JOYCE CAROL OATES

Teaches the Art of the Short Story

MASTERCLASS

CH 01

INTRODUCTION

"A born writer wants to tell a story."

There's something comforting in this statement: a simple outlining of the writer's task, a universal and almost primal instinct that writers share. If you think you're a writer, says Joyce, it's likely that you are. How each writer tells his or her story, however, is a gradual and layered process.

This class, inspired by the format that Joyce uses with her undergraduate students at Princeton, focuses on the craft of writing the short story. You will receive writing exercises and assignments, explore the power of voice and perspective, learn about workshopping and revising, see what it means to "read as a writer," and start finding the form that your stories can—and must—take. Joyce designs this course as a focus on process; a short story or a book is a wonderful product, but discovery and growth happen in the actual writing of that product.

This class will engage with both shorter and longer forms of prose and assign a variety of writing exercises and prompts focused on working with scene, perspective, journaling, and more. Regardless of your perceived skill level, by the end of this course, you will have experimented with multiple narrative perspectives, revised your prose, analyzed your own literary influences, and taken direct inspiration from both your past and present.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

1. Dedicate a notebook to your work for this class. Throughout the course you'll be offered writing assignments, like freewriting and interviews, and you'll have opportunities to take your notebook—your writing mind—out into the world to record what you see, feel, and hear.

"On The Art Of the Short Story": Joyce Carol Oates Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

CH 02

PRINCIPLES OF WRITING SHORT FICTION

"Constant interruptions are the destruction of the imagination."

Everybody has a story. Fiction writing is a way to make sense—or make a story—out of the events and emotions in your life: loss, jealousy, anxiety, love. Some of those events may present themselves as mysteries, especially if you're pulling source material from your childhood—when we're young, Joyce says, adults are a mystery to us. Why are they doing what they're doing? Why do they cry or rage or stay silent? As children, we inhabit the adult world but don't quite understand it; we confront mysteries every day.

Joyce encourages you to retain a childlike sense of mystery as you engage in the writing process, seeking to understand the power structures—the institution of marriage, the government, patriarchy, the internet, the nuclear family—that keep us "in thrall." Many of these subjects can be intimidating and even frightening, and you can't overcome them by power and force. But, as Joyce says, "the writer has the power to analyze and dissect society." We overcome these structures by outsmarting them.

Key Term
Synecdoche: A figure of speech in which a part of the whole is used to represent the whole, or vice versa. Think of the way "Coke" is often used to refer to all sodas, or how "Los Angeles wins by three" is meant to indicate Los Angeles's basketball team wins by three points.

But how do we analyze the world around us in a way that makes sense? How can we dissect society and turn it into a story? Joyce suggests four ways of structuring your storytelling practices: economizing your characters, writing about pivotal events, burning through the first draft, and prioritizing your time.

FOCUS ON CRITICAL CHARACTERS

Joyce is interested in people and their personalities—largely because personalities are so varied. She encourages you to get to know your characters as if they are people you've met in real life: people with repressed memories, hopes, and regrets unique to them. It's important to choose characters who fascinate you; the short story can be an exploration into why exactly this character is so important or unique to your perspective. As you think about your characters or even write your first draft, challenge yourself to understand how and why their motivations drive the story, what their background is like, and how their life experiences will determine the way they move and act on the page.

In short fiction, there's a limit to the number of characters who can function in a story. Imagine that each is a hired actor in a movie. These actors need to be paid, so each must be worth the money. If a character doesn't need to be present in the story, they can (and should) be cut. Their function can be merged into the personality of a different character who pulls more weight.

WRITE ABOUT PIVOTAL EVENTS

It's important to be deliberate and economical in terms of events and place. In writing a novel about Marilyn Monroe (*Blonde*), Joyce was selective about which pivotal moments to include: For example, she wrote about only one of Monroe's miscarriages rather than all of them and only one foster home in which Monroe lived rather than several. Joyce calls this the art of synecdoche: choosing which small parts of the narrative are essential to the story you want to tell and which aren't. Art doesn't exactly imitate life—we don't need to see characters brush their teeth day after day. Instead, we need to see them in pivotal or profound moments in order to heighten drama and limit (or structure) the time frame.

For that reason, most of Joyce's stories focus on personalities (people) at one momentous time. There are, of course, examples of authors—Tolstoy and Chekhov, say—who have written short stories that occur over a long period of time, but Joyce encourages you to start developing your skills and flexing your narrative muscles by focusing on more finite amounts of time and singular events. Ideally, a story can be read in one sitting; narrow and intense experiences are excellent content.

We can return once more to the "paid actor" analogy: The short story's set (or stage) is small, and writers must fill it economically.

Learn More: The Unities and Aristotle's *Poetics*

Although there's certainly a precedent for short fiction that takes on larger expanses of time and place, there's a classical basis for thinking of the short story as a small, well-kept stage. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle prescribes three ideas of unity in drama: unity of place, unity of time, and unity of action. Literally speaking, this meant that dramas were intended to deliver one unified plot over one unified day occurring within one unified location. Although most writers no longer strictly adhere to this theory, it can be helpful to think of the Unities when crafting a short story that takes place during a finite amount of time with a finite group of characters.

Learn More: *The Philosophy of Composition*

The Edgar Allan Poe text that Joyce references is an 1846 essay titled "The Philosophy of Composition." In this essay, craft master Poe expounds on his theories of fiction. His "Unity of Effect" theory encourages writers to deliberately focus their prose on the unified emotion they wish to evoke in the reader. He also proposes that works of art should be short enough to be consumed in a single sitting.

BURN THROUGH THE FIRST DRAFT

The first draft, Joyce says, should be blazing. Let the fires of creativity burn, and write your first draft as fast as you can. Once you finish the first draft, you'll have a feeling of power and autonomy over this integral first step in the process—you can take weeks to revise and craft the piece once you've allowed for the creative energy to manifest your original idea.

REVISE RELENTLESSLY

Even though Joyce suggests writing the first draft of a story as quickly as possible—in one sitting, even—she rewrites her pieces countless times after finishing them.

To structure a revision, start looking at your story in parts. For example, reread just the beginning of your story as many times as possible, and change things along the way. You might end up cutting paragraphs to achieve quicker pacing, focusing on the nitty-gritty syntax of your sentences, or adding sections to the story in order to give the piece more depth.

The more you read your story, the faster your reading pace becomes; this emulates the experience of your actual audience. For Joyce, this experience often leads her to enhance certain "sketchy" parts by bulking up scenes, description, and dialogue. Be on the lookout for those same "sketchy" passages in your own piece as you read, reread, and revise.

Writing is a process. Burning through the first draft is important, but it's unlikely that your final product will resemble that first attempt. Don't rush yourself, and give the process time.

WEIGH STORY AND LANGUAGE

"There are two ways of looking at writing," says Joyce. The first is that you're telling a story transparently—plot, action, dialogue, and characters who are precise and easily understood. The other is that your language is telling a story unto itself. The decisions you make about the language you use can be another layer of storytelling.

Certain writers, like George Orwell, are interested in using language to render a world in precise and transparent detail (indeed, in Orwell's *1984*, words are weaponized by the government in order to manipulate people's thoughts). Other authors, like Joyce herself, are more interested in what and how their language contributes to the experience.

Playing with the language of the story is a craft in and of itself: You'll have to make decisions about how long you want your paragraphs to be, how fast you want your story to read, which characters do or don't have dialogue, and how much description is applied to setting, among other things.

PROTECT YOUR TIME

The writing process differs for every writer, but one thing applies across the board: The worst thing for writing is interruption.

Sometimes we interrupt ourselves. We look at our phones or the news, breaking our concentration and slowing our creative momentum. Other times external factors, like family or work pressures, break our concentration and remove us from the writing process.

Being proactive and protecting your time is paramount. Joyce has learned to utilize times of day that tend to be quieter—morning and night—to write. However possible, we need to learn to go into a room, close the door, and give our writing the concentration it requires. How you manage this task is up to you.

Learn More: *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf believed that having the time, space, and resources to concentrate was essential to being a writer. She also believed that for women, this was particularly challenging to achieve. In 1929, Woolf published the essay collection *A Room of One's Own*, a feminist text about women and art-making. In this collection, Woolf states frankly that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." She also creates a fictionalized version of William Shakespeare's sister to demonstrate her point. Woolf uses this character, Judith, to show that even if Shakespeare's sister had her brother's talent as a writer, she would have been denied the education, resources, and space to manifest these skills.

Further Reading
A Room of One's Own,
Virginia Woolf,
Mariner Books, 1989

GET OUTSIDE OPINIONS

Once you've rewritten your story, it's important to workshop the piece with at least one (if not more) readers. Writing workshops, either formal ones through a university or informal groups among writerly friends, can help you gain a new perspective

on your fiction by giving you insight into what's working and not working in a story (what, if anything, is confusing; which characters seem over- or under-developed; how the dialogue is landing). You may not end up making changes based on these opinions, but it can be incredibly illuminating to know how your story appears to an external audience so that you can be more strategic with your revisions. Letting others read your work can be intimidating and scary, but ultimately you are writing for an audience and you want your stories to be read. Practice taking criticism. If nothing else, workshopping will give you clarity on how your fiction is being received.

PRACTICE FINISHING

Joyce says there is a neurophysiological impact when you finish something, including a short story: When you write or type that last sentence, you will experience a surge of energy. This is a galvanizing force for new writers, and that is one reason Joyce suggests that new writers begin with short fiction rather than a novel. Novel-writing can be exhausting and long—it could take years—and the shadow that novel-writing casts is likely to be oppressive for new writers. Allow yourself to have a few surges of energy in the early stages of your writing life by starting small and finishing your narratives.

CAPITALIZE ON REJECTION

It's inevitable that you'll have a short story that is rejected from a publication. Look at this rejection as an opportunity to view the piece with "colder and crueler eyes," to borrow a phrase from Joyce. When Joyce has been rejected, she has used the experience as an opportunity to revise.

You want your best work out in the world, so don't force yourself to publish too soon. Rejection is a chance to make sure that you believe in the draft before sharing it with readers.

"If I had time, I would tell you about all the writers—from James Joyce on to people you don't know—who were very lucky that their first novels were rejected," says Joyce. James Joyce's first novel was rejected, so know that you're in good company if your work doesn't get published on its first (or even 50th) try.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. In your notebook or on the computer, write a scene that occurs between no more than four characters in one single location over a unified period of time (a morning, a day, or even a long meal).

2. Write a character outline. Think of a character who interests you—it could be a totally fictionalized person or based on a person you know—and write a background for them. What was their childhood like? What are their significant memories? What are their regrets? What do they desperately want? What are they good at? Bad at? Now ask yourself: Based on the outline you've created, what's a particularly interesting, sinister, funny, or dramatic situation in which this character can become involved? Use this situation as the basis for a story.

3. Burn through a scene: Give yourself 45 minutes to write a scene. Burn through the first draft of this scene, allowing yourself to get as much of your words down on paper as quickly as possible. For now, don't revise—you can come back to that later.

4. Take one of your working stories and spend a writing session revising it. Break it into parts: intro, scene one, scene two (and so on), end. Spend at least 20 minutes revising each part, focusing on sentence structure, pacing, language choice, and dialogue. Try to get to the point where you're reading your draft with the eyes of a third-party observer.

5. Practice workshopping by asking a friend or colleague to read your piece, even if you don't feel like it's ready for public consumption. Give yourself grace when it comes to feedback; all writers, even the most brilliant ones, not only benefit from but need editors. Remember, you don't have to implement any or all of the suggestions you get, but you can take them under consideration when it comes to writing and revising.

Further Reading

Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews, Edgar Allan Poe, Library of America, 1984

Poetics, Aristotle, Penguin Classics, 1997

Blonde, Joyce Carol Oates, HarperCollins, 2001

Homesick for Another World, Ottessa Moshfegh, Penguin Press, 2017

"The Fruit of My Woman," Han Kang, *Granta*, 2016

CH 03

JOURNALS: OBSERVING THE WORLD

"Self-expression in a journal could turn into a work of art."

SHARPEN YOUR POWER OF OBSERVATION

On some level, a motive for all writing is self-expression. Journaling is an effective way to keep in contact with your own thoughts. Joyce has kept a diary or journal since she was 21 and has found it helpful not only for self-expression and self-knowledge but for observation of the world around her.

Taking down your thoughts before they escape you is a good way to sharpen your observational skills, especially when you're traveling. Although the prose itself doesn't need to be elegant, it's important to use the modes of narrative in your journaling. Push yourself to describe the places you visit—who populates them, how they look, what they smell like, what sort of food or plant life or architecture you see—and record dialogue you overhear or conversations you have with the people you meet. Becoming familiar with how people speak and the subjects that move them in conversation will help both with writing dialogue and plotting your fiction.

Some of these entries will be ordinary. Some will be inherently interesting. Some may even start out ordinary and become interesting on repeat readings. With distance, a handful of these observations will become profound and potentially engender some ideas for a story. It's virtually impossible to predict which notes and observations will resonate 3, 10, or 20 years into the future, so it's important to write them all down and have faith in this part of the writing process.

WRITE AT ODD HOURS

Scheduling your writing time is important, but it's also a worthwhile practice to write at odd and spontaneous hours, when your mind and mood are altered.

Joyce encourages you to do assignments quickly and give yourself no more than 40 minutes to write. A limited time frame gives you the freedom to not fuss over your work and to write into the rush of creativity. Similarly, Joyce encourages you to write when you're incredibly tired, busy, or even feverish. After allowing a new mental state into your process, you might look over what you've done and see something with new potential.

CAPTURE YOUR DAYDREAMS

Allow yourself to daydream about your stories and take notes. Go on a walk, Joyce says, and then return home and write down any thoughts about a particular story: characters, details, dialogue. If you repeat this action for a few days, you'll likely have the disjointed outline of a story.

Learn More: Physical Activity and an Active Writing Life

Getting out of the house and moving—going for a walk or run—has been a part of Joyce's process for years. Many writers have found physical activity to be a way to both activate new ideas and facilitate the creative processing that physicality and distance create.

"In running the mind flies with the body; the mysterious efflorescence of language seems to pulse in the brain," Joyce wrote for *The New York Times* in 1999. Many writers, including Haruki Murakami, Malcolm Gladwell, and Don DeLillo, have felt a similar connection between exercise and writing.

Further Reading

Hawthorne's First Diary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Kessinger Publishing, 2010

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Henry David Thoreau, New York Review of Books Classics, 2009

The Journals of John Cheever, John Cheever, Vintage, 2008

The Diary of Anaïs Nin Vol. I, Anaïs Nin, Mariner Books, 1969

Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963, Susan Sontag, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008

Memory Wall, Anthony Doerr, Scribner, 1994

Holidays on Ice, David Sedaris, Back Bay Books, 2010

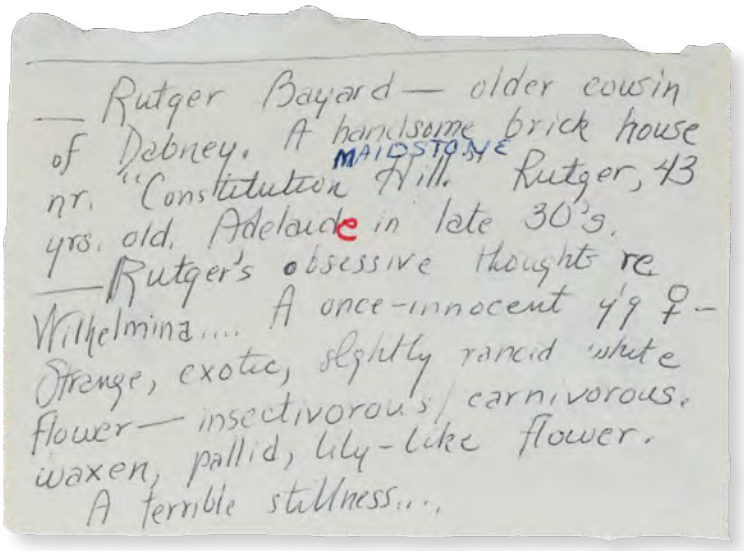
The White Album, Joan Didion, FSG Classics, 2009

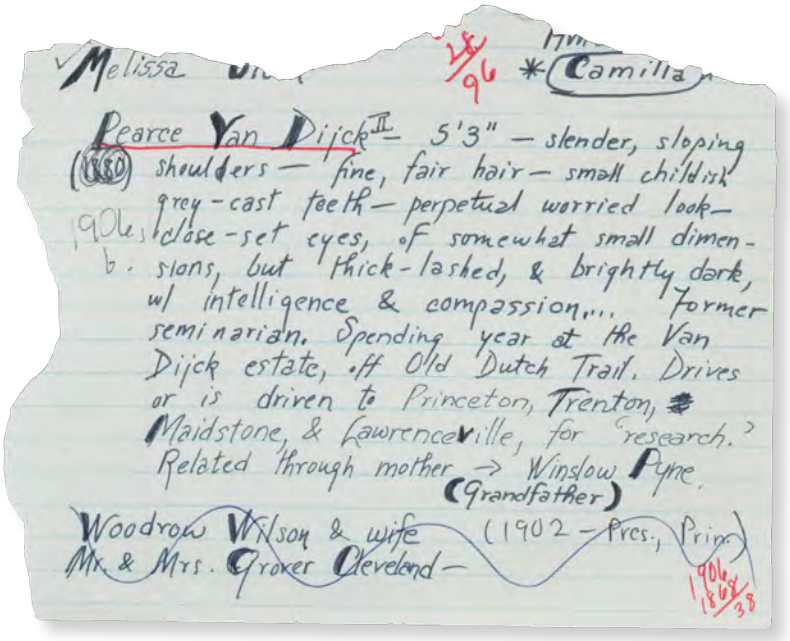
Further Reading

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running, Haruki Murakami, Vintage, 2009

White Noise, Don DeLillo, Penguin, 2009

However you do it, engaging in an activity that activates different parts of your brain and body is an important aspect of the writing process. Running, painting, playing music, going on a walk, or any other activity that stimulates you in a different way can lead to a new perspective on current work or pique entirely new ideas for fiction.





Syracuse archival material - Joyce's notes: Joyce Carol Oates Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

MAKE CHECKLISTS OF DETAILS

When an idea for a story starts percolating in your mind, do some research. Let's say you (like Joyce) want to write a story about Marilyn Monroe: You might study her films, visit the Los Angeles neighborhoods where she lived (if you're able), imagine scenes between her family, analyze her iconic fashion choices, and comb through her past interviews. Think about your setting and motivations for writing, and then make a checklist of details you might want to include in your story.

When Joyce set a novel in the 19th century, she made many notes—not all of which she used—on the kind of furniture, objects, and other things that might populate this world. Then she marked off the details that she included in the book, as if she were completing a checklist.

Learn More: Worldbuilding

While it's most often referenced in discussions of fantasy writing and science fiction, the concept of "worldbuilding" is now beginning to take on a more universal meaning. Understanding the details and nuances of the world, or setting, of your fiction is key to getting your readers to suspend their disbelief. Whether it's a suburban street or outer space, Hogwarts or Narnia, your characters and settings need to feel full, layered, and real in order for readers to get lost in a fictional world. Otherwise, they'll lose interest and put your book down.

Fantasy writers might draw maps of the realm in which their story takes place (think Middle-Earth in *The Lord of the Rings*) or even create fictional family trees (like the Black family tree in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). Detailing the subtleties of 19th-century furniture and writing physical and botanical notes on a particularly relevant flower—as Joyce shows us—are also examples of an author adding details and logic to a narrative setting.

A WRITER'S DIARY BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf was known for her polished, mannered prose and fiction. Her language in her books is stylized, impressionistic, and floating.

Her journals, however, reveal a narrator who is caustic, funny, and sharp: In *A Writer's Diary*, a collection of Woolf's journaling published posthumously by her husband, Woolf is absolutely uncensored. The kind of character observations and judgments she makes in her journals could never be found in her fiction, at least not in the same form. Writing in a journal or diary is a way to record the raw thoughts and observations you have during the day. Like Woolf, you will be able to find a language and form for this information later. (Though don't be afraid of letting that more intimate voice make its way into your fiction—Joyce herself prefers Woolf's journals to her books.) See an excerpt from Woolf's diary below:

An Excerpt From

A WRITER'S DIARY

Virginia Woolf

Date: Tuesday, a day in March, 1930

All because I have to buy myself a dress this afternoon, & cant think what I want, I cannot read. I have written, fairly well—but it is a difficult book—at Waves; but cant keep on after 12; & now shall write here, for 20 minutes.

My impressions of Margaret [Llewelyn Davies] & Lilian [Harris] at Monks House were of great lumps of grey coat; straggling wisps of hair; hats floppy & home made; thick woolen stockings; black shoes, many wraps, shabby handbags, & shapelessness, & shabbiness & dreariness & drabness unspeakable. A tragedy in its way. Margaret at any rate deserved better of life than this dishevelled & undistinguished end. They are in lodgings—as usual. Have, as usual, a wonderful Xtian Scientist landlady; are somehow rejected by active life; sit knitting perhaps & smoking cigarettes in the parlour where they have their meals, where there is always left a dish of oranges & bananas. I doubt if they have enough to eat. They seem to me flabby & bloodless, spread into rather toneless chunks of flesh; having lost any commerce with looking glasses. So we showed them the garden, gave them tea (& I dont think an iced cake had come Lilian's way this 6 weeks) & then—oh the dismal sense of people stranded, wanting to be energised; drifting—all woolen & hairy. (It is odd how the visual impression dominates.) There is a jay blue spark in Margaret's eye, now & then, But she had not been out of the lodging for 5 weeks because of the East wind. Her mind has softened & wrinkled, sitting indoors with the oranges & cigarettes. Lilian is almost stone deaf, & mumbles & crumbles, emerging clearly only once, to discuss politics. Something has blunted Margaret's edge, rusted it, worn it, long before its time. Must old age be so shapeless?

"A Writer's Diary" by Virginia Woolf: The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Virginia Woolf

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take your notebook with you when you leave for the day. Throughout the morning and afternoon, take notes on the world around you. Make sure to include snippets of dialogue (active or overheard), and take the time to describe the places you go: a sea of cubicles, a public park, or a city street. Make sure you take as many notes as you can, as often as possible.

   That evening, go over your notes. Which ones pop out as interesting? Are any confusing or mysterious? Are there some notes you don't even remember writing? Use one of these notes to write a scene of that specific moment, fictionalizing as much as you want (for example, the protagonist doesn't have to be you; it can be someone else entirely). Give yourself 40 minutes, and burn through the first draft.

2. When do you usually write? Do you take mornings, afternoons, or evenings to sit down and work on fiction? Figure out the average time you usually write, and then plan to sit down and write exactly 12 hours later: If you often write at 6 p.m., try 6 a.m.

3. Go on a walk and tell yourself a story. Allow yourself to daydream details as you walk. When you get home, write down what you can remember about these daydreams in your notebook. Chronological order isn't necessarily relevant. Include snippets of dialogue or even out-of-context observations that you thought up while out on your walk.

   Later, transcribe these notes into an electronic document. You'll have a disjointed outline of a story, perhaps with out-of-order scenes and dialogue. Put these scenes in order, and you'll be well on your way to writing your first draft.

Further Reading

A Writer's Diary,
Virginia Woolf,
Martino Fine Books, 2012

Moments of Being,
Virginia Woolf,
Mariner Books, 1985

4. *Moments of Being* is a collection of essays by Virginia Woolf—the only autobiographical work she ever wrote. A "moment of being" is an intense experience of emotion and new perspective (a child learning of death for the first time, an adult reuniting with someone they thought they lost, suddenly seeing a mundane object in a completely new way). Read some or all of Woolf's collection, then think of your own "moment of being" (it can be morbid or joyful, excavated from childhood or taken from much more recent memory), and spend 40 minutes writing about that experience. The account doesn't have to be entirely accurate; in fact, use fictional elements—like description, dialogue, and economy of characters—as you write this memory.

5 WRITERS ON THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF KEEPING A DIARY

ANAÏS NIN

A near-lifelong diarist, Nin started journaling in 1914 at the age of 11 and didn't stop until her death in 1977. Her collected journal entries constitute her most influential and admired work. She expounded upon her diary-keeping process in a 1946 lecture at Dartmouth, which later became the chapbook *On Writing*. "Keeping a Diary all my life helped me to discover some basic elements essential to the vitality of writing…of these [discoveries] the most important is naturalness and spontaneity. These elements sprung, I observed, from my freedom of selection: in the Diary I only wrote of what interested me genuinely, what I felt most ***strongly*** at the moment, and I found this fervor, this enthusiasm produced a vividness which often withered in the formal work. Improvisation, free association, obedience to mood, impulse, brought forth countless images, portraits, descriptions, impressionistic sketches, symphonic experiments, from which I could dip at any time for material."

SUSAN SONTAG

Cited as one of the most important writers of her generation, and known for her many works of nonfiction including "Notes on 'Camp'" and *Against Interpretation*, Sontag saw journaling as a deep and rewarding part of the writing process. In the collection *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963*, Sontag writes: "Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one's private, secret thoughts—like a confidante who is deaf, dumb, and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself."

DAVID SEDARIS

Beloved by critics and readers, Sedaris made a name for himself by blending brilliant humor and deep emotion in his personal essays. His debut collection came out in 1994, and he has gone on to publish multiple bestselling essay and short fiction collections, including *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (whose title was lifted from a childhood spent attempting to correct a speech impediment). In a 2009 interview, he told *The New Yorker*, "I've been keeping a diary for 33 years and write in it every morning. Most of it's just whining, but every so often there'll be something I can use later: a joke, a description, a quote. It's an invaluable aid when it comes to winning arguments. 'That's not what you said on February 3, 1996,' I'll say to someone."

JOAN DIDION

Didion is a writer who's often credited with changing Los Angeles's understanding of itself. Her essays on loss, culture, art, and place are considered some of the most important pieces of writing in a generation. Through it all, Didion journaled consistently. In her essay collection ***Slouching Towards Bethlehem***, she wrote: "Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss."

ANTHONY DOERR

Pulitzer Prize winner Doerr writes fiction, memoir, and short fiction that almost seem to have come from another time. Known for their rich and elegant prose, his stories often deal with war, loss, poverty, hope, and, ultimately, love. What he had to say about his diary in his memoir, ***Four Seasons in Rome***, then, is only fitting: "A good journal entry—like a good song, or sketch, or photograph—ought to break up the habitual and lift away the film that forms over the eye, the finger, the tongue, the heart. A good journal entry ought to be a love letter to the world."

CH 04

IDEAS: EXPLORING TABOOS AND DARKNESS

"It's an interesting paradox that the most powerful writing often comes from areas that are repressed."

When Joyce began publishing, women were expected to write about the domestic sphere: the household, family, raising children. So Joyce's novels, which tackled larger political topics, were first met with some hostility. "Leave the novel of social unrest to Norman Mailer," said one reviewer.

Though fiction about family and domestic life—by both women and men—has an incredibly profound place in literature, it isn't the type of fiction that inspired Joyce to write. So she forged ahead, understanding that she was writing her own narratives that functioned independently of her contemporaries.

Key Term
Elliptical language: Language that is deliberately mysterious and deliberately obscures some of its meaning. Prose marked by a stripped-down and economical style, often without adjectives and adverbs.

FACE THE DARKEST ELEMENTS

Write about what haunts you. Look to the past, to history, perhaps even to your own family and ancestry to find the stories that haven't—or maybe couldn't—be told.

Joyce has found herself dealing with domestic violence in her writing time and again. She links this directly to growing up next to a family that was terrorized by an abusive father. In the 1940s, no one called the police for that sort of thing, and words like *domestic abuse* weren't a part of the contemporary lexicon, she says, so much of her own fiction has dealt with this subject and its surrounding injustices.

Writing about what haunts you—the stories, images, and facts of life that trouble you on a deep level—is frightening. But there is a profound power in facing these fears.

WRITE TABOO SUBJECTS ELLIPTICALLY

In his seminal novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Oscar Wilde writes about homosexuality and male beauty using artful prose. In 19th-century London, where Wilde lived and wrote, homosexuality was illegal, sometimes even penalized by death. Although Wilde writes into his own sexual oppression and repression in this novel, the subversive nature of the prose—the elliptical language Wilde employed in order to obfuscate such a taboo subject—is part of what makes the book so powerful. Would *The Picture of Dorian Gray* be as transcendent if homosexuality had been accepted and more normalized at the time of its writing? Joyce isn't sure.

Learn More: Oscar Wilde

Born in Ireland in 1854, Oscar Wilde was a darling of London high society known for his intelligence, literary talent, humor, and aesthetic sensibility. He was famous for his comic plays *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both of which remain popular on stages today. He was imprisoned for homosexuality (which at the time was a criminal offense) and known to have what is now considered taboo and predatory relationships with teenage boys and young men. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is his only novel.

Further Reading

We Were the Mulvaneys, Joyce Carol Oates, Plume, 1997

Rape: A Love Story, Joyce Carol Oates, De Capo Press, 2004

Tampa, Alyssa Nutting, Ecco, 2013

The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde, Vintage, 2011

The Liars' Club, Mary Karr, Penguin Books, 2005

Darkness Visible, William Styron, Vintage, 1992

The Widower's Notebook, Jonathan Santlofer, Penguin Books, 2018

Learn More: Taboo Fiction

Many books that rocked the literary world explore taboo topics—sex, mortality, identity, violence. And they've made their way into the artistic canon because it's precisely those subjects that get to the essence of humanity and pierce readers' hearts and minds. If you're looking for some examples of taboo writing, start with the books on this list:

- *Tampa* by Alyssa Nutting is a rare novel that examines a disturbing sexual relationship between an adult woman and an adolescent boy (teacher and student). It was published in 2013.
- *Junky* by William S. Burroughs is an excruciating semi-autobiographical account of addiction, drug use, and drug dealing.
- *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides brings an intimate portrayal of an anatomically intersex narrator to the mainstream public.
- *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner questions the existence of God—a rare and daring act in the American South in 1930.
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison tackles racism, socially created identities, incest, and child molestation against the backdrop of Ohio during the Great Depression. Public schools have attempted to ban it from libraries several times.
- *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov details the narrator's frightening, paternal sexual relationship with a young girl.
- *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy follows an adolescent runaway from Tennessee, employing extreme violence in its prose.

Read more on Book Riot.

YOUR DARKNESS HAS AN AUDIENCE

Your darkness—the parts of yourself and your mind that you might consider vulgar, sinister, tragic, or strange—has an audience. People commonly experience these more troubling characteristics and thoughts, though most have no outlet for them.

Writing into darkness, be it your own or something you've fabricated, may garner a surprising audience that finds your work liberating. Mary Karr's first memoir of alcoholism, *The Liars' Club*, was a *New York Times* bestseller that, says Joyce, "hit a nerve of candor in young women." Alcoholism in young women was a relatively new subject to address in literature or in any public sphere, and people were ready and waiting for a writer to explore it. The book was a harbinger of the revitalized appreciation for the memoir in American literature. William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, a memoir of his descent into depression, and Jonathan Santlofer's *The Widower's Notebook*, a memoir about losing his wife, each found audiences that felt seen by the writers' individual accounts of tragedy and darkness.

People, Joyce says, are often "yearning to share" in your dark moments. In writing, you create an outlet for both yourself and others.

CH 05 STRUCTURE AND FORM

"There's only one rule of show business, or writing, and that's don't be boring."

BE BOLD WITH FORM

The most important rule to remember in fiction (and in art in general) is a simple one: Don't be boring. Experimenting with form—surprising yourself and readers with structure—will pay off.

Joyce often asks her students to write a story that simply sets an evocative, detailed scene. Rather than having a narrative arc, the prose should focus on elements like detail, character portraits, color, sound, movement, and dialogue that are not necessarily explained or contextualized for the reader. Experimental moves like this force us to look at narrative and its paradigms—like scene-setting, narration, and description—in a new way, with new motivations behind our process. Other more experimental structural premises might come with setting a story in the form of a question-and-answer series; a set of answers without questions, a compilation of different individuals' memories of the same event, a totally nameless narrator, or even a book without individual characters. When you're planning out a story, challenge yourself to find an unusual way of telling it. For example,

Key Terms

Declarative sentence: A sentence that clearly states something (a fact or opinion). It is a sentence that specifically relays information.

Typography: The arrangement of letters and words on the printed page.

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* uses the nameless, plural narrator of a group of local boys, simply referred to as "we," to tell the mysterious, dark story of five sisters in town. By making this stark decision, Eugenides amplifies the mystery, loneliness, and voyeurism in his subjects. *McGlue*, a novella by Ottessa Moshfegh, uses fast, jolting, and truncated prose to mimic the epic hangover and delirium of the eponymous narrator, an alcoholic deckhand in the mid-1800s. In Eric Puchner's short story "Essay #3: Leda and the Swan," an intimate portrayal of desire, womanhood, and broken family relationships takes the form of a high school essay on Greek mythology, emphasizing the narrator's own troubling innocence and doubling down on the melancholic mood and feeling of fate in the story's ending.

Bold choices with narrative form are a way to not only entice your reader but fortify the mood and characters of your story.

For example, Joyce's story "Notes on Contributors," which you can find in her collection *The Seduction & Other Stories*, tells a story by imitating the "notes on contributors" section in many journals and magazines. The story subverts the traditional narrative form by using fictional biographies for the various writers and contributors to a publication.

EXPERIMENTS IN STRUCTURE: "HEAT"

Often, different artistic disciplines can challenge us to see fiction in a new way. Draw inspiration and formal ideas not only from other literature and books but from music, visual art, and film as well.

Joyce remembers her own interest in the music of experimental pianist Henry Cowell. Cowell's technique was to open the piano and play the strings rather than the keys, without using a pedal—meaning, there was no resonance or vibration. The technique created a discontinuous and ghostly sound.

ASSEMBLING STRUCTURE LIKE MEMORIES

Joyce wrote a story that mimics that discontinuous structure—made up of multiple small paragraphs with disjointed facts. Titled "Heat," it evokes memory and recollections of death, trauma, and childhood by using floating, fragmented prose.

Further Reading

"Essay #3: Leda and the Swan," *Music Through the Floor,* Eric Puchner, Scribner, 2007

City Life, Donald Barthelme, Pocket, 1976

Wait Till You See Me Dance, Deb Olin Unferth, Graywolf, 2017

The Fun Parts, Sam Lipsyte, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004

Ties, Domenico Starnone, Europa Editions, 2017

McGlue, Ottessa Moshfegh, Fence Books, 2014

The Virgin Suicides, Jeffrey Eugenides, Picador, 2018

Music - "The Banshee" by Henry Cowell from the recording entitled Piano Music, SFW40801, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. (p) (c) 1993. Used by permission.

"Nobody has a chronological memory—all our memories are ripples in the pan," says Joyce. "Heat" looks to the music of Henry Cowell to explore such fragmented memory.

WRITE VISUAL ART

In her iconic story "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses rapid-fire images and disjointed sentences to describe a narrator experiencing a nervous breakdown. The visualization of these separate, imagistic sentences creates a manic effect that mirrors the narrator's mental state. Looking at "The Yellow Wall-Paper" typographically, you'll see there's something exciting about this jagged, discontinuous prose.

Other writers opt to play with typography and visuals by writing stories and other prose in one long paragraph (like the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, often called "Molly Bloom's Soliloquy," which Joyce wrote as a single, rambling passage void of punctuation). This particular experiment really agitates the reader's mind. "We like finite things," says Joyce. We like things to end: minutes, hours, days, years, seasons. We like to cross things off. A novel written in one paragraph is a challenge, Joyce warns, and it likely means that your readership will diminish. Most bestsellers move quickly, with digestible paragraphs and chapters and short, declarative sentences, offering readers a sense of safety in the finite.

Joyce herself is interested in the visual quality of writing: prose that recognizes our tendency to interact with art through sight. In her story "The Maze," Joyce positions her text along the outer margins of the page, letting the type get smaller and smaller as the sentences get closer to the center. Then, at the center, she ends her story with a two-word sentence. She uses the form to imitate the content, creating a clear resonance between the visual and textual elements of the work. Whole approaches to poetry, like "pattern poetry" or "figure poetry," are based on using the visual orientation and typography of the words as another layer of expression.

Learn More: Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*

In 1918, French poet and early surrealist Guillaume Apollinaire published a collection of poetry titled *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War, 1913-1916*. In *Calligrammes*, the visual patterns of the words on the page (written in neither rhyme nor meter) follow an artistic design, often mirroring objects and scenes from the poem itself (animals, buildings, landscapes, eyes, and more). These word-design forms are called "calligrammes," and they give each poem a very clear visual expectation. Take a look at some of the poems from *Calligrammes* reproduced online.

Further Reading

The Seduction & Other Stories, Joyce Carol Oates, Black Sparrow Press, 1975

The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Penguin Classics, 2009

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Spend a week waking up before dawn and observing the light. Is it a dawn that shines bright? Is it a foggy, misty morning? Write down everything you can about what the light looks like—if it's soft or hard, what shade it is, what it touches, how far it reaches. Do the same at dusk and at midnight. (Does the sunset make the sky look muted or like cotton candy? How full is the moon, and what is the effect of the lunar phase on the light?) Use your observations to describe the light in a scene of a story.

2. Write a story no more than two pages long that sets a scene. Describe the setting—the people within it, the colors, the objects, the time of day and year, and more—and be deliberate and generous with the details you include. Try to make the details of your scene-setting reveal a mystery or tell a story of their own.

3. Read "Heat" by clicking this link. If you can, listen to one of Henry Cowell's compositions. (Many of them are available online.) Now write a story that employs Joyce's technique of multiple, disjointed paragraphs that each contain a new fact or impression.

CH 06

IDEAS: WRITING THE FAMILIAR

"The motives for art are very general, and they have much to do with commemoration."

Art is often an act of commemoration: We tell the stories that we believe need to be told, stories that are dear or essential to our hearts. It's only fitting that much inspiration for fiction is drawn from authors' own ancestry, generational narratives, and history.

Key Terms

Exploitative: Using something or someone—often against their will or judgment—for one's own personal gain.

Transmogrify: To transform dramatically, often with magical or ridiculous effects.

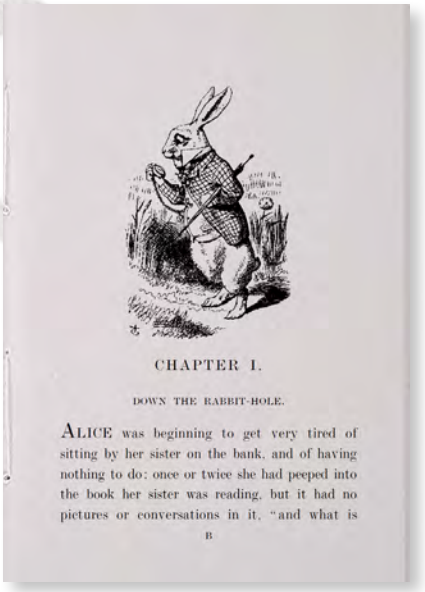
REVISIT YOUR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES

Joyce has internalized a lot from reading and rereading *Alice in Wonderland*. She thinks that Alice's logical approach to chaos and horror—that stiff-upper-lip quality particularly lauded in 19th-century England, where the book was first published—was especially important to her as a young girl and later to her writing process.

She inherited the *Alice in Wonderland* books from her own grandmother. From the age of eight and beyond, Joyce devoured Lewis Carroll's work. She dog-eared pages and essentially memorized every word.

Joyce still draws inspiration from childhood books. When it comes to Carroll in particular, the combination of darkness and whimsy was especially appealing, and these literary interests can be felt in Joyce's own work.

Think about the books, movies, and music that you treasured as a child. How has this art shaped you today? What stylistic influences, subject matter, or artistic motivations can you draw from this art? It's likely already within you.

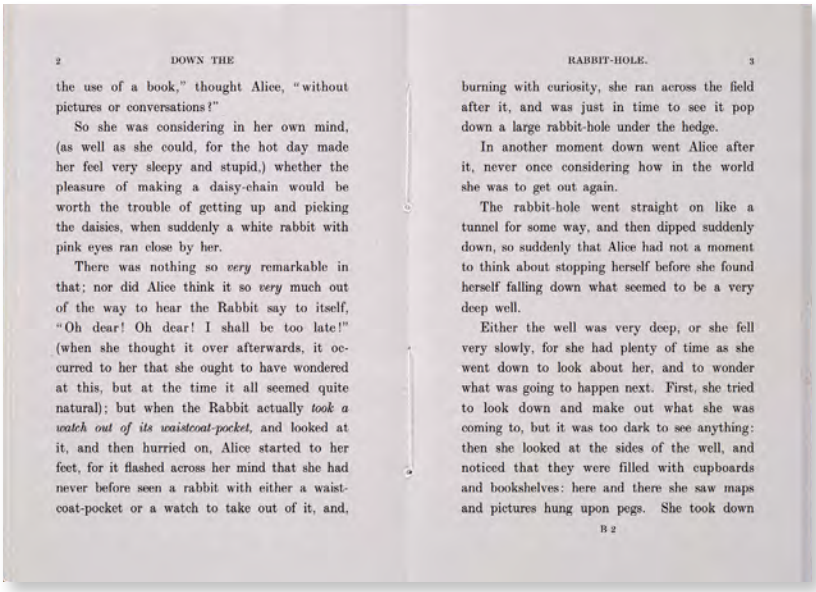


CHAPTER I.

DOWN THE RABBIT-HOLE.

ALICE was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is

B



2 DOWN THE

the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

So she was considering in her own mind, (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid,) whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a white rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket or a watch to take out of it, and,

RABBIT-HOLE. 3

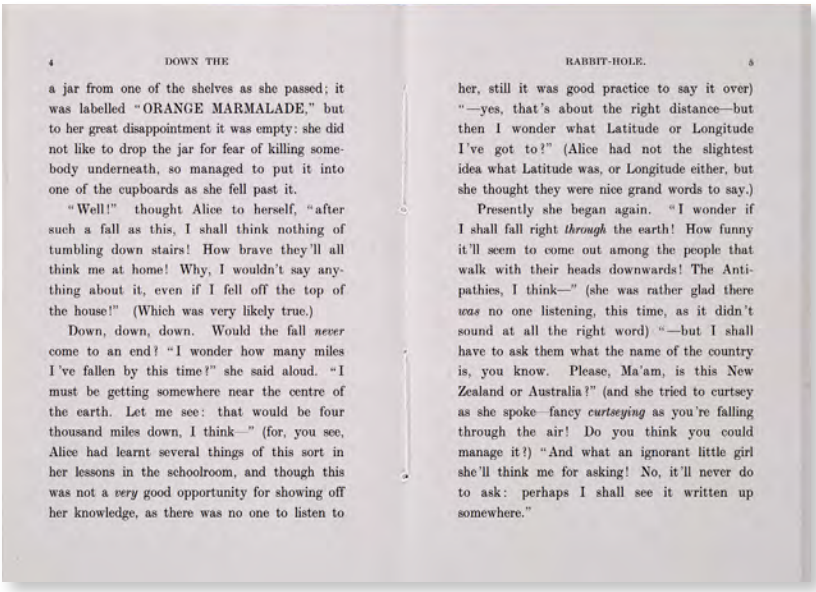
burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well.

Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything: then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and bookshelves: here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. She took down

B 2



4 DOWN THE

a jar from one of the shelves as she passed; it was labelled "ORANGE MARMALADE," but to her great disappointment it was empty: she did not like to drop the jar for fear of killing somebody underneath, so managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it.

"Well!" thought Alice to herself, "after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" (Which was very likely true.)

Down, down, down. Would the fall *never* come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—" (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the schoolroom, and though this was not a *very* good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to

RABBIT-HOLE. 5

her, still it was good practice to say it over) "—yes, that's about the right distance—but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.)

Presently she began again. "I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The Antipathies, I think—" (she was rather glad there *was* no one listening, this time, as it didn't sound at all the right word) "—but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know. Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?" (and she tried to curtsey as she spoke—fancy *curtseying* as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?) "And what an ignorant little girl she'll think me for asking! No, it'll never do to ask: perhaps I shall see it written up somewhere."

You can continue reading Alice in Wonderland here.

Further Reading

Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll, Dover Publications, 1993

Stories for Nightime and Some for the Day, Ben Loory, Penguin Books, 2011

Tales of Falling and Flying, Ben Loory, Penguin Books, 2017

The Stepford Wives, Ira Levin, Random House, 1972

Missing Mom, Joyce Carol Oates, Ecco, 2005

The Best Tales of Hoffmann, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Dover Publications, 1979

INTERVIEW A FAMILY MEMBER

Interviewing an intimate friend or family member, someone whom you think you know very well, creates a critical, creative distance and allows you to see the individual in a new light. More broadly, looking at the people, places, and objects that we may consider to be a part of our quotidian world with a new perspective can be an effective way to find ideas and find inspiration.

Joyce had an incredibly profound and even devastating experience while interviewing her mother. Thanks to the interview format, Joyce found that her mother was willing to discuss things she had never before revealed about her past life, including the traumatic experience of being given away when she was nine months old (Joyce's maternal grandfather had been murdered in a tavern, and so Joyce's mother was sent to live with relatives). The struggle and emotion that her mother displayed in that interview gave Joyce the ideas for two new novels, including *Missing Mom.*

Learn More: Freud's "The Uncanny"

Sigmund Freud published his essay "The Uncanny" in 1919. Fascinated personally and professionally by the subconscious, expression, and art, the founder of psychoanalysis linked his research into the "uncanny" with the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* (German for "homey" or "familiar" and "unhomey" or "unfamiliar," respectively). According to Freud, a feeling of the uncanny is the result when something unfamiliar and frightening leads us back to the familiar, or when something alien intrudes on what we consider to be homey or safe. The uncanny is a feeling of secrets being exposed: The familiar is hidden in the unfamiliar; fear is hidden in what we think is comfortable. Our private, domestic lives contain more complication and darkness than we may know. In challenging ourselves to see unfamiliar character traits in familiar people from our own lives—our mothers, our fathers, our pets, our best friends, even our children—there can be an eerie and creatively inspiring effect of the "uncanny." Think of the book *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin: The subservient, obedient, impossibly beautiful, and immaculate wives of wealthy Connecticut men are in fact robots created to be the perfect spouses. There's an immediate fantasy to this premise, but there's also an uncomfortable truth about wealth and gender in the book's commentary. It is this uncanny blend of the familiar and

unfamiliar, the exposing of a buried truth, that makes the book so compelling. (The concept of the "double"—like a human self and an automaton self—is, unsurprisingly, also a hallmark of Freud's uncanny.)

PROTECT YOUR SUBJECTS

When drawing content and inspiration from real people, writers need to take care to protect their subjects.

Joyce warns against writing to settle scores (like Philip Roth, who was often taking revenge on his ex-lovers by immortalizing his relationships with them in fiction). It's better, she says, to take care to transmogrify the people into characters who are at least superficially unrecognizable. Keep the most important elements (this may depend on the story at hand), and profoundly alter the more obvious details to protect the people in your life from exposure they don't want.

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY IS A THORN IN THE HEART

Many works of fiction are a means for making sense of an unsolved mystery. Though the nature of detective or mystery novels may be obligated to give concrete answers, literary fiction allows the writer to spend time within the mystery, circling closer to something that resembles closure rather than an answer.

New writers should think back to some of these unsolved mysteries from their lives—questions they don't have answers to but ones they still find themselves asking anyway—and write about them.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Spend 15 minutes writing down a list of all the art—books, nursery rhymes, even movies—you loved as a child. Write down as many as you can in your notebook, stretching your memory back as far as it will go. After you've made your list, annotate it. Ask yourself how each book or other piece of art has informed the person you are today. Write this down either on a separate sheet of paper or, if you have room, next to each book's name.

Further Reading

Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories, Philip Roth, Vintage International, 1993

The Complete Ripley Novels, Patricia Highsmith, W.W. Norton, 2008

Her Body and Other Parties, Carmen Machado, Graywolf, 2017

The Dark Dark: Stories, Samantha Hunt, FSG Originals, 2017

2. Interview a family member or close friend. Set a time to interview them, and come up with your interview questions beforehand. (Treat it as if you were doing a professional interview.) Record the interview, and transcribe it in either your notebook or on a computer. In your notebook, write down your reaction: What surprised you about this interview? What disturbed you? Fascinated you? Is there any information that gives you a new idea for a story?

3. Experiment with the uncanny. Pick an object or even a person in the room and describe them in a short paragraph. Then describe it again. And again. And again. Describe this same object or person 10 times. How does your last paragraph compare with your first? Do you see a progression in your descriptions? Does the object seem more or less familiar to you now?

4. Write a story about an unsolved mystery in your life. Use Joyce's phrase "An unsolved mystery is a thorn in the heart" as your first line. Then, in an entirely new paragraph, begin explaining the mystery while keeping the first line in mind.

5. Revisit a significant place in your memory. Joyce gives the examples of your first room, the first house you lived in, your parents when they were young, your first memories of your grandparents, or an important childhood smell.

6. Think of the earliest memory you have—feel free to choose one of the examples above—and write about it. Describe it and even use dialogue and sensory detail; try your best to evoke this specific memory. This assignment does not have to be a rounded narrative in itself; in fact, if you evoke this memory well, it may make for the beginning of a short story.

15 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FAMILY MEMBERS OR CLOSE FRIENDS

Interviewing family members can be a daunting task. You may feel as if you already know everything—or that you don't want to know everything. It will help to have questions prepared ahead of time so that you can help guide the conversation. Here are 15 questions to get you started; once you have your answers, see if one sparks an idea for a story.

1. Who have been the three most important people in your life? How and why?
2. What was the best year of your life? The worst? Can you tell me about them?
3. What moment are you proudest of?
4. What is your first memory of feeling ashamed or embarrassed?
5. What is your earliest memory?
6. In what ways do people's perceptions of you differ from your own sense of self?
7. What song would you want to be played at your funeral and why?
8. If you could redo one thing from your life, what would it be?
9. How are you different from the person you were 10 years ago? And then 10 years before that?
10. Do you think we might ever lose touch with each other?
11. Against whom do you still hold a grudge? For what?
12. What has been the most important piece of art in your life? Why?
13. What were you like as a baby?
14. Did you ever see a parent cry? When?
15. Are you currently in love? When did you first fall in love and with whom? Tell me about it.

Find more ideas on StoryCorps.

CH 07

FORM STUDY: MINIATURE NARRATIVE

"The shorter you can make a story, the better."

William Carlos Williams was one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. He had a sensuous, methodical way of exploring complex themes—identity, love, midcentury America—that marked him as a leader of the Imagist movement (a style of poetry that favored precise visual imagery and exacting, clear language).

Many Americans knew William Carlos Williams as a poet. But in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, he was primarily known as a pediatric doctor. "The Use of Force" is a short story likely inspired by the home visits Williams would make in underserved New Jersey communities.

Key Terms

The Imagist movement: An early and mid-20th-century poetic movement that used clear and concrete visual description to convey complicated meanings and deep emotions.

Allegory: A fictional narrative, often using elements of the fantastic, that can be read as having multiple meanings (usually of the moral or political variety).

Flash fiction: Short fiction marked by extreme brevity and economy of language.

"THE USE OF FORCE" BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Williams's very short story (read it here) is a prime example of what he does well in all of his writing: It extracts deep, almost allegorical meaning from the mundane and everyday. Williams sets a small stage (one house), limits the number of characters (the doctor/narrator, the girl, and the girl's parents), and unifies his action (one single doctor's visit). The scene itself is simple and

brief, and yet through an economic and impressionistic use of dialogue and an escalation of tension, Williams is able to reveal a visceral and traumatic emotional truth.

Further Reading

Can't and Won't, Lydia Davis, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014

Tenth of December, George Saunders, Random House, 2013

The Babysitter at Rest, Jen George, Dorothy, 2016

Learn More: Flash Fiction

Flash fiction is a genre of short-form fiction marked by extreme brevity and economy of language (pieces of flash fiction are often only a few hundred words, although some journals will take anything under 2,000 words). Lydia Davis, Deb Olin Unferth, George Saunders, Franz Kafka, and Ernest Hemingway have all been fans of the form. If you're thinking about working within the confines of a single scene or even paragraph, be aware that there is a precedent for pieces of profound brevity. *The New Yorker*'s flash fiction archives include work from myriad authors, including Joyce herself. Tin House's Flash Fiction Friday series is another fantastic archive of short fiction pieces under 1,500 words.

KEEP THE LANGUAGE SIMPLE

Key Term

Impressionistic writing: Writing that relies on personal emotions and subjective opinions rather than on anything realistic or fact-based.

Another way Williams achieves such economy and unity in "The Use of Force" is through his style of dialogue. While we hear the characters speak—the mother calls the doctor and speaks to him about her sick daughter, the parents scold the little girl—their speech is rendered within the text. The dialogue isn't always set off by quotation marks and often includes only the most essential parts of the conversation. This allows the pace of the story to quicken without sacrificing interior thought or the essentials of plot development. In this way, there is an impressionistic quality to the way Williams writes his characters' speech because dialogue is always filtered through the mind of our narrator.

WELCOME TO THE DREAM FACTORY

Learn more from David Lynch in his MasterClass on Creativity and Film

Learn More: Dream Logic

Joyce notes how the subjective narration in "The Use of Force" creates an almost dreamlike quality, as if the narrator is recounting the way events transpired in a dream. Writers who have a highly subjective narrative perspective and whose pacing is slightly askew are sometimes said to have "dream logic." The term has been used to describe director David Lynch's work (*Mulholland Drive*, *Twin Peaks*, and many others), but it's also present in the storytelling of several contemporary fiction writers.

Jennifer George, whose debut collection of short stories came out in 2016, uses a subjective, often fragmented narration to achieve dream logic in her storytelling. Watch her interview on this subject with *Granta* magazine.

Reading from *"The Use of Force"* by William Carlos Williams: ©1938 by William Carlos Williams. Used by permission of the William Carlos Williams Estate in care of the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency, Inc (permissions@jvnla.com)

WORK TOWARD A DELICATE ENDING

The ending of "The Use of Force" is subversive: On one level, it's a fairly ordinary scene showing a doctor and his young patient. On another, the simple and violent language and the use of the word *defeated* in the last sentence lend it much darker, more universal, and allegorical implications. This story may be saying something about the medical profession as a whole. There's also something sinister about the idea of a male doctor physically forcing himself on a young female patient.

Williams builds up to this ending gradually, which leaves the reader surprised by the story's turn. Taking a gradated, progressive approach to the larger themes in your work will help you write an ending that's equal parts delicate and momentous. You will be able to move, as Joyce says, from "point A" to a decidedly different "point B" without being bombastic or melodramatic.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Try filtering your dialogue: Write a story that does not create a new, separate line for dialogue and instead embeds characters' spoken words into the paragraphs as part of the narration. Filter each piece of dialogue through your narrator's own inner monologue.

2. Write a story that consists of a scene from daily life—something about work, school, parenting, or marriage. Start your scene with a matter-of-fact approach and then build in your darker themes gradually. This can be done by slowly and surreptitiously increasing the amount of violent language and imagery. Or perhaps the scene itself can start charming and then abruptly take a strange turn. Challenge yourself to begin with the normal and quotidian and gradually get the reader to a deeper meaning. Limit yourself to 1,500 words.

CH 08

FORM STUDY: SHORT MONOLOGUE

"One of these little monologues could be like the stepping-stone to a novel. If the character comes alive, the person could be very much a character that you would want to write about."

MONOLOGUE READING: "LETHAL"

In 1990, Joyce wrote a series of 10 linked monologues in which, as she wrote for the *The New York Times*, "character is reduced to an essence and dramatized in the smallest possible period of time." The production, called *I Stand Before You Naked*, premiered at the American Place Theatre in New York City. One of these linked monologues, "Lethal," is written in a single, long paragraph and spoken by a man. Read it below:

Key Term

Monologue: Any longer piece of dialogue, usually ranging between a paragraph and a few pages, spoken by a single character. A dramatic monologue is delivered by one character to another. A soliloquy is spoken by one character to either himself/herself or the audience. Interior monologue (in prose) is the speech that passes through a character's mind.

"LETHAL"

Joyce Carol Oates

I just want to touch you a little. That delicate blue vein at your temple, the soft down of your neck. I just want to caress you a little. I just want to kiss you a little—your lips, your throat, your breasts. I just want to embrace you a little. I just want to comfort you a little. I just want to hold you tight!—like this. I just want to measure your skeleton with my arms. These are strong healthy arms, aren't they. I just want to poke my tongue in your ear. Don't giggle! Don't squirm! This is serious! This is the real thing! I just want to suck a little. I just want to press into you a little. I just want to press into you a little. I just want to penetrate you a little. I just want to ejaculate into you a little. It won't hurt if you don't scream but you'll be hurt if you keep straining away like that, if you exaggerate. Thank you, I just want to squeeze you a little. I just want to feel my weight against your bones a little. I just want to bite a little. I just want a taste of it. Your saliva, your blood. Just a taste. A little. You've got plenty to spare. You're being selfish. You're being ridiculous. You're being cruel. You're being unfair. You're hysterical. You're hyper-ventilating. You're provoking me. You're laughing at me. You want to humiliate me. You want to make a fool of me. You want to gut me like a chicken. You want to castrate me. You want to make me fight for my life, is that it? *You want to make **me** fight for my life, is that it?*

ESCALATE THE TENSION

Compelling monologues should have a narrative arc all their own. As with a short story, Joyce says that the best monologues will often start at point A and end up at point B. Unlike fiction, however, monologues rarely use plot to create this movement. Instead, the starting and ending points are differentiated by registers of emotion—otherwise known as an emotional arc—and audience understanding.

You can achieve an emotional arc by starting a monologue on a somber note and ending it with the character feeling maniacal, which creates a tonal tension. Similarly, gradual reveals of character detail can create an arc that plays on the audience's own understanding. We as readers can start a monologue with limited knowledge about the speaker and then learn something important about their character by the end, thus shedding new light on the speech and generating a satisfying element of surprise and tension.

The narrative arc in "Lethal" relies largely on the audience developing an understanding of the subject matter. What starts as a seemingly innocuous romantic overture morphs quickly into a horrifying rape scene. At the same time, the monologue's speaker is accusing the woman in question of humiliating him, of making him "fight for his life." The dark irony of this last line hinges on the audience's new understanding of the speaker and the actions of the monologue. The speaker's perverted and inverted idea of who, exactly, is the "victim" in this situation becomes clear by the end of the piece. It's this gradual arc of meaning that keeps the monologue moving forward.

WRITE FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

It's important to maintain a sense of play in writing—your creative process will not be graded, and the story you're writing doesn't need any professor's approval. Give yourself permission to mess up, to experiment, and to write from perspectives other than your own. Creating characters whose lives would never parallel yours, says Joyce, is an incredibly liberating way to write. Distancing yourself from your characters can free you to tackle subjects that might have seemed taboo before. Joyce encourages you to go beyond age, gender, and even morality to challenge

your imagination and garner a sense of play. By projecting your own imagination onto characters who may be very different from you, you'll be able to explore stranger subjects and writing styles—caustic humor, a poetic form of melancholy—with even more freedom.

Further Reading

Great Expectations, Charles Dickens, Penguin, 2002

Bright Lights, Big City, Jay McInerney, Vintage, 1984

Mrs. Dalloway, Virgina Woolf, Mariner Books, 1990

Catch 22, Joseph Heller, Simon & Schuster, 2011

The *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling, Bloomsbury, 1997–2007

1984, George Orwell, Secker & Warburg, 1949

Learn More: Point of View

There are many ways to portray a particular narrative perspective, but one of the first steps is choosing the point of view your work is going to take. There are several points of view, or POVs:

- **First person:** First person uses the personal pronouns "I" and "me" in the prose, which is to say the narrator is telling the reader their story and filtering action through their own voice. (This POV is very often employed in personal essay and memoir.) **Where you can read it:** "Lethal" and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* are both examples of first person narration.
- **Second person:** Second person uses the personal pronouns "you" and "yours." A story might start: "You wake up and rub your eyes. You hear someone laugh outside your window, and you peep through your blinds to see who it is." This POV very directly includes the reader in the narrative. **Where you can read it:** *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney famously uses the second person POV in narrating a young Manhattanite's story.
- **Third person:** Third person uses the personal pronouns "he," "she," "they," and "it." A third-person narrator refers to the characters by their names or pronouns. It's a very classic narrative perspective and is divided into limited and omniscient (below).
- **Third person limited:** In third person limited, all characters are described using the same pronouns as third person POV, but the writer follows only one character closely, making his or her inner monologue, thoughts, feelings, and emotions clear to the reader. The other characters' thoughts remain largely obscured. **Where you can read it:** *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller uses a third person limited narration, as does the *Harry Potter* series and *1984* by George Orwell.

- **Third person omniscient:** In third person omniscient, all characters are described using the same pronouns as third person POV. This POV is the inverse of third person limited: The thoughts and feelings of multiple characters are made known to the reader. **Where you can read it:** *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf uses a third person omniscient POV, letting us know not only the protagonist's inner thoughts but the thoughts of her friends and community as well.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Using a first-person narrator, write a monologue no more than 1,000 words from the perspective of someone very unlike you. This could be a child, a great-grandmother, or an individual with an entirely different background and set of interests. Project your imagination onto this character.

2. In "Lethal," Joyce chooses to write a monologue in the voice of a violent man. She uses his intimate psychology as a channel to tackle darker, larger themes. Write a monologue in the voice of someone you dislike or even hate. Inhabit their voice, and truly try to arrive at their logic.

3. Write a monologue that has an emotional arc: Start the monologue with your character feeling one way about their subject matter, and have it end with your character doing an emotional 180. Let this arc drive the movement of the monologue and the progression of the content. (For example, your character could move from feeling happy to scared, or sad to manic, or angry to amused.)

CH 09

STORY STUDY: "WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?"

"Rather than start with the murderer, and with the phenomenon of the teenagers protecting him, I started with the victim."

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is arguably Joyce's most famous story—it's been frequently anthologized, has literary scholars divided on its use of allegory and symbolism, and has inspired several films, including *Smooth Talk* (1985).

The story draws inspiration partly from a motif called Death and the Maiden in a larger medieval allegory known as "Danse Macabre." In fact, after discovering this recurring motif on a medieval engraving, Joyce considered using "Death and the Maiden" as the original title for what ended up being "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Although multiple renderings, tellings, and interpretations of the Death and the Maiden motif exist, Joyce describes it as the tale of a young girl who is approached by a prince on a horse while walking in the forest, only the prince is Death in disguise. The girl voluntarily gets on the horse and rides alongside Death to her own demise.

In addition to the motif, Joyce also based "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" on the real story of Charles Schmid, a serial killer in Tucson, Arizona, whom *Life* magazine called

"The Pied Piper of Tucson" in a 1966 feature. Similar to Death in the fairy tale, the killer (an adult man in his 20s) masqueraded as a teenage heartthrob—wearing makeup, stuffing his boots to make himself taller, driving sexy cars, curating his social group—and lured young girls to their deaths under this guise.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" introduces us to Connie, a pretty and somewhat shallow teenage girl, and a sinister adult man named Arnold Friend. Friend claims to be 18 and coaxes Connie out of her house and into his gold jalopy, almost like a snake charmer.

Above: Death and the Maiden *by Egon Schiele (1915-16)*

THE ALLEGORY OF "DANSE MACABRE"

The motif of Death and the Maiden originated in the medieval concept of the Danse Macabre, or the Dance of Death. "Danse Macabre" was an allegory that explored the omnipotence of death: its equalizing power over kings, doctors, mothers, and beautiful maidens alike. Thought to have been fortified by an onslaught of plagues and wars that occurred in Europe's Middle Ages, the concept of Danse Macabre inspired poetry, music, and visual art that tackled the subject matter. The allegory can be found in paintings and woodcuts that date to the 1400s (see the motif depicted in Egon Schiele's 1915-16 painting at left), but it's also wormed its way into contemporary films by Roman Polanski and Ingmar Bergman.

Listen to Franz Schubert's quartet "Death and the Maiden," here. If you can, reread "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" with the music playing quietly in the room.

CHOOSING A POINT OF VIEW

Joyce was particularly interested in the story of the Pied Piper of Tucson because according to reports, a number of kids knew that Schmid was responsible for these murders. Even so, they kept his secret.

Joyce was fascinated by Schmid's hypnotic charisma and bravado, and it was her original intent to focus on that Charles Manson-esque phenomenon in her story. As she wrote, though, she realized that she was much more interested in—and empathetic to—Connie. The story, then, is written from Connie's perspective. The reader is exposed to her thoughts, feelings, and inner monologue, while we only see the murderer, Arnold Friend, in limited quantities.

Learn More: True Crime and Sinister Charms

Between the Golden State Killer saga, the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, a recent spate of Netflix documentaries (*Making a Murderer*, *Abducted in Plain Sight*), and most recently the biographical film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (about Ted Bundy), the appetite for true-crime narratives is at an all-time high. But the truth is, the morbid and macabre have been inspiring writers from the start. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which chronicles the murders of four family members on a small rural farm in Kansas, skyrocketed to fame in 1966 and was one of the more seminal works to be called a "nonfiction novel" (others include *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt, *Roots* by Alex Haley, and *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe). Here are five more famous books inspired by true crime and charming killers.

- ***Women Talking* by Miriam Toews (Bloomsbury, 2019**)
  Published just this year, *Women Talking* is inspired by the true and recent account of a group of Mennonite women and girls in Bolivia who were knocked unconscious and raped by the men in their community. When they awoke, they were told that the crimes were being committed by demons and ghosts as punishment for their sins.

- ***The Girls* by Emma Cline (Random House, 2017)**
  Cline's book focuses on the young women of 1960s L.A. who were trapped in the thrall of Charles Manson, the captivating and magnetic leader of a band of misfits the world came to know as the Manson Family.

- ***Room* by Emma Donoghue (Little, Brown and Company, 2010)**
  Donoghue's bestselling novel could have been inspired by a number of grisly crimes, but it most closely resembles the case of Elisabeth Fritzl, an Austrian teenager who was imprisoned in a cellar by her father for more than 24 years. The book was turned into an Oscar-winning movie starring Brie Larson in 2015.

- ***Black Water* by Joyce Carol Oates (Dutton, 1992)**
  Hauntingly familiar and surreal, this novella by Joyce draws inspiration from the Chappaquiddick incident in 1969, in which Senator Ted Kennedy left a party on Martha's Vineyard with a young woman and, subsequently, drove both himself and the young woman over a bridge. He swam away alive, but the 28-year-old woman did not. (He waited 10 hours to report the accident.)

- ***Psycho* by Robert Bloch (Simon & Schuster, 1959)**
  Bloch was partly inspired by the true story of murderer Ed Gein (or "Norman Bates" in the novel). The book spawned the iconic Hitchcock film adaptation.

WHEN CONNIE'S TWO SELVES COLLIDE

We see different sides of Connie throughout "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" With her mother, Connie is bratty and sulky. When she's with her friends, she is flirtatious, confident, and magnetic.

We also see Connie progress from an immature and superficial teenager to a young woman who accepts death with an eerie, ethereal maturity. When she voluntarily leaves the house to get into the car, there is a methodical resignation to her choice. While she complains to her mother and friends about superficial problems, she accepts death (or what we assume will become death very soon) in a way that paints her sacrifice as noble.

"As death approaches her," Joyce says, "she becomes very dignified." As her fate looms, Connie thinks about her family with respect and love. For Joyce, the story is also about the layers of personality present in this individual girl. You can see in the story's ending how Connie resolves to do the thing she dreads:

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just two things, or maybe three," Arnold Friend said. "But I promise it won't last long and you'll like me the way you get to like people you're close to. You will. It's all over for you here, so come on out. You don't want your people in any trouble, do you?"

She turned and bumped against a chair or something, hurting her leg, but she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend was stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house.

After a while she could hear again. She was sitting on the floor with her wet back against the wall.

Arnold Friend was saying from the door, "That's a good girl. Put the phone back."

She kicked the phone away from her.

"No, honey. Pick it up. Put it back right." She picked it up and put it back. The dial tone stopped.

"That's a good girl. Now, you come outside."

She was hollow with what had been fear but what was now just an emptiness. All that screaming had blasted it out of her. She sat, one leg cramped under her, and deep inside her brain was something like a pinpoint of light that kept going and would not let her relax. She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not

going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet.

Arnold Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, “The place where you came from ain’t there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy’s house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?”

She thought, I have got to think. I have got to know what to do.

“We’ll go out to a nice field, out in the country here where it smells so nice and it’s sunny,” Arnold Friend said. “I’ll have my arms tight around you so you won’t need to try to get away and I’ll show you what love is like, what it does. The hell with this house! It looks solid all right,” he said. He ran a fingernail down the screen and the noise did not make Connie shiver, as it would have the day before. “Now, put your hand on your heart, honey. Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better. Be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?—and get away before her people come back?”

She felt her pounding heart. Her hand seemed to enclose it. She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn’t really hers either.

“You don’t want them to get hurt,” Arnold Friend went on. “Now, get up, honey. Get up all by yourself.”

She stood.

“Now, turn this way. That’s right. Come over here to me.—Ellie, put that away, didn’t I tell you? You dope. You miserable creepy dope,” Arnold Friend said. His words were not angry but only part of an incantation. The incantation was kindly. “Now come out through the kitchen to me, honey, and let’s see a smile, try it, you’re a brave, sweet little girl and now they’re eating corn and hot dogs cooked to bursting over an outdoor fire, and they don’t know one thing about you and never did and honey, you’re better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you.”

Connie felt the linoleum under her feet; it was cool. She brushed her hair back out of her eyes. Arnold Friend let go of the post tentatively and opened his arms for her, his elbows pointing in toward each other and his wrists limp, to show that this was an embarrassed embrace and a little mocking, he didn't want to make her self-conscious.

She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited.

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.

END YOUR STORY WHEN YOU'VE SAID ENOUGH

It's a natural inclination to overwrite your first draft—even Joyce had this experience with "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Whatever happens after Connie gets in the car doesn't need to be detailed; her decision to get into the jalopy is the most important and profound moment on which to end. As we've explored previously in this chapter, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a story about one girl's transcendence of life and death rather than the murder itself: The moment that Connie leaves the house, she trascends her own small, adolescent world and enters into a liminal space between life and death, the literal and the allegorical. This is what interested Joyce as the writer. After rereading and better understanding her own intentions with her story, Joyce chose to end "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" on the moment that Connie leaves the house and approaches the car rather than the moment she dies.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Choose one of two ways to switch perspective: Take a piece of short fiction that you've already written (preferably one with a complete first draft) and ask yourself which perspective this story is in: Is it third person limited, first person, second person? Now recast the narrative with a new point of view. For example, change a third person limited story to a second person, or a first person narration to a third person omniscient.

   Radically change your tense. For example, if your story is in past tense, change it to present.

2. Take a story you've already finished and examine its ending. Where does the ending start? How long is your ending? Is it possible that your ending could—and should—come earlier? Try cutting your ending by a full page, and revise your new ending for style and momentum. Now reread the new draft. How does the revision alter the story?

CH 10

READING AND STUDYING WRITING

"Most readers are reading for character, and they're reading for plot. But the writer has to present that in the most coherent way possible."

READING AS APPRENTICESHIP

Writers are shaped by other writers. The books we read as children influence our tastes and can often have an impact on our writing style as adults. The writers who shape us are almost like unofficial mentors: By reading widely and closely, young writers can learn at the feet of history's most famed and beloved authors.

Ask most writers for tricks of the trade, and it's all but guaranteed they'll tell you to read voraciously. It's also important to read with a purpose: Look at the ways different writers tackle different subjects, how they craft their sentences and story structures, and how they handle dialogue.

In sports, they say you should always compete with someone more skilled than you are because it forces you to rise to a higher level of competency. Similarly, reading the writing of authors who have shaped the canon as well as lesser-known authors whose

Further Reading

Ulysses Annotated, James Joyce and Don Gifford, University of California Press, 2008

Twenty Grand, Rebecca Curtis, Harper Perennial, 2007

The History of Love, Nicole Krauss, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006

Blonde, Joyce Carol Oates, Harper Perennial, 2001

work you want to emulate will challenge you to up your game and expose you to excellent craftsmanship.

If you read *Ulysses* by James Joyce, for example, chances are your vocabulary will improve (or, if nothing else, you'll *want* your vocabulary to improve). Your work won't necessarily come out sounding like his, but your process will be informed and elevated by him. Other authors can teach you different lessons in craft: J.K. Rowling can teach you how to build fictional worlds; Nicole Krauss can teach you how to layer multiple narrators and perspectives; Rebecca Curtis can teach you how to use patterns and repetition for humor. All you have to do is study their work.

TWO KINDS OF READING

Joyce feels there are two kinds of reading, each important in its own right:

- Spontaneous reading is when an individual finds a book by chance—perhaps they see its cover in a bookstore or are intrigued by a review online—and reads it. In spontaneous reading, readers are plunged into a world they didn't plan for and couldn't expect, and the outcome is often a personal emotional reaction: They loved this book, they were moved by this book, they forgot this book. Spontaneous reading is similar to pleasure reading; it's about the books that we read for curiosity and fun rather than pointed lessons or information.
- Systematic reading, on the other hand, is the process of thoughtfully choosing your reading material. You could, for example, tell yourself you plan on reading 25 early short stories by Ernest Hemingway in an effort to learn about brevity and dialogue. Systematic reading often involves the kind of material and reading schedule that one might find on a syllabus.

There is a time and place for both types of reading, but don't restrict yourself to the systematic type, even if you're on a mission to learn. You can draw inspiration from the books you read spontaneously, too. If you love, hate, or find yourself fascinated by a particular book, ask yourself why. While wandering through the American History section at the library, Joyce stumbled on a book that featured an early photograph of Norma Jean Baker, aka

Marilyn Monroe. This totally spontaneous reading experience eventually motivated Joyce to write a long historical novel titled *Blond*e, based on, she says, "the accident of seeing that snapshot."

Blonde Manuscript / notes: ©1938 by William Carlos Williams. Used by permission of the William Carlos Williams Estate in care of the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency, Inc. (permissions@jvnla.com)

REREAD FOR FORMAL QUALITIES

If a piece of fiction makes a dramatic impression on you, reread it. Ask yourself about its formal qualities: What is its title? How long are its paragraphs? Does it have chapters? How are those chapters divided? How is the story structured? Do events appear chronologically? Are there subsections?

These formal questions and observations are not necessarily what most people ask themselves when they read for pleasure. Writers, however, should read for these formal qualities.

DISCUSS YOUR READING WITH OTHERS

Being part of a home group, book club, or community college course allows you to have a discussion and dialogue around your reading. Hearing multiple perspectives and challenging yourself to share your thoughts on a text—what you liked about a character, what you didn't like about the prose—in a coherent manner is a more concrete way to learn, deepen your understanding of a work, and put your "formal reading" into practice.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

1. Reread one of your favorite short stories. In the margins of the page or in your class notebook, make notes on its formal qualities. Make sure to ask yourself, among other things: How does the title function in the work? How long are the story's paragraphs? Are there subsections or chapters? Are events chronological? How is the dialogue treated? Note any formal choices the author makes. You'll be able to come back to this set of notes as a resource for your own writing.

CH 11

WRITER'S WORKSHOP: "INDIAN CAMP"

"All of Hemingway's short stories…have this dark, enigmatic quality."

Read "Indian Camp," and as you do, take some notes on the qualities that make this Hemingway story a classic, according to Joyce. These elements span the story's style, pacing, economy and omission, what is implicit versus explicit, the economy of characters, character names, relationships, and the mysterious ending.

OPEN INTERPRETATIONS

It's this last quality—the more hanging, mysterious ending indicative of Hemingway's short fiction—that Joyce thinks makes the prose feel very contemporary. Hemingway gives a lot of power and authority to his readers; he lets them decide what happens in the story for themselves. With his succinct language and postmodern dialogue, Hemingway relinquishes some of his control as an author and leaves his prose open to interpretation.

Notice how the vocabulary is fairly limited, which makes sense considering that Hemingway's protagonist, Nick, is a boy of only eight or nine years old. Although you don't know exactly whose

Key Term

Postmodernist: An artistic movement that sought to contradict some of the styles of modernist art, which broke with linear narrative and narrative consistency to favor more fragmented, high-art, stream-of-consciousness, and allusion-heavy styles. Hemingway's simple prose and direct, chronological narratives, which achieved depth through sparsity and consistency, were a contradiction to more modernist and elitist artistic ideals.

head—whose intimate, third-person perspective—you're in until the third paragraph, you get an idea of the tone and narrative through Hemingway's vocabulary.

As the plot begins to thicken, the events and actions become layered and open to interpretation despite their sparse rendering. You see the themes of paternity and cuckolding begin to unfold, but also themes of colonial violence, exploitation, and voyeurism.

In fact, as Joyce points out, the passage of time has only made "Indian Camp" even more disturbing: Readers in the 21st century are more likely to focus on the depictions of colonial violence and rape. "Indian Camp," like many pieces of fiction, has evolved and will continue to evolve with time.

The last two paragraphs of "Indian Camp" are carefully written, full of sensory details and descriptions. There's an irony to this ending, given the uplifting scene of a bass jumping and the sun rising—two images of new life—in combination with the disturbing and ominous events and dialogue.

Hemingway also uses his ending to do something unexpected with his language. As Joyce points out, he strays slightly from curt and declarative sentences with this line: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he was quite sure that he would never die." This sentence uses multiple prepositions, a comma, multiple clauses, and a conditional tense. Hemingway's divergence from his normal style adds a tone of finality to what is a mysterious and open-ended close.

LITERATURE AS AN ICEBERG

In the same way Freud viewed human consciousness, Hemingway saw literature as an iceberg: A story is like an iceberg poking out of the water, its peak visible to the sailor. Most of the iceberg, however, remains out of sight. Hemingway's short stories, says Joyce, have a "dark, enigmatic" quality to them. What you see on the page is the iceberg's peak, but the rest of the "iceberg"—that is to say, the story's deeper meaning—is lurking beneath the surface.

Further Reading

The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway, Scribner, 1998

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, Raymond Carver, Vintage, 1989

Note that "Indian Camp," despite its brevity and sparse style, is a result of multiple revisions and drafts. Hemingway's signature economic prose took time to fully realize. In earlier drafts, Hemingway had a backstory for Nick that he eventually took out. (Happily so, says Joyce, as the lack of backstory is what makes Hemingway's fiction so compelling.)

Hemingway's initial writing process, too, involved a lot of cutting. While living in Paris, he would sit and write for hours about his childhood. As he wrote out these memories, eventually one sentence would appear to him as the first "true" sentence; to Hemingway, this was a sentence that had neither needless decoration nor rhetorical flourishes that might obscure what he really wanted to say. Often, he would make this the first sentence of a story, as was the case with "Indian Camp."

Although not everyone will choose to write in the declarative style of Hemingway, his process works for different types of prose. As you begin the writing process, don't be afraid to journal, freewrite, and eventually discard most of what you've come up with when one sentence or idea feels exciting.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Carve an hour or more out of your day, and use it to sit and write longhand in your notebook (like Hemingway did). Focus on detailing your childhood memories. Keep writing until one sentence or image strikes you as particularly compelling or important. Now use this sentence as the first line of a short story.

2. In "Indian Camp," Hemingway's chosen vocabulary mirrors that of his young protagonist, Nick—meaning, he uses only the language a little boy would use. Think of a character and make a language outline for them. How old are they? What kind of education did they have? Are they funny or serious? Boisterous or restrained? In six columns, jot down the following:

   - Where the character grew up
   - How old he or she is
   - What his or her education was like

- The emotional register in which the character speaks
- His or her hobbies and passions
- Any slang or idioms the character uses

Feel free to add more columns as you see fit.

Write a third-person story about this character, and use this outline to augment your prose. Check your vocabulary and language against this outline to make sure it lines up with the protagonist you've detailed.

CH 12

REVISION WORKSHOP: "LABOR DAY" BY LINDSEY SKILLEN

"Writers are like cooks. They keep everything in the refrigerator and put it all in the casserole. What doesn't go in for dinner tonight, well, it's gonna show up next Sunday."

One of the most helpful things that an outside reader can bring to your work is clarity. A third party can shed light on the blind spots you have in your own work: You may be clear on which character is speaking, but it may not be clear to the reader. Outside readers don't know your intention, so you can look at workshops as an opportunity to receive clarity on whether your work is coming across the way you intended it to.

Download "Labor Day" by Lindsey Skillen in the Resources section and read it through. Notice how in this workshop, Joyce and another student, Corey Arnold, begin by discussing their reading experience. In the case of "Labor Day," humor and laughter were large parts of the story's first impression. Quickly, however, the humor starts descending into horror and gothic elements and even includes heist tropes. Lindsey gradually builds tension by giving cues throughout the story, including a reference to the movie *Grizzly Man*, that hint at darker themes at play.

STAKES AND PACING

When reading another writer's work, gently pointing out areas where the momentum slows or reader interest is lost is particularly helpful. In Lindsey's workshop, Joyce pinpoints a scene in which she feels a break in momentum, largely because it seems Lindsey's intention isn't fully realized. (The buildup for the scene suggests something repulsive and dramatic, but the scene itself is actually very anticlimactic.)

Part of this has to do with the story's stakes, or what's on the line for your main character. While both Joyce and Corey like that there are only a few select moments of interiority in the story (moments in which we see the candid inner thoughts and feelings of our narrator), there seems to be a lack of stakes in the story's narration. The narrator doesn't seem invested in Cliff or the events that transpire. Joyce suggests that the narrator's emotions about Cliff be slightly stronger so that the actions between the two characters feel more important to the reader. Another solution would be to up the ante on Cliff's character traits: Lindsey could make him creepier or slightly more sinister. Joyce brings up Kristen Roupenian's story "Cat Person," which does a good job of writing an eerie character while still rendering him as real and non-cartoonish. As Joyce says, each character needs to have some vested interest—often because the narrator has a particular stake in them—so that the actions that transpire are noteworthy. "If [the narrator] doesn't care," says Joyce, "maybe the reader doesn't care either."

Learn More: The Phenomenon of "Cat Person"

In December 2017, a piece of short fiction for *The New Yorker* went viral for the first time. "Cat Person," written by Kristen Roupenian, follows Margot, a 20-year-old college student who falls into a flirtation with a man in his mid-30s. Throughout the story, Margot vacillates between being frightened by, attracted to, disgusted by, and saddened by this man.

A sea of think pieces have been written about why and how "Cat Person" got so much traction, with much of the conversation focusing on its true themes, subject, and genre. With the story being published at the height of the #MeToo movement, many thought it was a narrative dealing with subtle forms of sexual

Further Reading
You Know You Want This, Kristen Roupenian, Gallery/Scout Press, 2019

oppression. Others thought it was simply boring storytelling. Some thought it was brilliant. Some thought Margot was a villain and Robert—her "romantic" counterpart—was a victim. Some people questioned the story's qualification as "fiction," likening it more to personal essay.

The dialogue around "Cat Person" got so heated that entire Twitter accounts were made to document readers' reactions. The account @MenCatPerson (or "Men React to Cat Person") was one platform that helped the story continue on its viral trajectory. (This account specifically poked fun at the indignant and sometimes downright confused or angry reactions men had to Margot and Robert's relationship.) Certainly, so much public dialogue around a piece of literary fiction felt like a win for writers everywhere. And the phenomenon of "Cat Person" helped Kristen Roupenian land a million-dollar book deal. But the publication of her short story also called into question the role of the critic and the relationship between author and reader. "Many horror stories revolve around this theme: If we could eavesdrop on all the quick, dismissive thoughts that other people are having about us, we would go insane," Roupenian wrote for *The New Yorker*. "We are simply not meant to see ourselves as others see us."

As you begin to read others' work and give feedback, remain constructive and kind. Similarly, be deliberate with how, why, and with whom you open up your own fiction to critique in its earlier, more vulnerable stages.

ECONOMY AND UNITY

The workshop of Lindsey's piece also includes a discussion about economizing characters. This hearkens back to the idea of "setting a small stage" discussed in Chapter 2: Principles of Writing Short Fiction. With multiple animals running around the house in "Labor Day," Joyce suggests combining two of the pets into one in order to keep a slightly tidier stage and a smaller scope for the action.

Similarly, Joyce suggests cutting a few scenes—some of the more vaudevillian "bit" scenes and the tarot deck scene near the end—in order to shorten the story and end at a more satisfying point in the action. She does suggest that Lindsey keep that tarot scene

in mind and include it in a future story, one where it can take up more energy. "Writers are like cooks," Joyce explains. "They keep everything in the refrigerator and put it all in the casserole. What doesn't go in for dinner tonight, well, it's gonna show up next Sunday."

WORKSHOPPING "LABOR DAY"

In the Resources section you can download three versions of Lindsey Skillen's story "Labor Day": First, the draft that Joyce and Corey workshopped, then an edited version that begins to incorporate workshop feedback, and last a new draft that has resulted from workshop feedback and subsequent author edits. Notice how the editing process happens in stages. As you read through these three versions, take note of how particular challenges (like economy of characters and stakes) have been addressed.

Look back at a draft of one of your own stories. Reread it and make comments to yourself, as Lindsey did, in the margins. Take notice of economy of characters and the stakes of the characters. Now methodically go through the story once more and address the comments. Do some sections need to be cut? Rewritten? Do we need more moments of interiority? If you have any lingering questions, highlight certain sections to come back to later. Remember that these drafts are a work in progress.

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REVISION WORKSHOP: "NEAR DEATH" BY COREY ARNOLD

"It's understood that anyone who comes into a writing workshop wants criticism and will look forward to it."

Download and read "Near Death" by Corey Arnold in the Resources section and read it through. As we take a critical look at "Near Death," remember that in a workshop environment, everything is understood to be a work in progress.

Key Term
Allusion: A inexplicit reference to a specific event, person, or text.

BREAKING WORKSHOP RULES

"Near Death" revolves around a youth group and deals with faith, visions, and the body. "Near Death" is a wonderful example of "breaking workshop rules" to great effect.

What are workshop rules? Unofficially, workshop rules are a collection of admonitions against certain plot and prose decisions. These rules come from no single source but are instead repeated enough times in enough workshops to become unwritten parameters. You may have heard phrases like "write what you know" (even though writing into imagination is a hallmark of both literary fiction and fantasy alike); "don't use pop culture references" (which truly limits the scope and ability of fiction that's interested in specific time periods and culture); and "less

is more" (tell that to *Infinite Jest*). Another common rule warns against writing dream sequences for fear of losing reader interest.

But as helpful as rules can be, some are meant to be broken. The various injury-induced visions throughout Corey's story as well as the hallucinogenic dream at the end turn out to be some of the most compelling parts of "Near Death":

An Excerpt From

NEAR DEATH

Corey Arnold

I had never floated on my back before. It had always frustrated me when I was younger, watching the older kids float in the pool while I had to tread water constantly, my legs growing tired in a matter of minutes. But something was different about the river that day. It moved with a swift current, pushed through a furrow of red shale that rose as giant walls on both sides of the water. I looked up at the sky and watched it move, saw the stringy gold clouds enter and then exit my vision as I floated downstream, the cool water pressing up against my back and my legs.

Where had we even met? I couldn't recall exactly, could only remember the pressure rising in my chest and neck as she pulled me away from the group and asked me to come with her, someplace private, a place she went when she wanted to be alone. She was standing there now, on the bank, holding the rope swing. I knew that if I could just keep my body still, could stay afloat for just a moment, that soon I'd be there with her, and that I could admit myself to desire in a spirit of joy.

That's when I saw them. There were just two or three at first, each one tumbling through the air over the red cliff side above me. They seemed to hang in the sky for a moment, haloed with orange sunlight, frozen, but followed suddenly by many more, dozens even, an entire stampede of snarling pigs tossing themselves over the edge. The animals plummeted towards me in a havoc of tusks and dust and bristly fur that blocked out the light from the sun, each one screaming in its own voice, announcing its readiness to plunge into the rocks and water below and be done with it forever. I closed my eyes and waited for the splash.

As you move forward in your writing practice and have your stories workshopped, know that breaking traditional craft rules can be extremely exciting when done with good reason and with reader interest in mind.

THE TITLE OF YOUR STORY SHOULD ADD DEPTH

Another thing to evaluate during workshop is a piece's title. How does the title function in the story? How does it impact the reader experience? In "Near Death," the title lends clarity to the story's ending. When titling, it can be helpful to look for a word or phrase that adds a layer to the narrative.

AVOID CONVENTIONAL CHARACTERS

The therapist character in "Near Death" is one of the largest sticking points in this workshop session. A therapist can be an easy way to tap into another character's interior thoughts and monologue. By nature, therapists ask questions and probe, which makes for a convenient narrative trope. But in the case of "Near Death," the character ends up lowering the stakes of the story. As Lindsey remarks, she's almost less worried about the pastor because he's seeing a therapist. Through the conceit of this character seeking—and on some level receiving—help, there's a certain safety in the narrative that may result in the reader losing interest.

On another level, the idea of an adult man spending all of his time with the children of this youth group, with no other adult to talk to, is interesting and funny. By introducing the therapist, the excitement of this conceit is reduced. One decision to address this, then, is to perhaps merge the character of the therapist with other forces of the story. What does the therapist add? How can other characters or narration techniques do the therapist's job? How can we get into the pastor's head without putting him in dialogue with a therapist? As you begin revising after a workshop, ask yourself how and why each element in your story is functioning. Ask yourself if there's room to merge or transpose some of these functions or even cut some of the more irrelevant details.

Like Lindsey, Joyce also thinks that the therapist seems more like a convention in this draft. The fact that the pastor has someone to whom he tells nothing but his own candid truths does, to her, cut the drama of the narrative. If the therapist is integral to Corey's storytelling, she suggests that he play with the tension between the pastor and the therapist. Is there room for the pastor to lie or mislead the therapist about certain elements of the story? This might restore some of the drama and make the therapist seem less like a convention and more like a generative character.

REFERENCES AND ALLUSIONS

"Near Death" draws on the Bible, and there is one specific reference—an allusion to Jesus in the country of the Gadarenes—that doesn't resonate because it occurs too quickly. Joyce was lost during this scene because the intentions weren't clear. After Corey explains his intentions and the biblical allusion, it's clear that there's a mismatch between the author's intended effect—in Corey's case, to draw parallels between biblical narratives and the events of "Near Death"—and the actual effect in the story. This is a good example of what workshopping can do: It can clarify whether the author's intentions have been realized. In this case, it seems that Corey may have to revise his pacing to slow down this scene and allow the allusion to resonate more clearly with readers.

Further Reading

Infinite Jest, David Foster Wallace, Back Bay Books, 2006

All My Puny Sorrows, Miriam Toews, McSweeney's, 2015

Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology, Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson, Eerdmans, 2001

CH 14

CLOSING

"One of the main things to remember…is that writing should be pleasurable, it should be fun, it should be exploratory. You should be writing about things that surprise you."

FIND YOUR WINDOW

Wherever your writing career takes you, always respect and cultivate your imagination. For Joyce, this means sitting at a window that looks out onto nature. Joyce doesn't write looking at an air shaft or a parking lot. To motivate her and stimulate her imagination, she needs a reminder of the natural world outside.

Find your window. Perhaps you, like Joyce, need to write with a view of nature. Or maybe you prefer the air shaft or parking lot, or an urban scene. Maybe you need to listen to music or you need a specific kind of light to keep you motivated and inspired.

"One of the main things to remember…is that writing should be pleasurable, it should be fun, it should be exploratory. You should be writing about things that surprise you," says Joyce. Figure out what surprises you every day and what makes your imagination

wander. It may seem hokey or youthful, but it's part of the writing process that deserves more care than it gets. Do whatever it takes to cultivate your sense of wonder and surprise.

Ultimately, though, the most surprising part of the writing process will be you. You have the ability to shock, surprise, and delight yourself every day if you allow your imagination to take the wheel. Writing is a "spiritual manifestation" of something—many things—deep within us. This could be a secret shame, or an ancestral story never told, or an experience that's absurd and humorous. It could even be a memory that you haven't yet accessed.

As you continue pursuing a career as a writer, be gentle with yourself. Expect nothing other than the pleasure of writing and, potentially one day, the honor of connecting with an audience. Greatness doesn't come quickly, and beautiful narratives aren't written in a week. Allow yourself to explore. Expect to come to know yourself and the world around you a bit better, to see the past and future in a more exciting way. That is the pleasure of writing.

From the class lesson

"The Maze" by Joyce Carol Oates: Joyce Carol Oates Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

"Notes on Contributors" by Joyce Carol Oates: Joyce Carol Oates Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries