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A Creative Approach to Workshop Etiquette

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What is the function of the writing workshop? What is it exactly that we're trying to accomplish? These are questions I ask on the first day of every creative writing class I teach, and the answers are essentially the same. "We're trying to get better." But when I ask my students how this "bettering" is to take place, I am usually met with faces earnestly awaiting an answer from me. Surely this "bettering" is the job of the teacher. The teacher is Merlin, Svengali, Henry Higgins. From the appointed position at the end of the seminar table, he or she is expected to work magic. Would that such a spell existed. How happy the publishers, critics, and readers would be—no one need ever write a bad book again. Books would fly off of the shelves of libraries and bookstores, even without the lure of coffee. Kids would joyously receive books with their Happy Meals at McDonalds, and there would be a work of genius at the bottom of every Cracker Jacks box.

No such luck, young writers. For the same ingredient that makes one story brilliant leaves another story dead on the page. And so we return to the original question: What is the function of the writing workshop?

The writing workshop is a class like no other. It is a collaborative effort. All voices should and must be heard. As a student, I remember gainsaying such an approach—how I wished we could forego the portion of class devoted to student response and cut directly to the part where the teacher offers up an opinion. It was the only opinion in which I was really interested because, presumably, teachers know more than students. Or do they?

As a teacher, I once criticized a young writer for presenting two new characters five pages into an eight-page story, and giving them only a single sentence-worth of existence. They appeared to have no significant effect on the protagonist or on the world the writer had created. My students sniggered à la Eliza Doolittle. Like her, I asked what they were “sniggering at”? After all, the characters in question had neither substance nor purpose and we had talked at length about the problems of characters who were nothing more than names. In this case, “Mike” and “Ike.” My students were now in hysterics. When they managed to control themselves enough to address my irritation at their sudden lack of seriousness, they explained that Mike and Ike were not characters. They were the candy the protagonist was eating. Teachers may know more about craft and technique, they may have spent more time in the proverbial saddle, but since students frequently know more about the lives they live and the worlds they create, their thoughts and observations are every bit as crucial as the teacher’s. Students can often see what a writer has aimed for even when the arrow falls far from the mark.

The teacher is a facilitator, an inquisitor, occasionally a referee. But the teacher of a writing workshop does not define correctness, does not pronounce the rightness or wrongness of student reactions. Teachers steer the ship, keep it from running aground, point out sights that the students might otherwise have missed, and help the students learn which questions they need to ask of their own writing.

Nothing is so good that it cannot be made better, even when we as readers cannot imagine how. So it is imperative that neither the teacher nor the students pronounce judgment on any piece regardless of whether that judgment be positive or negative. We must leave the *yes*’s and *no*’s to the publishers. The workshop is not a sentry guarding the keep of great art. The workshop is a forum for guidance and possibility, where we critique without judgment, encourage without lavish praise, and make suggestions.

There are many writing workshop teachers who, during a lively, well-managed class (in which all criticism is action-oriented and text-driven, and all students begin their observations with “in this section on page such and such, I like this or that, but I think the piece would work better if the writer tried thus and so”) have glanced up from the pages and seen a writer with trembling lips and eyes filling with tears. I have read countless student evaluations in which a teacher says something like, “Betty is very talented but she must learn to handle criticism better.” This may be absolutely true. Betty may be a bit over-sensitive. But more often than not, the problem is not that the young writer cannot handle criticism but rather that the criticism they receive is not appropriate for the piece they are trying to write.

Imagine an ideal workshop. Everyone is there because they want to be. The students are talented, smart, hard-working lovers of literature. They’ve read the canon, supplemented significantly by contemporary work. They’ve had some workshop experience and they know what to look for in terms of character, narrative arc, language, imagery, etc. In fact this workshop will run itself.

The first student to present is a young fellow by the name of Herman. He comes to class with a very long manuscript. He's obviously invested a good bit of time and seriousness in the completion of his draft. The teacher recognizes this and decides to give the work the time it deserves. Little Herman hands out copies of his magnum opus and the teacher gives the students two weeks (rather than one) to read and prepare to discuss the material.

Two weeks later all reassemble around the seminar table which in this case is made of dark-stained, venerable oak. It sits in a garret-like classroom on the top floor of an academic building—a room allocated to creative writing because nobody else really wants to use it and because writers find garrets homey. Herman sits in his usual place, the second student on the left at the opposite end of the long table. He's eager, fidgety, tapping his pen as he anxiously awaits the thoughts of his peers and his teacher.

"So," the teacher says, "off we go." The discussion moves seamlessly. Herman has his notebook out madly scribbling down every suggestion that is offered. One of the students, let's call her Marjorie, has been quiet through most of the discussion but she looks very pensive so the teacher asks what she's thinking.

Marjorie answers a little timidly, because Herman has received a good bit of approval for his draft, "I enjoyed this, I really did, but I found some of the images overwhelming. They took me away from the narrative."

"Marjorie," the teacher says, "can you be more specific? Show Herman in the text where you felt the images were too large."

"Alright," says she, flipping backwards through the manuscript. "Here on page 75, I don't think this character needs to be so extreme."

"Be specific, Marjorie," the teacher insists. "Specificity is the cornerstone of good writing and, by extension, good criticism."

She nods. "This man," she says, "on the ship. I can't remember his name. But every time he comes on the page I forget all about the narrator."

Another student chimes in. "I actually had trouble with that character too. But I think it's because of his leg."

"Why don't we all look at that," the teacher says. And the class flips to the page that the man makes his first appearance.

"It's because his leg is fake," says the freckly boy to the right. "It's really bad, but I think when a character has a disability like this, sometimes that's all we see."

"Maybe he doesn't need to be missing a leg at all," offers a girl in jeans and a mid-drift.

Marjorie shakes her head. "I don't think that's it. I just think this character is so big that he overshadows the narrator."

A girl who has been earnestly chewing her hair snatches her braid out of her mouth and says, "What if he was a boy instead of a man?"

"Yes," says Marjorie. "A little boy would be much better."

Herman looks uncomfortable but he's very serious about his writing, so he continues jotting down notes without comment.

"You know," says the boy in the corner as he pulls a mustache hair out of his braces. "The whale is also a very large image and if you set it against a little boy it's just totally overwhelming."

"But the story really needs the tension between the human and animal elements," says Miss Mid-drift.

"Agreed but he needs a less intrusive animal."

Marjorie's eyes light up. "How about a deer?"

"Yes," the freckled boy agrees. "A boy and a deer is a nice balance."

Mustache and braces rolls his eyes. "A boy and a deer on an ocean? That doesn't make a lot of sense."

"So move it," says Marjorie. "Put them in the Midwest and the whole thing comes together."

All the students (with the exception of Herman) look very pleased with themselves. They've offered insightful and sincere suggestions that will without doubt help an author to write a fine book. Unfortunately that book would be *The Yearling* instead of *Moby-Dick*, which is what Herman Melville set out to write.

In even the healthiest of workshops there is the possibility of danger. Because there is nothing more potentially damaging to an author than a workshop that's eagerly helping him write a story that is different from the one he is trying to tell.

So while the workshop is busily encouraging without over-praising, critiquing without judging, accomplishing the betterment of the students' talents, the teacher must remember: It is never the function of the writing workshop to put fur on a student's whale.

