

CRAFT IN THE REAL WORLD

Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping



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PREFACE

This book is a challenge to accepted models of craft and workshop, to everything from a character-driven plot to the “cone of silence,” or “gag rule,” that in a creative writing workshop silences the manuscript’s author. The challenge is this: to take craft out of some imaginary vacuum (as if meaning in fiction is separate from meaning in life) and return it to its cultural and historical context. Race, gender, sexuality, etc. affect our lives and so must affect our fiction. Real-world context, and particularly what we do with that context, *is* craft.

Over a decade ago, I sat silently in an MFA workshop while mostly white writers discussed my race. I had decided not to name the race of any character, Asian American or otherwise—but the workshop demanded that the story inform “the reader” if my characters were like me, people of color. A common assumption lies behind this phenomenon: that no mention of race is supposed to mean a character is white. I didn’t have to ask why the white writers in the room never identified the

race of their white characters. I already knew why: they believed that white is literature's default. I just couldn't say so.

To name or not name a character's race is a matter of craft. To consider a character to be white unless stated otherwise is a matter of craft. Since this is a craft book, let's explore what exactly is at stake for the craft of fiction here. There are three possibilities:

1. If fiction dictates that a writer identify only the race of non-white characters, then craft is a tool used to normalize whiteness.
2. If race is a factor only in stories with characters of color, then craft must be different for fiction with characters of color than it is for fiction with white characters.
3. Otherwise, if any mention of race affects a story, then, like setting, race must be a part of any craft discussion.

Our current methods of teaching craft date back to at least 1936 and the creation of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the first MFA program. The Workshop rose to prominence under the leadership (1941-1965) of Paul Engle, a white poet from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who was invested in what scholar Eric Bennett calls "Iowa as the home of the free individual, of the poet at peace with democratic capitalism, of the novelist devoted to the contemporary

outlines of liberty." (You will find more about this history later in the book.) In other words, the Workshop never meant craft to be neutral. Craft expressed certain artistic and social values that could be weaponized against the threat of Communism.

Craft is part of the history of Western empire that goes back even to the Ancient Greek and Roman empires, upon which American democratic values are based. We still talk about plot the way Aristotle wrote about it over two thousand years ago, when he argued that plot should be driven by character. When we continue to teach plot this way, we ignore both the many other kinds of plot found in literatures around the world and even the context of Aristotle's original complaint (he was fed up with the fate/god-driven plots popular with tragedians of his time).

What we call craft is in fact nothing more or less than a set of expectations. Those expectations are shaped by workshop, by reading, by awards and gatekeepers, by biases about whose stories matter and how they should be told. How we engage with craft expectations is what we can control as writers. The more we know about the context of those expectations, the more consciously we can engage with them.

These expectations are never neutral. They represent the values of the culturally dominant population: in America that means (straight, cis, able, upper-middle-class) white males. When craft is taught unreflexively, within a limited understanding of the canon, it reinforces

narrow ideas about whose stories are important and what makes a story beautiful, moving, or good. We need to rethink craft and the teaching of it to better serve writers with increasingly diverse backgrounds, which means diverse ways of telling stories. Like in revision, the fiction writer must break down what she thinks she knows about her craft in order to liberate it.

This book is organized with the understanding that while some readers may read from start to finish, others may skip around according to their particular interests. For convenience, chapters are loosely collected in two parts, "Fiction in the Real World" and "Workshop in the Real World," though how we use craft and how we teach it are inseparable in a nation in which art has been institutionalized and many writers are supported financially and ideologically by colleges and universities. If you read this book from start to finish, you will find that some context is repeated as needed by particular chapters. In the appendix, you will find exercises that can be practiced alone or in the classroom.

This book is intended to begin further conversation—it should never be taken as an exhaustive or definitive resource. The conversation about power and craft must continue both in a more public context and in one's own personal context. Which is to say that while any writer benefits from encountering further possibilities, the

lesson of this book is not that any writer should be able to use any cultural expectation no matter her identity position. An understanding that craft is cultural will also bring up issues of how to engage with craft appropriately, and those issues are inadequately addressed here. Likewise, this book does not present a representative range of perspectives, cultures, and narrative techniques, nor does it mean to. With luck, it will spark writers to find a place for themselves. I write and teach Asian American literature and will use it as an example throughout, but never as an example of what Asian American literature *should* do, only as an example of what Asian American literature *can* do and has done for me. Because of the lack of craft books that consider cultural context, *Craft in the Real World* primarily builds on two basic questions: "Why do we limit our ideas about craft and workshop? and How do we start changing things?"

That means, as much as possible, that this book will offer practical and practicable advice. To make craft accessible and inclusive, we must pull back the curtain on what craft is and does. In other words, dear reader, you will find no lightning bolts, no genius, no voices-in-my-head here. We must reject the mystification/mythification of creative writing. The mystical writer uses the myth of his genius to gain power. He (since it is almost always a he) benefits from keeping up the illusions that he has natural talent and that writing cannot be taught. If writing is not beholden to culture,

then he is free from the constraints of actually being a part of (or responsible to) the world in which he and his readers live.

Make no mistake—writing is power. What this fact should prompt us to ask is: What kind of power is it, where does it come from, and what does it mean?

If we take from Aristotle his idea of plot, for example, we should also remember that he believed art relied on slavery: slaves freed their masters to think and create. For the most part, writing has proved a privileged pursuit. To write for publication requires time, education, cultural fluency, and often financial solvency, connections, and a built-in audience. In order to become a writer at all, writing has to seem possible as a career path. Reading has to seem as valuable as work, friendships, dating, etc. Where does that sense of value come from?

Perhaps we know all about the privilege it takes to write. Yet somehow writers seem to forget that this context influences how we evaluate fiction, what we think of as *moving*, what we think of as *correct* or *well-written*. Literary criticism tells us that the Western novel is a product of the middle class. It is written by people in the middle class for an audience of people in the middle class. Novels are about social identity, mass production, the economy of art, and so on. But unlike in life, in fiction, class and race and gender, etc., are *choices*. That is, they are a part of craft. To become a better writer is to make conscious what may start out as unconscious.

This is all another way of saying that fiction can never be separated from its place in the world. Even the choice to write about something completely imaginary—elves and wizards—is a choice made by someone reacting to the world in which they live by fantasizing about another. It is also a choice about what kind of other world to fantasize—why elves and wizards rather than fox-spirits and ghosts?

This book will focus on literary fiction because its expectations are the expectations I know best. And like most readers, I actually enjoy having many of my expectations fulfilled and a few undermined or challenged. To meet expectations is not inherently bad. I love romantic comedies that stick close to the formula. Most of the TV we love is very formulaic. Most literary fiction is no different. It meets the expectations of a specific audience.

This book is against the idea of “finding” an audience and for the idea of writing toward the audience whose expectations matter to you. As writers we need to know that there are many different conventions—not just convention and experimentation—and we need to know where those conventions come from, and whom they serve, in order to know what and why and how to *mean*. If, as the story tells us, language always comes up short of representing experience, then how language evokes experience is as much about whose experience gets represented as it is about which words are chosen. Language evokes meaning *for someone*. Even a sentence like “She walked to the grocery store” requires some cultural context. What a

grocery store is like, what challenges walking presents, perhaps an entire setting can be called to mind in the gaps between words and the way those gaps are filled in by a reader's personal and cultural assumptions.

When the "traditional" creative writing workshop, in which the author submits a manuscript to a group of peers and listens silently, began at Iowa, it was developed with shared assumptions in mind. The workshop was made up of white males reading white male fiction, as students and especially as instructors. In this world only does the "gag rule" make some sense, in that it forced men used to being heard to stop and listen to their likely audience. But the world has moved on. The traditional workshop does not work without shared assumptions. It doesn't work if some of the writers in the room have different audiences or expectations—as in the workshop where I was told to race characters of color. At best, it pressures the least normative writers to make fiction that is "likeable" and generalizable to the most normative audience. Non-normative experience becomes exoticized or unspecific, something extra rather than something foundational.

If this idea of craft persists, it is because workshop pedagogy (as Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice argued back in 2005) is largely shaped by "lore," by writers teaching what they learned as students, rather than by pedagogical theory or intersectional criticism. What

does the traditional workshop offer? One common refrain is that writers learn most from hearing what they haven't yet realized about their own work. And this is an important aspect of workshop, just not one that is actually best served by silence. Imagine, for example, a conversation about gardening in which other gardeners look at your garden and tell you about it without allowing you to talk about your attempts to grow it. This conversation is at best underinformed. It is likely to mislead. It could easily end up harmful to both the garden and even the gardener's desire to garden, especially if the other gardeners have experience in a different kind of garden, or with different plants, or a different climate, or soil, etc.

In other words, the traditional model does not work in the real world. The "gag rule" tells those who are silenced that in order to speak they must speak with an acceptable voice. Especially when the workshop focuses on form and avoids content, it says to the silent author: *You own your story but not how you get to tell it or whom you get to tell it to.* Your story must be framed so that the majority can read via their own lens.

The later chapters in this book will expand on the dangers of traditional workshop, the unbalanced and often hurtful power dynamics it mimics and perpetuates, the stultification of different kinds of craft, the hide-and-seek game created by the term "the reader," and ways to teach craft with more cultural understanding and sensitivity. As Laura Mulvey said about pleasure in film and

the male gaze, pleasure or interest in workshop is based on how one group "sees" the work, and that group's gaze is built into the model. The gaze persists even without the group to do the looking—just as the male gaze persists in film even when the film is watched by someone who does not identify as male. We must take apart the whole model.

If we are trying, through workshop, to see our own work better, to re-see (as in revision), then with which gaze are we re-seeing? Workshop should be a place that helps a writer see and re-see for herself. The goal of workshop should be to provide the tools a writer will use long after the workshop disbands. Has it instead become a place in which we teach writers how to *be* seen? Does it encourage the false equivalence of "the reader" as the workshop?

Workshop has created many axioms: "show, don't tell," "write what you know," "kill your darlings," etc. Writers have pushed back against those axioms, but we must also push back against the context that creates them, that nurtures them and passes them on. If not, we simply recreate the same exceptions within the same culturally defined argument we were taught to engage in. Whole other traditions of writing become only rule-breaking, boundary-crossing. Some of us have larger arguments at stake, arguments often about the bounds of the argument themselves, of what is and is not normal, good, beautiful.

A workshop should not participate in the binding but in freeing the writer from the culturally regulated boundaries of what it is possible to say and how it is possible to say it.



Part 1

FICTION IN THE REAL WORLD

“PURE CRAFT” IS A LIE

Like many creative writing instructors, I teach my students that it can be to their advantage in fiction to use the dialogue tags “say” and “ask” instead of less common tags like “commented” or “queried.” This is a strategy I myself was taught. The usual reasoning goes like this: the tags “say” and “ask” are effectively “invisible” to readers, so they take the reader’s focus off the tag and put it on who is talking. Most of the time, the main purpose of a dialogue tag is to indicate who has spoken. (Tags also provide rhythm and other benefits, but let’s focus on this main purpose.) I tell my students that if the main purpose of a particular tag is not who is speaking but *how* the character speaks, such as in a shout or a whisper, then those dialogue tags (“she shouted,” “they whispered”) become useful for the very fact that they are not “invisible.” Readers are meant to register the way of speaking as much or more than who is doing it. When writers use “say” or “ask,” it isn’t to get readers to register the fact that something is said or asked—the dialogue already makes this obvious.

I believe this advice to be useful and true. I also know that it is cultural. We read “say” and “ask” as invisible terms not, of course, because they are invisible, and not because of their meaning—“commented” and “queried” would do in this regard—but because we have read other books that also use “say” and “ask.” We read the words “say” and “ask” a lot, so much that we barely notice them.

To be clear, if every writer in America started using the word “queried,” then American readers would start to treat “queried” as invisible. That is the influence of culture. Our exposure to culture is what makes our advice on dialogue tags advisable. To learn craft is to learn how to use cultural expectations to your advantage.

Craft works best, then, when a writer and reader share the same cultural background. If a writer were to use “ask” in a culture where “queried” is the invisible term, then “ask” would draw attention to itself—it would lose its value as invisible. A reader who picks up her first literary novel in English will often question why an author repetitively writes “say” and “ask,” instead of changing it up with synonyms. Many primary schools teach children to avoid repetition (one real benefit is to improve children’s vocabulary). I’ve had the experience of assigning Hemingway to ESL readers, thinking of his simplicity, only for them to ask why Hemingway is such a bad writer. Why the hell does he keep using the same dialogue tags over and over? Why doesn’t he know any bigger words?

I use the example of dialogue tags for its relative

straightforwardness, but cultural expectations also apply to how we characterize, why some characters are called “unsympathetic” and others are not, how we plot by causation and agency rather than by coincidence, how we emphasize conflict, how we expect characters to change or at least actively fail to change, etc. If not everything about fiction is cultural (though how could it not be, when language is cultural), certainly any aspect of craft that relies on shared meanings relies on shared culture. This is why aspiring writers should read a lot, and why artists learn art history, and why certain fiction gets grouped together under terms like “Modernism” or “Fantasy.”

Here’s a quick thought experiment. Imagine a writer from a culture that uses “query” enrolls in a creative writing workshop in our “ask” culture. How much would the repetition of “queried” frustrate the workshop? The writer might even be convinced to use “ask” from then on.

What’s the problem with that? To switch to using “ask” is to switch audiences. “Ask” is not for readers from the writer’s “query” culture but for the workshop. Suddenly the writer has changed allegiances.

We must be careful not to frame craft as prescription or even guidelines without first making it clear where those guidelines come from and whom they benefit. In many workshops, in many craft books, the dominance of one tradition of craft, serving one particular audience (white, middle-class, straight, able, etc.), is essentially literary

imperialism, a term that should make us wary of the danger especially to emerging minority and marginalized voices.

Here plenty of writers will feign queasiness over any introduction of politics or literary theory. There is, of course, a kind of writer who believes art is free from the rest of the world, as if he does not live and read and write in that world. There is also a kind of writer who believes that human experience is universal, so his experience is enough to know everyone else's. What's the big deal, these privileged writers will ask: Why not encourage writers to reach a "wide" "mainstream" audience? Even if they want to experiment, they should know tradition first.

In other words: "You have to know the rules in order to break them."

These tired arguments get trotted out whenever writers are asked to take more responsibility for their positions in the world. But reading and writing are not done in a vacuum. What people read and write affects how they act in the world. If writers really believe that art is important to actual life, then the responsibilities of actual life are the responsibilities of art. The argument that one should know the rules before breaking them is really an argument about who gets to make the rules, whose rules get to be the norms and determine the exceptions. To teach the writer from a "query" culture to use "ask" is not to teach her how to write *better* but to teach her *whose*

writing is better. Writing that follows nondominant cultural standards is often treated as if it is "breaking the rules," but why one set of rules and not another? What is official always has to do with power.

To sum up, what we are telling the writer from a "query" culture who learns to write "ask" is (a) she must either write to people from our culture, instead of hers, or learn how to write to people from our culture if she wants to write to people from hers; (b) she should accept our normal as her normal; and (c) she is at a disadvantage toward the shared learning goals, since writers from our culture don't have to learn new norms; they only have to recognize the norms they already understand.

Now extend this hypothetical situation to real people who, for whatever reason, are less familiar with or less invested in the cultural expectations of the dominant literature. I'll give you another example, one many creative writing instructors are familiar with—a workshop in which most people want to write "literary" fiction, but Student X and maybe a few others want to write "high fantasy." I am not entirely versed in fantasy, but I am versed in this situation. The people who prefer literary fiction likely have read a lot of literary fiction and less fantasy. The people who prefer fantasy have likely read a lot of fantasy and less literary fiction. (These terms are used too sweepingly here, with distinctions I don't endorse, but let's put that aside for the sake of the example.)

The instructor sets out to teach characterization,

assigns a literary story with “complex, three-dimensional characters,” and says something like, characters should not be “types.” If I am Student X, the hypothetical fantasy-writer, I might find that my instructor’s words are not supported by my experience. In many of the books I read, characters are “types” and could not be otherwise. An elf who does not act like an elf is a poorly written character. The term “type” might even strike me as a strange way to refer to non-“complex” characters. Why shouldn’t an elf-like elf be complex? Plus, the literary story the instructor assigned as a model bores me, and I don’t see why it has any value other than by being literary. Its superiority to everything high fantasy seems taken for granted by the workshop.

Do I raise my hand to object or even to ask questions? It is possible that my objections will lead to an interesting discussion about what a “type” is and does. But it is also possible that I will feel mocked or attacked or at least condescended to. Likely I won’t say anything at all. After all, I am already expending a lot of mental energy trying to keep up with what my instructor means by “types” and what makes something “literary” or not, while my classmates seem to require very little explanation. The whole idea of workshop is terrifying enough without the added pressure of coming off as ignorant, especially when I will have to face my classmates’ criticism in silence anyway.

It is true that many instructors would want the interesting discussion that might arise if the fantasy writer

voices her objections. But this (hypothetical) class is already set up to make a fair discussion difficult. There is a lot of bias in the room—most of the writers already prefer literary fiction, and everyone has read a literary story as the example text, and the instructor is better understood by the literary writers and vice versa, and the instructor is respected as a literary writer. How can Student X catch up when the gap between her knowledge of literary conventions and the other students’ knowledge only widens as new lessons continue to build on past lessons?

I have been in this kind of workshop both as a student and a professor. An open-minded workshop leader may indeed encourage interesting discussion and, as many professors would argue, Student X may indeed learn to write better fantasy by incorporating literary craft (and vice versa). But none of this changes the fact that everything is stacked against Student X from go. Even if Student X’s instructor *wants* to teach her to write literary fiction (not my goal, but a goal I have often heard stated by MFA professors), that option is never fully made available to her. If Student X never realizes that she is learning cultural values, then what she learns is that her knowledge of the world isn’t useful in a craft discussion and needs to be discarded.

The literary writers enjoy a lot of privilege in this workshop compared to Student X. The instructor teaches mostly to them; they have a foundation of knowledge with which to immediately process lessons; they are invested in that knowledge and the culture that produces it; and

they are invested in producing more of that culture, for an audience similarly invested. The rich get richer.

The writer with different cultural values has to learn more than the terms and sayings of literary craft. She has to learn a whole new value system, a whole new tradition. If she believes that she must learn that tradition's rules before she can break them, then she has to become a part of that tradition before she can figure out whether or not its craft will be useful to her old tradition.

So much for the neutrality of genre. Now imagine a workshop of twelve people who are *all* interested in "literary" writing. Three of them are writers of color. Imagine that the readings are all by white writers, and the instructor is white. Imagine that this instructor keeps insisting that fiction is not ideological.

I have been in that workshop too, many times. Of course, only as a student.

Writers of color in a workshop where the craft values are implicitly white, or LGBT writers in a workshop where the craft values are straight and cis, or women writers in a workshop where the craft values are patriarchal, and so on, are regularly told to "know the rules before they can break them." They are rarely told that these rules are more than "just craft" or "pure craft," that rules are always cultural. The spread of craft starts to feel and work like colonization.

Let us look at one final example, focusing on the use of sensory details. Fiction writers are often taught the three following strategies for using sensory details in their stories:

1. Choose "striking" or "lasting" or "unusual" (or so forth) details.
2. Leave out unnecessary or "common" details.
3. Defamiliarize the familiar.

Imagine that one of the three writers of color in the workshop submits a story about characters of color. For the purpose of the example, we will imagine that the workshop was taught the three strategies above and is supposed to address them in the manuscript. Let's go over some typical comments. Since these are comments I have heard and/or experienced firsthand, pretend the story is about Korean Americans in Korea. We'll explore two separate possibilities: one in which the writer takes the advice of cultural craft, and one in which the writer resists that craft. For convenience, let's start with the first two strategies and come back to the third later.

Say the writer has taken the first two pieces of advice. He has included what he thinks are striking details—the fish a man is taking home on the subway, the man's incorrectly buttoned coat, the smell of unwashed bodies, the slickness of the bodies pressed close—all details which will be important to some kind of plot concerning the

man with the fish—and he has left out other details that are unnecessary to the story.

In this scenario, it would not be surprising to hear the workshop say that the writer has not done the things that he in fact did: i.e. including unusual details and leaving out unnecessary details. The other writers might suggest he include details like—an extreme example—passengers eating kimchi in their box lunches. This seems like a reasonable suggestion to them because the strategies for using sensory details assume a white audience and white cultural norms. In other words, the writer should be addressing white Americans who may have experienced the smell of unwashed bodies but would be “struck” by the “vivid” details of the smell of kimchi or so forth. There might even be a white American in the workshop who speaks up to say he’s been to Korea and goes on to give some examples of what he found unusual.

As an opposite scenario, say the writer *resists* the craft lessons and, following other writers of color he has read (and writing against stories in which white expats in Asia eat exoticized food on the lunar new year, etc.), tries to include details that would be common and recognizable to a Korean American audience. Details, for instance, like how the man with the fish can tell by the protagonist’s clothes that he’s a *gyopo*. Maybe the writer includes these recognizable details because he knows how little fiction there is about people like him and he believes that representation is important. In this workshop, the other

writers might ask him to define “*gyopo*” if it is supposed to be a striking detail. They might complain that if it is not a striking detail, the writer should cut it. They might complain that the word is not clear to them, or that if it is supposed to be a common word, the writer should cut it. They might say that “the spell of the story was broken” for them when they encountered a word they didn’t know and couldn’t figure out from context clues. Again, these would be appropriate responses—if the point of craft is to meet the expectations of an audience who is not like the writer.

Lastly, let’s talk about defamiliarization. If the writer tried to familiarize rather than defamiliarize, the responses would be similar to those in the paragraph above. If the writer tries to defamiliarize, to *take* the craft advice—say he defamiliarizes the familiar lunch box by describing it as a little square house with a room for each side dish—it wouldn’t be surprising to hear the workshop object. They might say they can’t understand what the square house of side dishes is. They might even encourage the writer not to defamiliarize, since common details of Korean culture are already unfamiliar enough for them. The writer will likely end up either in conflict or simply in confusion, not knowing (because the workshop never says it) that the criticism is not of his craft, but of his cultural position.

I began this essay in response to a writer friend asking why writers of color don't write "pure craft" essays, rather than craft essays about race. This essay is a way of answering her question with a question: Why do we believe there is any such thing as "pure craft"? When writers identify race and gender and sexuality, etc., as central concerns of writing, it isn't because they have nothing to say about pacing or space breaks. They are doing the hard work other writers avoid, in order to shed light on the nature of craft itself.

They are:

- a. reacting to a history of craft as "just craft" and even trying to correct it,
- b. catching up writers outside the dominant culture by teaching the cultural context that goes mostly unexamined, and
- c. making sure that they do not participate in the erasure of their own difference.

The way we tell stories has real consequences on the way we interpret meaning in our everyday lives. The books I read as a child, about children who find they are actually heirs to some magical kingdom, of course affected the way I thought about my adoption, which of course affects the way I think about plot and character and conflict and so on. Craft is not innocent or neutral. When I participate in the sharing and changing of craft,

I can only do so by acknowledging my own attraction to certain cultural conventions. Culture stands behind what makes many craft moves "work" or not, and *for whom* they work. Writers need to understand their real-world relationship to craft in order to understand their relationship to their audience and to their writing's place in the world. There's a lot of work left to do to open up craft to writers beyond the cis, straight, white, able, middle-class (etc.) literary establishment, and there is no "pure" way of doing that work. There is only our engagement with culture.

In her book *Immigrant Acts*, theorist Lisa Lowe argues that the novel regulates cultural ideas of identity, nationhood, gender, sexuality, race, and history. Lowe suggests that Western psychological realism, especially the *bildungsroman*/coming-of-age novel, has tended toward stories about an individual reincorporated into society—an outsider finds his place in the world, though not without loss. Other writers and scholars share Lowe's reading. Examples abound: In *Jane Eyre*, Jane marries Rochester. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet marries Mr. Darcy. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer, after some hesitation, marries May Welland. (There is a lot of marriage.) In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway returns to the Midwest and Daisy Buchanan returns to her husband.

Some of these protagonists end up happy and some unhappy, but all end up incorporated into society. A common craft axiom states that by the end of a story, a protagonist must either change or fail to change. These novels fulfill this expectation. In the end, it's not only the characters who find themselves trapped by societal norms. It's the novels.

3.

But expectations are not a bad thing. In a viral craft talk on YouTube, author Kurt Vonnegut graphs several archetypal (Western) story structures, such as "Man in a Hole" (a protagonist gets in trouble and then gets out of it) and

WHAT IS CRAFT? 25 THOUGHTS

1.

Craft is a set of expectations.

2.

Expectations are not universal; they are standardized. It is like what we say about wine or espresso: we acquire "taste." With each story we read, we draw on and contribute to our knowledge of what a story is or should be. This is true of cultural standards as fundamental as whether to read from left to right or right to left, just as it is true of more complicated context such as how to appreciate a sentence like "She was absolutely sure she hated him," which relies on our expectation that stating a person's certainty casts doubt on that certainty as well as our expectation that fictional hatred often turns into attraction or love.

Our appreciation then *relies on* but also *reinforces* our expectations.

What expectations, however, are we really talking about here?

Cinderella (which Vonnegut jokes automatically earns an author a million dollars). The archetypes are recognizable to us the way that beats in a romantic comedy are recognizable to us—a meet-cute, mutual dislike, the realization of true feelings, consummation, a big fight, some growing up, and a reunion (often at the airport). The fulfillment of expectations is pleasurable. Part of the fun of Vonnegut's talk is that he shows us how well we already know certain story types and how our familiarity with them doesn't decrease, maybe only increases, our fondness for them. Any parent knows that a child's favorite stories are the stories she has already heard. Children like to know what is coming. It reduces their anxiety, validates their predictions, and leaves them able to learn from other details. Research suggests that children learn more from a story they already know. What they do not learn is precisely: other stories.

Craft is also about omission. What rules and archetypes standardize are models that are easily generalizable to accepted cultural preferences. What doesn't fit the model is othered. What is our responsibility to the other? In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell famously theorized a "monomyth" story shape common to all cultures. In reality, his theory is widely dismissed as reductionist—far more selective than universal and unjustly valuing similarity over difference. It has been especially criticized for the way its focus on the "hero's journey" dismisses stories like the heroine's

journey or other stories in which people do not set off to conquer and return with booty (knowledge and/or spirituality and/or riches and/or love objects). It is important to recognize Campbell's investment in masculinity as universal.

Craft is the history of which kind of stories have typically held power—and for whom—so it also is the history of which stories have typically been omitted. That we have certain expectations for what a story is or should include means we also have certain expectations for what a story isn't or shouldn't include. Any story relies on negative space, and a tradition relies on the negative space of history. The ability for a reader to fill in white space relies on that reader having seen what *could* be there. Some readers are asked to stay always, only, in the negative. To wield craft responsibly is to take responsibility for absence.

4.

In "A Journey Into Speech," Michelle Cliff writes about how she had to break from accepted craft in order to tell her story. Cliff grew up under colonial rule in Jamaica and was taught the "King's English" in school. To write well was to write in one specific mode. She went to graduate school and even published her dissertation, but when she started to write directly about her experience, she found that it could not be represented by the kind of language and forms she had learned.

In order to include her own experience, Cliff says she

had to reject a British "cold-blooded dependence on logical construction." She mixed vernacular with the King's English, mixed Caribbean stories and ways of storytelling with British. She wrote in fragments, to embody her fragmentation. She reclaimed the absences that formed the way she spoke and thought, that created the "split-consciousness" she lived with.

To own her writing—I am paraphrasing—was to own herself. This is craft.

5.

Craft is both much more and much less than we're taught it is.

6.

In his book on post-World War II MFA programs, Eric Bennett documents how the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the first place to formalize the education of creative writing, fundraised on claims that it would spread American values of freedom, of creative writing and art in general as "the last refuge of the individual." The Workshop popularized an idea of craft as non-ideological, but its claims should make clear that individualism is itself an ideology. (It shouldn't surprise us that apolitical writing has long been a political stance.) If we can admit by now that history is about who has had the power to write history, we should be able to admit the same of craft. Craft is about who has the power to write stories, what stories are

historicized and who historicizes them, who gets to write literature and who folklore, whose writing is important and to whom, in what context. This is the process of standardization. If craft is teachable, it is because standardization is teachable. These standards must be challenged and disempowered. Too often craft is taught only as what has already been taught before.

7.

In the West, fiction is inseparable from the project of the individual. Craft as we know it from Aristotle to E. M. Forster to John Gardner rests on the premise that a work of creative writing represents an individual creator, who, as Ezra Pound famously put it, "makes it new." Not on the premise that Thomas King describes in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*: that any engagement with speaking is an engagement with listening, that to tell a story is always to retell it, and that no story has behind it an individual. Each "chapter" of King's book, in fact, begins and ends almost the same way and includes a quote from another Native writer.

Audre Lorde puts it this way: "There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of *examining what our ideas really mean.*" (My italics.)

It is clear in an oral tradition that individual creation is impossible—the authors of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the "Beowulf poet," Homer, were all engaging with the expectations their stories had accrued over many tellings.

Individualism does not free one from cultural expectations; it is a cultural expectation. Fiction does not "make it new;" it makes it *felt*. Craft does not separate the author from the real world.

When I was in graduate school, a famous white writer defended Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (whose craft was famously criticized by author Chinua Achebe for the racist use of Africans as objects and setting rather than as characters) by claiming that the book should be read for craft, not race. Around the same time, another famous white writer gave a public talk in a sombrero about the freedom to appropriate. Thomas King, on the contrary, respects the shared responsibility of storytelling and warns us that to tell a story one way can "cure," while to tell it another can injure.

Craft is never neutral. Craft is the cure or injury that can be done in our shared world when it isn't acknowledged that there are different ways that world is felt.

8.

Since craft is always about expectations, two questions to ask are: Whose expectations? and Who is free to break them?

Audre Lorde again: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

Lorde presents a difficult problem for people who understand that freedom is never general but always freedom *for someone*: how to free oneself from oppression while using the language of one's oppressors? This is a problem

Lorde perhaps never fully "solved." Maybe it has no solution, but it can't be dismissed. When we are first handed craft, we are handed the master's tools. We are told we must learn the rules before we can dismantle them. We build the master's house, and then we look to build houses of our own, but we are given no new tools. We must find them or we must work around the tools we have.

To wield craft is always to wield a tool that already exists. Author Trinh Minh-ha writes that even the expectation of "clarity" is an expectation of what is "correct" and/or "official" language. Clear to whom? Take round and flat characters. In *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, authors Chinweizu, Orwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike complain that African literature is unfairly criticized by Western critics as lacking round characters. E. M. Forster's original definition of roundness is "capable of surprising in a convincing way." Chinweizu et al. point out that this definition is clear evidence that roundness comes not from the author's words but from the audience's reading. One reader from one background might be convincingly surprised while another reader from another background might be unsurprised and/or unconvinced by the same character.

Whom are we writing for?

9.

Expectations belong to an audience. To use craft is to engage with an audience's bias. Like freedom, craft is always

craft for someone. Whose expectations does a writer prioritize? Craft says something about who deserves their story told. Who has agency and who does not. What is worthy of action and what description. Whose bodies are on display. Who changes and who stays the same. Who controls time. Whose world it is. Who holds meaning and who gives it.

Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark* that the craft of American fiction is to use Black people and images and culture as symbols, as tools. In other words, the craft of American fiction is the tool that names who the master is. To signify light as good, as we are taught to do from our first children's stories, is to signify darkness as bad—and in this country lightness and darkness will always be tied to a racialized history of which people are people and which people are tools. To engage in craft is always to engage in a hierarchy of symbolization (and to not recognize a hierarchy is to hide it). Who can use that hierarchy, those tools? Not I, says Morrison. And so she sets off to find other craft.

10.

In his book *The Art of the Novel*, Czech author Milan Kundera rejects psychological realism as the tradition of the European novel. He offers an alternate history that begins with *Don Quixote* and goes through Franz Kafka. He offers this history in order to make a claim about craft,

because he knows that craft must come from somewhere. Contrary to psychological realism's focus on individual agency, Kundera's alternate craft says that the main cause of action in a novel is the world's "naked" force.

Kundera wants to decenter internal causation (character-driven plot) and (re)center external causation (such as an earthquake or fascism or God). He insists that psychological realism is no "realer" than the bureaucratic world Kafka presents in which individuals have little or no agency and everything is a function of the system. (This is also a claim about how to read history.) Only our expectations of what realism is/should be make us classify one type of fiction (which by definition is not "real") as realer than another. Any novel, for Kundera, is about a possible way of "being in the world," and Kafka's bureaucracy came true in the Czech Republic in a way that individual agency did not.

Another advocate of Kafka's brand of "realism" is the author Julio Cortázar. Cortázar is usually considered a fabulist or magical realist. Yet in a series of lectures collected in *Literature Class*, he categorizes his own and other "fantastic" stories as simply more inclusive realities. He uses his story "The Island at Noon" as an example, in which a character dives into the ocean to save a drowning man, only to find that the man is himself. The story ends with a fisherman walking onto the beach we have just seen, alone "as always." The swimmer and the drowner were never there. Cortázar says this story represents a real

experience of time in which, like a daydream, it becomes impossible to tell what is real and what is not. Time, fate, magic—these are forces beyond human agency that to Cortázar allow literature to “make reality more real.”

In *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu et al. encourage African writers to remember African traditions of storytelling. They identify four conventions from a tradition of incorporating the fantastic into everyday life: (1) spirit beings have a non-human trait that gives them away, such as floating; (2) if a human visits the spiritland, it involves a dangerous border-crossing; (3) spirits have agency and can possess humans; and (4) spirits are not subject to human concepts of time and space.

Craft tells us how to see the world.

11.

The Iowa Writers' Workshop established craft's current focus on style and form, writes Eric Bennett, a focus which also conveniently

served four related agendas: (1) it overthrew the domination of totalitarian manipulation (if Soviet) or commercial manipulation (if American) by being irreducibly individualistic; (2) it facilitated the creation of an ideologically informed canon [of dead white men] on ostensibly apolitical grounds; (3) it provided a modernist means

to make literature feel transcendent for the ages [rather than tied to time and place]; and (4) it gave reading and writing a new semblance of difficulty, a pitch of rigor appropriate for the college or graduate school classroom.

In other words, it made literature easy to fundraise for, and easy to teach.

12.

We have come to teach plot as a string of causation in which the protagonist's desires move the action forward. The craft of fiction has come to adopt the terms of Freytag's triangle, which were meant to apply to drama, and of Aristotle's poetics, which were meant to apply to Greek tragedy. Exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, denouement. But to think of plot and story shape in this way is cultural and represents the dominance of a specific cultural tradition.

In contrast, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese stories have developed from a four-act, rather than a three- or five-act structure: in Japanese it is called *kishotenketsu* (ki: introduction; sho: development; ten: twist; ketsu: reconciliation). Western fiction can often be boiled down to A wants B and C gets in the way of it. I draw this shape for my students:



This kind of story shape is inherently conflict-based, perhaps also inherently male (as author Jane Alison puts it: "Something that swells and tautens until climax, then collapses? Bit masculo-sexual, no?"). In East Asian fiction, the twist (ten) is not confrontation but surprise, something that reconfigures what its audience thinks the story is "about." For example, a man puts up a flyer of a missing dog, he hands out flyers to everyone on the street, a woman appears and asks whether her dog has been found, they look for the dog together. The change in this kind of story is in the audience's understanding or attention rather than what happens. Like African storytellers, Asian storytellers are often criticized for what basically amounts to addressing a different audience's different expectations—Asian fiction gets labeled "undramatic" or "plotless" by Western critics.

The Greek tragedians were likewise criticized by Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle does not just put forward an early version of Western craft (one closely tied to his philosophical project of the individual) but also puts down many of his contemporaries, tragedians for whom action is driven by the interference of the gods (in the form of coincidence) rather than from a character's internal struggle. It is from Aristotle that Westerners get the cultural distaste for *deus ex machina*, which was more like the fashion of his time. Aristotle's dissent went forward as the norm.

13.

Craft, like the self, is made by culture and reflects culture, and can develop to resist and reshape culture if it is sufficiently examined and enough work is done to unmake expectations and replace them with new ones. (As Aristotle did by writing the first craft book.)

We are constantly telling stories—about who we are, about every person we see, hear, hear about—and when we don't know something, we fill in the gaps with parts of stories we've told or heard before. Stories are always only representations. To tell a story about a person based on her clothes, or the color of her skin, or the way she talks, or her body—is to subject her to a set of cultural expectations. In the same way, to tell a story based on a character-driven plot or a moment of epiphany or a three-act structure leading to a character's change is to subject story to cultural expectations. To wield craft morally is not to pretend that those expectations can be met innocently or artfully without ideology, but to engage with the problems ideology presents and creates.

In my research for this book, I found various authors (mostly foreign) asking how it is that we have forgotten that character is made up, that it isn't real or universal. Kundera points out that we have bought unreflexively into conventions that say (a) that a writer should give the maximum information about a character's looks and speech, (b) that backstory contains motivation, and (c) that writers

somehow do not have control over their characters. Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, in *The Naive and Sentimental Novelist*, complains that creative writing programs make it seem as if characters are autonomous beings who have their own voices, when in fact character is a "historical construct . . . we choose to believe in." To Pamuk, a character isn't even formed by an individual personality but by the particular situation and context the author needs her for. When it's all made up, he suggests, character is more nurture than nature. If fiction encourages a certain way that a character should be understood or read, then of course this way must influence and be influenced by the way we understand and read each other.

14.

To really engage with craft is to engage with how we know each other. Craft is inseparable from identity. Craft does not exist outside of society, outside of culture, outside of power. In the world we live in, and write in, craft must reckon with the implications of our expectations for what stories should be—with, as Lorde says, what our ideas really mean.

15.

Consider the example of the Chinese literary tradition, which we will get to later in the book. Western critics have generally called traditional Chinese fiction formless. Yet Chinese critic Zheng Zhenduo, who studies the

Chinese novel's historical trajectory, says one characteristic of Chinese fiction is that it is "water-tight," by which he means that it is structurally sound. They are describing the same fiction but different expectations.

While Western narrative comes from romantic and epic tradition, Chinese narrative comes from a tradition of gossip and street talk. Chinese fiction has always challenged historical record and accepted versions of "reality." Western storytelling developed from a tradition of oral performances meant to recount heroic deeds for an audience of the ruling class. Like Thomas King, author Ming Dong Gu, in his book *Chinese Theories of Fiction*, describes writing as something more like "transmission" than like "creation." More collective and less individual.

16.

Chinese American author Gish Jen claims in *Tiger Writing* that her fiction combines Western and Eastern craft. She makes a case for an Asian American storytelling that mixes the "independent" and "interdependent" self: the individual speaker vs. the collective speaker, internal agency vs. external agency.

The difficulty for Jen in her fiction was not in finding it a Western audience but in representing her Chinese values. As Jen writes, "existing schema are powerful." Growing up with American and European fiction, she struggled to represent her culture and self. The kind of agency a Western protagonist has was compelling to

her—she describes it almost as a seduction—being so different from her family life. *Tiger Writing* actually begins with Jen analyzing her father's memoir, which is mostly family history and only gets around to himself in the final third. The suggestion is that family history, the ancestral home, their immigration to America, is exactly what defines her father, rather than any individual characteristic. Jen compares the memoir to a Chinese teapot, which unlike an American teapot is worth much more used than new, prized for how many teas have already been made in it, so that the flavor of a new tea mixes with the flavors before it.

17.

"Know your audience" is craft. Language has meaning because it has meaning *for someone*. Meaning and audience do not exist without one another. A word spoken to no one, not even the self, has no meaning because it has no one to hear it. It has no purpose.

Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike employ the metaphor of an artist's sketch. Responding to Western critics who claim African fiction has too little description and weak characterization, they compare the relationship between craft and expectation to the relationship between a sketch and its evocation of a picture. "It perhaps needs to be stressed that the adequacy of a sketch depends upon its purpose, its context, and also upon what its beholders accept as normal or proper." In other words, "the writer's

primary audience" may find the sketch enough to evoke the picture even if the European audience cannot. It shouldn't be the writer's concern to satisfy an audience who is not hers.

African fiction is written for Africans—what is easier to understand than that? Not that other people can't read it, but, as Chinweizu et al. tell us, it might take "time and effort and a sloughing off of their racist superiority complexes and imperialist arrogance" to appreciate it.

When the *Thousand and One Nights* is translated into English, translators often cut stories. The *Nights* is a story about storytelling, full of framed narratives, stories within stories within stories. Like Chinese fiction, it is often accused of the opposite sins of African fiction—of having too many digressions and extraneous parts. Part of the necessity of abridgment is that the *Nights* is extremely long, and part is that different versions of the *Nights* include different groups of stories—it might be impossible to include every story or to know what a complete version of the *Nights* would even look like, as every telling is a retelling—but stories that get cut out as extraneous are never actually pointless. Author Ulrich Marzolph argues convincingly that repetition of similar stories and themes and motifs is not a failure of craft but "a highly effective narrative technique for linking new and unknown tales to a web of tradition the audience shares." Children learn the most from stories they already know.

Similar abridgments occur in translations of traditional Chinese fiction. Again, these are often cases of translators misrepresenting the audience. In Chinese fiction, repetitions and digressions like those in the *Nights* are called “Casual Touches” and are a sign of mastery. According to author Jianan Qian, it takes a very good writer to be able to add “seemingly unrelated details . . . here and there effortlessly to stretch and strengthen a story’s meanings.” What is considered “good writing” is a matter of who is reading it.

18.

There are many crafts, and one way the teaching of craft fails is to teach craft as if it is one.

19.

Author Jennifer Riddle Harding writes about what she calls “masked narrative” in African American fiction, in which Black authors wrote to two audiences at the same time: a white audience they needed in order to have a career and a Black audience who would be able to understand a second, “hidden” meaning through context clues that rely on cultural knowledge. As an example, Harding analyzes a story by Charles W. Chesnutt about a white-presenting woman who wants to know who her mother is, and a Black caretaker who allows the woman to think her mother was white—though a Black audience would realize that the caretaker is the actual mother.

Different expectations guide different readings. “The black story had to look like a white story,” writes the author Raymond Hedin, while also speaking to a Black audience via the same words.

In other words, the plot of external causation that Kundera would like to return to never disappeared; it was simply underground. In America, coincidence and fate have long been the domain of storytellers of color, for whom the “naked” force of the world is an everyday experience. In the tradition of African American fiction, for example, coincidence plots and reunion plots are normal. People of color often need coincidence in order to reunite with their kin.

20.

Adoptee stories also frequently feature coincidence and reunion. Maybe that is why I am drawn to external causation, to alternative traditions, to non-Western story shapes. Like Jen, I grew up with fiction that wasn’t written for me. My desire to write was probably a desire to give myself the agency I didn’t have in life. To give my desires the power of plot.

Cortázar calls plot, that string of causation, an inherent danger to the realistic story. “Reality is multiple and infinite,” he writes, and to organize it by cause and effect is to reduce it to a “slice.” Plot is always a departure from reality, a symbol of reality. But the power of stories is that we can mistake the symbolic for the real.

21.

In *Maps of the Imagination*, author Peter Turchi writes about invisible conventions such as organizing prose in paragraphs, capitalizing the first letter of a sentence, assuming that the fictional narrator is not the author. These conventions become visible when they are broken. To identify them (these are tools: whose tools are these?) is the first step toward making craft conscious. Craft that pretends it does not exist is the craft of conformity or, worse, complicity.

22.

Here is a convention up for debate, one in the process of becoming visible: in an essay on the pathetic fallacy, author Charles Baxter argues that setting in literary realist fiction should less often reflect the protagonist's inner state. Baxter has seen too much rain when the hero is sad, too many sad barns when the hero has lost a child (as in the famous John Gardner prompt). In reality, rain is not contingent on emotion and objects do not change their appearances to fit people's moods. (The Gardner prompt, to describe a barn from the perspective of a grieving father, is more about what a person in a certain mood would *notice*—but the point holds.) Baxter thinks realism should do more to resist story conventions and accurately represent reality.

Yet on screen, the pathetic fallacy seems widely accepted (especially if there is no voiceover to provide a character's thoughts), and student fiction seems more

and more influenced by film expectations than prose expectations.

For a few months, I read almost exclusively fiction by a trio of Japanese writers, Haruki Murakami, Yoko Ogawa, and Banana Yoshimoto. Each seems to offer a world that is very shaped by the interiority of the protagonist. In Murakami's work, it's a fair critique to complain that female characters seem to be who they are because the male protagonists want them to be so. In Yoshimoto's work, characters often seem created solely for their effect on the protagonist: a psychic gives the protagonist a crucial warning, or a dying character shows the protagonist how to live. In Ogawa's work, settings and even mathematical equations represent emotion. There are foils and mirrors and examples of how to act and how not to act and sexual fantasies and supernatural guides and exactly the right wrong partner. In truth, these worlds that seem half the protagonist's imagination give great pleasure. There is a kind of structural pleasure that comes from seeing the pathetic fallacy played out on a grand scale. It's not the pleasure of reality, but of what we sometimes *feel* reality to be, a way of being in the world.

23.

Why, when the protagonist faces the world, does she need to win, lose, or draw? This is a Western idea of conflict. (For more, see the later chapter on redefining conflict.) What if she understands herself as a part of that world,

that world as a part of herself? What if she simply continues to live?

24.

In *Tiger Writing*, Gish Jen cites a study in which whites and Asians are asked to identify how many separate events there are in a specific passage of text. Whites identify more events, because they see each individual action, such as “come back upstairs” and “take a shower,” which appear in the same sentence, as separate events—while Asians do not. Jen writes that the American novel tends to separate time into events and to see those events as progression, as development—a phenomenon she calls “episodic specificity.” At first, she believed herself to be culturally disadvantaged, as a writer, but then she found Kundera and his idea of the novel as existential rather than a vehicle for plot.

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” author Zora Neale Hurston identifies characteristics of African American storytelling, such as adornment, double descriptions, angularity and asymmetry, and dialect. All are things often edited out of workshop stories in the name of craft. Hurston identifies them in order to legitimize them. Craft is in the habit of making and maintaining taboos.

25.

The considerations here are not only aesthetic. To consider what forces have shaped what we think of as

psychological realism is to consider what forces have shaped what we think of as reality, and to consider what forces have shaped what we think of as pleasurable, as entertaining, as enlightening, in life.

Realism insists on one representation of what is real. Not only through what is narrated on the page, but through the shape that narration takes.

Craft is support for a certain worldview.

If it is true that drafts become more and more conscious, more and more based on decisions and less and less on “intuition,” then revision is where we can take heart. Revision is the craft through which a writer is able to say and shape who they are and what kind of world they live in. Revision must also be the revision of craft. To be a writer is to wield and to be wielded by culture. There is no story separate from that. To better understand one’s culture and audience is to better understand how to write.