a victimized figure, that suggest individualism supersedes sociality or group identification, and that repeat the maxim to show not tell all tell a story in which holding attention requires an adherence to the values of a neoliberal status quo. These recommendations are inimical to the putative objectives of creative writing manuals to assist aspiring writers amongst the "millions left behind"[331] by cultural gatekeepers and institutions, and they conceal their lack of interest in alterity beneath a purpose that preempts all others, seizing and sustaining the reader's future attention.

In tracing creative writing manual advice on characterization and its supposed attendant functions, producing identification in the reader and apprehending the reader's time, we can see, then, the way in which too often creative writing manual advice forecloses or impedes precisely the empathy it may aim to produce. Literature can, of course, produce empathy. However, it will require further engagement with the question of whether the aspiring writer ought to write toward the appetites of the imagined composite reader drawn up in preexisting craft literature, ought to write for others, or ought to envision audience reception in new ways entirely. It will need to ask how technique itself might be used to subvert violent orthodoxies regarding who is empathetic, worthy of attention, and able to act. In the publishing community, it is now not uncommon to encounter a call to arms like that of the speculative fiction author K. Tempest Bradford who has written that writers must take seriously "crafting characters and fictions that don't support or excuse or ignore colonialism, marginalization, and other forms of oppression.

[331] Clark, *Writing Tools*, 4.

That means creating inclusive fiction that reflects of the diversity of the world we all live in. Representation is key to good writing."[332] This view thickens the humanist interpretation of craft, suggesting that good craft requires insight into human life, not only the human lives that have historically found representation in literature.

In, fact, such craft has already been exercised by practitioners themselves. It has been exercised, for example, in works like "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club," written by Justin Torres. Following the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, Torres wrote it for the *Washington Post* and defied conventions of the newspaper's pages. Rather than adopting the frequently prescribed first or third person point of view, Torres offers a second person narrator. Torres conveys that the unnamed "you" of the piece is queer and Latin through a series of hypotheticals: "Maybe your Tia dropped you off, gave you cab money home. Maybe you had to get a sitter. Maybe you've yet to come out to your family at all, or maybe your family kicked you out years ago."[333]

This second-person subject identity is represented with capaciousness. He, she, or they *could* is a number of people, a number of queer, Latin individuals. The reader is invited to closely relate with the protagonist of this narrative as a sort of both-audience-and-protagonist, to trace the same plot in which, as the writer notes, though identity is politicized and violence too frequently follows this identity, tractable joys and safeties might be had in the safe spaces of the queer nightclub. This character is formed not only through action but the world inhabited, one in which, "outside, Puerto Rico is still a colony, being allowed to drown in debt, to suffer, without the right to file for bankruptcy, to protect itself. Outside, there are more than 100 bills targeting

[332] K. Tempest Bradford, "Representation Matters: A Literary Call to Arms," LitReactor, January 31, 2017, https://litreactor.com/columns/representation-matters.
[333] Justin Torres, "In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club," *Washington Post* (June 13, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/in-praise-of-latin-night-at-the-queer-club/2016/06/13/e841867e-317b-11e6-95c0-2a6873031302_story.html.

you, your choices, your people, pending in various states." And throughout these characterization moves, the reader is always both "you" and not.

Torres orients his subject not as a character acting in pursuit of a particular desire whose lack sits in the present while its fulfillment is a hypothetical at a temporal distance, instead situating the action of the character in an inhabitation of the text's present. "The only imperative is to be transformed, transfigured in the disco light," Torres writes. "To lighten, loosen, see yourself reflected in the beauty of others. You didn't come here to be a martyr, you came to live, papi. To live, mamacita. To live, hijos. To live, mariposas." The reader might have a background very much like the second person character in the piece, and if not, the reader has now been prompted to see that to oppose the queer, Latin subject becomes, then, to direct violence, death. To refuse the sanctity of Latin night at the queer club is to urge self-execution. It is not that character identification is imposed through familiarity but through values.

In the final two graphs of the piece, Torres performs gymnastic feats, turning toward two third-person subjects, the media and politicians, before introducing a first-person narrator. He speaks of what the media and republicans will do, a future forecast by a handful of normative moves. The media— as usual, it is implied— shall frame the narrative of the massacre in binary terms, with Islamist terrorists at war with the United States. It's a familiar narrative. It is also not the narrative that has been performed up until that point in the op-ed. Meanwhile, republicans who refuse to support policies in favor of gay rights will attempt to seize the mass shooting and exploit it for various and unrelated political ends, becoming beneficiaries of tragedy. This rhetorical move does not efface the author but rather foregrounds the writer as thinker, writer as subject, writer as the text's producer. It reminds the reader that the text has been written, a fact underscored by the introduction of the writer as character and first person narrator, the *I* suddenly

introduced: “But for a moment, I want to talk about the sacredness of Latin Night at the Queer Club. Amid all the noise, I want to close my eyes and see you all there, dancing, inviolable, free.”[334]

This first-person narrator does not claim the narrative as his alone. The I wishes the story of you experiencing freedom. The I invests in the notion that though a normative frame might tell the narrative of one night in which the agent was a man who massacred, the protagonists of the story were always those who were not on a mission but inhabiting a space of everyday pleasure.

It is through aspects of craft, in part, that Torres recuperates the story from both formally and ideologically normative storytellers. It is through engaging such techniques not following from but in counterpoint to sociopolitical norms, too, that pedagogical writing texts can contribute to a discourse of radical and empathic politics.

[334] Torres, “In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club.”

Chapter 3: The King Died, Or Narrative Structure

In 1993, Toni Morrison welcomed two interviewers from *The Paris Review*, Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, to her office at Princeton University. Morrison had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction five years before and that year won the Nobel Prize. She disliked being referred to as a "poetic writer," an attribution she viewed as meager. She had once said that her responsibility as a black woman writer was "to bear witness to a history that is unrecorded,"[335] yet she did not view this project as specifically autobiographical. In creative writing workshops she was apt to tell students, "I don't want to hear about your little life, OK? Because you don't know nothing."[336] A fiction of unrecorded history was not necessarily the story of the individual writer, and she rejected the regurgitation of autobiographical narratives endemic in the creative writing classroom.

The office at Princeton with its china cup holding number two pencils, with its jade plants and a bench supporting stacks of books and papers, had been hers since 1989. It was a Sunday when Schappell and Lacour sat down with the novelist. They were interested in the notion that the authorial impulse was tied to a therapeutic one, or at least the question of what writing might do for a writer. "I read that you started writing after your divorce as a way of beating back the loneliness. Was that true, and do you write for different reasons now?" Morrison was asked.

"Sort of," Morrison said. "Sounds simpler than it was. I don't know if I was writing for that reason or some other reason—or one that I don't even suspect. I do know that I don't like it here if I don't have something to write." When asked for clarification about what "here" was, Morrison continued:

[335] K. Biswas, "Toni Morrison, Public Intellectual," *The New Statesman America*, August 12, 2019. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2019/08/toni-morrison-public-intellectual.
[336] Pip Cummings, "'I Don't Want to Come Back': Toni Morrison on Life, Death, and Desdemona," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 7, 2015. https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/i-didnt-want-to-come-back-toni-morrison-on-life-death-and-desdemona-20150804-giqaxu.html.

> Meaning out in the world. It is not possible for me to be unaware of the incredible violence, the willful ignorance, the hunger for other people's pain. I'm always conscious of that…Teaching makes a big difference, but that is not enough. Teaching could make me into someone who is complacent, unaware, rather than part of the solution. So what makes me feel as though I belong here out in this world is not the teacher, not the mother, not the lover, but what goes on in my mind when I am writing. Then I belong here and then all of the things that are disparate and irreconcilable can be useful. I can do the traditional things that writers always say they do, which is to make order out of chaos. Even if you are reproducing the disorder, you are sovereign at that point.[337]

Schappell and Lacour were not sure what to make of Morrison's position. They puzzled over the relationship between the chaos of which the novelist spoke and the act of writing, over the dangers of teaching turning to complacency and the "here" of an unruly world reordered through the act of composition. "Wouldn't the answer to that be either to lecture about the chaos or to be in politics?" they asked. If the aim was to organize the chaos of the real world, a chaos of political urgency that included ignorance and violence, they wondered why fiction was Morrison's vehicle. Why not teaching or politics? What was it about putting made-up people into sequences of made-up events that could make being "here" in a ragged, painful world a better place to be?

Morrison implied that it was through writing that she apprehended a world more sensical; story could reinterpret sprawling violence, ignorance, and sadism that were in the real world both rampant and too often accepted, the *feeling* of spectacular injustice suppressed by the narcoticizing sense of "how it is." In the century preceding that when wokeness would achieve viral idiomatic usage and over fifty years after Lead Belly sang in "Scottsboro Boys," a song about the famous miscarriage of justice against nine black youths, to "stay woke" and a black union miner announced he and his fellow laborers were prepared to "stay woke longer,"

[337] Toni Morrison, "The Art of Fiction No. 134," interviewed by Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, *The Paris Review*, Fall 1993, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison.

Morrison suggested that it was writing stories, or unrecorded histories, in which she could stay woke, could reorder what might at other times, by other people, be accepted inflictions of harm.

At its most basic, after all, story is a way of containing, organizing, and editorializing time around action to create meanings which are necessarily political. Beyond the meanings explicitly inscribed in texts, as Paul Ricœur so famously argues, "[T]ime becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience,"[338] and "narrative, which is never ethically neutral, proves to be the first laboratory of moral judgment."[339] To Ricœur, who understands the political sphere through an ethical lens,[340] man stands passive within the immensity of cosmic time, but narratives, both fictional and historical, can provide the imaginative resources to apprehend a sense of the connectedness of events and the unity of human life. This unity, he claims, is a necessary condition to understand oneself as an agent who is connected, indebted, and responsible to others, even those no longer alive to whom one owes remembrance, rather than a being whose position in diffuse time makes one's existence random, aimless, and insignificant.[341] Entanglement with the social course of history creates a sense of permanence in time for the acting self despite the transience of individual human life. Some stories, then, fulfill an existential, social, and ethical function through the way in which they construe actions as significant by virtue of their effects in an intersubjective human history. Story is to Ricœur a requisite for a functioning polity, holding great political potential.

On that Sunday in Princeton, turning over the interview question about her choice of vocation, or her rejection of others more directly involved in social reformation, Morrison

[338] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 3.
[339] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 140.
[340] Berry Tholen, "Political Responsibility as a Virtue: Nussbaum, MacIntyre, and Ricoeur on the Fragility of Politics," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 43, no. 1 (2018): 23-24.
[341] Ricoeur *Oneself as Another*, 164-165.

demurred that she had no talent for professional politics.[342] As the interview continued, the tension between teaching and the politically potent writing that Morrison alluded to was not expounded upon further. Why might teaching leech exigency from the consciousness of the world's unhappy status quo?

Popular creative writing manuals offer some clues. These pedagogically-oriented texts, after all, at times reveal worldviews incommensurable with the political potentialities of creative narrative writing, for it is in these manuals that politically urgent narratives are often conceived of as at odds with form, unrealistic, melodramatic, devoid of meaning, or too dull to be bothered with. The paradox of many of these manuals is that in presupposing certain universal laws or a physics of narrative logic in the upholding of certain flows and forms in storytelling, fiction frequently becomes hostile to the utopian imagination itself. Utopia, or the push toward it, does not fit the prescribed plot structures.

It is my thesis in this chapter that creative writing manual authors prescribe approaches to narrative structure that restrict their radical possibility. While formal analysis has frequently been conflated with dismissing apolitical aesthetics, I critique the implicit politics of manual discourse around forms. Building upon my claim in Chapter 3, I argue that if in guidebooks the aspiring writer's first prerogative is to take hold of the reader's attention and it is supposed that the reader will feel the meaningfulness of plot events along with the characters, assumptions about how to produce emotionality through narrative structure rely upon value judgments about what is considered normatively emotionally resonant and meaningful, emotion and meaningfulness often conflated. Though ideas about how to invest time with emotion and meaning through narrative structure sometimes conflict, manual writers tend to reinforce values such as incremental change,

[342] Ricoeur *Oneself as Another*, 164-165.

normative behavior, provincialism, anti-intellectualism, managed selfhood, efficiency, stoicism, customer satisfaction, universalism, moderatism, presentism, in addition to the reality judgment that there is a moral physics to the universe in which people get what they deserve. I focus on how these values are implicitly reinforced through recommendations regarding several specific and connected elements of narrative structure: pacing, plot type, plot shape, plot structure, narrative subject, and the proportions between summarized action and scene.

My argument in this chapter takes cues from Herbert Gans's conception of news values. In his seminal work *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, Gans posits that journalists, like sociologists, make "reality judgments," interpretive moves which suggest a number of assumptions about the nature of external reality and the values therein,[343] so that news stories are both a product and transmitter of values.[344] Gans identifies two types of values: topical and enduring. Topical values are "the opinions expressed about specific actors or activities of the moment," while enduring values can be located in many news stories over time and exert a power over what events become news, contributing to the definition of news itself.[345] Among the enduring news values he identifies are ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, moderatism, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, and individualism, values which he ties to moderate ideologies implicit in the news.[346] Because the news acts as transmitter and product of values, I assume that there are more general narrative values with implicit political affinities and logics that can be located in craft manuals' discussion of forms of narrative structure. These values derive from and structure what is understood to be emotionally potent and meaningful.

[343] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, 25th anniversary edition (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1979, 2004): 39.
[344] Gans, *Deciding What's News,* 40.
[345] Gans, *Deciding What's News,* 41.
[346] Gans, *Deciding What's News,* 42-52.

If it is unclear what the connection is between time, emotion, meaning, and narrative structure, it is because the four mutually inform each other. In one study of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles written between 1995 and 2011, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen found that the honored texts tended to invoke emotion,[347] which was interpreted as a strategic ritual meant to generate cultural currency closely associated with the perceived emotional intelligence of the journalists.[348] The representation of emotion has been afforded cultural capital and, therefore, meaning. Its cultural capital is presumed equivalent with meaningfulness. Beyond the incorporation of directly emotional idiom, Wahl-Jorgensen alludes to a linkage to elements of narrative structure, in this case, dramatic tension:

> Emotions may also be built into the narrative: even in stories that do not use emotional language, dramatic tension is created through a variety of narrative strategies, including detailed description, juxtaposition and personalized story-telling, as the article explores in more detail later. In part, the creation of dramatic tension is so difficult to detect at the surface-level because it draws on presuppositions, or claims based on shared normative assumptions that are taken for granted and implicit, 'embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance' (Richardson, 2007: 63), such as the idea that stealing and killing are morally wrong, that death is a tragic event, and that caring and loving are morally right.[349]

Though Wahl-Jorgensen does not elaborate specific techniques or forms of narrative structure, her insight into narrative design's predication on the presumed normativity of emotional reaction does point to the sociopolitical assumptions underpinning formal considerations—and one might infer if forms are recommended in guidebooks because of their supposed effect upon normative emotionality, they might sometimes miss the opportunity to expand emotional repertoires toward the end of imbuing political concerns with emotional urgency.

[347] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "The Strategic Ritual of Emotionality: A Case of Study of Pulitzer Prize-winning Articles," *Journalism* 14, no. 1 (2013): 137.
[348] Wahl-Jorgensen, "The Strategic Ritual of Emotionality," 141.
[349] Wahl-Jorgensen, "The Strategic Ritual of Emotionality," 135.

Through temporally-inflected forms, or narrative structure, the writer editorializes and transmits something of their politics, that is, which actions can be done, ought to be done, or are meaningful. If the relationship between time forms in story and action and meaning is not immediately obvious, we might turn to real life. We are aware that in real life time itself is political. How time is imagined, how it is thought to clump or spread, its scarcity or infinite excess, whose it is to fill and where and why it is appropriate for particular action, the way it is thought to begin and end at particular periods on the scale of history or domestic calendars, the fashion in which it unfurls for particular demographic groups, how it determines modes of communication or media, makes possible or forecloses collective action whether via an election or religious celebration—all of these are just a few ways in which the organization of time is political. How we conceive of time determines what we believe to be possible, the quickness with which we consider acting, how ambitious an action we believe tenable, what we consider meaningful—what is news is news in part because it is thought aberrant—and even the viability of discussion. The holiday party is no time to discuss politics or religion. The work day is no time to air grievances about the Second Shift in one's personal life. Or else movements like #TimesUp have mobilized tropes of time to signal the availability of change. And it is no coincidence that since the late eighteenth century, as Theo Jung has observed, political actors have become accustomed to defining themselves and their opponents under the temporalized rubric of progress, either as advancing historical progress, out-of-date or behind the times, working for the nation's children's futures, so on.[350] Francis Fukuyama declared, incorrectly, the end of history.[351] In narrative, as in real life, the arrangement of time in reality is political.

3.1 What Is Structure?

[350] Theo Jung, "Zeitgeist in Early Nineteenth Century Political Discourse," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 9, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 25.
[351] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* no. 16 (Summer 1989): 4.

One of the challenges of discussing craft is the instability of terminology. While most practitioners use the words "narrative" and "story" synonymously, for example, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jon Franklin deviates from this norm, writing, "Narrative is chronology: This happens, that happens, the other thing happens, and then something else happens. All of our lives are narrative—usually a rather confusing version of it. Story is something else: taking select parts of a narrative, separating them from everything else, and arranging them so they have meaning."[352] Though Franklin's use of "narrative" and "story" are unconventional, the arrangement he refers to neatly summarizes narrative structure. All issues of narrative structure return to the organization of time for the purpose of conveying meaning, political or otherwise, and they are interwoven with assumptions about what is interesting and emotional. Gardner proposes:

> The *sine qua non* of narrative, so far as form is concerned, is that it takes time. We cannot read a whole novel in an instant, so to be coherent, to work as a unified experience necessarily and not just accidentally temporal, narrative must show some profluence of development. What the logical progress of an argument is to nonfiction, event-sequence is to fiction. Page 1, even if it's a page of description, raises questions, suspicions, and expectations; the mind casts forward to later pages, wondering what will come about and how. It is this casting forward that draws us from paragraph to paragraph and chapter to chapter. At least in conventional fiction, the moment we stop caring where the story will go next, the writer has failed, and we stop reading.[353]

If to speak of narrative structure is to speak of making time less diffuse, articulating shapes of time around action, the author strategizes narrative structure because the shapeliness of time in the narrative is thought to correspond with the reader's attention, emotional response, and meaning. The relationship between form and function might range from filtering information to

[352] Jon Franklin, "A Story Structure," in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 109.
[353] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 55.

make particular phenomena more prominent to prolonging tension in hopes of producing a stronger sense of change at a point of plot reversal.

In Morrison's case, for example, beginning *Sula's* first non-prefatory chapter with the remark that the one time the fictional National Suicide Day was interrupted was World War II is more than a mordant joke. It is rueful lament on the way in which the management of trauma through habitual time eventually normalizes horror even as it attempts to commemorate. Initially meant to strike the reader as merely ironic and later, as the history and eventual communal acceptance of the holiday—a day declared upon return from the battlefields of World War I by Shadrack to be the one day anyone in the community can kill themselves or others—is relayed, the opening comments upon the way in which even the devastation of war can be glanced upon without a tremble by a community when structured around the temporality of repetition; when National Suicide Day's holiday cycle is interrupted, it is not because the traumatized veteran Shadrack has been helped but because war has broken out once more. Beginning with the idea of cycles of trauma, Morrison provides a framework for reading the narrative that follows, which centers around cycles of trauma and an individual, Sula, who attempts a form of care that breaks such cycles. This is an authorial choice regarding narrative structure that is alive to the way in which the politics of a historical moment distribute affect.

The following are just a few questions about narrative structure that the writer must ask when approaching their own work:

How does the beginning offer a promise of what's to come in the narrative? Is there a tension or mystery established, a suggestion of a situation that may develop, an unfamiliar world or voice or characters? How does the moment in time from which the narration is issued produce

a particular mood, make possible differences in knowledge between the dramatized scenes and the narration, etc.?

How does the story move through time? Is there an antecedent scenario suggested, and if so, how does the "present" scenario unsettle or disharmonize it? How does the tense contribute to the mood, pacing, themes, and plot possibilities? When does the pacing accelerate or lag, and what makes the pace accelerate or lag? How do leaps forward or backward in time affect the momentum of the narrative? How do the proportions between dramatized scenes, summarized action, exposition, physical description of stagnant bodies, and characters' interior meditations/reflections/emotional renderings pace the narrative? What is the purpose behind these proportions?

What is the plot of the narrative? How are elements of plot structured in the narrative, and how do these proportions affect the pacing? How is tension intensified or released? What is at stake for the different characters? How is the plot complicated? Does the plot have meaning beyond itself? How does the focal length of the narration affect our ability to feel what is at stake and remain invested throughout the narrative? Is the focal point too "on the nose," simple, or unwavering? Does the author provide enough shifting of the balance between knowledge and mystery as we move through the narrative?

What are the different parts? Where do the breaks come? How does the writer create a sense of continuity at various points? Are there changes in point of view? Why does the rhythm shift in different parts (sentences, paragraphs, scenes, etc.)? Do characters view particular happenings in the narrative as dividing marks in their lives? Does the reader? At which points, if any, does an effaced narrator "editorialize" what the character thinks about his or her situation? How do such intrusions create an architecture for the narrative? How do they create tension?

Writers of craft manuals are apt to delineate theories of the formal units apparent in an ideal story, types of story, and the narrative modes best suited to achieve the story's meaning. For many of these writers, plot is the primary element of narrative structure, that which erects the shape of the story and distinguishes it from undifferentiated and unmeaningful temporal flows. King's view stands as an outlier in the group, understanding story as motivated by what he calls "the situation" and made up of narration (a term which he inexplicably decides means the characters' physical movements alone), description, and dialogue.[354] Though between his three parts and what King refers to as "the situation," or premise of the narrative, plot is approximated, he confesses a "distrust" in plot grounded in the notion that life is plotless and that the spontaneous creation of the aspiring writer will be hindered by thinking too much of it. In replacing plot with "the situation" et. al., King is able to draw up a sense that his theory is both unique and more accommodating of artistic caprice, one substantiated through his own career as a writer:

> A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine with me. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a *What-if* question:
>
> *What if* vampires invaded a small New England village? (*Salem's Lot)*
>
> *What if* a policeman in a remote Nevada town went berserk and started killing everyone in sight? (*Desperation*)
>
> *What if* a cleaning woman suspected of a murder she got away with (her husband) fell under suspicion for a murder she did not commit (her employer)? (*Dolores Claiborne*)
>
> *What if* a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (*Cujo*)
>
> There were all situations which occurred to me—while showering, while driving, while taking my daily walk—and which I eventually turned into books. In no case were they plotted.[355]

What King does not state is a widely held view that plot is an element more characteristic of commercial fiction than literary fiction. Many falsely equate plot and formulaic storytelling or

[354] King, *On Writing*, 187.
[355] King, *On Writing*, 196-197.

commercial fiction lacking literary quality. To call a narrative plot-driven is understood to malign its other qualities. Many would-be defenders of literary fiction forget that perhaps plot's greatest champion was, in fact, E.M. Forster. To Forster, plot was what distinguished a crude reader from a sophisticated one:

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say "and then?" If it is in a plot we ask "why?"…A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by "and then—and then—" They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also.[356]

Forster's conception of plot is most famous for its emphasis on plot as a causally-married series of events. However, in invoking the memory of the reader, Forster also gestured toward a temporality beyond the text. He imagined the reader latching onto and holding space for details of the narrative through the time of reading, while assimilating new information from the text, cutting two divergent time orientations in the mind, the reader "see[ing] it from two points of view: isolated, and related to the other facts that he has read on previous pages"[357] since "to appreciate a mystery, part of the mind must be left behind, brooding, while the other part goes marching on.[358] Brooding and marching on, of course, imagine two very different relationships between time in the mind, one lingering and *repeating* a thought or chain of thoughts and the other advancing through new thoughts, new information. While one pedals stationary in time, the other is active through time.

[356] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 86.
[357] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 87.
[358] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 87.

This divergent sense of time is in Forster's hands one fulfillment of an unspoken agreement between reader and writer. The writer produces a plot that resists summary, requiring time to reach the form's fulfillment, and the reader commits time to reading the narrative, a commitment contingent upon the presumptive promise of the writer to eventually reveal the unity of the temporally dispersed plot points:

> The plot-maker expects us to remember, we expect him to leave no loose ends. Every action or word ought to count; it ought to be economical and spare; even when complicated it should be organic and free from dead-matter…[O]ver it, as it unfolds, will hover the memory of the reader (that dull flow of the mind of which intelligence is the bright advancing edge) and will constantly rearrange and reconsider, seeing new clues, new chains of cause and effect, and the final sense (if the plot has been a fine one) will not be of clues or chains, but of something aesthetically compact, something which might have been shown by the novelist straight away, only if had had shown it straight away it would never have become beautiful.[359]

The beauty of the text is, here, not a single impression upon the final image of information of the text, not its answer to what happened. Rather, it is in its ability to create effects *through time*, rather than simply at a moment in time, for the reader, the effects building a pattern that happen to culminate in an answer the question of what happened but, more importantly, show the disparate effects at disparate moments to belong to a single, unified form. Narrative structure is, thus, best understood not in spatial terms, not as the scaffolding of a building, for example, or any physical image. Rather, it is best understood as a structure of time, more like a week, an academic recess, a commemorative day, a historical period, a mourning period, or the length of a loan, and what coheres it is, often, plot.

3.2 Narrative Subject

When the director Mike Nichols decided to film a biopic about the Kerr-McGee Cimarron Plutonium Recycling Plant whistle-blower Karen Silkwood who ultimately died in a

[359] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 88.

car crash under shadowy circumstance, he hired Nora Ephron and Alice Arlen to write the script. Ephron had been one of the women involved in a class action lawsuit against *Newsweek* for sexual discrimination in the workplace. She had gone on to write as a journalist for several publications and had been hired at one point to doctor the script for *All the President's Men*, but none of her full-length feature film scripts had ever before made it to the box office. *Silkwood* would earn Ephron and Arlen an Oscar nod, and later, detailing her transition from a *New York Post* reporter to a screenwriter, suggested that journalists could learn something from writers of narrative. Narrative mastery was contingent upon embroidering characters' emotions into the plot, and not any emotions would do. Recalling her work on the screenplay for *Silkwood*, Ephron described Silkwood's politicization as too dull to meet the requirements of an audience's attention span. To become passionate about politics was viewed as insufficient to the demands of narrative:

> As we wrote *Silkwood*, we realized that we had to condense the period before Karen's death. We knew the movie would end with the automobile accident that killed her even though parts of her story continued long after her death. Since Meryl Streep was playing Karen, we couldn't eliminate our lead character before the end of the movie. After we made that decision, it was clear that the movie had to begin before plutonium plant worker Karen became whistle-blower Karen Silkwood. We had one other major problem, one that always faces screenwriters. What do you do in the middle of the movie? In the middle of any movie complications ensue and the whammies mount up. In the middle of *Silkwood*, Karen becomes a political human being. Well, that's boring to watch. How could we show this process without turning off the audience? The answer was to make the movie very domestic, about three people in a house. Martin Scorsese says the dream movie scene is three people in a room. We had that: Karen, her roommate, and her boyfriend Drew Stevens. These three people, all going in different directions, gave us a huge amount of material to play against the story that we wanted to tell: *A young woman becomes political*.[360]

To Ephron, narrative structure was stable. Middles are where complications stack up. And those complications could not be merely political. Silkwood had raised alarms about the

[360] Nora Ephron, "What Narrative Writers Can Learn from Screenwriters," in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 99-100.

insufficient safety protocols at her workplace. She had become active in her labor union. She had been contaminated with nuclear materials on the job. And attempting to investigate her employer herself, she had been planning to meet with a *New York Times* reporter on the night of her death. Yet these plot points were not understood to be interesting enough to constitute a narrative. There must, to the writers, be a domestic drama to make Silkwood's story interesting enough to an audience. The time of the private sphere was imagined to be what made the time of the represented events bearable for the consumer of narrative because it was there that supposedly universal emotions live. It was there that the individual's investment in what is understood to be *eternally important*—the home—rather than historically contingent—the plant's violations against its own laborers—might be represented, and the lack of contingency is understood to indicate greater meaningfulness in comparison to the historically situated problem of the specific laborers' contamination illness. Not everyone will find labor activism affecting, Ephron suggested, but everyone might find meaning via the universal and eternal *emotions* of the domestic relationships. Like many manual writers, she presumes that the aspiring writer's objective is to write a book as broadly popular as possible, rather than writing a book for a specific audience.

The issue of reader interest is centralized in manual writers' attempt to define the ideal narrative subject and often suggests manual writers' paradoxical devotion to both provincialism and universalism. To Clark, "Stories need an engine, a question that the action answers for the reader. Who done it? Guilty or not guilty? Who will win the race? Which man will she marry? Will the hero escape or die trying? Will the body be found?"[361] De Silva declares, "Readers devour narratives to discover how the problem, will be resolved. Once they know, they stop

[361] Clark, *Writing Tools,* 150.

reading—so you had better stop writing."[362] Unlike Forster's treatment, both of these theories view narrative as a dialogue between question and answers about what will happen. Once the "answer" to the plot's question is ascertained, the plot is complete. The plot is the piecemeal provision of information over a prolonged period of time. Yet this unfurling of information is limited in its scope; the plot's information requires, ideally, little specialized knowledge or interest in particular subjects outside human emotion. "How do you keep a reader moving through your story? We have described three techniques that do the trick: foreshadowing, cliffhangers, and story engines," Clark writes, continuing, "[T]he reader makes predictions about what lies down the road. When readers encounter boring and technical information, especially at the beginning, they will expect more boring matter below."[363] The dismissal of technical information in storytelling is just one reason that writers have struggled to tell narratives around climate change, structural inequalities, and the problems of big data have. Discussion of craft has treated them as boring.

In 2014, CNN President Jeff Zucker lamented that in the face of a "tremendous lack of interest" in climate change, they had not "figure[d] out how to engage that story in a meaningful way."[364] To do so requires the offering of some technical information. While framing climate change as, for example, extreme weather stories might be perceived as a worthwhile strategy to avoid the need for excessive technical writing, psychometric studies have shown that extreme weather stories are perceived as less controllable and are less dreaded.[365] When events are viewed as uncontrollable, there is less motivation or onus to act, of course, and so writers

[362] DeSilva, "Endings," 118.
[363] Clark, *Writing Tools*, 155.
[364] Emily Atkin, "The Real Reason No One Cares About CNN's Climate Change Stories," *ThinkProgress*, May 22, 2014, https://thinkprogress.org/the-real-reason-why-no-one-cares-about-cnns-climate-stories-13a7cf86f2b/.
[365] Ann Bostrom and Daniel Lashof, "Weather or climate change?" in *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*, eds. Lisa Dilling and Susanne C. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 38.

attempting to write about climate change in hopes of inspiring political action likely would find their objectives irreconcilable with the craft prescription to structure narrative in avoidance of technical explanation. Philip Smith has argued that the apocalypse genre has proven to be an effective narrative canister for telling the story of global warming, gleaning modest results like new forms of civic responsibility and higher rates of concern over the phenomenon. However, Smith also acknowledges that the triumph of the apocalyptic global warming story is "shallow" since there is a "mismatch between discourse and action."[366] While the role of social values cannot be discounted, it is also true that imagining and describing action, particularly in the policy sphere, may require writers to grapple with how to convey technical information to readers.

Clark construes technical information only as boring, but it is likely that this advice is meant to address an additional concern; it is a roadblock in the manual writers' prerogative for the aspiring writer to produce works as universally appealing as possible. The impulse toward universality leads some manual writers to theorize or advance pseudo-psychological theories regarding primal emotion. Burroway imagines plot's quintessence to be a two-axis scaffolding, one keyed into the individual's primary conflict and another keyed into the social fabric of the narrative:

> Whereas the hierarchical or "vertical" nature of narrative, the power struggle, has long been acknowledged, there also appears in all narrative a "horizontal" pattern of connection and disconnection between characters which is the main source of its emotional effect. In discussing human behavior, psychologists speak in terms of "tower" and "network" patterns, the need to climb (which implies conflict) and the need for community, the need to win out over others and the need to belong to others; and these two forces also drive fiction.[367]

[366] Philip Smith, *Climate Change as Social Drama: Global Warming in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 68.
[367] Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 35.

Burroway's assessment makes a rather presumptuous claim about the tension between competitive individualism and the desire to belong. Every story does not, of course, find its dramatic potential in this tension. But in displacing the advice onto psychologists, the framework can be construed as "scientific" and universal, rather than culturally-situated. Though it reveals anxieties characteristic of an individualistic society, it can be thought to apply to all human life.

Though expressions of the value of universalism recur throughout creative writing manuals, their writers are not averse to suggesting certain provincial in-group appeals. Maas, even while brandishing an often repeated manual trope—the book must win out in a competition of attention against television—compares the engagement of reading with the engagement of television spectatorship. He suggests that the plot must include five elements: sympathetic character, conflict for the sympathetic character, plot reinforcement (or the complication of conflict), climax, resolution to seize and sustain the reader's attention.[368] However in elaborating his theory of how these plot elements attain success, his reasoning skews toward provincialism as he attempts to marry interest and immediacy:

> To achieve that level of involvement, the conflict must matter to us; equally, our interest level will decline in ratio to how removed we feel from those involved in a conflict. Take TV news: How do you react when you hear about war in the third world? If you are like me, you probably furrow your brow and feel bad for a moment but quickly put it out of your mind. On the other hand, how did you react to the shooting of President Kennedy or Reagan, or to the Challenger explosion? Did you watch TV for hours, flipping channels for fresh information? I did, too.[369]

Maas assumes third world stories will not be interesting to the audience desired by the aspiring writer and that the aspiring writer writes to satisfy such an audience. The matter is not advancing a new vision of storytelling or investing in the importance of such stories but reproducing a somewhat ethnocentric formula which has previously proven successful in mass

[368] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel,* 136-138.
[369] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel,* 134-135.

media. It would seem that in Maas's imagination, the aspiring writer's ideal reader is someone like Maas himself: a person with little affinity for global citizenship, someone who views the problems of the third world as distant, never quite mattering. In contrast, domestic news stories matter to Maas greatly, and the ultimate plot he holds up is that of the Columbine shooting:

> Only a few news stories have the power to maintain our attention for days, weeks or even months. Think of the shootings at Columbine High School. Why did that last in the news? The first reason is obvious: It happened close to home. We could easily imagine it happening in our own town, to our own kids…The shock and proximity of that tragedy do not fully explain why it held our attention, however. What really made Columbine a long-lived news story were its layers, the questions it raised and, most significantly, the media's personalization of its victims.[370]

Though Mass points to the personalization of victims, which correlates with two of his five-part structures elements regarding character, as well as elements outside of his formula, what is most prominent in Maas's treatment of plot is his sense that the vital element of plot is its grounding in the culture of the reader. Maas suggests the aspiring writer enters into a plot of their own in which the writer must attempt to woo the consumer of narratives from television. Its climax occurs in the moment in which the consumer of narrative can imagine someone else's story as their own, but this imagination, even if changed, does not change in one fundamental aspect. In Maas's narrative, the consumer of narrative does not learn to imagine the lives of people suffering war in the third world. The consumer of narrative remains unapologetically provincial, and the aspiring writer is behooved to meet this provincialism through the selection of narrative subject.

3.3 Plot Types and Shapes

[370] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 135.

It was 1945 when Kurt Vonnegut, newly returned from military service that had left him a prisoner of war in a Dresden meat locker, enrolled at the University of Chicago. Studying anthropology under the likes of Robert Redfield and James Sydney Slotkin[371], he submitted a proposal for a master's thesis. It was rejected, Vonnegut dropped out, and his fiction earned him a reputation as one of the great moralists of 20th century letters. In 1965, while teaching at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he submitted a revised thesis, "Fluctuations Between Good and Ill Fortune in Simple Tales." It was rejected again, prompting Vonnegut to declare the university's apathy and denounce it as "repulsive."[372] However, decades later, five researchers at the University of Vermont took interest in Vonnegut's thesis, an analysis of plot shapes along two axes—the qualitative ill fortune-great fortune axis and the temporal beginning-end axis—and using natural language processing computational technology, attempted to delineate emotional arc plot types across 1,737 books.[373] The researchers identified six plot shapes, defined by how the protagonist's fortunes rose and fell over time: "rags to riches" (ill fortune to good fortune), "tragedy" or "riches to rags" (good fortune to ill fortune), "man in a hole" (fortunes fall to fortunes rise), "Icarus" (fortunes rise to fortunes fall), "Cinderella" (fortunes rise, fortunes fall, fortunes rise), and "Oedipus" (fortunes fall, fortunes rise, fortunes fall).[374]

Vonnegut was not the only writer interested in narrative typology. Leo Tolstoy famously remarked that there are only two story types: a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town. While these writers have attempted to classify story types in existing archives, however, creative writing manuals suggest *ideal* plot shapes. While one records the past, the other is

[371] Geoffrey Johnson, "Kurt Vonnegut in Chicago: Some Footnotes," *Chicago Magazine* (March 19, 2012): https://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/The-312/March-2012/Kurt-Vonnegut-in-Chicago-Some-Footnotes/.
[372] Alison Flood, "Three, Six, or 36: How Many Basic Plots Are There in All Stories Ever Written?" (July 13, 2016): https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/13/three-six-or-36-how-many-basic-plots-are-there-in-all-stories-ever-written.
[373] Andrew J. Reagan, Lewis Mitchell, et. al. "The Emotional Arcs of Stories are Dominated by Six Basic Shapes," *EPJ Data Science* no. 5, 31 (2016): 2.
[374] Reagan et. al., "The Emotional Arcs," 5.

oriented toward the future of literature, and in assuming this role in molding literature's future, manual writers assume an ethical imperative to engage the political stakes of narrative design, one frequently flouted. Plot shapes represent the most prominent or obvious element of narrative structure that attempts to organize time, and is often treated as one and the same as story. It is my contention that in discussion of plot shapes and story types, values such as anti-intellectualism, individualism, stoicism, and self-improvement are portrayed as determining factors in the aspiring writer's potential success in attaining attention and emotional response from the reader.

Manual writers often construe particular plot forms as *necessarily* emotional, shapes that invest time with emotion and meaning, and this emotional quality is frequently thought diametrically opposed to ideas. It is understood, therefore, that ideas do not contribute to the emotional shifts that comprise plot, and to many manual writers, it would seem, the equal weighting of emotion and idea or the weighting of ideas would detract from the story's plotting. LaPlante supplies one opinion on the nonviability of emotional connection to ideas:

> You can't attach an emotion to an abstraction or intellectual idea. There's no 'stickiness' there. It won't work. Emotions need to be attached to things of this world: things as mundane as tables and chairs and trees and flowers. Innocuous things…until we've imbued them with the power of our imagination. What these images should (must) be: the outward manifestation of interior movement, or emotions. Not just physical objects, but truth.[375]

LaPlante, like many others in the genre, ignores the emotional inflection of ideas and emotion's inflection with ideas. Though in theory forms might be imagined as "fillable" with any detail, subject, or data, manual writers are apt to define ideas as unsuited to plot types and shapes.

Amongst craft manuals, Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction* centers plot forms most prominently, offering sixteen shapes: Façade, Juggling, Iceberg, Last Lap, Trauma, Specimen,

[375] LaPlante, *The Making of a Story*, 510.

Gathering, A Day in the Life, Onion, Journey, Visitation, Aha!, Bear at the Door, Snapshot, Blue Moon, and Explosion. Stern specifies that his shapes are not rules, suggesting that they are more like productive constraints. However, this proto-Oulipian assertion is somewhat undercut by the fact that Stern dissuades the aspiring writer from attempting several shapes: the Banging-Shutter Story, in which a perceived threat is at the end revealed to be innocuous; the Bathtub Story, in which a character stays in a single, confined space the entire story (which, in fact, is the basis of Tolstoy's favorite novel, *Oblomov*, a narrative about a man who mostly stays in bed, seeing little point in doing anything and has been reprised in a fashion by Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*); the Hobos-in-Space Story, in which a small number of characters talk about life without doing much else; the I-Can-Hardly-Wait Story, where a character eagerly anticipating something has his hopes dashed; the I-Cried-Because-I-Had-No-Shoes-Till-I-Met-a-Man-Who-Had-No-Feet Story, in which a wooden character reaches a moral; the Last-Line-Should-Be-The-First-Line Story, in which there is a long lead-up to an unpleasant surprise ending of revelation and oddity, the Weird Harold Story, in which an eccentric character is shown in action without explanation of his interior life and motivations; The Zero-to-Zero Story, in which a character who is "rigid and dull" is told in order to show the character's rigidity and dullness; and The Zero-to-One-Hundred Story, where a character is able to absolutely overcome a problem of personality.[376]

What is shared by the Banging-Shutter Story, the Bathtub Story, the Hobos-in-Space Story, the I-Can-Hardly-Wait Story, and the I-Cried-Because-I-Had-No-Shoes-Til I Met-a-Man-Who-Had-No-Feet Story is their emphasis on mental life. Each is a plot of the mind, in which the primary action is mental, the stakes married to the mind itself. Moving beyond his repertoire of

[376] Stern 70-76.

plot types, in a passage typical of the genre, Stern warns writers of writing stories that are "simply idea-driven," since "[i]n a good story…the experience is primary, not a message,"[377] implying that what is of value in storytelling is the feeling of feeling in the reader, not the transmission of ideas or political meaning, and that ideas and feelings might be separated.

The potential of form to manifest the feeling of feeling is not distinct from political meaning, however. In his 1917 essay "Art as Device," Viktor Shklovsky describes his concept of *ostranenie*, i.e. estrangement or defamiliarization, which to him defines art and recuperates experience from a form of psychological efficiency that diminishes the feeling of feeling. Though often understood as averse to sociopolitical interpretations of literature, Shklovsky invokes sociopolitical exigencies in this seminal Russian Formalist text. Elaborating his position, he writes, "A thing passes us as if packaged; we know of its existence by the space it takes up, but we only see its surface. Perceived in this way, the thing dries up, first in experience… This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and *the fear of war*." [Emphasis added.] One of the reasons to attempt to inspire the feeling of feeling in the reader through form, one might understand, is its political significance, that doing so might work against an "efficient" psychology that numbly accepts, for example, political violence as inextricable from the passage of time. But by dismissing the importance of ideas, manual writers are able to eschew responsibility for thinking about the politics of the text, focusing instead on how form creates emotionality, which is equated with meaning; emotionality distinct from ideas—and by extension politics—is thought to make time meaningful.

Regarding plot types, the only value more prominent in guidebooks than anti-intellectualism is individualism, mapped in plots of self-improvement and self-management.

[377] Stern 68.

Emphasis on inner conflict as the quintessential conflict of story features in several plot types. Gardner, for one, offers what he believes to be a worthy plot, the energeic plot. Gardner proposes that there are three plot types whose distinct characters are produced by different synaptic relations between events: "Successful novel-length fictions can be organized in numerous ways: energeically, that is, by a sequence of causally related events; juxtapositionally, when the novel's parts have symbolic cause and effect; or lyrically, that is, by some essentially musical principle—one thinks, for example, of the novels of Marcel Proust or Virginia Woolf."[378] Gardner favors the energeic plot, and it is in this plot that problems of the individual self can be mediated. "The most common form of the novel is energeic," he writes. "This is both the simplest and the hardest kind of novel to write—the simplest because it's the most inevitable and self-propelled, the hardest because it's by far the hardest to fake. By his made-up word *Energeia*, as we've said, Aristotle meant 'the actualization of the potential that exists in character and situation.'" [379] Gardner's understands the protagonist's individual change, toward reaching potential through cause-and-effect mechanisms, is the marker of a superior plot type.

In assigning primacy to the individual feelings and growth of characters, manual writers often prefer plot types that enact quasi-therapeutic narratives of selfhood, not unlike those of psychologists like William James and Karen Horney who imagined mental hygiene to involve locating the shard of true self from the rubble of fractured selfhood. In Façade, for example, Stern suggests that aspiring writers narrate an anecdote in the voice of a character who inadvertently undercuts himself.[380] Such a character, like Horney's neurotic, operates in pursuit of an ideal self, rather than an actual self, and this is the character's folly. Similarly, Stern's

[378] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 185.
[379] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 186.
[380] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,* 5.

Iceberg, derived ostensibly from Forster's famed metaphor, involves an argument between characters whose real feelings are not expressed in the dialogue.[381] The Juggling shape asks the aspiring writer to have a character do one thing and think about another.[382] Sterns describes Façade, Juggling, and Iceberg merely as shapes for thoughts, dialogue, and action. However, what more specifically coheres them is that the tension Stern believes motivated by each shape is a tension of selfhood. The character of each shape is unable to grasp which self is the authentic self, like James's vision of someone unable to decide on single life path, and the timeframe of the plot is invested with meaningful tension insofar as the tension hinges upon the question of whether the rent self might be sewn together once more. Their prerogative is to mend the self, and such a narrative journey is considered necessarily emotional and meaningful.

In these quasi-therapeutic narratives, individual choices are drawn up as ideal plot points. While therapeutic narratives are, of course, as varied as the individuals seeking psychological care, the primary marker of the therapeutic narrative is its infusion of the present with what, in narrative, might be called tension, the emotional and intellectual force generated by disparate potentials within a literary work. Yet it is not just any tension. In quasi-therapeutic narratives, tension is produced through a sense of disparate potentials or a possible altered emotional and mental future for the individual who is at work on and/or for themselves. As the healthy patient "takes control of their life," so too does the manual protagonist, and the manual writer's diagnosis inches closer to literal than figurative. The ideal plot is one that turns around the individual's quest for health and unity of self, and the emotional journey presumed part of it, but these plot shapes often conceal from view social forces that inform the ability of an individual to act or how the actions of the individual might be interpreted.

[381] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,*12.
[382] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*, 8.

The emotional trajectory of the quest for the healthy self is precisely what organizes other shapes advanced by Stern such as A Day in the Life, a story about a day in which someone goes to work. Stern suggests that the conflict in such a story might be the job's "pressure or its killing monotony" or "the conflict between the character and the routine in which she is trapped."[383] In Journey, a character leaves behind their ordinary life, a shape Stern says is natural since "life's a voyage, a pilgrimage, a trip."[384] In Aha! a character comes to a realization, which Stern exemplifies in his description of a woman who asks a department store salesman and recognizes through the salesman's politeness that she has accepted people's unkindness to her.[385] The central conflict of such narratives is fractured selfhood, fractured individual authenticity, but these fractures are not understood to be historically contingent. The Aha! woman's story is not portrayed as important because it might reflect patriarchal power structures in which men behaving badly to women is usual and a man behaving courteously is so rare a woman might have an epiphany. Nor does it occur to Stern that a particular historical moment, type of time like the work day or a class, period of life like pregnancy, or religious occasion like the length of a Sabbath, might, in its inflections of power, make it impossible or nearly impossible to resist or avoid abusive treatment. To Stern, the emotional logic behind the plot shape is construed as valuable because, in the case of its exemplar, the woman has a shift in consciousness not about gendered expectations but about her*self*. She has "allowed" herself to be treated a particular way, rather than proactively preventing other people's behavior or asserting boundaries. The woman who has been sexually harassed by her boss has allowed herself to be sexually harassed. The woman financially dependent upon her husband who does not leave him has allowed herself to

[383] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*, 28.
[384] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*, 36.
[385] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*, 40-41.

be abused. To Stern, this is a plot about a woman who could have used a self-help book. This woman could have leaned in. It is a story about failed self-improvement.

Manual writers are apt to mindlessly remark about the unsuitability of character inaction to worthy narrative design. What makes the time of the plot meaningful is not characters' inner lives alone but the coupling of inner life with action, action refashioning feeling and often self. Like therapeutic patients, they must not only think about their lives but manage behavior; they must take control of their lives; they must seize the reigns of personhood. "By the end of Act 1, each character must know his or her story goal and must be firmly committed to it. Why committed? Because if the characters won't commit, then the reader won't, either,"[386] claim Ingermanson and Economy. And, describing the Onion shape of narrative, in which situations are contained in situations, Stern states that a "problem in family stories is that the point-of-view character is often passive, a person who doesn't act so much as get acted upon."[387] He offers solutions for potential character inactivity. In Bear at the Door, the story is prompted by an unusual problem such as a bear appearing at the door. "Stories that begin by merely establishing that something is wrong—for example that your character is depressed—still don't really signal whether anything will happen," he writes. "A character can stay depressed for a very long time. The bear demands action."[388] The journalist and crime novelist Bruce DeSilva even goes so far as to suggest "Every narrative tale—from *The Iliad* to the latest Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper serial—has the same underlying structure…A central character encounters a problem, struggles with it, and, in the end, overcomes it or is defeated by it or is changed in some way. If

[386] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 148.
[387] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,* 31.
[388] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,* 46.

the story, as it unfolds in life, lacks one of these elements, you should not attempt to write it as a narrative."[389]

Here is where characterization and narrative design meet, and where the notion of victimhood is once more at stake; the time of the victim is understood to make a shoddy plot. The manual writer disposes of the victim narrative as a worthy story, disposes of the victim plot as a worthy plot. Gardner elaborates a plot in which a young Chinese teacher in San Francisco is kidnapped by a group of "Chinese thugs" who want him to write their story. The teacher's subject, after all, is English. "If the fiction is not to be a victim story (hence unusable), some conflict must be established: The teacher must be given a will of his own and a purpose opposed to that of his captors. In other words, he must want—in some desperately serious way—not to write their story."[390]

Of course victim narratives may be precisely what prompts political action. Stories like those of Matthew Shepard and Trayvon Martin, for example, were specifically stories about violence suffered not as a result of the victim's choices, and both galvanized political mobilization. Narratives of sexual harassment in the case of Alexandra v. Yale pushed universities to establish formal grievance procedures for sexual misconduct. Yet to Gardner and other manual writers who criticize victim narratives, the values of stoicism and managing selfhood through action are what define successful story shapes.

In guidebooks, the meaning of narrated events to a story's characters is further frequently confused with the meaningfulness of the story itself. Thus, to manual writers, the text's success is achieved through the putative emotionality of the characters, conceived of as osmotically tied

[389] Bruce DeSilva, "Endings," in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007): 118.
[390] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 178.

to the reader's emotions, rather than the meaning *of* the text or its meaningful contribution to larger discursive frameworks or fields of meaning, political or otherwise. Maas provides a summary of *The Quilter's Apprentice* by Jennifer Chiaverini, which he believes to be an expertly-plotted character-driven novel:

> [Y]oung wife Sarah McClure is adrift due to nothing more profound than her inability to find a job after moving with her husband to a small Pennsylvania town…No dark angst here. No depression or drinking to make her unsympathetic. Sarah is merely adrift. Although she wonders whether she is unconsciously sabotaging her job interviews, it is not a deep worry. Sarah occupies herself by taking quilting lessons from master quilter Sylvia Thompson. As Mrs. Compson stitches together the story of her life, Sarah finds herself increasingly drawn to the quilters' world. In the end, she uses her hated accounting skills to save Mrs. Compson's endangered home, Elm Creek Manor, and turn it into a quilting retreat center. Her life achieves meaning and purpose.[391]

What defines its therapeutic shape is McClure's journey toward contentment, and Maass supposes much of its imputed masterfulness locates in the ability of the author to convey a sense of inner conflict without the character veering into deviance, mental unhealth, or otherwise socially unacceptable behavior. Her angst is limited. McClure is managing her selfhood. And because the protagonist McClure finds her change meaningful, Maas expects the reader will too.

Within this paradigm of emotionality is a mostly tacit assumption: the character's presumptive humanness or near-humanness in the case of the anthropomorphized figure. A non-sentient thing cannot want after all. Burroway articulates this position through the invocation of the human as the supposed center of tragedy, as she declares, "Human action is the foreground of all fiction…[O]nly the human is tragic. We may describe a landscape as 'tragic' because nature has been devastated by industry, but the tragedy lies in the cupidity of those who wrought the havoc, in the dreariness, poverty, or disease of those who must live there."[392] In positioning the human figure as the strait of tragedy, Burroway suggests that it is human choice that defines

[391] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 165.
[392] Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, 99.

story. While human choice may in fact be the origin of phenomena such as poverty and environmental devastation, however, the notion that story converges in the human presents a problem for the parts of narratives in which human action precipitates a long series of effects. In defining story as necessarily human-centered, craft manuals position sequences of events involving the non-human as non-stories. The consequences might be understood in stories regarding systems, technologies, policies, and climate change, in particular. The sequence of events in, for example, a pandemic might be understood as not narrative enough when regarded at a global scale. While each does have a human impact and might be said to have originated in human action, vast swathes of such stories situate in processes outside the human or even human time. By understanding story as a human phenomenon, the scope of storytelling advice may often miss considering how techniques might be applied to make visible stories about some of the most urgent and fundamental phenomena of our time.

3.4 Dramatized Scene

> Let us say that our stripper, Fanny, is thirty-six, well-preserved, even beautiful, but hard put to compete with younger stripper of the new breed. She's an old-style stripper, the kind who teases and scorns her male audience, as if taunting them, asking to be tamed—a classic act (she's been the star for years), but her act, like her body, is slipping. Her act is of the highly polished kind: She unclothes slowly, tormentingly, with artistic style. She has, let us say, trained white doves who fly away with each article of clothing she takes off. The younger strippers, who are beginning to challenge her top billing, are new-style strippers. Nakedness means nothing to them—they take off their clothes as indifferently as trees drop leaves—and their acts, because of their easy and unhibited sexuality, have no need of high artifice or polish. Whereas Fanny grew up in Texas, of stern, southern Baptist stock, and fled to burlesque in troubled defiance, guiltily but brazenly, the new breed grew up in cities like San Francisco and feels no such inner conflict.[393]

So runs Gardner's premise for a model narrative. Discussing the work of plotting, Gardner imagines first a scene in which Fanny regards her younger co-worker's act with fear and

[393] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 175.

anger. The second scene involves Fanny's confrontation of her manager, who she slaps and who then slaps her in return. Gardner's third scene entails Fanny driving toward a flagman who smiles "a trifle lewdly at her"[394] which motivates her to run him down with her car. Gardner imagines these scenes to capture a unified theme about the relationship between art and nature, but more importantly, he imagines scene to operate as a building block of story that reveals the abstract and invisible emotions, thoughts, and themes of the narrative; these scenes are meant to operate around the often-repeated workshop maxim: "Show, don't tell." The instruction finds a home in many creative writing guidebooks, and Goldberg, offering a typical rationale for it, believes that the methods power lies in its ability to deposit emotion in the reader:

> Don't tell us about anger (or any of those big words like honesty, truth, hate, love, sorrow, life, justice, etc.); show us what made you angry. We will read it and feel angry. Don't tell readers what to feel. Show the situation, and that feeling will awaken in them. Writing is not psychology. We do not talk "about" feelings. Instead the writer feels and through her words awakens those feelings in the reader.[395]

This anticipated emotional inflection is tied to the way in which "showing" is often conceived of as scene work. "Showing," or conveying what is not explicit through evocative action, might comprise dramatized scene or the other action modality, summarized action, though at other points, summarized action might fit under the umbrella of "telling," such as in the case of summarized action that includes an emotion verb, like "moping" or "sulking," verbs of interiority such as "thinking" or "imagining," or to be verbs combined with adjectives or adjectival phrases of interiority like "exhausted" or "hurt." Where the former a denotes series of events tied to a particular time and place, paced in a way that the effect is that actions are in the process of unfolding in "real-time" or longer than real time, summarized action has been condensed, paced in a way that it is clear that the actions on the page unfold in what is clearly a

[394] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 176.
[395] Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones,* 117.

time span shorter than "real-time" and possibly at different locations. Though both modes fit under the umbrella of showing, scene is generally more celebrated in creative writing manuals as the epitome of showing. A scene operates as the spatiotemporal stage for drama that is intended to be conveyed as though it is happening in real time at a particular place. Summarized action will be relayed at a pace that is clearly faster than real time and may occur over more than one place. As shorthand, many people will say that a scene is what could be captured by a video camera. This is not strictly true in the sense that scenes will often be cut through with snatches of interiority such as a character thinking, remembering, or reflecting upon his emotional temperature; or brief panels of exposition; but it does gesture to scene's etymology and evolution from theater. Its Latin etymon *scaena,* after all, refers to a theater stage. And the theater stage as a space of emotional expression provides the basis for the idealization of scene in narrative writing.

It is, moreover, the distinct time dimension of scene which is considered most narrative and what distinguishes work viewed as more literary from other forms, like classic news stories which rely more on summarized action following the inverted triangle model of ordering, or most oral storytelling. In a view typical of the genre that once more distinguishes narrative writing, LaPlante declares that story answers different questions than other forms of communication; story evokes *how* events feel, not why they occur. Glossing Henry James, she writes that the job of writers is not "to solve the mysteries around us, but to *render* them precisely… [I]nstead of dramatizing the *why* down to the last possible causal factor (the girl's father had blue eyes, her fiancé had brown ones, the match was therefore incompatible in her mind) to the point of oversimplifying via pop psychology the complex bundles of thoughts and

emotions that are human beings, we depict *how* they acted."[396] The thought about showing is that in elaborating concrete action, something interior will be made evident, that questions like *why* might be answered. But it is also that showing is able to capture the feeling of experience more fully. "The scene is the basic unit of narrative literature," writes Clark, "the capsule of time and space created by the writer and entered by the reader or viewer. What we gain from the scene is not information, but experience."[397] Lee Gutkind, who is best known for elevating creative nonfiction, adds, "The building blocks of creative nonfiction are little scenes or stories. The best and most successful work is constructed that way."[398] To Gutkind, this is because action is the bedrock of narrative, and he suggests, "The stronger the scene and the faster you involve the reader in the scene, the more successful you'll be. So when writing a scene, think about thrusting your reader into the heat of the action as quickly as possible. Action comes before place and characters."[399]

One of the clues into the value of scenes to manual writers is the frequent admonition that writers must compete with television. "Remember, you are trying to hook the reader's attention, to pull the reader into your story so that he won't wonder, *What's on television tonight?"*[400] write Bernays and Painter. "When the conflict level in a novel is high—that is, when it is immediate, credible, personal, unavoidable and urgent—it makes us slow down and read every word. When it is low, we are tempted to skim. We do not care. We wonder, *what's on TV*?"[401] Scene, more closely aligned with the narrative structure of television, is proposed as a way to retain readership from seeking narrative satisfactions elsewhere. While TV, of course, feeds the senses

[396] LaPlante, *The Making of a Story*, 377.
[397] Clark, *Writing Tools*, 171.
[398] Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up,* 107.
[399] Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up,* 204.
[400] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 1.
[401] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 174.

more directly through audiovisual components, it is assumed that if the structure of a book or story grounds in scene work, it may provide an experiential richness sufficient enough to keep readers from conversion to viewers. Dialogue, after all, might form a commonality between TV and textual scene. All dialogue will be in scene, of course, because dialogue can only ever occupy the temporal framework of its reading, a temporal span that matches real time. Dialogue is identified as one of King's three major parts of narrative, and James Scott Bell even proposes that superior dialogue is the most expedient way to improve narrative composition:

> Readers react just like the industry pros, only on a subconscious level. Great dialogue increases their confidence in the author. That, in turn, makes it more likely they'll finish your book. On the other hands, flabby dialogue will dull the motivation to read on. Which kind of makes dialogue important, don't you think? Indeed, I believe dialogue is the fastest way to assess the skill of a writer of fiction. This means it's also the fastest way to improve your manuscript.[402]

Although scene might be understood to occupy more prolonged periods of the reader's time than summarized action—it is not summarized, after all—the devotion to scene work in manuals derives from its perceived efficiency. It is thought that scenes might fulfill more functions: propelling the action of the narrative, characterizing its human figures, providing details of setting, etc. The interest in dramatized scene is, thus, that in its efficiency, in its perceived multitasking function, win out in a battle against the reader's anticipated slim attention span.

Some manual writers admit that the usefulness of scenes is relative, adopting a more nuanced or open view of the proportions between showing and telling, scene and summarized action. To LaPlante, showing and telling both have a place in writing, though she does not offer much specificity about how the aspiring writer might decide between the two.

[402] Bell, *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue*, 9-10.

A more sophisticated argument is that of Booth, who recommends understanding that the relationship between the two modes is determined more by the narrative point of view, writing, "[T]he contrast between scene and summary, between showing and telling, is likely to be of little use until we specify the kind of narrator who is providing the scene or summary."[403] Booth identifies various determinants: whether narrators comment on events, whether narrators are self-conscious, how distant the narrator is from the implied author, characters, and the reader's norms and the reader themselves; how distant the implied author is from the other characters. To Booth, the reader's involvement, sympathy, and identification are determined by a cluster of reactions to the author, narrators, and other characters.[404] For Brown and King, the issue is not merely one of positive emotionality. It is also the anticipated reader's stamina:

> Even though immediate scenes are almost always more engaging than narrative summary, be careful when self-editing not to convert *all* your narrative summary into scenes. Narrative summary serves several good purposes in fiction, the main one being to vary the rhythm of your writing. Scenes are immediate and engaging, but scene after scene without a break can become relentless and exhausting, especially if you tend to write brief, intense scenes. Every once in a while you will want to slow things down, to give your readers a chance to catch their breath.[405]

Brown and King suppose that the significance of rhythm in a narrative is to prevent reader fatigue. They propose that the immediacy so craved by many aspiring writers might also overwhelm the reader—it is just too much *feeling*—requiring detours into summary. In this sense, they, like many manual writers, view customer satisfaction—in this case, the customer paying for the book as consumer good—as a primary value. The aspiring writer is meant to give readers what they want, and the assumption is that texts of unwavering intensity, technical information via exposition or "telling," or illegible character action can exhaust the reader's

[403] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* 155.
[404] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* 155-158.
[405] Browne and King, *Self-Editing for Writers,* 6-7.

capacities of attention or even emotional resources to the point at which the reader will discard the book.

Most of the work on showing and telling is far less concerned with the potential of scene to overwhelm, however. In one representative passage, Ingermanson and Economy attempt to illustrate the benefit of showing over telling through invoking an experience in which many aspiring writers might find themselves "reading" action, an editor meeting:

> Look at all you can figure out about your editor from a few sentences about her gestures:
> - She smiles, telling you she's happy to see you.
> - She's talking on her cellphone, telling you she's a busy woman.
> - She gestures to the seat across the table, welcoming you and reinforcing the message that she's glad to see you.
> - She points to her watch, indicating she's aware of the time and she's conscious she's encroaching on your appointment time.
> - She holds up one finger. In this context, this can only mean that she wants you to wait one minute. The text makes this explicit by adding the sentence *One minute* in italics.[406]

To this pair, like Goldberg, "Showing your reader an emotion is far stronger than telling your reader that emotion. You tell the emotion by naming it. You show the emotion by showing the character's physiological reactions at moments of high tension."[407] Manual writers often valorize showing over "telling," that is, exposition. What they miss, like many manual writers, is that in privileging "showing" over "telling," guidebooks tend to value normative behavior, presentism, empiricism, modesty, and customer satisfaction.

Whether talking on one's cell phone does indicate business or gesturing to a seat indicates happiness to see the person gestured toward is questionable. Yet in Ingermanson and Economy's example, it is presumed that the editor figure's exteriorized action can be read for the interior of her mind because normative behavior is construed as the default mechanism of

[406] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 180.
[407] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 183.

narrative and because it is presumed that interior life can be empirically ascertained through the observation of gesture. Such a view draws upon Forster's formulation of the causality within narrative, and Cron, going further, suggests that a scene always includes a cause to which there is an effect. The cause, or what happens, should be accompanied by a reason that it matters to the character. The consequence or effect of what happens should prompt a realization in the character, which then prompts another happening. In this way, action will form a spiraling effect.[408] Ingermanson and Economy echo the sentiment. "In fiction, as in real life, actions speak louder than words," they write. "If a character's actions send a different message than her dialogue does, the reader will always believe the actions."[409] The aphorism does not hold, however. This view ignores the cultural determinants of the meanings of actions. A thumb raised up might signify approval in American culture, but it is considered rude in many Asian cultures. It is common practice in Poland to offer a guest food or drink three times before relenting, though it might stem from a desire exceeding tradition in others. At its best, to view inner life—intentions, emotions, thoughts—as empirically provable through behavior alone reduces the complexity and variousness of individual human behavior and dismisses how social life and representational logics differs across cultures.

Yet the formulation also implies that normative behavior is the action that deserves a place in plot because, its meaning requiring no exposition, can efficiently fulfill the functions of plot advancement and characterization. Despite the framework of the permission to write; despite its putative orientation against the grain of the censorious, the disciplinary, and the gatekeeping; manual advice tacitly suggests that in order for dramatized scene to remain legible to a reading public, the conventions or normative behavior of the dominant culture need to be written toward.

[408] Cron, *Story Genius*, 248.
[409] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies*, 180.

That particular actions might be legible only to people within certain groups may be a way of coding the text, signaling to certain readers: this text is for you. It is a common gesture for writers to engage particular allusions that situate the text in a conversation with other texts in a sociocultural or political domain, to use idioms or syntaxes of particular regions, so on. What is troubling is not the signaling necessarily but that manual writers miss the ways in which what they regard as empirically true *already* signals who the projected audience of a text is. This audience is presumed to be that of a dominant culture which becomes normalized to the point of supposed universality as manual writers declare the "empirical" nature of showing gestures in summarized action and scene.

Within a particular society, of course, interpretations of the same action might be taken differently too, either at the time or across different historical periods. A writer describing a trial in Northern Ireland might include a detail about the defendant remaining silent under questioning. Were the trial to have occurred in the period in which the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, which abolished the right of silence, was in effect, one might understand the defendant's silence to be motivated by factors different than those in which different legal frameworks were in place. Should the defendant be on trial for an act of terrorism against loyalist soldiers, a reader's understanding of what silence signified might be informed by social affiliations or any other number of influences. The writer could not depend upon a stable meaning to be inferred. In "show, don't tell," manual writers may encourage presentism, risking the naturalization of social constructions and distorting the historical factors that have informed the space for political action and participation in social life. Depending on the audience, in order to prevent misunderstanding the writer in the example above might *have* to "tell," would have to include exposition unraveling the semiotics, cultural norms, legal frameworks, so on of another time. More broadly,

this is particularly true for narrative nonfiction writers whose professional truth-telling prerogatives supersede other potential narrative imperatives such as producing emotion.

Scene might be further classified into types, and Ingermanson and Economy divide scenes into two: proactive scenes in which there is a goal, a conflict, and a setback and reactive scenes in which there is a reaction, a dilemma, and a decision.[410] The goal in the proactive scene should be simple, objective, worthwhile, achievable, and difficult.[411] The reactive scene decision should be simple, objective, worthwhile, achievable, and difficult.[412] In emphasizing achievability, these writers construe the category of socially constructed expectations as a facet of form. The writers do not care to elaborate any rationale for the aesthetic value of achievability in the scene. Nor do the two ever define what makes an objective achievable. Yet, the consequence of such thinking is that radical projects may be considered not assimilable with storytelling. Consider Occupy Wall Street. In a fairly typical centrist response to the protests, the democratic pollster Douglas Schoen wrote:

> The proposal that Occupy Wall Street's demands group published is unrealistic and not achievable. They are calling for a $1.5 trillion spending program to create 25 million public-sector jobs and provide free public education, free university education and free universal health care for all. Our government doesn't have the money for such programs, tax increases on the rich will not cover them, and no one, including Democrats, has the inclination to pay for such programs.[413]

To Ingermanson and Economy, the Occupy protests, then, might not fit into the scene work understood to be the central unit of storytelling. This view understands achievability to provide a shape in that if a goal is achievable, its journey toward satisfaction can form a pointed arc thought to be narrative in nature. Political change operates differently, however. What is

[410] Ingermanson and Economy 168.
[411] Ingermanson and Economy 169-170.
[412] Ingermanson and Economy 172.
[413] Douglas Schoen, "What should Occupy Wall Street's agenda be?" *Washington Post* (October 21, 2011): https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-should-occupy-wall-streets-agenda-be/2011/10/21/gIQA5iTk4L_story.html.

achieved is not necessarily permanent, a fact made evident by rollbacks on abortion restrictions in the last decade, for example. And the call for achievability, one indexed by terms like electability and economic viability in our political discourse, is one that constructs scene as a unit of time whose dimensions are defined by modest objectives irreconcilable with radical politics or even portrayal of radical affect.

3.5 Pacing

In 2008, fifteen years after the world wide web was made public domain[414], Nicholas Carr wrote an article for *The Atlantic* describing what was to many an eerily familiar sense:

> Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. I think I know what's going on. For more than a decade now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet.[415]

Carr had evoked a paradigm that would gain ballast: the internet had made readers *faster*. The speed of the internet whipped up a new style of reading, one brisk, promiscuous, and flighty. And this was to the detriment of serious thought.

The perception of wafer-thin attention spans, however, even before the advent of the internet, has driven those in the craft manual business to home in on pacing as an attention-maintenance resource, one that lubricates that passage of events within the narrative so that they

[414] David Grossman, "On This Day Twenty-five Years Ago, the Web Became Public Domain," *Popular Mechanics* (April 30, 2018): https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/web/a20104417/www-public-domain/.
[415] Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic* (July/August 2008): https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.

might slide through the reader's consciousness with ease. The emphasis is not what constructing a text worthy of deep reading would mean for the aspiring creative writer but in circumventing the propensity for shallow reading. Paradoxically, guidebook writers tend to emphasize both the efficiency of narrative thrust and incremental change as valuable qualities in the narrative structure, the former invested with the perceived ability to colonize readerly attention and the latter with realism. It is supposed that changes in the narrative ought to occur quickly enough that a reader will not feel their time wasted but slowly enough that the reader will view the changes in characters as not improbable and likely meaningful. Once more, the advice is aimed at an imagined scenario of consumer satisfaction in the creative economy, and once more, the consumer's taste is imagined to operate in a realm of optimization whereby well-spent time is time eventhood has passed through conspicuously and plentifully, like a vacation crammed with sightseeing. Pacing is not simply a formal consideration in which action divided by time produces the pace. Rather, the discourse of pacing in guidebooks is organized around values that are often inimical to politically efficacious or inwardly complex narrative.

Unsurprisingly, guidebook writers suggest that pacing ought to correlate inversely with the "best" of what is narrated, so that moments that are striking are lingered upon and other parts of the narrative are galloped through more quickly. Yet what is the best material? Sometimes in manuals, pacing is theorized in a feedback loop, pacing constituting good material and the quality of material constituting the aspiring writer's most appropriate pacing, as in the journalist Tom French's advice: "Speed up when explaining boring (but essential) information, and when the action is moving rapidly—your very best material—slow down. You slow down so the reader can enter the scene and process what is happening. You speed up because you have a lot

of ground to cover."[416] To French, material gains strength when it includes rapid action, and because of its strength in speed, the aspiring writer ought to pace it more slowly to calibrate to the reader's attention. The suggestion to slow the pace does not shift the structure of value, however; French believes that rapid action is inherently best but also that the writer can sometimes *afford* slowness if the slowness is in service to emphasizing the "thickness" of action in a given timespan. The relative slowness is still an efficient slowness, that is, scene work. While the action may not be condensed, the narrative mode is efficient in that it relays action that may illuminate ideas, emotions, so on, without requiring further exposition.

In order to produce brisk pacing, guidebook writers tend to view beginning the narrative *in media res* as ideal. *In media res* is, of course, a troubled terminology. What precisely is not "into the middle of things" in a narrative? All narratives are presumed to hold an antecedent scenario. No narratives are presumed to exist prior to time. In manual writers' terms, however, *in media res* aligns with the project of identifying the animating tension of the narrative as quickly as possible. Maass argues, "So fatal is the business of 'setting up' something in a novel that I believe the very idea should be banned. 'Setup' is, by definition, not story. It always drags. Always. Leave it out. Find another way…Backstory delivered early on crashes down on a story's momentum like a sumo wrestler falling on his opponent."[417] Maass's formulation suffers tautology. By beginning a narrative at a given point, the writer constructs the imagined events preceding it as backstory. Backstory is not inherently backstory. It comes to constitute backstory in the writer's decision of which temporal point will operate as the moment the narration begins.

[416] Tom French, "Sequencing: Text as Line," in *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Neiman Foundation at Harvard University*, eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 144.
[417] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 190-191.

To speak of "setup" presupposed an inherent shape to narrative that does not exist prior to the procedures of representation.

A more accurate view acknowledges that beginning *in media res* is to begin at a point at which the central tension of the narrative is supposed immediately apparent to the reader. It is a narrative choice aimed again at legibility, providing an answer to the question of what the narrative is about, which is presumed a facet of pacing. The more legible, the more quickly the text might be read follows this line of thought, though who the text is legible to and how the reader's sociocultural positionality make particular narratives legible is not parsed. Maass, who has worked as a literary agent, declares, "The number one mistake I see in manuscript submissions is a failure to put the main conflict in place quickly enough... In fact, it is the primary reason I reject over 90 percent of the material I receive."[418] Maass never provides a substantive rationale for the importance of establishing a primary tension early in the narrative, but presumably, he views the identification of a primary tension as a way to boost legibility and therefore create the conditions for a more expedient reading experience. Clarifying the aboutness or subject of a narrative is, after all, even drawn up as a condition of customer satisfaction by Bernays and Painter:

> However your proportion problems may arise, the most serious effect they can have on your writing is to mislead the reader. When you spend a great deal of time on one character or plot element for whatever reason, your readers naturally assume that element to be important. So if the character you spend time on turns out to be insignificant or the plot element you set up in such detail never comes into play, readers are going to feel cheated.[419]

While Bernays and Painter conceptualize the clarity of subject matter as a matter of proportion, never directly invoking pacing, it is the nature of a creative work that craft elements

[418] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 190.
[419] Browne and King, *Self-Editing*, 148.

are ecologically connected. The proportions of a narrative frequently operate as a determinant of pacing, and the assumption here is that when a narrative does not stake out what its subject will be clearly, the reader may feel as though the work of representation, that is, the text, has deceived expectations about what lingering on a particular phenomenon—an issue of pace and proportion—means.

Manual writers are inclined to indirectly theorize pacing through discussion of focused or coherent narrative. Writers like Stern, Maass, Ingermanson and Economy, and Gardner are particularly interested in narratives of narrow focus, that is, narratives with fewer plot threads and characters. "The chief beauty of a novella is its almost oriental purity, its elegant tracing of an emotional line,"[420] writes Gardner, while Stern recommends avoiding attempting to tell too many stories at once,[421] suggesting that the benefit is a *reduction* to a defined form, which is presumed to be necessarily desirable. If form represents the reduction of everyness to what is discrete enough to have dimensions, from everything to something, it is form that is seen as inherently artful; craft is providing form. However, in guidebooks such a view slips easily into a preference for narrowly focused narrative, an anti-Dickensian aesthetics that apprehends the novel not as a polyvocal, symphonic text or even, in Henry James's affectionate deprecation a "loose, baggy monster," but as a centripetal text wound tightly as a self. "A storyline," write Ingermanson and Economy, "should be short, emotive, and arouse curiosity. You should try to be able to summarize the story in twenty-five words or less, limiting it to no more than three characters.[422]

[420] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 183.
[421] Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction,* 65.
[422] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 138.

At its heart, this relatively unambitious approach to plotting is premised upon pacing. Maass elaborates a rationale that centers around the way in which the quantity of plot lines defines the pace of reading:

> Novels swimming in subplots can feel diffuse. Two or three major subplots are about all that even the longest quest fantasies can contain. With more than three subplots, it becomes difficult to sustain reader involvement. Focus is too scattered. Sympathy is torn in too many directions. Readers of overcrowded novels frequently complain, "It was hard to keep the characters straight."[423]

The reader's predicted failure to delineate characters or remember plot points, to Maass, represents a threat to pacing. After all, if the reader must pause to refer to pages earlier in the text, the reading is *slowed*. While Forster found great beauty in his presumption that the reader would remember specificities in the text and perceive connections between moments, primarily guidebook writers are quite ready to dispense with baroque plotting in order to sustain what they consider sufficiently brisk pacing, are quite ready to imagine readers of meager intellectual capacity. Unspoken, a second concern runs a current beneath this pacing advice. If the reader must strain cognition to remember many facets of the narrative, the reader is *thinking* not *feeling*; and if thinking is tied to a laborious pace, the counter-assumption is that feeling motivates a celerity over the page, that the impassioned reader is *moved* both at the level of affect and textual consumption. Conflating these two forms of the reader's being-moved, the guidebook writer specifies a more austere narrative structure.

Such a view, of course, may pose serious problems for an aspiring writer hoping to attempt a work of, for example, politically significant literature related to technology. Let's consider a story about big data. To a guidebook writer ascribing to this aesthetic, the story ought to begin at a moment in which a central character is aware of the problem and proceeds to chip

[423] Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*, 184.

away at it, without the aspiring writer dragging the pace of early pages with "setup" or exposition; it would be assumed a pared-down plotting and cast of characters to maintain the briskness of pace. Yet part of the story of big data is its breathtaking breadth; that as a form of knowledge production it has become the basis for policy decisions, cultural taste-making, editorial decision-making, research models, and access to financial products; that its applications have moved into policing, education, national security, healthcare, business and marketing, social communications, academia, cultural curation. Its stakeholders are as wide as the globe, though an important part of the story is that many are aware of the privacy incursions embedded into their lives and therefore do *not* register emotional reaction to them. Big data stories require explaining how technologies work, rather simply than that people use them and are affected, and that the effects of big data logics and applications are not immediately observable in the scene work manual writers associate with rapid pacing, since much of the power of big data lies in its ability to extract data and reprocess it for other uses at other times and other places. In order to tell such a narrative, an aspiring writer would likely need to tell more than the three plotlines Maass views as the outer limit of storytelling: the story of someone whose privacy has been violated, the story of how the technology apprehended information about this character, the story of someone who *does* understand the technology attempting to restore privacy norms, and the story of the stakeholders preventing the work the latter character. The frequently repeated advice that storytelling ought to constrain, rather than proliferate, storylines makes it advice particularly unsuitable to telling stories of systems, especially systems in which technological or specialized expertise operates as a locus of power animating action and consequence.

In construing narratives requiring several plot threads and narratives compelled by expertise as antithetical to the project of brisk pacing in creative writing manuals, manual writers

suggest that many of the vital political exigencies of our time are too boring, too slow a slog to tell. Climate change narratives require dragging through scientific explanation. Narratives of the financial crisis require explanations of financial instruments unassimilable with fast-paced storytelling. And stories about violence at the margins must be delimited to stories of individual harm, rather than telling the stories of structural or systemic inequalities, in order to calibrate pacing to the imagined reader's attention span. While certainly it is possible to tell the stories of individuals within systems, turning away from systems narratives may limit the discourse around these narratives to piecemeal reactions, may suggest to readers that these problems are individual—"It is *that* person's problem, not the problem of many," might be one response—rather than systemic, and may constrain the ability of readers to identify shared interests in addressing the key political issues. They may also produce a false sense of the individual's ability to resist, deflect, and negotiate with corporate, governmental, or systemic powers.

While it is presumed that circumscribing plotlines and scaling back explanation will provide the sort of efficient pacing compatible with readerly attention, it is also presumed that in order for attention to be sustained, a narrative must be realistic. Realism is of the utmost importance to Lajos Egri, who views narrative structure largely in terms of character change, change he understands to attain realism through gradual pacing:

> No honest man will become a thief overnight; no thief will become honest in the same period of time. No sane woman will leave her husband on the spur of the moment, without previous motivation. No burglar contemplates a robbery and carries it out at the same time. No violent physical act was ever carried out without *mental preparation*. No shipwreck has ever occurred without a sound reason. Some essential part of the ship may be missing; the captain may be overworked or inexperienced or ill. Even when a ship collides with an iceberg, human negligence is involved…If you know your character has to travel from one pole to another, you are in an advantageous position to see that he or she grows at a steady rate.[424]

[424] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* 142-143.

Egri naturalizes incremental change, making not only claims about what constitutes good storytelling but also reality judgments. He disparages rapid change as the stuff of melodrama, offering the example of a ruthless killer who, during a police chase, stops to help a blind man across the street as the kind of unlikely character change that does not belong in realistic narrative.[425] Moderate pacing, we are told, is the speed of real change. Real change, we are told, has a particular rhythm.

Yet a progressive political literature requires the capacity to imagine rapid change. It does not impute realism to incrementalism. It imputes, instead, political realities with the possibility of quickly becoming what they always should have been. In contrast with Egri, David Aitchison defines the radical chronotope, which might be more simply understood as a radical paradigm of time and space in or out of the literary text, as a "particular kind of narrative time-space, in which the everyday present registers inequities proactively to be undone."[426] A literature that turns its gaze on the undoing of the unequitable present is one of a quite different pacing, different in that it is skeptical that rapid change necessarily *is* rapid. Taking a more capacious view of story and story's situation in history, it gloms onto Benjamin's succinct summation that "what is catastrophic is the status quo," understanding the period before substantive change as necessarily too long, so long, in fact, that gradual change, gradual pacing toward the moment of equity is precisely what's untenable. The abrupt change is the change that is paced away from what is in fact insane, the long acceptance of the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and rights.

3.6 Plot Structure

[425] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* 249.
[426] David Aitchison, "Lost Causes, Affective Affinities: Radical Chronotope in the Age of Liberal Narrative," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 413

In 1989, Jack Hart became the *Oregonian*'s writing coach. Hart, who held a PhD in communications and had worked as the Sunday magazine's editor, began a monthly newsletter called *Second Takes* for the staff in which he offered training resources and interpretation on the art of narrative journalism.[427] Hart would eventually publish his own craft manuals, *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* and *A Writer's Coach: The Complete Guide to Writing Strategies That Work*. In the *Second Takes* issues, he contextualized the emphasis on narrative writing at the *Oregonion*, explaining that its editor Sandy Rowe wished to capture "the same laughter, anger, sorrow and excitement that folks in the movie theaters, rivets them to the tube and sells slick magazines."[428] Doing so, he advised, would mean unknotting the procedures of the journalist.

According to Hart, journalists writing conventional news narratives were in the habit of information gathering for the nut or the takeaway, in the process shedding the details that make a text more narrative, closer to "the raw world" and more capable to fulfilling the narrative writer's imperative: "You have to feel to make other people feel."[429] Rather than structuring stories around the inverted triangle, the narrative turn in journalism understood that story structure itself might correspond with emotionality. While the inverted triangle structure of conventional newswriting situated the most important information in the lede—which often meant displacing the "last" event in a series of events at the beginning of the text—writing coaches and editors associated with the narrative turn in journalism looked to restore a degree of chronology to events, a structure they believed was imbued with greater potential to evoke emotion.

[427] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*, 87-88.
[428] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*, 92.
[429] Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*, 92.

Popular creative writing manuals favor this approach to plot structure, often described as having a beginning, middle, and end. In fact, all texts have a beginning, middle, and end. All sentences do, whether they occur in narrative or not. However, the beginning-middle-end formulation has come to stand in for a conception of plot structure in which a central tension is established, intensifies toward climax, and is resolved. Such a structure has been variously associated with a few thinkers, including the 19th century novelist and playwright Gustav Freytag and Aristotle, and it is not uncommon for craft manual writers at some point to gloss Freytag's conception of story as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution[430], a three-act structure[431], or else Aristotle's notion of story as a reversal of fate through the terms of character desire. [432] While it may seem that these are different structures, in fact they follow the same route of action, represented by a peak of climax flanked by rising and falling action, the exposition and resolution as non-action forms assuming the image of the starting and ending points on the horizontal plane. These plot structures in their durability have been conceived of as transhistorical, and craft manual writers offer an equally transhistorical interpretation of plot: that though narrative endings ought to represent the supposed fundamental morality of the universe, desire and conflict operate as the constitutive elements of plot and, even more radically, the linchpins of human life.

The advice dispensed implies that certain social realities are an unchangeable, that there is a fixed status quo. On the other, manual writers circumscribe a constrained, that is, individual rather than collective, space for action. In manual discourse on plot structure, individuals may change—and decisively—but their changes tend to be defined by finally attaining harmony with

[430] LaPlante, *The Making of a Story,* 155.
[431] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 145
[432] Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 38.

the supposedly already and always present morality of the universe. Fixating on the individual character's time spent pursuing desire as the engine of emotion, rather than other forms of pursuit (such as communal pursuits) or pursuit of objectives not understood to directly affect the protagonist, manual writers place importance on *therapeutic* plots, apt to assign primacy to structures in which a present thick with heroic volition moves through variations of mounting tension and moderate change until a moment of sharpened and decisive action converts individual struggle into a phase of the past, the hero having now "healed" by matching the moral "health" of the universe. In other words, the problems represented in plot are problems of individual dysfunction; they are not problems of social injustice. And this understanding of plot is, of course, incommensurable with a project of radical narrative.

To most culturally literate folk, it is probably unsurprising that craft manual writers have construed conflict as the engine of narrative. Without conflict, goes the logic, what would one read to discover? Conflict is supposed what drives the events linked through narrative time in the plot and what impresses in the reader a sense of an unstable narrative future that demands reading toward. Manual writers, across the board, have little interest in imagining what might drive reading in a utopian literature. There are no conceptualizations that take cues from other art forms like visual art or music, in which it is not thought interest is produced by a sense of the outcome of struggle. Nor are there conceptualizations of how a utopian literature might produce intellectual tension in the reader precisely through its difference from the real world and its political frailties.

Most craft manual writers instead refashion Freytag and Aristotle's paradigms to speak of plot structure through the language of desire. Burroway offers the neat summation "3-D: Drama

equals desire plus danger."[433] And to Bernays and Painter, "The more complicated and unsuspected—both to her and to us—are a protagonist's aims, the more interesting that character will be and the more interesting will be the unfolding of her story."[434] Some writers conceive of establishing desire as the "beginning" of a three-act structure in that the middle is made up of action that will move toward or away from satisfaction of the characters' desires and the end will turn around whether the desire has or has definitely not been satisfied. Cron suggests:

> All protagonists stand on the threshold of the novel they're about to be flung into with two things about to burn a hole in their pocket:
>
> 1. A deep-seated desire—something they've wanted for a very long time.
> 2. A defining misbelief that stands in the way of achieving that desire. This is where the fear that's holding them back comes in.
>
> Taken together, these two warring elements will become your novel's third rail."[435]

In one of the most audacious, or hyperbolic, treatments of plot, Egri has declared, "Without conflict life could not be possible on earth, or, for that matter, anywhere in the universe. The technique of writing is only a replica of the universal law which governs an atom or a constellation above us."[436] That conflict is a requisite condition of human life is a steep reality judgment that perhaps celebrates conflict too much, and it is one that is tamped down or ignored at other moments of his craft manual. Egri deviates from his notion of plot-making as a replica of universal law to argue, "There are more complex forms of conflict, but they all rise on this simple basis: attack and counterattack. We see real, rising conflict when the antagonists are evenly matched. There is no thrill in watching a strong, skillful man fighting a sickly, awkward one."[437] Within this framework, the supposed reality of conflict's inevitability is qualified. A *good* plot will involve evenly matched forces, never mind more complicated notions of the way

[433] Burroway, *Writing Fiction*, 32.
[434] Bernays and Painter, *What If?*, 51.
[435] Cron, *Story Genius*, 74.
[436] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, 175.
[437] Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, 128.

that power might operate; the even match is where the excitement lies, where the untold narrative future dangles seductions. That is where conflict can take the shape of rising action because that is where one opponent raises the stakes and the other answers the call, producing an amplification of narrative tension.

If an aspiring writer were to follow Egri's advice, it would mean dispensing with the notion that stories of refugee crises, genocide, or housing discrimination, to name a few examples, are the stuff of good plots. These stories, because they do not pair evenly matched forces of opposition, are not necessarily stories that can produce the intensification of conflict thought to define "middles" or rising action. They may not lead to climax. Yet, political literature often must concern itself precisely with uneven matches, instances in which power insulates actors from consequence and in which compounding inequalities leave little leverage for those at the margins to disrupt the structures, systems, and individuals effectuating harm. Egri's forceful prose styling might create the appearance that his position is unusual in the genre. However, the theory that rising action requires even matches is simply an iteration of the admonitions against victim narratives.

In part, too, manual writers deter aspiring writers from uneven matches because change is understood to be the hallmark of narrative structure, and an uneven match may not culminate in a changed circumstance. Ingermanson and Economy argue that in scenes, the primary requirement is change; something should change, characters should receive new information, or the scene should end with a setback or a decision.[438] Franklin writes, "In nearly all stories, the characters go through some transformation. The reporter may have trouble discerning it at first. If it isn't

[438] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies*, 168-173.

there, the reporter probably doesn't have a story. The key is to find that significant point of change."[439] Gutkind even clumps the notion of plot as a change in people, place, or thing.[440]

The privileging of change in guidebook discourse can, however, obscure the way in which sometimes politically significant stories are stories of non-change: how campaign finance reform has not happened, how income inequality persists. The stories we must tell are, indeed, frequently the stories of non-events. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has advanced the term "governance of the prior" to name a mode of governance compelled by "the priority of the prior across political, market, and social relations,"[441] which she argues has allowed various catastrophes to remain "affectively and cognitively sensible and practical [in] late liberal distributions of life and death, of hope and harm, and of endurance and exhaustion across social difference."[442] Following from Povinelli, it might be said that the advice that plot hinge on change may collaborate with the governance of the prior; such recommendations push from view real and tragic forms of social injustice, by making that they have not changed disqualify them from narrative. A literature of resistance is one that can imagine plot shapes turning around precisely the stories many have not been woke to. A literature of resistance reminds the reader that one must stay woke to the conditions of non-change.

That guidebooks have not thoroughly engaged narrative as a mode of reenlivening the reader to broadly accepted unjust social conditions and political disasters derives in part from a neoliberal reality judgment that one gets what one deserves. To manual writers, the world is fair, and so action must attain a moral physics in creative writing manuals for the sake of rendering a plot believable. The writer must follow the rules presumed to govern the real world. "[T]he plot

[439] Franklin, "A Story Structure," 110.
[440] Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, 218.
[441] Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 33.
[442] Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 5.

is karma. Not karma in the metaphysical 'what goes around comes around' sense—as in if you're nice to kittens and little children, you will get your dream job—but karma in the very literal cause-and-effect sense, as in if you lie about graduating college, then just as you're about to get that dream job, said lie is bound surface,"[443] writes Cron, though of course, people *do* get away with lies. People do get away with much worse. Still, her sense that by some mysterious disciplinary logic the universe will, in time, punish those who have done wrong is one shared by a number of manual writers. Lamott, collapsing the boundary between real life and life represented in narrative, writes of how she, as a writer, needed to learn to allow her characters to be punished by her own hand just as she needed to learn to allow associates in her own life to suffer repercussions for their moments of folly:

> No matter what, you are probably going to have to let bad things happen to some of the characters you love or you won't have much of a story. Bad things happen to good characters, because our actions have consequences, and we do not all behave perfectly all the time. As soon as you start protecting your characters from the ramifications of their less-than-lofty behavior, your story will start to feel flat and pointless, just like in real life…My Al-Anon friend told me about the frazzled, defeated wife of an alcoholic man who kept passing out on the front lawn in the middle of the night. The wife kept dragging him in before dawn so that the neighbors wouldn't see him, until finally an old black woman from the South came up to her one day after a meeting and said, "Honey? Leave him lay where Jesus flang him." And I am slowly, slowly in my work—and even more slowly in real life—learning to do this.[444]

Lamott assumes that "bad" behavior yields consequences for those who enact it, and plot structure must, in mimesis, do so too. The writer's job is not to "protect" characters but to invest in the notion that agency pools around the individual, ignoring the way in which forces beyond the individual are often a determinant to their ability to act efficaciously. It is a vision of reality as already dictated by moral force, one that is incompatible with prescribing mechanisms of injustice and therefore incompatible with politically significant narrative. It asks the aspiring

[443] Cron, *Story Genius,* 107-108.
[444] Lamott, *Bird by Bird,* 45.

writer to participate in the reinforcement of sense that the world operates with an already-just logic.

Not all manual writers share this opinion. "In most good stories the characters decide their own destinies. In the real world that often doesn't happen," writes journalist Jon Franklin. "In that way stories are not like real life. Good stories show how people survive."[445] Yet both views share a sense that the quality of a plot corresponds with the character's successful navigation of choice. For writers of nonfiction, such end-plotting may revolve more around locating subjects, while for writers of fiction, it regards inventing events.

This act of invention is particularly fraught for many writers, and Forster, in one of his cheekier turns, lamented, "The plot requires to be wound up. Why is this necessary? Why is there not a convention which allows a novelist to stop as soon as he feels muddled or bored? Alas, he has to round things off, and usually the characters go dead while he is at work…If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude."[446] Manual writers often construe endings as hinged to beginnings, the latter providing the conditions for reader emotionality in response to the former. Booth, for example, draws a correlation between morality and reader empathy, supposing that readers are themselves conventionally moral and that this morality informs empathy. Describing Boccacio's *Decameron*, he posits that Boccacio is able to secure the reader's empathetic sharing of happiness with the happiness of the characters in the narrative by drawing up its female character, Monna Giovanna, as a moral woman early in the plot, her eventual marriage functioning as something like a reward for her goodness. "To insure our pleasure in such an outcome—a pleasure which might have been mild indeed considering that there are nine other tales attempting something like the same effect—the

[445] Franklin, "A Story Structure," 110.
[446] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 95-96.

two main characters must be established with great precision," writes Booth. "First the heroine, Monna Giovanna, must be felt to be thoroughly worthy of Federigo's 'extravagant' love."[447] To Booth, it would seem, morality is the currency in an emotional economy, so that Monna Giovanna is rewarded for her morality with the love of both Federigo and the reader. It is supposed that love without a moral rationale is beyond the reader's empathetic capacity. The beginning must offer itself as a sequence of evidence that the protagonist is morally viable, to substantiate the notion that her triumph is thus worth emoting over.

Other craft writers have even advanced a notion of a moral relationship to the reader, in which the reader ought to be rewarded for having read the entire text. The journalist and novelist Bruce DeSilva, critiquing the inverted pyramid, argues its chronology fails the demands of plot structure, particularly endings:

> The ending is your final chance to nail the point of the story to the readers' memory so it will echo there for days. Among those who write for a living, newspaper writers are the only ones who do not seem to understand this fact…[M]ost newspaper stories dribble pitifully to an end. This is the enduring legacy of the inverted pyramid—a form that makes good endings impossible. The inverted pyramid orders information from most important to least important, robbing stories of their drama and leaving nothing to reward readers who stay with it to the last line. It is important to recognize that the inverted pyramid never had anything to do with writing or readers or the news.[448]

While writing instructors frequently speak of the writer earning their endings, meaning the writer has sufficiently established the conditions that impress the ending's feasibility, DeSilva speaks of the *reader* having earned an ending in which significance appears to pool. Reading is imagined as a sort of morally-inflected labor that the writer ought to recognize in the practice of narrative writing. Anticlimax, then, holds little esteem. Rather, the ending is constructed as a point of deep feeling, the amplification of emotion operating as a readerly

[447] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* 10.
[448] DeSilva,"Endings," 116.

reward. “If it’s a happy ending, can you make the victory more complete?” ask Ingermanson and Economy. “If it’s an unhappy ending, can you make the defeat more terrible? If it’s bittersweet, can you sharpen the contrast?”[449] So well-preserved is this notion of the morally-structured plot and rewarding ending that Gardner concludes a deviation from it would be understood as a near-violation of the novel reader. If the reader has assumed the empathetic linkage sought by the author, they can only feel injustices of the plot as injustices against themselves. Furthermore, in Gardner’s estimation, the function of the ending of the narrative is to crystallize around the notion that free will is an immense responsibility in a moral universe:

> A novel is like a symphony in that its closing movement echoes and resounds with all that has gone before… Toward the close of a novel, the writer brings back—directly or in the form of his characters’ recollections—images, characters, events, and intellectual motifs encountered earlier. Unexpected connections begin to surface; hidden causes become plain; life becomes, however briefly and unstably, organized; the universe reveals itself, if only for the moment, as inexorably moral; the outcome of the various characters’ actions is at last manifest; and we see the responsibility of free will. It is this closing orchestration that the novel exists for. If such a close does not come, for whatever theoretically good reason, we shut the book with feelings of dissatisfaction, as if cheated. This is of course tantamount to saying that the novel, as a genre, has a built-in metaphysic. And so it does.[450]

Gardner’s “metaphysic” lays claim to narrative as a resource for moral education, a plot functioning as an extended maxim about the weight of individual agency. The time of the narrative is understood as synecdochic of real time, and just as one might ask exactly what the point is of existing through time if the world does not function by the rule of meritocracy, so Gardner understands the reader’s emotional response to the story of injustice. He does not consider the possibility that exactly this dissatisfaction, sadness, frustration, or disappointment might prove galvanizing for the reader in real life.

[449] Ingermanson and Economy, *Dummies,* 254.
[450] Gardner, *The Art of Fiction,* 184.

For Forster, endings were grand illusions of permanence. His ruminations on endings reveal a melancholy about this fact, a desire for transformation that lasts, a desire to no longer require groping toward what is lacked. Turning his mordant joke about weddings and death as writerly resources, he meditated on the way in which the two phenomena "worked" because they indicated a shift away from the reality of unstable, shifting life, toward an apparition of fate secured:

> Love, like death, is congenial to a novelist because it ends a book conveniently. He can make it a permanency, and his readers easily acquiesce, because one of the illusions attached to love is that it will be permanent. Not has been—will be. All history, all our experience, teaches us that no human relationship is constant, it is as unstable as the living beings who compose it, and they must balance like jugglers if it is to remain; if it is constant it is no longer a human relationship but a social habit, the emphasis in it has passed from love to marriage. All this we know, yet we cannot bear to apply our bitter knowledge to the future; the future is to be so different; the perfect person is to come along, or the person we know already is to become perfect. There are to be no changes, no necessity for alertness. We are to be happy or even perhaps miserable for ever and ever. Any strong emotion brings with it the illusion of permanence, and the novelists have seized upon this.[451]

That there is no more need to change is, indeed, alluring. It also can, indeed, prove inimical to the prerogatives of political literature, which ask readers not to feel with characters that no more need be done but that an altered political future has been deferred too long.

Clark identifies ten ending types: closing the circles, in which the ending reinvokes something of the beginning; the tie back, in which the ending ties back to an offbeat element that appeared somewhere in the story; the time frame, in which time is foregrounded as advancing "relentlessly" and ends at the chronological final unit of time in the timeframe; the space frame, in which the writer emphasizes a final geographic destination; the payoff, in which a satisfaction such as a secret revealed or a mystery solved is offered to the reader; the epilogue in which the story ends but life goes on; the problem and solution, in which the ending offers solutions or

[451] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 55.

resolutions of a problem; the apt quote, in which a character makes a statement that summarizes or distills the narrative; the look to the future, in which the future is imagined; and the mobilize the reader, in which the reader is pointed toward some action in their own life.[452] It is this final ending type which is perhaps most promising for writers of narrative invested in the political life of the work of literature.

This sort of writer, in plotting a narrative, might consider the way in which the layers of exterior, concrete, action-oriented and interior, affective plot structures could be positioned against each other to create dramatic tension, rather than simply understanding rising action and climax to be contingent upon equal matches on the level of the plot's exteriorized actions and culminate in a moment of decisive change. This sort of writer might be less interested in establishing a beginning scenario that the individual actor character will change through personal agency alone in the time of the plot, and this sort of writer might understand that falling action and denouement are not requisite elements of the narrative; rather the text might end at a point at which it is understood that the denouement—and even the climax—might exist not within the timeframe of the story but within the timeframe of the reader. Aitchison, for one, observes that the time and space of a narrative can attain tension and meaning through its inflection with its characters' radical awareness, writing:

> In the age of the liberal narrative it is compelled to characterize the present anew: longer in duration, harder to endure… What the chronotope reoriented suggests, rather, is the production of an altered engagement, a heightening of the consciousness of political feeling, in that the object of consciousness becomes not so much the cause, nor even the lost cause as such, but the feeling of involvement itself: it becomes the "figure" standing at the center of consciousness rather than the "background." What this in turns lends itself to is the production of a subject equipped with a more muscular revolutionist time, a new patience—geared not to waiting, as such, but more to enduring—one who never ceases to act even (or especially) when struggle in the present crowds out the idea of the future…Now, more than ever, does it refuse consolation in the sense of an ending. Now, more than ever, does it leave off before its own narrative anticipation is over. In this way

[452] Clark, *Writing Tools,* 190-191.

> what it offers is an antidote to the liberal imagination, and a disavowal of the post-utopian, continuing rather in its attempt to consolidate our discontent with all that is repugnant, to render us less capable of complying with the damaging patterns of existence.[453]

To Aitchison, plot structure is not simply a series of actions mounting and building upon each other toward a turn imagined permanent. He speaks to a plot of the mind, and a plot of radical feeling. Such a plot is interested less in producing positive affect tied to positive action outcomes in its characters that are presumed will catch in the reader. It is not in putting to the page a rendering of equal and opposite reactions but in making visible the way in which human life in its internal vagaries of thought and emotion fracture inertia; an object at rest may stay in rest, but the object of the human body, even if still, may vibrate with a revolutionary and enduring discontent. Such a plot may never offer to its reader an application of the discontent in the exterior world of the narrative, and though it may never be "untied" in a denouement, it may leave its reader, who has endured through the text in wondering what might be done with such bottled unquiet, with a sense that there is still something that must be done, that perhaps it is left to the reader to ferry a consciousness that *something must change* into world beyond the page.

3.7 Conclusion

In her explanation of why the narrative structural element of plot matters, Burroway anticipates that the aspiring writer may resist its study. She appeals to the notion that something *more* is what drives the impulse to write, that this something *more* centers less on discovering a narrative outcome and more to do with a worldview, writing:

> [I]t's probably that your impulse to write has little to do with the desire or the skill to work out a plot. On the contrary, you want to write because you are sensitive. You have something to say that does not answer the question, What happened next? You share with most—and the best—twentieth century fiction writers a sense of the injustice, the

[453] Aitchison, "Lost Causes," 413-414.

> absurdity, and the beauty of the world; and you want to register your protest, your laughter, and your affirmation. Yet readers will still wonder what happened next, and unless you make them wonder, they will not turn the page. You must master plot, because no matter how profound or illuminating your vision of the world may be, you cannot convey it to those who do not read you.[454]

The sense of injustice that Burroway identifies may very well motivate aspiring creative writers, but, as I've argued in this chapter, engaging questions of injustice requires troubling much of the advice dispensed in manuals regarding narrative structure. Though guidebooks tend to portray narrative structures as empty canvases onto which one might project any given subject matter, much of the advice about how to structure story relies on values incompatible with a progressive literature. The "empty" forms advanced by manual writers are not so apolitical as they might appear.

Guidebooks conceive of narrative structure strategies as ways to apprehend the reader's attention and leverage the reader's emotion, the production of emotion conflated with the meaningfulness of the text. Emotion is certainly a powerful resource for reimagining political life. And elements like pacing, plot type, plot shape, plot structure, narrative subject, and the proportions between summarized action and scene may influence emotional response in readers. However, manual discourse on narrative structure tends to reveal values and preferences for incremental change, normative behavior, provincialism, anti-intellectualism, managed selfhood, efficiency, stoicism, universalism, moderatism, and presentism, sometimes even advancing reality judgments that there is a moral physics to the universe which need not be troubled by political action.

If we accept that cultural production does inform our political life, that art and letters hold special value in shaping the thought and emotion underpinning political engagement, and that we

[454] Burroway, *Writing Fiction,* 29.

tell stories not in order to live but also to make and shift meaning, we will need to erect bolder narrative structures. We will need to think less about how to provide familiar, comforting narrative shapes to a readership imagined to be unempathetic, moderate, averse to absorbing technical information and uninterested in ideas, a readership thought to crave sprints to an end that is a return to life as it is. Burroway identifies a sense of injustice as a potential reason to write. So is a desire to widen a view of how stories can be constructed, and by turning attention toward the creation of new forms, the aspiring writer may be able to recuperate experience, may be able to organize time in a manner that reminds readers to stay woke.

Conclusion

In 1973, the Conference on Teaching Creative Writing gathered writing instructors from around the United States at the Library of Congress. The conference, hosted by the organization that was then known as the Associated Writing Programs and would later become the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, was the first of its kind. There were only four panels: "A Perspective of Academic Programs in Creative Writing," "The Writing of Poetry," "The Writing of Fiction," and "Nonfiction Prose," led by Elliott Coleman of the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, Paul Engle of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Wallace Stegner of the Creative Writing Center at Stanford University, and John Ciardi, the director of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Stegner, speaking of the challenges of teaching writing during "The Writing of Fiction," described certain rebellious students he called "mutants" who after learning the fundamentals of craft catch an impulse to innovate and have little respect for their teachers, those for whom canonical literature exists to only to be trampled and vacated. To Stegner, however, what required more thought was another sort of student:

> The situation is more complex among young writers whose motivation is ethnic and political, who are fighting their way out from under traditions which to them have been foreign and oppressive and are looking for their own ways, new affirmations, forms, even languages, within our multiple culture. Black English is a case in point. How do I, white and 63, *teach* anything to a black writer of 23 who wants, legitimately, to speak from within the black experience and in the black tone of voice? Do I even try? If I attempt to tailor him to the tradition I know, I may do him real harm. If I try to "correct" his language into standard English I may cripple him—and I know that I am never going to correct him into importance, in any case. The importance he achieves will be his own doing. Maybe I can't teach him; maybe I can only encourage him.[455]

Stegner, one of the founding fathers of creative writing instruction in the university, was concerned with the complexities of authority in the creative writing classroom, concerned that

[455] Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund, ed. 1974. *Teaching Creative Writing:* Washington D.C., Library of Congress, *January 1973*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.

his qualifications as someone who'd thought about how craft *had* been done in canonical literature might not translate into a qualification to offer craft advice on narratives attempting some forms of rupture ought to or could be done. While he did not offer solutions, his sense that political intervention in literature might be tied to a break from particular aesthetic traditions for many writers is one rarely to be found in the craft manuals that have been positioned as alternatives or adjuncts to the traditional university creative writing workshop. Nor is his questioning around the navigation of the tension between "tested" and novel forms.

Minutes later, Margaret Walker, a Chicago Black Renaissance writer, and Ernest J. Gaines, who would go on to win the Macarthur Fellowship, engaged the issue Stegner had raised in a discussion of which literary texts become the object of study. Gaines related that he had learned literary technique through reading writers like Chekhov, De Maupassant, and but also blues singers and jazz singers like Lightnin' Hopkins, Billie Holiday, and Muddy Waters. He argued that Count Basie's understatement was as artful as Hemingway's, making a case for a broader canon that might inform the writer's craft. And Walker raised questions about whether the notion of the writer's true self, a true self who was specifically a sociopolitical actor, might define the scope of one's ability to engage the politics of craft:

> Now, Wallace Stegner says he has difficulty, 63 and white, relating to that black and 23-year-old writer, and I appreciate his honesty. Is it because you're not black and cannot understand black humanity? Well, I am neither 63 not white, and I relate to this young writer. Is it because I am—is it merely because I am black? Because I ask myself, what is it about words or language that I can teach that you cannot? After all, I have also had this education in white universities superimposed on my southern black origins and my early black southern education. What is it I can teach about language that is different from the same methods or the same things about language that I learned in white universities? After all, my teachers were white as well as black, and if I succeed, ever, as a writer, it must be with that black idiom, because that is me. That black writer, like that white writer, must be himself; a natural-born woman, and a natural-born man, writing a world we understand, interpreting ourselves as black people in a hostile white land, trying to

> make the society in which we live less hostile, seeking understanding and liberation, seeking liberation and reconciliation through the mere manipulation of words.[456]

In Walker's view, the black writer's ambitions in creative writing necessarily included political objectives. The black creative writing teacher, then, might by tapping into true selfhood, true experience, offer a craft discourse honed by their ability to comprehend lives white writers had historically failed to consider or account for. Where Lamott's narrative of finding of the voice began with the child's psychic wound—and in invoking the child likely she suggests the wound likely occurs within the family unity—Walker spoke of the true self's language originating within through processing its position in an unequitable society. If one is an orientation that views selfhood as a phenomenon generated within the psychology of the family, the other embeds in the matrix of the psychocultural.

As the panel continued, Ralph Ellison, who'd remained silent throughout the conversation, was asked by Stegner what *he* thought. Ellison was perhaps the most celebrated writer on the panel, a National Book Award winner, who in his later essays wrote of the need to separate art from politics. Nevertheless, on that day in 1973, Ellison evidenced a commitment to the political, philosophical, and moral functions of literature:

> [I]n this country, which has not really found itself for all of its power, for all of its turmoil, literature does have the function of creating values, of helping us have feedback upon ourselves from our diverse regions, racial, and cultural backgrounds…Now if you can teach the would-be writer just to read from the inside, if you can teach him the relation between a technique and its moral and philosophical implications, if you can do that, if you can show him, lead him to discover for himself how his life links up with the lives of others as drawn out, dramatized, and made eloquent in literature, you will have done something very much worth doing. You will have restored the teaching of literature to the center of the humanities and to the center of the university.[457]

[456] Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund, *Teaching Creative Writing.*
[457] Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund, *Teaching Creative Writing.*

Unlike Stegner, Ellison identified an important link between craft and values; rather than naturalizing a schism between the two, he was certain that values were implicit in craft. Ideas about how society ought to function, about the individual's responsibility to a larger society—these were necessarily part of literary technique, even if teaching students to find the relationship between individual voice and social responsibility was a great challenge.

Forty-four years later, what was now called the AWP Conference looked quite different. No longer was the dominant assumption that literary composition was apolitical. In February 2017, less than one month after Donald Trump's presidential inauguration, the annual Association of Writing Programs Conference welcomed panelists to Washington D.C., where presenters alternated between the fluorescent lighting of the Washington Convention Center and a Marriot Marquis Hotel bar that, situated at the center of a cylindrical architecture, produced the impression of a panopticon designed to hold perpetrators of white collar crime. Over the four-day conference, forty-five panels were scheduled that explicitly framed their discussion around politics or the political. One, "Strange Bedfellows: The Unholy Mingling of Politics and Art," asked, "If the pen is mightier than the sword, why are young writers so often told that politics and literature don't—or shouldn't—mix? The introduction of real-world conflicts interferes with good storytelling, the theory goes, favoring ideas over characters and the general over the concrete. How then can writers find a space to explore the matters of life and death, wealth and poverty, war and governance that affect us all? How should art respond to the terrors of modern life?"[458] Three hundred writers turned up at Capitol Hill to protest the president's proposed travel

[458] "2017 AWP Conference Schedule," Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Accessed January 21, 2020, https://www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference/schedule_overview/2017_WASHDC?date=all&from_time=&to_time=&event_keyword=politic&participant=&type=all.

ban.[459] And the group Split This Rock, an organization dedicated to politically engaged poetry, hosted an organizing meeting and a candlelight vigil in front of the White House for free speech. Truth, its executive director Luis J. Rodriguez said, had become "a subversive act."[460]

This heightened awareness of literary production as political action in the public sphere has been an important corrective to a discourse that has too often conceived of political and artistic concerns as mutually exclusive. Other significant contributions have been made by VIDA, an organization that publishes a yearly quantitative analysis of the gender beakdown in literary publications, awards, and book reviews, the VIDA Count; in 2010, it found that 87.5% of the *Paris Review*'s stories were written by men and 12.5% were written by women, for example, the magazine's response landing its ratio at 50% male writers, 48.8% female writers, and 1.2% nonbinary writers in 2018.[461] A similar effort by Lee & Low tracked the demographics of publishing industry professionals in 2015 and 2019. In 2015, they found, the publishing industry overall was 79% white, 78% female, 88% heterosexual, and 92% non-disabled[462]; four years later, the polls showed slight shifts, the industry now 76% white, 74% cis women, 81% heterosexual, and 89% non-disabled.[463] Quantifying who is hired, published, and rewarded has highlighted inequalities in and around publishing, establishing that the putatively liberal literary enclave is hardly immune to systematic inequality. Still, the trajectory of the creative writing manual has not substantially kept up with such efforts. Amongst the most popular guidebooks

[459] Claire Kirch, "AWP 2017: Writers Take to the Streets of Washington D.C.," Publishers Weekly, *Publishers Weekly*, February 10, 2017, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/trade-shows-events/article/72772-awp-2017-writers-take-to-the-streets-of-washington-d-c.html.
[460] Claire Kirch, "AWP 2017: Politicized Writing Conference Ends With White House Vigil.," Publishers Weekly, *Publishers Weekly*, February 12, 2017, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/trade-shows-events/article/72774-awp-2017-politicized-writing-conference-ends-with-white-house-vigil.html.
[461] Suzi F. Garcia and Ruth Ellen Kocher, "The 2018 Vida Count," VIDA, *VIDA*, 2019, https://www.vidaweb.org/the-count/the-2018-vida-count/#Main.
[462] Jason Low and Hannah Erlich, "Diversity Baseline Survey 2015," Lee & Low, *Lee & Low*, January 26, 2016, https://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/.
[463] Jason Low and Hannah Erlich, "Diversity Baseline Survey 2019," Lee & Low, *Lee & Low*, January 28, 2020, https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/.

today, there is less engagement with the challenges the 1973 conference acknowledged—the problem of how to discuss literary experimentation and the problem of how to discuss how craft and political intervention might function symbiotically—than when Stegner confessed his bafflement nearly half a century before.

Popular creative writing manuals are odd beasts. Few would call them art, but like spiritual writings, their power rests as much in the possibility that they will prompt their readers to *feel* differently as in their pedagogic utility. The genre, after all, has homed in on one short supply seemingly endlessly in demand: hope. Guidebooks offer their readers hope not only that creative writing is a practice available to them but also that their efforts—and sometimes their own experiences—if rendered honestly, could *matter*. George Orwell, in his essay "Why I Write," identified four reasons he believed all writers write: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. He confessed of his youth, "I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life."[464] Perhaps learning to get one's back, one form of mattering, is a prominent reason that aspiring writers are drawn to manuals. Mattering, it is often suggested in manuals is roughly synonymous with holding attention and prompting emotional response—objectives perhaps best suited to Orwell's conceptions of sheer egoism and, to a degree, aesthetic enthusiasm. Yet as anyone who has met a child in a tantrum can attest, that holding attention and producing emotion inherently matter is false, and popular creative writing manuals fail to engage how craft might be politically meaningful or how craft might act as a strategy of political intervention. And the types of narrative forms celebrated by these books tend toward conservative or neoliberal narratives, even

[464] George Orwell, "Why I Write," *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, Reportage,* ed. Richard H. Rovere (San Diego: Harcourt, 1984): 390.

as author of manuals claim through the paradigm of the permission to write that good writing is a matter of finding one's voice, expressing oneself honestly, and otherwise exercising individuality. Tell your truth, the craft manuals recommend, unless your truth deviates too far left, too far experimental, too far toward intellectualism.

Aspiring writers arrive at interest in writing for various reasons, amongst which one is the desire to effect progressive political change, as noted by Walker and Ellison. I've argued in this dissertation that popular craft discourse swerves away from progressivism, however, not only failing to uphold its argument that successful creative writing is a matter of finding one's individual voice whatever that voice might be but also that it reinforcing conservative and neoliberal narratives as those which hold meaning. These books dissuade writers from pursuing particular types of stories such as those about climate change and victimized populations. The consequences range from ossifying logics in which achievement is bound to work ethic without acknowledgment of vast inequalities that inhibit the ability of many to cultivate creative practices to reproducing a sense that *quality* of writing aligns with familiar, uncomplicated narratives and narratives about people already broadly considered empathetic—often tacitly white, well-to-do, and heteronormative.

The influence of craft manuals is powerful, leveraging the manual writers' "proven" expertise as individuals who have published books, the promise of transformative feeling, and harnessing the putative efficacy of "tested" forms and archetypes. In a study of the colonial legacy of white supremacy in communications scholarship, Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, & Charlton McIlwain argued that "publication and citation practices produce a hierarchy of visibility and value. This has material consequences on the field's quality of

knowledge."[465] Applied to creative writing manuals, it can be concluded that in referencing particular stylistic choices and narrative forms in didactic literature for aspiring writers, guidebooks similarly create and reinforce hierarchies of visibility and value, with those of underlying neoliberal and conservative logics and principles at the top.

Nevertheless, not all readers are accustomed to swallowing the lessons of the genre whole. Rather, meaning is negotiated through "decoding" of the text. Though perhaps the review community is not the intended audience for creative writing manuals and though it is questionable how many aspiring writers consult reviews prior to purchasing guidebooks, for example, critical interpretations help convey to review readers that the manual writer's authority is not absolute and that, therefore, alternative approaches to craft are worth considering. Or a review may pinpoint the way in which a manual might satisfy the needs of a particular readership. One reviewer for *Kirkus* wrote that Natalie Goldberg's *Long, Quiet Highway*, the story of her "awakening" to writing, is "a resonant book that will appeal to, and likely help, all who believe that life can be a spiritual adventure," adding, "The cadence of Goldberg's writing gets monotonous. Isn't it possible to be `awake' and yet experiment with more intricate prose structures?"

There is currently little good, systematically kept data on what manual readers want, whether they believe the books have satisfied their desires, and how they use the advice. It is commonly known that online merchants like Amazon pay for reviews.[466] The social cataloguing website Goodreads, which is owned by Amazon, in theory prohibits paid reviews, though forum threads make apparent that Goodreads removes only what their moderators are able to detect are

[465] Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, & Charlton McIlwain "#CommunicationSoWhite," *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018): 257.
[466] Ryan Kailath, "Some Amazon Reviews Are Too Good to Be Believed. They're Paid For," NPR, July 30, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/07/30/629800775/some-amazon-reviews-are-too-good-to-be-believed-theyre-paid-for.

paid reviews, a process one might put little faith in considering there has been on the site even some confusion about what constitutes a paid review. One user, A.W., had paid *Kirkus Reviews*, a trade publication, $425 for a review as part of a purely commercial scheme in which the magazine accepts cash to review self-published books,[467] and that users needed to be asked by a Goodreads "Librarian" not to post paid-for reviews suggests that the site was having some trouble keeping up with the culling of these reviews from those of other reads. However, negative consumer reviews might be presumed not to have been paid for to boost sales, and negative reviews do document some points of dissatisfaction, in the process, revealing shades of what these readers had sought in reading the book and information about these aspiring writers.

Goodreads registers a high overall star rating for *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass, for example, but lower rating reviews tell a more textured story than the star rating average. Jane, who said she'd purchased the book at a conference, categorized the book in a virtual shelf she'd labelled "shelf-of-shame" and criticized the book for centering the explanation of craft too much on books of the 1980s and 1990s. Jane observed that Maass seemed quite enamored of Anne Perry,[468] without seeming to recognize that Maass was Perry's agent, an indication that Jane likely had little knowledge of the professional references and networks of the publishing world. Someone named Clare's review read in its entirety, "I decided I didn't want to write a breakout novel because I didn't like any of the books the author referenced,"[469] a common grievance mentioned on Goodreads that implies many aspiring writers want not only to have their egos satisfied but also to write toward the aesthetics they've cultivated. And in an unusually

[467] A.W. "Start Here > A Note About Commercial Reviews," Goodreads, August 14, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1959419-a-note-about-commercial-reviews.
[468] Jane, September 5, 2015, comment on Goodreads, "Writing the Breakout Novel."
[469] Clare, January 3, 2013, comment on Goodreads, "Writing the Breakout Novel."

robust review, Troy Blackford elaborated a laundry list of misgivings about Donald Maass's *Writing the Breakout Novel* which I will quote at length:

> In the year 2000, Maass says:
>
> "Middle-eastern terrorists are not likely to attack us. This is an implausible plot for a thriller." (Look me in the eye and repeat that at the end of 2001, Donald.)
>
> "A global financial crisis wouldn't affect people enough to be the topic of a thriller. So what if Wall Street has a bad day, or even a VERY bad day." (I'll check back with you when the unemployment and foreclosure rate is skyrocketing in 2008, Mr. Maass.)
>
> "Conspiracies make a bad topic for a thriller - so too do the so-called 'treasure hunt' stories." (This just a few years before 'The Davinci Code,' which basically combines the two, came out and made millions.)
>
> Then you have the long section on how 'e-readers' will 'never have an effect on the paper publishing business.' People don't want e-readers, Maass sniffs, because 'they don't offer anything superior to reading it on paper.' There will never be a magic revolution wherein authors can skip the publishing houses and directly put their works up for ebooks, so stop wishing for it. I guess in 2000 that felt like a safe thing to think. In 2013, I was reading him make this declaration ON MY KINDLE. So yeah, it was a little hard to take seriously.
>
> I was bothered not just by these types of predictions, which are in some sense understandable. But early in the book, he (a literary agent) talks about a book he got a huge, nearly million dollar advance for, praising it as an example of the kind of book he will help you learn to write. He claims that he read the manuscript and saw a clear turning point where the author was maturing and transcending his earlier work.
>
> Looking at its sales on Amazon in 2013, it has a sales ranking of #1,000,000 (meaning one million books are placing above it) and an average review of 2 1/2 stars out of 5. The author's fans consistently said 'This isn't as good as his prior books.' Admittedly, it's a kind of old book 13 years later, but ranking at the 1,000,000 level is still bad for a professionally published book. If this is the kind of book he's going to teach us to write - hated by the author's fans as a turning point into being worse, and disappointing in sales - well... [sic][470]

To Blackford, Maass's expertise was compromised by his failure to make accurate *societal* predictions, indicating a notional interest in the work of narrative as a social form, representing the world beyond itself and possibly also "enriching" it as Bakhtin so famously proposed. Blackford was put off by the track record of a book that Maass had sold in a lucrative deal; the book had earned its author a large advance, but it had not enjoyed sustained popularity and had not garnered sufficient esteem from readers. Blackford, it would seem, wanted not only to publish, not only to hit a particular dollar figure. Blackford had sought for

[470] Troy Blackford, December 27, 2013, comment on Goodreads, "Writing the Breakout Novel."

advice in how to be *admired*. He was interested in the text's ability to mediate a relationship between author and social landscape.

A more compelling, or at least tortured, review gestures toward a tension between skepticism and dreaming in the aspiring writer. The Goodreads user Adrian Alvarez admitted to having read other manuals—and having found them disappointing. His frustration is palpable as he urges other aspirants not to make his mistake:

> God, this book was irritating. Every time I read a "this is how you write" book by a non-writer I swear I'll never do it again. Then I end up doing it again because someone will swear "oh this one is different." Nope. Not different. Exactly the same, actually. 260 pages of selling (in this case he's selling the phrase "breakout novel") and about 1 or 2 useful ideas. Nothing new, mind you, just useful to be reminded of them. I suppose actually reading a good novel could have reminded me of those ideas too. In fact, you know what? The time I spent reading this really annoying guy would have been much better spent reading a good novel.
>
> Don't buy this book. If you really want to learn something about story crafting and you really, really think you can gain something more than you would from just reading and writing and sharing your work, at least read a "this is how you write" book written by a writer who's work you respect.[471]

Alvarez, it seemed, had bought the book against his better judgment. He, like many, suggested that the best way to write well was the read well, but tried the genre once more, taking a gamble that maybe the future held something new. Or else perhaps Alvarez hoped that if there are gatekeepers; if privilege in other areas of life provides a fast track to things like home ownership, access to higher education, and enviable positions, perhaps there was a simpler path or key to writing creative narrative; the subtitle of Maass's book, after all, promises "insider advice." It is an understandable hope, one produced by exactly the inequalities some aspiring writers hope to engage.

Writers for whom the politics of craft are important will not find much assistance in popular craft manuals, but the varied interpretations of guidebook readers evidence that the effect of craft manuals is not simply hegemonic, that aspiring writers negotiate meaning. Some aspiring

[471] Adrian Alvarez, January 28, 2011, comment on Goodreads, "Writing the Breakout Novel."

writers compare the craft advice they read with the books they believe to be well-crafted. They notice that manual writers are not experts holding stable aesthetic knowledge but people who may self-aggrandize and definitely have specific *tastes*. And some, though perhaps at times they've permitted their optimism to lead them to the territory of guidebooks, even posit their own modes of refining craft through narrative reading practices, suggesting a modicum of trust in their individual authority to gauge how to best cultivate creative practice.

This trust in the creative self ought to give us some that aspiring writers will experiment in their own writing practices and self-education, just as they "try on" manuals for size. While currently many popular creative writing manuals ignore the politics of craft, books like *A Stranger's Journey* and *Writing the Other*, as well as some interviews with published writers, essays, conferences, and university workshops continue to problematize and refine the politics of craft. These alternative resources might be incorporated into the work of aspirants attempting to teach themselves more about literary technique.

If popular manuals are not particularly compatible with the project of progressive politics, the "mutant" impulse Stegner identified might serve the progressive aspiring writer who wishes to spin some danger into their writing, locating conventions and strategizing their subversions to pool attention to those subjects too often ignored, too often kept submerged by complacency. The progressive aspiring writer might reinterpret the permission to write to give themselves the permission to invest in the notion that there is use to weirdness. There is use to crumpling up mawkish plots and tired forms. To Shklovsky, for example, Tolstoy narrating from the point of view of a horse in the story "Strider" was not arbitrary; it was a choice of consequence because the unusual point of view emphasized the strangeness, the irrationality, and the violence of flogging. Such an investment in unusual craft, in the individuality of the writer

could inspire the feeling of wrongness that social conventions of routinized violence had tamped down. The aspiring writer's experiments in craft might too swing our attention to what we too often coast over. It might remind us how flexible the shape of our politics can be, as flexible as the mind of the perverse writer.

Literary conventions, obviously, are conventions once they become familiar. But the call to stay woke requires a turn from the familiar and toward awakening forms, which is to say unusual ones, experimental ones, ones that draw attention to themselves and their subjects. It is in experimental writing, writing driven not by a compulsion to reproduce what is the norm but to poke out at odd angles, that aspiring writers may be able to break through the apathy to register the subprime of the status quo, to explode how much wider a future could be, and to offer one more story's weight to the heft of the utopian imagination. Creative writing manuals may be useful, then, precisely for the purposes of misprision. They may point the aspiring writer toward the forms that have become rote, to a sense that the permission to write obtains in compliance to the imagined demands of a dominant culture, but those who misread willfully will still seize upon their own authority and transfigure technique in creative composition aversive to the politics that have failed to hasten toward a longed-for future.

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