

Disassembling Empire

University creative writing programs have proven to be a conservative force in literary culture, for reasons that probably could not have been avoided. Once these programs reached such a level of ubiquity that virtually all aspiring writers enrolled in writing workshops, the most ambitious pursuing an MFA degree as a matter of course (not to mention ultimately teaching in a creative program as well), it was almost inevitable that the collective “Program” would assume the task of regulating practice and enforcing norms among its graduates—who are overwhelmingly the authors of most published literary fiction, at least in the United States. Since most “little magazines”—whose numbers have proliferated at an astonishing rate over the past 20-years, particularly as these journals migrated online--exist primarily to provide a place of publication for Program writers (who need such publications to secure and maintain jobs among creative writing faculty), that “serious fiction” would reflect the assumptions of creative writing instruction should not be surprising.

It is not coincidental that from the time creative writing programs really began to expand in the 1960s and 70s to the present, the “cutting edge” in American fiction has shifted from the formally challenging work of postmodern writers such as Donald Barthelme or Gilbert Sorrentino to fiction featuring previously marginalized or unheard writers or characters, much of which tends to emphasize subject and content and is mostly conventional in form. An increasing aesthetic conservatism among students and instructors in creative writing programs cannot, of course, alone account for this movement from formal innovation toward a greater emphasis on theme. (Nor is this separation between manner and matter necessarily as stark as these

generalizations might imply: some postmodernists used formal or stylistic experimentation as the best way to evoke complex subjects, while many current writers are as attentive to form as to content.) However, to the extent that the university writing program increasingly became an instrument of professionalization, the preparation of students for a career in writing and writing instruction, it was destined to exert an increasingly conservative influence.

The varieties of this influence (and they are expressed in discrete ways that seem to go unnoticed because they so integrally inform creative writing practice) can be seen in three books conveniently published at about the same time in 2021: Matthew Salesses' *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, Lisa Zeidner's *Who Says?: Mastering Point of View in Fiction*, and George Saunders's *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*. These books reveal the by now fixed assumptions about both workshop practice and the aesthetics of fiction that have shaped the "disciplinarity" of academic creative writing, and are likely to determine its legacy in whatever future serious fiction might still have remaining—likely outside the academy, moved aside along with all the other humanities disciplines as the university ever more obediently submits to its political and economic overlords.

The most conservative of these books is Salesses' *Craft in the Real World*, even as it presents itself as something of a revolutionary manifesto. Salesses wants to transform the notion of "craft" to more properly suit the needs of a changed clientele (and a modernized faculty as well), but his effort merely replaces one set of critical precepts based on abstracted technique with another based on political and sociological doctrines derived from a generalized concept of cultural difference. If anything, the new rules Salesses lays down for the conduct of the writing workshop are even more rigid and uncompromising than the ones they are to replace: Under the old dispensation, the consequences for disobeying the rules are merely the disfavor of one's peers and the skepticism of the marketplace; under the dominion of the new, one is likely to be regarded as morally derelict and exiled to the land of lost souls—although, given the sort of strictures Salesses' revamped writing course would impose, it is no doubt the instructor who would be most subject to the sanctions in force.

Salesses wants to bring the writing workshop out of its fixation on mechanical details and a false claim to universality ("Pure Craft" is a Lie" proclaims the title of the first chapter) and instead make it face the concerns of the "real world." This is, of course, the world as understood

by the workshop's diverse and varied students. To adapt ourselves to this world will require a wholesale transformation of the concept of craft, since craft as we have known it until now "is part of the history of Western empire that goes back even to the Ancient Greek and Empires, upon which American democratic values are based." Salesses' ambitions thus are radical indeed, to help literature do its part in disassembling Empire by overturning the reign of "craft" as it has been regarded until now.

But has craft in the definition of the term Salesses wants to use, as an assemblage of well-known guidelines used by "Western" cultural gatekeepers to enforce an insular perspective on the nature of literary writing, actually held dominion over the course of Western literary history? To say that Salesses does not provide much in the way of evidence or illustration of this central assumption of his book would be a lenient way of putting it. Aristotle and E.M. Forster are really the only examples he cites (both on plot) of historical figures formulating or perpetuating the principles of craft, but of course neither of these men would have understood their comments to have anything to do with craft, even if we were to update them on how we currently use the term. We should in fairness likely assume that Salesses is knowingly simplifying, for rhetorical convenience, the relationship of such figures to what he is calling craft, but still it is difficult to imagine Aristotle believing that what he was doing in the *Poetics* was providing advice to writers about how to do their job.

If there are examples of establishing craft rules in Western literary history, most of them during most of this history would apply to poetry, but Salesses doesn't discuss poetry or the appropriate conduct of poetry workshops at all. Whether he would acknowledge that poetry does have certain canons of procedure that are more or less consistent across languages and traditions—canons that are necessary for the genre to exist in the first place—is thus uncertain, but it would seem to be a devaluation of fiction as a form to say that it does not call for the same sort of consideration of intended verbal effects as poetry, to deny that some essential features of prose narrative are recognizable to almost all humans. If Salesses is not resisting the salience of the traditional "elements of fiction"—the devices that allow for the full embodiment of narrative—but certain ritualized applications of those elements, almost their fetishization, the solution would seem to be to no longer apply them, to abandon the fetish.

But however much Salesses professes to want a *different* version of craft than the one putatively dominating creative writing workshops, he does not propose doing without craft as either an approach to the creative writing classroom or to the critical consideration of fiction in general. It is somewhat difficult to see why: Salesses objects to the way craft-talk excludes writers with a different understanding of fiction's purpose and possibilities that traditional craft does not accommodate, but such writers include not only those with non-Western cultural inheritances but many writers from within the Western cultural tradition who also find the imperatives of craft confining and alienating. Many of these writers deliberately avoid the institutional machinery of the academic creative writing Program (although some are just excluded), but even those holding out for the benefits of a creative writing degree might ask of this book and its author why exchanging one set of restrictions on the writer's creative judgment and imagination for another is necessarily an improvement.

Most of Salesses' directives, in fact, have little to do with "technical" matters encompassing style or form. They seem designed primarily to focus the writer's attention on *content*—more specifically, on the "world" to which the work points and away from the individualism of either character or author-as-artist. Thus, "whether positive or negative, fiction always says something about how we live, and not in an individual sense but a contextual one. When we write fiction, we write the world." And, "it's about time that individual agency stops dominating how we think about plot or even causality." This is because "being in the world is much more about dealing with effects than with causes." As a student himself, Salesses tells us, "story arc was always presented to me as something more like plot, something like how the character's situation changes or fails to change. . . It might be more useful to consider instead how the world is changed or fails to be changed." Since the purpose of Salesses' redefinition is clearly to minimize—if not eliminate—attention to the elements of fiction that highlight instrumentalized "method," it is at first unclear why Salesses retains such a term as "story arc" rather than just dispensing with it.

If what Salesses—and other like-minded critics of current literary education—really wants is a learning environment free of traditional craft conventions, which they believe unduly inhibits some students from fully realizing their artistic visions, he ought to declare that there are no rules the writer must learn to follow, that in fact as long as such rules continue to be assumed,

it should be entirely appropriate to break them. He should insist that the very notion of “craft” entails a conception of a unitary “art of fiction” that is bound to exclude any writer who resists the officially approved practices. What better way to ensure that the aesthetic preferences of all student writers be fairly considered than to simply relinquish the idea that to “learn” the art of fiction involves adopting the right assumptions and procedures, developing a suitable facility with whatever approach the currently established authority favors? Artificial distinctions between genres and modes, including the unhelpful distinction between “mainstream” and “experimental” fiction would collapse: all efforts to write a work of fiction would be experimental, attempts to sound out the possibilities of the form without conforming to any one conception of its proper mission.

Something tells me, however, that this is not what Salesses has in mind. Too much of the work would be left to the students to read widely and discover how other writers have redeemed these possibilities. The teacher could no doubt assist in this process of discovery, but that would require suppressing narrow beliefs about the function of literary art. While many creative writing teachers would certainly be able to accomplish such a task, it seems unlikely that Salesses, for one, with his stringent view of developing writers who “think critically about how they are working with and contributing to culture” would be prepared to discard this imperative. Salesses is too committed to the transformation of the fiction workshop into a reflection of the cultural multiplicity of “the real world” to give much attention to the critical multiplicity of fiction’s aesthetic projects.

The strength of Lisa Zeidner’s *Who Says?* is that she does attempt to account for such multiplicity, at least in the use of point of view. Zeidner covers each of the main types of point of view, differentiating in detail both third-person omniscient and the third-person limited (“central consciousness” or “free indirect”), as well as the issues that emerge in the use of first-person (reliable vs. unreliable, the rise of the self-conscious narrator, etc.). She also devotes space to the less common (although in some cases increasingly common) exercises in point of view (second-person, the communal “we,” “whiplashing” point of view), child as well as non-human narrators, and compares the effects of point of view in fiction and film.

Zeidner also has what is essentially a thesis about the importance of point of view: point of view is the most important consideration in fiction, involving “skillful manipulations in, and motivations of, your alliance with your characters,” manipulations that are “more central and crucial than plot.” She emphasizes the centrality of point of view in an initial chapter that examines the impression created by first lines and paragraphs: “My argument is that point of view in good fiction is embedded in every choice about tone, description, and diction, even about plot and pacing, and furthermore it has to be established very quickly.” One could disagree with Zeidner about the foundational status of point of view in prose fiction (as I do: surely style, the particular way language is ordered for effect, is even more primary) while still acknowledging that Zeidner has identified and explicated more comprehensively an element of the art of fiction that is often treated more cursorily than it deserves.

Who Says? ranges widely in its choice of sample texts, especially across genres and modes. The author clearly also makes the effort to reach across “cultures” in Salesses’ sense of the term (Susan Choi, Percival Everett, Junot Diaz, among others). Point of view is an aspect of craft that Salesses actually does not much discuss at all, and it is hard to know whether it is simply an element of fiction he takes for granted without submitting it to a critique of its real-world relevance, or whether as a purely “technical” issue, it is inherently too far removed from the “real” world to which Salesses wants fiction to be faithful that it simply evades the reach of his critique. If point of view is as crucial to the way fiction works as Zeidner would have it, however, Salesses’ notion that craft in its traditional guise is wholly irrelevant (even destructive) to the present and future direction of both fiction and creative writing instruction is altogether unfounded. The sorts of choices confronting the writer of fiction in achieving the most artful effects that Zeidner surveys in fact seem the craftiest of craft decisions.

Still, because of the relatively comprehensive treatment Zeidner provides, *Who Says?* would be the sort of book that might be used with students in presenting them a wide spectrum of possibilities relevant not just to point of view but to the creation of effects in fiction that in general expand the writer’s (and ultimately the reader’s) focus of attention beyond plot and character (while also obviously contributing to both). Zeidner does not take any strong position on the advisability of venturing a particular effect, although she does point out how some point of view choices work better than others for producing some particular effects, and thus the book

does indeed offer young or inexperienced writers an abundant selection of approaches to point of view for inspiration or emulation. However, this very impression of a kind of exhaustive sampling may actually encourage such writers not so much to perform their own variations on these models but to imitate them. This is surely not Zeidner's intention, but may in fact accentuate an inherent limitation to the efficacy of academic creative writing instruction.

The widespread establishment of creative writing as an academic field of "study" (by its nature creative writing is really closer to a professional program than a true academic mode of inquiry) quickly enough, if predictably, developed its own hierarchy of programs (perhaps with the Iowa workshop at the top), and from there a relative uniformity of practice—eventually the instructors were usually themselves the products of creative writing programs. In such a setup, it would be surprising if the long-term effect was not a substantial degree of conformity among those making their way through this system. Such conformity would indeed arise at the level of craft, since craft is something that presumably can be taught. Under the circumstances, "craft" acquires preeminent importance—so important that a writer like Matthew Salesses sees control of its operating assumptions as a compelling source of cultural power, "rethinking" its definition akin to an act of political revolution. But the successful transformation of the creative writing program in the manner Salesses envisions will change only the terms of compliance with the norms of the Program, not the reality.

Outside of its possible use in a creative writing course, Lisa Zeidner's book on point of view certainly provides interested readers with a breadth of coverage of the various options available to the writer of fiction when thinking about the enactment of point of view, but it is not really a book that probes very deeply into the potential transmutations of point of view that can make it a source of literary innovation and originality. You can gain a great deal of valuable insight about the application of point of view to the overall configuration of works of fiction from *Who Says?*, but not about how a writer can disregard the standard approaches taken by the preponderance of professional writers and discover a less-travelled path to follow.

George Saunders's *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* is essentially a craft book, pursuing "craft" more or less in the apolitical inherited understanding of the term Matthew Salesses wants to disown. But Saunders approaches teaching the principles of good writing from an unorthodox

angle, offering a course (this book is a version of it) that looks closely at a few stories by the 19th century Russian masters of the short story—Chekhov, Turgenev, Gogol, Tolstoy. Saunders moves methodically through each story, querying students about how the stories seem to be working on them. Saunders in the book often summarizes their responses, but he is more likely simply to move right to his own explication—done in an affable, humorous tone that perhaps readers expect from him. The overall impression created by Saunders’s leisurely walk through these stories is not of a teacher giving instruction but an enthusiastic reader drawing on his own experience as a writer to help us appreciate the stories’ effects.

The biggest drawback to Saunders’s admittedly engaging pedagogical strategy, at least in its implications for understanding the art of fiction, is of course that for English speakers these works are in another language. Certainly much can be learned about the structural order of fiction from the likes of Chekhov and Gogol, but inevitably the linguistic subtleties of their work remains inaccessible to those who read it only in translation, and such intricacies of structure and style is important not only in recognizing the full artistry of these Russian writers but in appreciating that form at its most fundamental level is realized through style—the writer’s particular way of shaping language. Of course, even Russian readers cannot finally learn to write “like” Chekhov or Tolstoy, but the broader sensitivity to the reverberations of language a writer’s style can provide seems like something a serious writer would want to cultivate.

The strengths and weaknesses of *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* are well-displayed in the book’s first two chapters, on Chekhov’s “In the Cart” and Turgenev’s “The Singers.” The chapter on “In the Cart” is the most systematic demonstration of Saunders’s approach to teaching the Russian writers, as he moves page by page through the story, contemplating Chekhov’s technique and speculating about the effects he seems to be after. Saunders also uses the story to draw conclusions about the nature of stories and the writer’s objectives:

We might think of a story this way: the reader is sitting in the sidecar of a motorcycle the writer is driving. In a well-told story, reader and writer are so close together that they’re one unit. My job as the writer is to keep the distance between motorcycle and sidecar small, so that when I go right, you go right. When I, at the end of the story, take the motorcycle off the cliff, you have no choice but to follow. . . .

Although Saunders is absolutely correct, here and throughout the book, to emphasize the importance of the reader's experience of a work of fiction, the implication in this motorcycle conceit is that such experience is most intensively directed to *plot*, an assumption that is sustained throughout the analysis of "In the Cart," at least insofar as the focus of attention remains on *what happens*. Indeed, "what happens" is very consequential in Chekhov, since our grasp of character must depend on our alert apprehension of what they say and do, usually in ordinary moments, but a consideration of what a Chekhov story has to offer an aspiring writer might also stress the way Chekhov is able to build such resonance into stories that are so minimalist in both structure and tone. This is something that happens beneath or around the narrated events themselves, not in the story as such.

Saunders's method works somewhat better in the examination of "The Singers," since this is a story in which what happens is clearly the focal point—although the reader may be more preoccupied by the story's lack of action (aside from the singing contest to which the narrator's account leads and the narrator's approach to and exit from the scene he describes, what happens is almost literally nothing) than by contemplating the narrative. But in this case Saunders's effort to understand the singing contest and its ramifications prompts him to compel our attention on the details of the contest (on the details in general), in turn making the story's aftermath take on increased importance. Saunders ultimately affirms Turgenev's emphasis on description rather than narrative, characterizing it as Turgenev's disinclination to accommodate contemporaneous notions of "craft" emphasizing plot. (Noting here that description is a compositional mode about which Matthew Salesses again has very little to say.) He might have gone farther, in the discussions of both Turgenev and Chekhov, and reminded us that each of these writers is considered an important figure in the development of literary realism, which in its classic form is meant to expel all conceptions of craft, leaving only life.

But, as Saunders observes at the beginning of the chapter on Gogol, close reading of stories such as "In the Cart" and "The Singers" shows these ostensibly realistic stories to be "compressed and exaggerated, with crazy levels of selection and omission and shaping going on in them." If in Turgenev and Chekhov these distortions are in the service of a greater fidelity to the "feel" or ordinary life, in Gogol's "The Nose" the distortion isn't hidden in "selection and omission" but is a blatant artifice the reader can't miss. Saunders is perhaps at his best in this

book in the analysis of “The Nose,” but this isn’t really surprising, since Saunders as a writer of fiction is closer in spirit to the representational breaches in Gogol than the other writers examined in this book. Saunders maintains that a story such as “The Nose” should not be regarded as absurdism or fantasy, but as a work that depicts “the process of rationality fraying under duress” in a way that reveals a more essential reality going beyond “the way things seem to how they really are,” no doubt similar, Saunders would say, to the way his own fiction incorporates the surreal and absurd.

In this chapter on “The Nose,” Saunders does address the limitations of reading a writer like Gogol in translation, since in particular much of the humor in the story lies in Gogol’s use of the Russian language. But he does perhaps get as close to Gogol’s Russian prose as we are likely to get by focusing on Gogol’s invocation of the “skaz” mode of narration—featuring an unreliable narrator speaking in something closer to an oral than a written idiom—and by emphasizing Gogol’s creation of voice. The instability of the voice (half formal, half awkwardly demotic), Saunders argues, points us to an instability in the human use of language:

Language, like algebra, usefully only operates within certain limits. It’s a tool for making representations of the world, which, unfortunately, we then go on to mistake for the world. Gogol is not making a ridiculous world; he’s showing us that we ourselves make a ridiculous world in every instant, by our thinking.

This is surely a valuable lesson about the writer’s medium for the apprentice writer to learn, and if in his course Saunders offers the kind of thorough analysis found in this book, students must indeed emerge from it more enlightened about craft as employed by these great Russian writers. A course such as the one Saunders teaches seems to me, at least, a better way of emphasizing “craft” than the entrenched workshop method. That it would not pass muster with Matthew Salesses seems like the most severe judgment on the merits of his “rethinking” of the principles of fiction and the teaching of writing.