

Syllabus  
805 Writers' Conference  
November 2, 2019  
*The Short Story*  
With Shelly Lowenkopf

- I. Introduction
- A. With little effort, you can find short stories with fifty or sixty words, known as flash or sudden fiction. Go to a search engine, type in either term, then you'll see what I mean. You can also find the gifted sprawl of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy," page after luxurious, insightful page of it for just under 15,000 words.
  - B. Comic or poignant, both extremes of length share these traits:
    - a. They are invented narratives, histories, if you will, of made-up individuals.
    - b. They begin at some precipitous moment, when a principal character faces a disadvantage, a discovery, or a challenge.
    - c. They evolve toward a crisis point, where some need for action demands attention.
    - d. They end.
    - e. They're intended for reading in one sitting
  - C. I'm here to guide you through the essential elements of the short story, lead you toward ways to make your short stories reflect the most vital aspect of fiction—your narrative voice.
  - D. Some basics to consider as we begin:
    - a. No matter how deep your attraction to short fiction, you haven't read enough of it.
    - b. Here's a list of 100 significant short stories you should know about for the techniques and dramatic effects that inform them
1. "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allen Poe.
  2. "Use of Force" by William Carlos Williams
  3. "The Swimmer" by John Cheever
  4. "The Magic Barrel" by Bernard Malamud
  5. "Bliss" by Katherine Mansfield.
  6. "The Shawl" by Francine Prose
  7. "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" by Eudora Welty
  8. "Goodbye and Good Luck" by Grace Paley
  9. "The Rich Boy" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
  10. "How Can I Tell You?" by John O'Hara

11. "Some Other, Better Otto" by Deborah Eisenberg
12. "The Sky Above" by Annie Proulx
13. "Shiloh" by Bobbie Ann Mason
14. "Ninety Nights on Mercury" by Lee K. Abbott
15. "Like Life," by Lorrie Moore
16. "Fatherland" by Viet Thanh Nguyen
17. "Good Country People," by Flannery O'Connor
18. "What Were You Dreaming?" by Nadine Gordimer
19. "The Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri
20. "The Laughing Man" by J. D. Salinger
21. "The Red Convertible" by Louise Erdrich
22. "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver
23. "The Conversion of the Jews" by Philip Roth
24. "Ranch Girl" by Maile Melloy
25. "Boil Some Water, Lots of It" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
26. "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D. H. Lawrence
27. "The Jailer Jailed" by Anton Chekhov
28. "Standard of Living" by Dorothy Parker
29. "In the Garden of the American Martyrs" by Tobias Wolff
30. "Hairball" by Margaret Atwood
31. "Park City" by Ann Beattie
32. "Peep Show" by Nathan Englander
33. "How I Met My Husband" by Alice Munro
34. "A Shocking Accident" by Graham Greene
35. "Babylon Revisited" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
36. "Bullet in the Brain" by George Saunders
37. "Racine and the Tablecloth" by A.S. Byatt
38. "Fifty Grand" by Ernest Hemingway
39. "The Outing" by Lydia Davis
40. "Sticks" by George Saunders
41. "The Swan as Metaphor for Love" by Amelia Gray
42. "Taylor Swift" by Hugh Behm-Steinberg
43. "The Lazy River" by Zadie Smith
44. "Dimension:" by Alice Munro
45. "Crooner" by Kazuo Ishiguro
46. "The Proxy Marriage" by Maile Meloy
47. "The Deer-Vehicle Collision Survivors Support Group" by Porochista  
Khakpour
48. "Fair Warning" by Robert Olen Butler
49. "Smokers" by Tobias Wolff
50. "The Tribute" by Jane Gardam
51. "A Simple Heart" by Gustave Flaubert
52. "After Rain" by William Trevor
53. "Paradise" by Edna O'Brien
54. "The Distance of the Moon" by Italo Calvino
55. "Civil Peace" by Chinua Achebe

56. "Happy Endings" by Margaret Atwood
57. "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter
58. "Why Don't You Dance?" by Raymond Carver
59. "The Country Husband: by John Cheever
60. "Twilight of the Superheroes" by Deborah Eisenberg
61. "In the Tunnel" by Mavis Gallant
62. "Six Feet of the Country" by Nadine Gordimer
63. "A Village After Dark" by Kazuo Ishiguro
64. "Emergency" by Denis Johnson
65. "Extra" by Yiyun Li
66. "A Horse and Two Goats" by RK Narayan
67. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor
68. "Atlantic City" by Kevin Barry
69. "Medusa's Ankles" by A.S. Byatt
70. "The Parrot" by Elizabeth Bowen
71. "The Basement Window" by Graham Greene
72. "Careless Talk" Elizabeth Bowen
73. "Christmas Is a Sad Season for the Poor" by John Cheever
74. "Bag Lady" by A.S. Byatt
75. "The Ultimate Safari" by Nadine Gordimer
76. "Chemistry" by Carol Shields
77. "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" by Amy Hemphil
78. "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" by D. H. Lawrence
79. "Charades" by Lorrie Moore
80. "Lunch Tuesday" by John O'Hara
81. "Aren't You Happy for Me?" by Richard Bausch
82. "How to Talk to a Hunter" by Pam Houston
83. "Why I live at the P.O." by Eudora Welty
84. "All Things, All at Once" by Lee K. Abbott
85. "Servants of the Map" by Andrea Barrett
86. "A Perfect Life" by Chita Diva Karuni
87. "The Chinese Lobster" by A. S. Byatt
88. "The Half-Skinned Steer" by Annie Proulx
89. "Before the Change" by Alice Munro
90. "Someone to Talk To" by Deborah Eisenberg
91. "Reading Lessons" by Edwidge Danticat
92. "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses" by Irwin Shaw
93. "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of  
Corrections and Began My Life over Again" by Joyce Carol Oates
94. "The Rest of Her Life" by Steve Yarborough
95. "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" by Ana Menendez
96. "Who's Irish?" by Gish Gen
97. "The High Divide" by Charles D'Ambrosio
98. "Peep Show" by Nathan Englander
99. "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor
100. "The Go-Away Bird" by Muriel Spark

c. Before you read, these observations from your instructor:

Why do you want to write short stories?

Do you wish to address some teaching or learning experience in dramatic form?

Or perhaps you'd read one or more short stories somewhere, and were hit with the excited awareness that perhaps you could do something like that—if you tried?

Your instructor, through his teaching, editing, and writing experiences, believes these are the two basic trampolines in which short story writers exercise. This observation doesn't imply any more judgement than the consideration of whether a particular individual is right-hand-dominant or left-hand-dominant.

You write short stories because you have things you wish to explore and say, with a limited amount of time available to do so, thus your wish to spend as much of it as possible in the act of composing.

You write short stories because you've recognized how many wonderful stories from other writers are available. You read to discover how they accomplished the stunning effects their stories produced, to experiment with the themes and techniques of others, and to see where your own imagination will lead you with similar themes and techniques.

At the present moment, two of your instructor's favorite short story writers, Deborah Eisenberg and Lee K. Abbott, are included in the following list of suggested reading. You may find neither to your taste. Does this mean your chances of finding your own narrative voice and subsequent publication are doomed? Absolutely not. This becomes even more a force in your favor if, from reading Eisenberg and Abbott, you understand the reasons why they aren't to your taste and has the effect of a double-down if you're led to the discovery of writers whose work does energize you.

The persistent, ongoing pursuit of reading will take years off your attempts to write publishable short stories.

- d. Begin now. Compile your own list.
- e. Everything you've learned about writing fiction is wrong, out-of-date, or both.
- f. Language evolves. So do dramatic techniques.

- g. With respect and reverence to stories written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, twenty-first-century fiction has evolved. Writers no longer write the way they once did or were taught.
- h. Adios, Author. Hello characters. Authors no longer tell stories; their characters experience them. Readers eavesdrop and infer. They no longer rely on authorial explanations and descriptions.
- i. Story relies on action, inference, subtext.
  - \*Hemingway iceberg image
- j. Story begins with characters in flux.
- k. Opening two sentences of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy" to demonstrate two of our building blocks.

"Begin with an individual, and before you know it you'll find that you have created a type; begin with a type and you'll find that you have created nothing. That is because we are all queer fish, queerer behind our faces and voices than we want anyone to know or than we want to know ourselves."

## II. The Building Blocks

### A. Characters

- a. Construction
  - i. Conscience
  - ii. Ego
  - iii. Needs
- b. Their relationship, the Compass Rose
- c. Triangulation

### B. The Scene, aka Arena

- a. The place where characters appear to pursue agendas
- b. The three platforms which define most dramatic action
  - i. Narrative
  - ii. Interior monologue
  - iii. Dialogue
- c. Other, lesser possibilities
  - i. Letters, emails, texts
  - ii. Journals
  - iii. Newspaper accounts
  - iv. Books
- d. Dramatic filters, aka point-of-view
  - i. Who's telling/experiencing the story
    - \*Why?
  - ii. The I or first-person narrator
  - iii. The he/she or third-person narrator
  - iv. The multiple narration
    - \*But ONLY one per scene

- v. The reliable or most trustworthy narrator
- vii. The least trustworthy narrator
- viii. The naïve narrator

- e. The Dramatic Pulse, aka The Beat
- III. How to make the reader continue reading
  - a. Opening story lines
  - b. Opening scene lines
  - c. Closing story sentences
  - d. Closing scene sentences
  - e. How to use the beat to create tension and suspense
- IV. Details
  - a. What details stay in the story?
    - i. Chekhov's Gun
  - b. What details to delete?
  - c. Equivalency between Characters and details
  - d. The d-word, Description
- V. Sentences as dramatic tools
- VI. Words as distractions
  - a. Habit words
  - b. Empty words
  - c. Distracting words
    - i. List:

The Terrible 40

- I. ✓ *any form of the verb: to be\**
- II. ✓ *into and onto when in and on are better*
- III. ✓ *Sentences that begin or end with "it"*

- |              |                             |
|--------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ almost     | ✓ might                     |
| I. ✓ am*     | ✓ must                      |
| II. ✓ and    | ✓ now                       |
| III. ✓ are*  | ✓ occasionally              |
| ✓ be*        | ✓ shall                     |
| IV. ✓ been*  | ✓ should                    |
| V. ✓ being*  | ✓ so                        |
| VI. ✓ can    | ✓ some                      |
| VII. ✓ could | ✓ somewhat                  |
| VIII. ✓ do   | ✓ still                     |
| IX. ✓ even   | ✓ suddenly. all of a sudden |
| X. ✓ had     | ✓ that                      |
| XI. ✓ has    | ✓ then                      |
| XII. ✓ have  | ✓ was*                      |
| XIII. ✓ is*  | ✓ were                      |
| XIV. ✓ just  | ✓ very                      |

XV.

✓ with

XVI.

✓ would

XVII.

XVIII. These words add little to your writing and they force you to use the passive voice.