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Rethinking Length and Form in Fiction: Workshopping Short Stories, Novels, Novellas, Flash, and Hybrid

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There is an appealing simplicity to the idea that to write fiction well, you must first learn to write a short story. Easier to write fifteen pages than 300, especially if the student is learning the elements that will allow her to succeed. Easier for the instructor to critique fifteen pages than 300. I won't argue against this logic. If a student wants to write short stories because she loves short stories, or if a student wants to learn how to write a short story before moving to a novel, then a fiction workshop is an ideal place for the student to improve her craft.

Indeed, if I had a steady stream of undergraduate and graduate students who revered short stories and wanted nothing more than to write their own, then I would not have written this essay. In twenty years teaching creative writing at the college level, something closer to the opposite has been true. Few of my students regularly read short stories on their own, and few prefer to write them. My students read and want to write other kinds of fiction: not only novels but also novellas, flash, and hybrid.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Virginia in the late 1990s, the “Kmart realism” of writers such as Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, and Bobbie Ann Mason was in vogue. Raymond Carver impersonations were widespread. In a 1995 essay in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Miriam Marty Clark wrote that these short stories “represent the colonization of private life by consumer capitalism” (150). This was the thinking that informed my early writing and—by extension—early teaching. I filled my first syllabi with writers I'd read as an undergraduate, writers sensitive to consumerism and class, which resonated with me as a first-generation student at an affluent public university. Many of my undergraduates now are first-generation students, and I assign short stories with characters who hold the factory and service jobs that so many of the students and their family members work.

I don't teach as many of these writers as I used to, however. I am conscious of other kinds of representation—few of the characters I read as an undergraduate were people of color, for instance, or people with disabilities—and I am conscious of how little of the fiction that my students read and write is grounded in literary realism. They are more likely to read and write fantasy or science fiction. They are as likely to reference television or film as short stories or novels. Video games inspire many of my students' sense of narrative.

Making the short story the default, if not only, form permitted in fiction workshops limits the writing that students submit but it does something more significant: it narrows students' sense of what writing can be. In confining discussion to short stories, instructors risk discouraging, alienating, or even losing students who might be more familiar with and interested in other forms.

The primacy of the short story is just one of many assumptions that have been ignored in workshops. Two books published to considerable attention in 2021, Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How To Decolonize the Creative Classroom* and Matthew Salesses's *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, examine how workshops have historically centered whiteness. I hope this essay can complement the work that Chavez and Salesses have done in 1) questioning fundamental assumptions of workshops and 2) offering more inclusive models.

Before moving forward, I would like to note an important difference between a workshop inclusive of form and a workshop inclusive of identity. A workshop that doesn't allow students to submit novel excerpts limits—unnecessarily, I will argue—what will be discussed, but it doesn't limit *who* can participate. The aspiring novelist in a short story workshop can still benefit from studying technical elements, such as dialogue and voice. By contrast, a workshop that marginalizes writers on the basis of identity precludes certain writers from truly participating independent of the form(s) they pursue. Building and maintaining workshops inclusive of identity should be a priority for all instructors, regardless of what they workshop.

The earliest creative writing programs were disproportionately attended and staffed by white cisgender men who disproportionately read the fiction of other white cisgender men, but workshops today are more diverse in student and faculty populations, and it's not difficult to fill syllabi with short stories that present difference in race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Although I will argue against the primacy of the short story in workshops, I will not argue against the short story.

No single list can capture the breadth of the contemporary short story, but a look at recent winners of the Story Prize, a book prize awarded by independent judges to the year's best short story collection, offers a microcosm of the vitality of the form. Deesha Philyaw won the 2020 prize for *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, which centers Black and queer women. Edwidge Danticat

won the first prize in 2004 for *The Dew Breaker* and the 2019 prize for *Everything Inside*; each book moves between Haiti, where Danticat was born, and Florida, where she later lived. Other winners include the Irish writer Patrick O’Keeffe (*The Hill Road* 2005), the Pakistani-American writer Daniyal Mueenuddin (*In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* 2009), and the American writer Jim Shepard (*Like You’d Understand, Anyway* 2007), whose short stories explore the “Chernobyl nuclear meltdown and it’s (sic) aftermath, a Roman outpost in hostile Britannia, a Nazi expedition in Tibet, a Texas hotbed of high school football, a female cosmonaut preparing for a Sputnik launch, and the executioner’s scaffold in revolutionary France” (“The Story Prize”).

Before presenting alternatives to workshops that privilege the short story, let me first praise the short story.

Because the short story can be read in a single sitting, there is a congruity to the form absent from longer forms. The various aspects of the short story work together and at once. Nothing is extraneous or forgotten. (I’m referring to unusually good short stories; any number of things are extraneous or forgotten in less successful examples.) Rust Hills stated in *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* (1977) that the “successful contemporary short story will demonstrate a more harmonious relationship of all its aspects than will any other literary art form, excepting perhaps lyric poetry” (1) and that “there is a degree of unity in a well-wrought story... that isn’t necessarily found in a good novel, that isn’t perhaps even desirable in a novel” (3). In *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life* (2021), George Saunders presented a similar case, noting that the “story form makes a de facto case for efficiency. Its limited length suggests that all of its parts must be there for a purpose. We assume that everything, down to the level of punctuation, is intended by the writer” (327).

The shortness of the short story makes it well-suited for workshops. At the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO), where I teach in the Writer’s Workshop and direct the low-residency MFA in Writing, undergraduate fiction studios meet once a week, and I workshop two or three students per session. During graduate residencies, faculty dedicate an hour-long workshop per student. Unlike novel or novella excerpts, short stories generally conform to Aristotle’s notion in *Poetics* of a whole as “that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end”:

A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. (14)

I'm sympathetic to the idea that students need to write—and fail at writing well—short stories before attempting a novel or novella. Short stories present a laboratory where students can test different attempts at point of view, tense, tone, etc. before applying them to longer forms. Because flash compresses the elements of the short story, it may help to write 5,000-word short stories before writing 500-word stories. Similarly, it may help to learn traditional forms before moving to experimental or hybrid forms. I will address all of these concerns later in this essay.

I also want to praise the short story because of how meaningful it has been to me as a reader. Alice Munro's short stories reconfigured the way I think about memory. Yiyun Li's short stories widened my understanding of grief and loss. In the short stories of Anton Chekhov, as translated from Russian by Constance Garnett and then Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, I recognized my own thoughts in spite of differences in language, culture, geography, and time. I still remember reading Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948) as a freshman in high school and thinking to myself: you can do this? It was a wonderful question to ask.

I assign short stories in my classes because I believe that students can learn a lot from them. I hope that short stories will move students as I have been moved, and I hope that short stories will move students in ways personal to them. I don't only assign short stories, though, and I don't require that students write them. I will dedicate the rest of this essay to answering the following question: how can a fiction workshop accommodate various lengths and forms? Because the short story historically has been the dominant form in fiction workshops, I will begin there before addressing the novella and novel, which is the form my students most often want to write. I will dedicate one section to flash and another section to hybrid. I will conclude by arguing why fiction workshops need to make space for different lengths and forms.

1. WORKSHOPPING SHORT STORIES

Almost all fiction workshops I've attended going back to my first workshop as an undergraduate have looked something like this: a student submits a short story, typically ten to twenty double-spaced pages in length; the other students in the class are given time to read the short story in advance, make line edits, and write the author an editorial letter about what's working and what the author might consider revising; once a workshop begins, the author remains silent with perhaps two exceptions: the author may read a short excerpt at the beginning, and the author may ask questions at the end; sometimes students address the author while her short story is being workshopped, but often the class acts as though she isn't in the room; the emphasis is on the text and not the author's intentions; although the instructor moderates the discussion, her voice is one of many in the room, and everyone is expected to contribute.

As a ritual, the workshop is formal and designed to be repeated. Indeed, someone who begins taking workshops as an undergraduate—if not earlier—before moving to an MFA or PhD and then writing groups or writing conferences or a career teaching writing can expect to participate in hundreds, even thousands, of workshops with meaningful variation only in the people in the room and the work being discussed. Given the ubiquity of this model, it's surprising not that it's being questioned but that it has survived for so long.

I won't argue that this model needs to be detonated. On the contrary, I admire many of the traditions within it and suspect that it has endured, in part, because it serves a wide range of artistic aims, even if it was designed more narrowly. I will argue that instructors and program directors need to rethink certain practices and that these practices require more than a touching up; in communicating the types of writing that students are permitted to submit, classes and programs communicate what they do and don't value.

One of the earliest indicators of values is the course syllabus. Frequently, this document is posted online before the semester starts. Students nervous about generating new work or, alternatively, eager to have as much work critiqued as possible may look to the syllabus to see what they're allowed to submit.

Although I believe that workshops need to be flexible with length and form, I don't believe that students ought to be able to submit any number of pages for the simple reason that it's unfair to other students, who have various academic, work, and family responsibilities. Workshops don't occur in vacuums, and students attend class between other classes, jobs, childcare pick-ups, etc. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the boundaries separating these responsibilities have blurred, if not collapsed, as any participant of a workshop on videoconference knows. (One time my students complained of a thin whistling noise in their audio before I realized it was my wife making tea; several times my daughter absently wandered onto my screen—these are benign examples compared to students sharing computers or participating from mobile phones or sitting in parking lots, where students can access Wi-Fi.) Nor would it be practical to discuss, for example, an 800-page novel in an hourlong workshop. It may have been done, but I doubt it can be done well. I specify an upper-page limit on the syllabus and encourage students to talk with me if they want to exceed that limit. If the limit for a workshop is twenty pages and a student wants to submit twenty-three pages, then I likely grant an exception. If a student wants to submit fifty pages, then I help her determine how to submit fewer pages.

In undergraduate workshops, I give students a week to read each short story, and I clarify on the syllabus what I expect in terms of line edits and editorial letters. The guiding principle is something like the Golden Rule: critique students' fiction as you would want your own fiction

critiqued. Critiques include both written feedback and in-class participation. In *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, Chavez addressed the importance of accountability:

Your workshop participants of color don't need you to soften your policies for them. Just the opposite. Try demanding more of them: Show up, on time, every time. Well-meaning colleagues have criticized my mandatory attendance policy as unnecessarily harsh and unrealistic. But a lesson I want to impress upon my workshop participants is that life is a series of conspiracies to keep us from exercising voice. To be a writer is to choose to write, to show up every day and do the work. There's always an excuse not to. (48)

My workshops begin with the author's reading from her work, as I want students to hear the short story in the author's own voice before we begin critiquing her work. Once the author finishes reading, she remains silent until the end when she's invited to ask questions. Before students comment on the short story, I ask one student to provide a flyover or brief summary of the piece. This both reminds the class of the material and allows the author to hear her work as one reader understood it.

There are various alternatives to the workshop model where the author remains silent while her fiction is workshopped. One well-known model is Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, which begins with participants stating what was "meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work." My workshops proceed similarly but diverge with Lerman's next step: "The artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist's questions." Although this process resembles the end of my workshops, the re-ordering is significant. In Lerman's model, the artist—and not the responders—dictates what is and isn't discussed. Her final steps are as follows:

Step 3. Neutral Questions

Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them...

Step 4. Opinion Time

Responders state opinions, given permission from the artist; the artist has the option to say no. (Lerman)

It's not difficult to see the benefits of putting the writer in an active role, dictating what to discuss in her short story, rather than a passive role, where she listens to whatever workshop participants wish to discuss. As an instructor, I regularly steer conversation away from tangents that have more to do with the participant speaking than the short story. As a student, I remember cringing as participants debated what I perceived to be a basic misreading of the text. Whether this was a result of their

inattention or my inexpert prose or a combination of the two didn't matter; I felt as though my time and the time of my peers had been used poorly. Why couldn't I simply tell everyone what I meant?

When I asked this question to Frank Conroy, who directed the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1987 to 2005, he told me that when your book is published, you don't get to put your arm around the reader's shoulder and explain what you wanted to say. The expectation was that I would publish a book and that it would have readers: the book would have to speak for itself, and workshop was preparation for that time. Conroy was an imposing figure, tough on short stories and sparing with praise, but I believed that he believed in his students, all of whom he'd admitted to the program.

Each instructor has her own pedagogical approach, and I'm not as severe with students' fiction as Conroy was with mine. His high standards for the short story have stayed with me, however, as has the confidence he showed in me as a writer. I want students to think of themselves as writers. That may seem self-evident, but many of my students—even graduate students—confess that they don't. When we meet to conference, they sometimes cite imposter syndrome. Convincing students to think of themselves as writers starts with taking their writing seriously. Although I limit how much I speak, I am an active facilitator throughout workshop: inviting participants to comment on other participants' observations, encouraging disagreement, and insisting that everyone stay focused on the writing during discussion. If I model these practices early and consistently, then students are more or less able to run workshops themselves by the end of the semester.

It might be uncomfortable to hear workshop participants read your work differently from how you intended it, but in a workshop where everyone is expected to read the work closely, participants are adept at diagnosing places where the short story could be improved. I tell students that workshops are good at figuring out *what* needs to be revised, though it's typically up to the writer to determine *how* to revise it. I find that writers are frequently unaware of major shortcomings in their own writing. Workshops allow authors to see things that they otherwise would have missed, but this is harder to achieve when the author is setting the terms for discussion. An author focused on character development, for example, may miss a structural shortcoming that undermines the entire piece. In my first workshops as a graduate student, I was so preoccupied with technical proficiency—with, in retrospect, proving myself—that I repeatedly overlooked flaws in point of view that participants noted en masse. The consistency of their feedback convinced me that I'd missed something fundamental.

As an instructor, I point repeatedly to the mystery of writing. I expect writers to have a comprehensive understanding of neither what they wrote nor how they wrote it. Lan Samantha Chang, Conroy's successor as Program Director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, captured this mystery powerfully in a 2017 essay for *Lit Hub*:

We make art about what we cannot understand through any other method. The finished product is like a pearl, complete and beautiful, but mute about itself. The writer has given us this piece of his interior and there is frequently no explanation, nothing to be said about it. Often, the writer himself has very little idea of what he has created.

Workshops where the author curates what's discussed foreclose the possibility that readers have noticed in the short story weaknesses as important as the ones the author has identified herself. Once a short story is published, readers co-create the work. There is no meaning for the reader until she makes meaning herself. Workshops where the author remains silent honor this co-creation with the crucial difference that the author has the ability to revise the short story, based on readers' feedback.

The tradition of acting as though the author isn't in the room has always struck me as contrived. I've workshopped short stories where the author wasn't in the room—because, for instance, she was unexpectedly absent—and these workshops have both been useful for the participants and unambiguously different from workshops where the author was there. Even if an author isn't named, her physical presence affects how people speak, and I see no reason to ignore this. I address the author by name and encourage participants to do the same (e.g. I'm interested in Luna's use of backstory and wonder if they might include a scene where the mother challenges the father through dialogue). As mentioned previously, I leave time at the end of workshop for the author to ask questions. I insist that this not be a time for the author to explain her intentions or quibble with readers' interpretations, though conversations like this may occur organically after class without the instructor's moderation. I see these informal sessions as a natural complement to the formal ritual of the workshop.

2. WORKSHOPPING NOVELS AND NOVELLAS

If you've participated in the workshop of a novel or novella, then there's a good chance that discussion turned at one point to what *wasn't* being workshopped. For readers raised on Aristotle—even if they never read *Poetics* themselves—fiction without a beginning, middle, and an end is necessarily incomplete. Instructors are wise to acknowledge this mindset, and I will offer in this section a model for workshopping novels and novellas in a workshop designed for short stories.

First, instructors have to do what many instructors are loath to do: admit that not all students—perhaps not even most students—want to write short stories. Although students, eager to please their instructor or conform to the class's expectations, will dutifully submit short stories, this fiction might not reflect what students actually want to write.

I am suspicious of any pedagogy that doesn't take into consideration what students hope to learn. That the fiction workshop has privileged short stories since its infancy does not mean that it can't adapt to other lengths and forms now.

One might wonder why a program can't offer different workshops for different forms: one for the short story, one for the novel, one for flash, etc. Large programs may be able to offer these courses, but most programs don't have the luxury (or desire) to do so. As such, I will present a semester-long workshop open to various lengths and forms. I will take as my starting point the workshop format described in the preceding section. Fiction students—especially students pursuing a degree in creative writing—will likely be familiar with a version of this format, even if the one I outlined differs in certain areas. For instructors willing to reimagine the fiction workshop, there are advantages to a space that welcomes forms beyond the short story while still leaving room for the short story, which has proven its suitability for the space.

When instructors accommodate novel or novella excerpts, they frequently emphasize stand-alone excerpts, the sort of fiction that could pass as a short story. Before Jennifer Egan published the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), several excerpts appeared in *The New Yorker*: “Found Objects” (2007), “Safari” (2010), “Ask Me if I Care” (2010). While stand-alone excerpts are an appealing option, not all novel or novella excerpts lend themselves naturally to this format. Given the publishing industry's appetite for novels as opposed to short story collections, well-meaning instructors risk giving students bad advice in the interest of preserving existing workshop models.

Novel excerpts and short stories aren't interchangeable. Although the former can resemble the latter, especially out of context, a writer who divides her novel into pieces that look like short stories may find that she's writing and revising the novel in a manner that's more damaging than helpful. If a short story is a mile, then a novel is—forgive the metaphor—a marathon. A runner's mile splits might vary over the course of twenty-six miles, but at no point does a runner confuse the marathon for a mile.

Pace is a clear place to highlight difference, but characterization works similarly. Think of how gradually Leo Tolstoy introduced the reader to Anna Karenina over the course of the novel. Compare her to Ivan Ilych in Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). Compare him to Vasili in Tolstoy's short story “Master and Man” (1895). In all three narratives, the protagonist dies in the ending: same outcome, different processes. Of the three, I would be most apprehensive workshoping *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. *Anna Karenina* (1878) contains sections that read like stand-alone pieces, but where would Tolstoy begin or end *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* other than where it begins and ends?

More recent case studies can be found in the fiction of Mary Gaitskill and Lauren Groff, each of whom has published short stories, novellas, and novels in the last few decades. Gaitskill and Groff work differently in each form, even if the forms resemble each other in style and/or content. It's hard to imagine “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” (1997) as a novel or *Fates and Furies* (2015) as a short story; the ending of the former would be muted if it came after hundreds of pages, and the latter could not be compressed into twenty pages without losing a great deal. It may seem as though I'm presenting a

straw man—who, after all, claims that short stories are the same as novels?—but when instructors ask students to translate novels and novellas into short story form, instructors privilege the length of the short story, including the way elements such as pace and characterization are executed in that form as opposed to other forms.

I give students who want to workshop novels or novellas two options: 1) Submit a novel or novella excerpt as a stand-alone piece that’s workshopped on its own terms (à la Egan’s “Safari”), or 2) Submit a novel or novella excerpt with a one-page synopsis. In *The Business of Being a Writer* (2018), Jane Friedman wrote that the synopsis has to accomplish the following three things:

First, you need to tell us what characters we’ll care about, including the protagonist, and convey their story. Generally you’ll write the synopsis with your protagonist as the focus, and show what’s at stake for them.

Second, we need a clear idea of the core conflict for the protagonist, what’s driving that conflict, and how the protagonist succeeds or fails in dealing with it.

Finally, we need to understand how the conflict is resolved and how the protagonist’s situation, both internally and externally, has changed. (115)

Friedman’s audience for the synopsis isn’t workshop participants but editors, and her understanding of a novel’s shape is conventional: a protagonist with a conflict and a conflict that’s resolved, revealing a change in the protagonist. Writers attempting something more experimental or writers who don’t know what shape their novel will take may resist this document.

But resistance might be the norm for the synopsis, which possesses none of the glory of the novel. Indeed, Friedman suggested that the synopsis “may be the single most despised document that novelists—and some narrative nonfiction writers—are asked to prepare” (114). Accordingly, I’m not fussy about what the synopsis looks like. I find that taking the time to outline a novel or novella is useful for the writer, no matter how frustrating the process, and that readers are grateful to have a guide, no matter how imperfect. Writers and readers recognize that manuscripts change in the writing and that no synopsis is fixed. The goal isn’t to provide a crystal ball. The goal is to situate the novel or novella excerpt in a larger framework. Absent this framework, workshops can become rudderless with participants deferential to what the writer may do or may have done already.

Then there is the question of whether graduate students, let alone undergraduate students, should workshop novels or novellas in the first place. It’s a question worth considering, as the stakes are high: a short story is likely to take weeks or months to write, but a novel is likely to take years.

Isn't it deleterious to a writer's development to commit herself to a long project before she's sure of what she wants to say and how she wants to say it?

Maybe. I wouldn't direct an ambivalent student toward the novel; I would encourage that student to work with a short form instead before committing herself to a long one. The experience of writing several short stories and revising some, though not all, of the short stories is good practice for a beginning fiction writer. But many students arrive to workshop having already done some of this work. Students who grew up with social media and/or online forums have practiced writing for an audience and receiving feedback in the form of comments or even likes. These students often have a sophisticated sense of what they want to say and how they want to say it. Sometimes I have undergraduates who have already written and shared novels. That these students have worked on their craft and sought peer review outside of an academic setting is something to celebrate, not ignore.

Some students arrive to the UNO MFA in Writing having already published books. Telling these students—who, as a rule, are pursuing the low-residency program in addition to managing their careers and/or families—that they have to write short stories because the workshop model is built for short stories would be absurd. Workshops should support students, not the other way around.

When I work with both undergraduate and graduate students, I'm frank about the risks of writing a novel. Most people don't publish the first novel they write. Students may have to write a novel or several novels before they achieve a finished product that interests readers, let alone agents or editors. Although the risks of writing a novel are high, the rewards are also high. The majority of agents and editors are looking for novels, not short stories. If students want to write novels, and the literary marketplace wants to read novels, then program directors should consider how their workshops encourage these desires rather than squash them.

In "Creativity and the Marketplace," a chapter of *The Creativity Market: Creative Writing in the 21st Century* (2012), Jen Webb called for a pedagogical approach that

allows teachers, students and graduates a space in which to consider what we do when we make creative work as professionals, and what we do when we employ the processes of creative thinking and practice to generate objects of benefit to ourselves as practitioners (the private sector) and to society more broadly (the public sector). (50)

In Webb's view, "creative objects, in general, and novels, in particular, can create public spaces – spaces for conversation, discussion, argument, reflection and exchange" (50).

Some creative writing programs discourage discussion of publication, preferring to focus exclusively on the artistic merits of the work. But if publication is a goal for the workshop—and it is for many upper-level undergraduate and graduate students—then it's appropriate to explore

submitting to independent and university presses, as well as contests. Depending on the size of the class, workshopping query letters to agents and/or novel synopses may prove a valuable use of class time, though I wait until students have first had their fiction workshopped.

If it seems as though I've discussed novels more than novellas, that's because I've found that students are much more interested in novels. Although university presses such as Miami University Press and Texas Review Press award annual novella prizes, the market for the novella is considerably smaller than the market for the novel. As a graduate student, I took a novella workshop with Ethan Canin, who by that point had published short stories, novels, and—most unusual to me—four novellas in *The Palace Thief* (1994), one of which was adapted into the 2002 film *The Emperor's Club*. Canin's workshop had a simple structure that graduate—and perhaps undergraduate—workshops can replicate if class sizes are small enough: one novella per week. In a sixteen-week semester with fifteen students, this means a lot of reading but not too much, provided novellas are limited to a certain length (e.g. 30,000 words). These workshops may demand more vigilant facilitation from the instructor than workshops of short stories or novel/novella excerpts, lest students discuss only a portion of the pages submitted.

3. WORKSHOPPING FLASH

The brevity of flash makes it, in certain regards, ideal for fiction workshops. For many students, especially beginning students, the length of flash feels less daunting. For courses with large class sizes and/or limited time, including workshops outside of colleges and universities, flash allows instructors to workshop more students in fewer sessions.

Instructors should clarify both length and number in advance. Flash is commonly considered to have fewer than 750 or 1,000 words. Many print and online journals allow writers to include up to three flash pieces with each submission (writers will discover publishing opportunities for flash that don't exist for longer forms, in part because flash takes up less space). These are useful guidelines, but they aren't absolute.

In a 2021 presentation collected in the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, Emily Capettini highlighted how workshopping flash benefits students familiar with workshopping short stories:

Teaching flash fiction within the short story workshop has created opportunities for students to be more purposeful and thoughtful about things like word choice, narrative structure and focus, use of constraint, or techniques like load-bearing sentences. While these techniques are often part of the short story craft, because flash fiction is brand new to a lot of students, practicing flash fiction creates an opportunity for students to go back to these basics of their craft and knock out the drywall and see what else is hidden.

I like the idea that writing flash leads students, especially those unfamiliar with the form, to be deliberate with literary techniques, though I don't assume that students will move in this direction without guidance. I assign published flash and dedicate time in class to discussing similarities to and differences from longer forms. I ask the straightforward question: is flash best understood as a short short story?

I'm not convinced myself, even if the label "short short story" was used regularly in the past and is still used sometimes today. Although I compare forms in class, it can be more reductive than illuminating to define one form in direct relation to another. Consider the first definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for "novella": "Originally: a short fictitious narrative. Now (usually): a short novel, a long short story." What a lot of work that comma is asked to do. It seems to signal an appositive, but I'll argue instead for a continuum, locating the novella between the short story and the novel. On the same continuum, I place flash first, before the short story.

Since I don't define flash in relation to the short story, I don't insist that writers practice writing short stories before writing flash. Some examples of flash are startlingly short, bearing a faint resemblance to the short story. Joyce Carol Oates's "The Widow's First Year" (2011) consists of four words: "I kept myself alive" (63). Deb Olin Unferth's "Likable" (2012) has a lot to say about age and gender in 334 words. Then there is Lydia Davis, who may be flash's best-known contemporary practitioner. *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009) and *Can't and Won't: Stories* (2014) offer a master class of the form, one that sometimes looks like a short story but often does not.

In *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction: Tips from Editors, Teachers, and Writers in the Field* (2009), Jayne Anne Phillips, one of the "Kmart realists," shared that she taught herself to write with "one-page fictions":

I found in the form the density I needed, the attention to the line, the syllable. I began writing as a poet. In the one-page form, I found the freedom of the paragraph. I learned to understand the paragraph as secretive and subversive. The poem in broken lines announces itself as a poem, but the paragraph seems innocent, workaday, invisible. The paragraph is simply the form of written information: instruction booklets, tax forms, newspapers, cookbooks: all are written in paragraphs. We read the lines; the words enter us. (36-37)

The relationship between writer and reader shows up regularly in discussions of flash, perhaps because that relationship can feel more intimate in a shorter form. In this way, flash is similar to the present tense, which trades the temporal range of the past tense for immediacy.

In *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories* (2006), James Thomas and Robert Shapard suggested two parameters for flash: "first that the subject of a flash should not be small, or trivial,

any more than it should for a poem, and second that the essence of a story (including its ‘true subject’) exists not just in the amount of ink on the page—the length—but in the writer’s mind, and subsequently the reader’s” (12-13). Teaching flash, I emphasize that smallness of form should suggest neither smallness of subject nor ambition. I articulate Thomas and Shapard’s second point in terms of trust: the writer trusts her prose to communicate meaning, and the writer trusts her reader to make meaning.

Workshopping multiple flash pieces in one session requires establishing explicit guidelines. Both participants and the author will want to know in advance how time will be allocated. Instructors may dedicate the same amount of time for each piece (e.g. twenty minutes per flash in an hour-long workshop) or allow participants to determine which pieces warrant greater attention, which is riskier but potentially more helpful. If instructors aren’t clear upfront, then the workshop is likely to suffer. Many participants have experienced the frustration of listening to a fellow participant itemize minor issues of diction or punctuation that easily could have been left as line edits. More frustrating is running out of time before a piece has been workshopped at all.

Flash lends itself to experimentation, perhaps because it’s considered a newer form and thus less indebted to tradition. The difference between flash and prose poems is a voluble source of disagreement, but in a fiction workshop, I’m unconcerned with this distinction. I’m committed to creating a space where students feel comfortable trying different things, including work unlike anything else students have seen. Introducing and maintaining such a space is the subject of the next section.

4. WORKSHOPPING HYBRID

Whereas I presented length as a continuum in the previous section (i.e. flash-short story-novella-novel), I’ll use Venn diagrams to present hybrid forms. Consider a work, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920), that liberally employs elements of fiction, poetry, and drama:

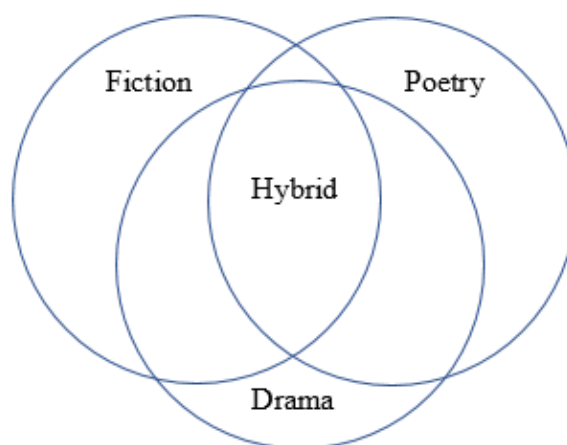


Figure 1.

This Side of Paradise was sold as a novel, and that's how the book is classified today. But *This Side of Paradise* doesn't much resemble the structures of Fitzgerald's better-known novels, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald interspersed verse throughout *This Side of Paradise*, and much of the middle section reads as a play. How would this text be workshopped today?

Based on the fiction workshops I've attended: uneasily. Participants might offer the following questions about Fitzgerald's submission: Why did the author start including poems (11)? Are these poems good—are they supposed to be? What's happening with "Interlude"—sometimes it's a letter, and sometimes it's a poem (117-121)? The novel turns into a play with "The Débutante"—doesn't that happen pretty late (123-146)? Why does the play turn back into a novel?

Other workshop participants might announce that they're unqualified for the job. Presented unexpectedly with verse, students can turn shy, as if line breaks rendered the words unintelligible. I appreciate these students' hesitancy, which I read as goodwill. Each of the workshop models I've described to this point has at least one central tenet in common: it's grounded in criticism. In such an environment, it's reasonable that students would point to places where they *don't* feel equipped to weigh in, lest they do more harm than good or seem like know-it-alls.

On the other hand: writers need to teach readers how to read each new piece of fiction, regardless of form. Writers and readers share language—to an extent—but characters, actions, conflicts, etc. start with the writer. If the reader doesn't care about whom she's watching or what that person is doing or why that person is doing that thing, then the reader will find another way to spend her time. In a fiction workshop, participants needn't be poets or playwrights to read a manuscript that includes verse or drama. I encourage students who are hesitant when encountering hybrid works to focus on the areas where they believe they can help the author and stay respectfully quiet elsewhere. A discussion of setting in a flash piece may be no different from a discussion of setting in a short story or novel excerpt. How does or doesn't the writer succeed at bringing the reader into the place?

On the other other hand: students are often less concerned with distinctions in form than instructors are. At the undergraduate level, there's a good chance that students in a fiction workshop have already taken, or are currently taking, a poetry or creative nonfiction (CNF) or screenwriting workshop. Hybrid forms allow students to apply what they've learned—or are actively learning—in a different context, which is precisely what a liberal arts education ought to do.

The writer shouldn't expect participants in a fiction workshop to offer critiques of meter or stage directions. Fortunately, I've never known an author to expect anything like this. Mostly, I've received gratitude for not ending a workshop before it has a chance to begin.

There are submissions I've vetoed. I remember a graduate student who wanted to submit a hybrid piece for a prose workshop. The piece included more pages of poetry and photography than prose, and I worried that the author would receive tentative feedback. Now I'm not convinced I made the right decision. The author's confidence may have been more undermined by my request for a new submission than from a meandering workshop of the original submission. The workshop participants, for that matter, might have risen to the occasion. There is a point, I think, where a piece no longer fits under the umbrella of fiction, where it turns into something else, and that piece may be no more suitable for a fiction workshop than a painting or a dance performance. It's difficult to maintain useful guidelines, however, if you're unwilling to test them.

Consider another hybrid work, Neela Vaswani's *You Have Given Me a Country: A Memoir* (2010), which blends fiction with memoir and graphic:

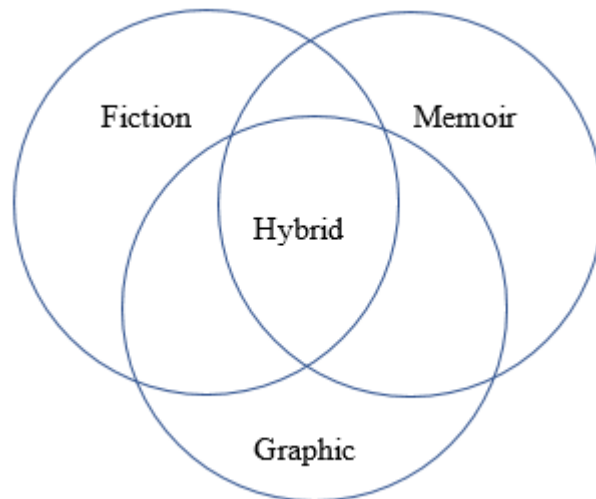


Figure 2.

The overlap between fiction and memoir is an area my students generally feel comfortable exploring and critiquing; it's not unusual in the UNO MFA in Writing to have students enter in CNF and migrate to fiction (CNF and fiction students workshop together as prose). *You Have Given Me a Country* announces itself as nonfiction in the title yet begins: "What follows is real, and imagined" (Vaswani viii). The interplay between fact and fiction and between text and image (the first image appears on page three) teaches readers how to understand the hybridity of the work, which explores the different identities that Vaswani lived as a biracial child with an Indian-born father and American-born mother: "I developed an ability to hold two things in my mind at once. Two feelings, two ideas, two languages. The in-between, inside me. Like two spotlights on a dark stage, coming together. And where they overlapped, it was brightest. It was easiest to see" (71-72).

In a 2016 essay in *The Writer's Chronicle*, published by the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Jacqueline Kolosov suggested that “taken individually but especially in conversation with one another, literary hybrids illustrate that genres are not fixed entities but vehicles for finding the best form for our stories, memories, and explorations.” I want to use Kolosov’s claim here to counter the argument that students need to establish themselves in a traditional form before moving to a hybrid form. One might conceptualize form as a vessel to take the reader somewhere, rather than as a pattern to replicate. The writer chooses—or creates—the appropriate vessel for each narrative she wishes to tell. In such a formulation, workshop participants might see their task as helping the writer to find the best vessel.

If a workshop can accommodate different lengths and forms, then it stands to reason that a workshop can accommodate different genres, such as CNF and poetry. Many workshops, especially introductory ones, do. The creative writing course that I taught as a teaching assistant was designed this way, as is the creative writing course taught by graduate assistants in the UNO MFA in Writing. As students progress to intermediate and advanced workshops, workshops typically specialize, but specialization needn’t exclude hybrid forms. As an instructor and program director, I want to encourage the unusual and the new.

5. WHY WORKSHOP DIFFERENT LENGTHS AND FORMS?

In the much-discussed essay collection *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* (2014), Chad Harbach wrote that the MFA “nudges the writer toward the writing of short stories; of all the ambient commonplaces about MFA programs, perhaps the only accurate one is that the programs are organized around the story form” (17). The difference between creative writing programs’ focus on the short story and major American publishers’ focus on the novel is the subject of Harbach’s essay and the impetus for the collection. I won’t dispute the difference, though I’m unconvinced it needs to persist.

Which is not to say that colleges and universities should look to the so-called Big Five of Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon and Schuster to guide curricula (Penguin Random House and Simon and Schuster recently pursued a merger, which follows the merger of Penguin and Random House in 2013). MFA programs and big publishers have different goals; the former produces graduates, and the latter produces books. Some graduates go on to publish books, but many—even at the most high-profile programs—don’t. Other graduates publish with independent or university presses. Some graduates find success writing—and, often, teaching—without publishing with a big press. These graduates don’t define their achievement relative to New York City, and the programs that produce and/or employ the graduates don’t ask them to do so.

Nor do major American publishers rely on creative writing programs; these publishers make most of their money from writers without an MFA. In 2020, the best-selling authors came from varied sources, such as politics (e.g. Barack and Michelle Obama, Mary L. Trump), anti-racism (e.g. Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi), celebrity (e.g. Matthew McConaughey), and Oprah Winfrey (e.g. Jeanine Cummins, Isabel Wilkerson). That's not counting titles for children, including workbooks and activity books, which were among the year's best sellers. The *Dog Man* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* empires are arguably more important to the Big Five than the combined heft of graduate creative writing.

Even if MFA and NYC don't need each other, they can help each other. As much as creative writing programs might like to see major American publishers release more short story collections, it's likelier that these publishers will market and distribute novels, which sell—with few exceptions—far better than short stories. Harbach again: “A writer's early short stories (as any New York editor will tell you) lead to a novel, or they lead nowhere at all” (18). Celeste Ng and Brit Bennett wrote two of the best-selling novels of 2020, each with Penguin Random House (the Penguin and Riverhead imprints, respectively). Both Ng and Bennett received an MFA from the University of Michigan, one of the strongest graduate programs in the United States.

A creative writing program that encourages students to workshop forms other than the short story acknowledges the literary marketplace without surrendering to it. If students want to write and workshop short stories, as students have been doing productively for decades, then I see no reason why students should stop. But if they want to write and workshop other forms, then programs can do more than begrudgingly allow students to do so (if programs even do that).

In a chapter of *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* (2010), “Introducing Masterclasses,” Sue Roe argued that “agents and publishers – increasingly, in our culture – are not only the best judges of what will work in current markets, they are also well placed, and usually willing, to point out to a student what works, what doesn't and what might be developed” (202). Roe went on to note the following:

However the main distinction between agents and editors is their understandable lack of concern with students who do not display the necessary credentials or skills to become published writers. Agents and editors would not be doing their job were they to expend time and energy on projects they know will not succeed in the market place. Tutors would not be doing theirs were they to ignore the authors of such projects, privileging the most obviously able. Agents and publishers should be in universities, talent-spotting and keeping students and staff up to date with market forces and commercial issues. But the teacher's responsibility is the painstaking job of teaching the rudiments, setting reading and exercises tailored to each individual student's progress; gradually improving the quality of each and every student's work. (202)

Some creative writing programs dedicate discrete courses to publication (such courses are beyond the scope of this essay, which takes the fiction workshop as its subject), but many programs don't provide instruction on traditional publishing, opting to focus on craft rather than professional practice. Instructors in such programs can still workshop novels by acknowledging Roe's distinction between the role of the agent or editor and the role of the teacher.

The teacher might communicate to students early that her mission is not to identify and develop the most promising projects for sale but to help all students become stronger writers, focusing on elements of the form as they appear in student and published manuscripts. This teacher doesn't ignore the market so much as establish boundaries of what she does and doesn't do in the workshop. Time inside any classroom is finite, and teachers benefit students by articulating how their time will be spent.

In a 2004 essay in *College English*, Patrick Bizzaro reviewed the history of workshops, concluding that they offered a "model of instruction over a hundred years old but basically unrevised":

Clearly, the lore of creative-writing instruction has it that writers should teach what they do when they write, employing the "workshop" approach to teaching—based on a longstanding notion that the teacher is a "master" who teaches "apprentices." The workshop method survives not because rigorous inquiry offers testimony to its excellence (though, once this research is done, such inquiry might support exactly that premise), but because only recently have some teachers of creative writing questioned its underlying assumptions. (296)

I share Bizzaro's skepticism of workshops not because I haven't found them useful—I have as a student, an instructor, and a program director—but because they seem guided more by tradition than by research or pedagogy. The choice needn't be between the workshop and a different method of instruction. The choice I'm interested in is between stasis and innovation within the workshop.

I made changes during two years of facilitating online workshops that I've brought to face-to-face workshops. I now, for example, request that students share something they appreciated or admired about the flash/short story/novella excerpt/novel excerpt/hybrid before we begin critiquing the piece, a continuation of the structured way that I ask students to participate in online workshops. At the beginning of these workshops, I place each student's name in the chat, and all participants offer something positive about the piece before—in the same order—they offer constructive criticism. During the criticism portion, which constitutes the majority of the workshop, I pause or redirect discussion to moderate a back-and-forth conversation, something difficult to achieve over videoconference where students are justifiably worried about speaking over others. While this method lacks spontaneity, the process assures that each participant hears her own

voice at least twice while removing the pressure that many students feel to speak only if they have something important to say (for some students, such discretion is helpful, but for too many, it means they rarely if ever speak).

When I discovered that my online workshops were eliciting insightful participation from students who had been quiet in face-to-face workshops, I adjusted those workshops accordingly. My face-to-face workshops today are a blend of structured and free-flowing discussion; some participants speak more than others, but all contribute. Although I have returned to face-to-face workshops, I still offer workshops by videoconference. Online workshops are able to reach writers who live in different places and/or with circumstances that make it difficult or impossible to attend a face-to-face workshop, including some people with disabilities. I hope that program directors take advantage of the disruption to the status quo occasioned by COVID-19. The post-pandemic workshop shouldn't rush to return to normal. It presents an opportunity for further introspection and experimentation.

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