

Being There

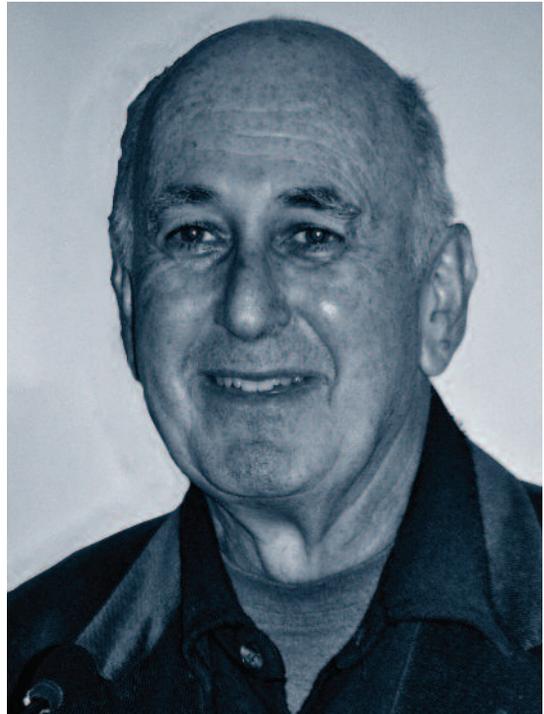
Phillip Lopate on Improvisation and the Art of Teaching

JENNY WILLIAMS

Almost forty years ago, the writer Phillip Lopate began teaching creative writing in a New York City public school as a teaching artist with Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Being With Children, his account of “the absurdities, heartaches, frustrations, delights, and mysteries of life” (Harvard Educational Review) at P.S. 75, was first published in 1975 and became an instant classic. Out of print for many years, the book has just been reissued by The New Press as part of their Classics in Progressive Education series, edited by T&W Founding Director Herb Kohl.

Lopate is a prolific and award-winning essayist, novelist, and poet. His most recent work, Two Marriages (Other Press), was published in the fall of 2008. He is a member of the T&W Board of Directors, currently holds the John Cranford Adams Chair at Hofstra University, and teaches in the MFA graduate programs at Columbia, The New School, and Bennington College.

Lopate spoke with us on October 28, 2008, at Teachers & Writers Collaborative.



Phillip Lopate at an event at Teachers & Writers Collaborative celebrating the reissue of *Being With Children*. Photo by Susan Karwoska.

Jenny Williams: It’s been 33 years since *Being with Children* was first published. What’s it like to re-read your work from decades ago?

Phillip Lopate: One thing that strikes me is that it was my first collection of essays. Before I even began writing personal essays, I wrote *Being with Children*. There are

Jenny Williams is the Teachers & Writers Communications Fellow for 2008–2009. She holds a BA in English from the University of California, Berkeley, where she also taught college writing to incoming freshmen. After spending several years abroad—including six months volunteering in Uganda and South Sudan—she returned to the U.S., where she currently works as a freelance developmental book editor. Her writing has appeared in Prick of the Spindle, Raving Dove, Flashquake, Pology, and Matador Travel.

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different sections: some are analytical, some are narrative—I was trying out all these different modes. Some are more like portraits of one person; some involve a lot of people. It gave me the opportunity to experiment with a lot of different kinds of literary prose.

And in fact, I see a lot of continuity between *Being with Children* and the writing I've done since. A way of working a loose tooth, you might say. I think at that point, I was more interested in just getting my ideas across clearly, and my writing has probably become a bit more elaborate over the years—that is, more involved in texture and tone. But I was trying to write a book for the general public. In other words, I can detect changes in the prose style, but I can also detect a lot of continuity.

JW: How did people at P.S. 75—which you call P.S. 90 in the book—respond to *Being with Children* when it came out?

PL: Everyone read it—the book was kind of a cause célèbre or scandal, almost. What surprised me is that I could never predict which teachers were going to be offended by it. Sometimes somebody would be offended because he or she wasn't in the book. Other people were amused by their portraits. Other people were diplomatic and didn't say anything one way or another. I certainly continued teaching there for another five years. It's a bit odd when you're in an environment where people know that you're a kind of spy, and you can write about them at any point. It's true of all literary nonfiction writers and memoirists that they end up being dangerous to those around them.

Some of the kids read the book, too, and have remained in touch with me over the years. Several of them became writers. In spite of the rhetoric about “every child is a poet,” I came to see that some kids really are going to be writers and most are not. When you're dealing with a whole bunch of kids, the likelihood is that a few of them are going to grow up to be writers. Others are going to grow up to be CEOs or thieves or whatever. But why not writers? And that's what happened.

JW: There were a couple moments in the book when you talk about a breakthrough with a kid who didn't seem to have that spark—the boy who talked about “coat love,” for example. Were there other kids whom you felt you never reached?

PL: I wrote about the girl, the very sweet Chinese girl Elizabeth, who wrote the poem about the land of polka dots. She didn't want me or anyone else getting into her head. She was very protective; she knew she didn't have to expose herself or be vulnerable in any way. And that was her right. I never thought I was going to reach all the kids—but what I did discover was that some kids who were not going to be excited by writing might be turned on by theater or movies or comic books or radio. I started doing other projects because I wanted to reach the kids who had different excitements. Some kids—all they wanted to do was to draw comic strips, so how could I tap into their interests? Others were fascinated with movies but not particularly with writing, so I might say to them, you wanna make a movie? Well, you have to write a script first, and then I'll let you make a movie.

There's a lot of psychology to teaching. That fascinates me. I'll pick up that one student—whom I hadn't been paying any attention to—hates me, despises me, or has decided I'm unfair or something like that. I think, this is odd. Then I start getting interested in him or her. I ask myself, what is this all about? See if I can seduce them out of their initial dislike. Others project so much adulation that I think, I haven't said anything, why are you acting as though I'm so great? I haven't done anything yet, give me a chance! Maybe I'll disappoint you! I think that the level of teaching which has to do with feeling the sub-vocal currents that are coming from a person, coming between people—that's quite magical and interesting to me.

JW: Now that most of your teaching is with older students—in MFA programs and the like—do you find teaching adults to be very different from teaching children?

PL: It was more fun working with kids! [*laughs*] They're more surprising. People in graduate workshops have to pay a great deal of money, and they're much more likely to hold you in awe. Whereas kids don't hold anyone in awe. Philip Roth could come into a classroom and they would have no idea. You still have to entertain them or reach them on some level. Kids give you very honest feedback in that sense. You're either reaching them or you're not, and if you're not, they're running around the room screaming—until the classroom teacher puts a lid on it.

I can't say in the middle of a graduate workshop, "Let's stop doing writing, let's put on a play!" We have to keep reading their manuscripts and discussing them. It's a stiffer environment. What I loved about working with kids was that it was very improvisational. There was a jazzy feeling; you had to be very loose. You'd come in with a plan, and let's say there had just been a fistfight between two kids. Suddenly you were dealing with violence in the air, and you had to quickly jettison that original assignment and come up with something else. Or there had been a snowstorm and everyone was looking at the snow out the window. You had to improvise, and you also had to change your approach depending on the different kids.

JW: That kind of improvisation sounds challenging.

PL: I used to come back from P.S. 75 and take a nap—I was exhausted! It really drained me. But it also excited me. And I really loved the kids. I remember their parents would come to pick them up and I'd say, "Oh your kid is wonderful," and the mother would look at me with this weary sigh and say, "Yeah, yeah. You get them during certain hours and they're excited to see you. It's not that way all the time." I was going through the peak of my "mad for children" period. Now that I have a daughter of my own, I see; she's quite wonderful, but she also has her snippy days when she's a pain in the butt.

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JW: And on those days, maybe you'd rather be her writing teacher?

PL: [*laughs*] And yes, maybe I'd rather be her writing teacher sometimes.

JW: In the book, you talk about writers as “change agents”—people who got dropped in to shake things up, and then had to leave.

PL: Well, that was the kamikaze model—you were supposed to make yourself replaceable and then leave, and the teacher was supposed to do what you had done. But that doesn't make too much sense to me. It seems to me that if you're an artist, you have something to give, so why assume that it's just temporary? Why not just say that artists have a legitimate place in the school building, instead of just thinking of them as fly-by-nights?

JW: Did you feel like you were more energized about your own writing when you were working with children or now that you're working with MFA students?

PL: The truth is that I'm not sure it has that much of an effect. I wrote a lot when I

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was working with kids. What they gave me, in a way, was subject matter. They were very animated; they would love or hate as though they were part of some melodrama. I learned from them how to get the emotions closer to the surface. Now, working with older people—some who are older than I am—I sympathize with them. I try to get them over the middles, which are the real problem—they already know how to start something—and I try to get them launched into something that they care about.

JW: In the book, you talk about being unsatisfied with the creative writing curriculum of the time. Now that you've been teaching for decades, do you have a curriculum that you stick to? Or do you still just wing it?

PL: I still wing it. When I first began teaching, I thought it was very important to get a curriculum. My first teaching job came about because Kenneth Koch recommended me. Kenneth was a poet and he had a very set curriculum himself. So from the very beginning, I was faced with a dilemma: I could be a Kochian or I could develop my own curriculum. I didn't want to just use his assignments because it felt too puppet-like. Those assignments worked for Kenneth, but I needed something that would work for me. So I began developing all kinds of assignments, and also stealing from my friends who were doing the same thing. Then, Teachers & Writers put out *The Whole Word Catalogue*, which I was involved in, as well as *The Whole Word Catalogue 2*.

By the time *The Whole Word Catalogue 2* came along, I felt like I was drowning in assignments—and all of them were equally valid. I became less oriented toward curriculum and more oriented toward the sociology and psychology of the school. In other words, it wasn't so important for me to come up with a fail-safe assignment. It was more important to read my environment, to get some insight into what each of

the kids was interested in, to try to see where the teachers were at, the principal. I shifted the orientation, and I think *Being With Children* purposely concentrates on this—it's not the curriculum, it's the membership in a community.

JW: Is that still true in your MFA workshops?

PL: No. Because there are many more barriers in academia, and to be honest, I'm more protective of my free time now. I gave so much when I was working with the kids because it was an adventure. Sometimes I think of it was the most heroic period of my life—I was doing seemingly altruistic work and I was learning so much. Now I'm more apt to go in, teach a workshop, and come home, and protect my writing hours. I'm not as involved in the life of the college—though I'm still involved in my individual students.

As far as curriculum is concerned, I alternate—I go through periods when I use a lot of assignments and periods when I don't use any. I try to bring students to the point where they can write without a prompt. I don't want them to become too dependent on a prompt. After *Being with Children*, I gave a lot of workshops for teachers. I would go around the country and pretend to be an educational expert. I would see teachers taking notes and thinking, "Oh, well, maybe I can use this on Monday." I would think, "Well, I can use it on Monday, because it's coming out of my practice and my obsession, but whether you can use it, I'm not so sure."

JW: How would assignments differ based on the teacher who's using them?

PL: Well, for example—I've done assignments where you write to music. This is one of the most standard assignments, nothing original about it. I put in music that I thought kids would really like to write to, because it's more problematic music, such as Tchaikovsky or Borodin. Now, it just so happens that I've never loved Tchaikovsky or Borodin. I prefer drier music like Bach. I once put on a record of Tchaikovsky, and the kids must have seen just in the way I put the record on the turntable that I didn't like it that much, that I liked the Bach more. They responded more to the Bach than the Tchaikovsky, even though they should have responded more to the Tchaikovsky because it has more imagery in it.

This is all part of the weird exchange that goes on in teaching. It's something I wrote about in *Being which Children* and I continue to think about, which is, in the broadest possible sense, the eros of teaching. There are feelings that go between your students and you, and a lot of times your students do things for you, to please you. The whole question of "what is children's writing" is mediated or made more impure necessarily by the relationship with the grownup. I came to understand that I needed to embrace this impurity; I needed to understand that my being there was going to distort or contort or push in a certain way the writing that came about. I just had to accept that. I had to accept that part of teaching is leaving an imprint. You're not just facilitating—it's a fantasy that you can just facilitate. You're also manipulating and

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You're not going to like all children equally in a class. You're going to be much more charmed by some children than others. . . . What I felt was that I needed to accept the guilt that I can't love all my students in the same way—just to understand and try to correct for that. . . . I could never get to the second stage unless I acknowledged the first stage.

and I don't mean that. I just mean that these feelings are an important part of any teaching situation. Instead of being frightened by these feelings, it's important to know that they're going to be there, and it's human.

For instance, you're not going to like all children equally in a class. You're going to be much more charmed by some children than others. Now, mothers of big families are accustomed to saying, "I love all of my children equally." It's very rarely true, by the way. What I felt was that I needed to accept the guilt that I can't love all my students in the same way—just to understand and try to correct for that. Let's say there was a certain kid who was particularly loud or something like that. I had to understand first that I was beginning to dislike the kid, and then correct for it and find something interesting in the kid. I could never get to the second stage unless I acknowledged the first stage.

JW: Is that also true for the writing they produce? If you like a certain type of writing better, does that affect the way you respond to it in a classroom?

PL: Inevitably it does. For instance, I like humor in writing a lot. Some kind of comic sensibility will go a long way with me. Conversely, if writing is very solemn, if it seems to take itself too seriously, I'm always put off a little bit. In a way, with my older students, I'm trying to teach them to develop a more comic or ironic attitude toward life. Not just for the benefit of their writing, but so they won't be so depressed or unhappy.

JW: You're preparing them to deal with the writer's life.

PL: [*laughs*] Exactly.

JW: Let's talk about your writing life. Your new book, *Two Marriages*, is two novellas with very different characters and situations. Did those two stories evolve simultaneously? Did they feed off each other?

PL: They fed off each other because they were ideas of marriage. They both involve, you might say, the pursuit of happiness. I guess I'm somewhat dubious about the pursuit of happiness. I think that happiness visits us from time to time, but we can't necessarily lock it in at a certain interest rate. It's not going to be there continuously. Both the men in these two novellas are trying to lock in happiness in some way instead of recognizing that it comes and goes.

controlling, and ultimately you have to accept the fact that this is going to happen. You say, well, I do know something about this, so I'm going to manipulate and try to get certain results.

JW: Do you do that in a group setting or one on one with the kids?

PL: Either way. It's all one on one ultimately, in that even if you're in a group setting, you're establishing individual relationships with each student. I know it sounds a little bit like being a therapist,

JW: Did you know you were going to write novellas from the start?

PL: Yes, I like the novella form very much. Also, because I see myself mostly as an essayist, a nonfiction writer, for me to write fiction is a gamble and a challenge. So I think, if I write a novella, it won't destroy my life for five years. I can get in and get out faster. Maybe I can sustain it for 150 pages but I couldn't sustain it for 500 pages.

I have this idea, which is probably wrong, that the novella has a tropism toward the comic because it's so condensed. It shows human nature in a more spasmodic form. It's hard to be tragic in such a short space.

I think also, because I am married, I knew I could not write personal essays about marriage or I would get in deep trouble. So I didn't write about myself—I wrote about fictional characters and took some of the anxieties, desires, discontents that might be in my own marriage, and fictionalized them and gave them a whole different narrative form.

JW: Do you do that in other works of fiction as well? That is, is your inclination to be a nonfiction writer first and then, if you can't do that, write fiction?

PL: I think, yes, I'm always aware that everything comes from an autobiographical source. Some writers are very sensitive about this. They say, "it's not me." Well, I've written this guy who's obviously not me—he's far wealthier than me, we know that. He's of Hispanic-Catholic origin. I'm not. On the other hand, I know that I'm taking certain tendencies of myself and twisting them a little. For instance, when I wrote the novel *The Rug Merchant*, I was taking a character who was much more refined in a way, and more passive. I tend to not be so passive and I'm more impatient. I'm a ruder person than this character. It was almost like an experiment: what would happen if I didn't insist on always doing things, but if I were more passive? Maybe my life would have gone in this direction. It's the road not taken.

JW: Is the process of writing for you both a joy and a labor?

PL: It's more a joy than a labor. I know that Red Smith said that writing was like opening up a vein. I've never felt that to be the case with me. On the contrary, I've almost never had writer's block—maybe when I was much younger, but not in my professional life. I want to write, given my druthers. If you were to tell me that nothing I write from now on would ever be published, I think I would still write. It's a way for me to make sense of life.

JW: Do you think that all writers should be readers first?

PL: My first love is reading. Before I was a writer, I was a reader, and I still feel that there are many, many more books to read, and we can learn from them. I believe that the principle way we learn is not in writing workshops but through reading books.

If I don't read a certain amount every day, I get cranky. I was on my way up here in the subway and I wanted to read this Anthony Trollope novel that I'd never

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My goal as a writer is to show how complicated things are, not necessarily to resolve anxieties or uncertainties. So maybe in a larger sense, I do feel I'm doing something moral, because I feel I'm increasing people's tolerance for irresolution, for ambiguity, for understanding that everyone has his reasons—that it isn't simply a question of a cheating wife or a cheating husband. I think the ability to identify with human beings in all their flaws is a kind of moral act.

too solemn. It has to be fun for me on some level. As soon as I think of something that's mischievous, it's hard for me to think of something that's socially responsible at the same time.

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JW: This sense of mischief—in *Being with Children*, you talk about how the concept of “play” is really valuable for children. But there's typically no room for “playing” in a more professional workshop environment. Do you think there should be?

PL: Oh, absolutely. I would love sometime to adapt the ideas of *Being with Children* to graduate students. But I think there's certainly room for play in terms of their experimenting in their manuscripts. If they come in and they think they can't afford to fail, then they're going to write something very conventional and predictable. But if you give them room to try and fall on their face, and convince them that it's not going to be the end of their career, then you're likely to get a looser environment and a more playful one.

Just in the conversation that occurs in discussing a piece, I try not to censor myself too much. That's something that I learned from teaching and also my writing—to invite any thought that will come along. When I'm teaching, sometimes I'll get this insight that something else is going on in this piece or with this person. I'll have this moment of indecision, like—should I say it or not? Am I presuming too much? Am I crossing a line? But more often than not I say it, because I'm trying to model for them what this lack of censorship is all about, so if they watch me doing it, they'll feel more comfortable doing it, both in class and outside of class. In other words, the world isn't going to come to an end if you say what you think. 

read . . . and then I've always wanted to read de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*—I've only read sections of it. And then I thought, well, you're just going on the subway after all. I went by a newsstand and ended up reading the *Village Voice* instead of Trollope or de Tocqueville.

JW: Teachers very clearly occupy a role of social relevance. Do writers have a similar social responsibility?

PL: Probably not. When I write, I don't think, this is going to improve the lot of the working class or bring about a more ecologically balanced planet. I write usually out of an impulse of mischief. Something has to amuse me, or it has to seem like I'm doing something impish.

That's how I get over the sense of it being