

MFA-Writing for Children & Young Adults
Winter Residency 2012

Lecture List

☆☆☆ Faculty ☆☆☆

A WRITER DIED AND WAS GIVEN THE OPTION OF GOING TO HEAVEN OR HELL . . .
HUMOR AS A LITERARY DEVICE

Tom Birdseye

A child's laughter is a contagious thing of beauty, especially when that burst of mirth is generated by a book. Let's take a look at the role of humor in the human experience, its value on both a cultural and individual level, and the many and varied forms it takes in literature. Generative, how-to-get-your-comedic-game-on moments will ensue. If Sue is in attendance. Seriously. Just saying . . . **Core Topics:** Middle Grade, YA, Picture Books, Genres, Voice, Character, Dialogue

A WORLD OF REALITIES

Bonnie Christensen

Dogs that talk. Cows that type. Bunnies that travel through outer space. Does anything go in the realm of picture books? No, absolutely not. Except for the exceptions. We'll explore reality structures in picture books and novels, and discuss systems for constructing credible "other" realities. Please bring paper and pencils. **Core Topics:** Plot/Structure and Picture Book

POETRY: "A MESSY BUSINESS"

Sharon Darrow

In *The Art Of Recklessness*, poet Dean Young says, "[The writing of a poem] needs to be a messy business, a devotion to unpredictability, the papers blowing around the room as the wind comes in."

How can recklessness be an art? How can we develop a "devotion to unpredictability"? What would happen if the wind blew in and swooped up all our carefully ordered pages, tossed them to the ceiling, some even blowing away through the open window, and rearranged those left into a joyful chaos? How would we cope? What treasures might we find? I'll share some of my favorite notions about writing poetry, some extraordinary pointers I've heard from mentors and gleaned from poets I admire, and then we'll do some writing singly, in pairs (tanka rengas), and in small groups (Exquisite Corpse). These exercises are also great to use in workshops you might lead or creative writing classes you might teach. **Core Topics:** Poetry, Pedagogy, The Writing Life.

SLOW YOUR ROLL: PATIENCE IN FICTION

Matt de la Peña

A good novelist understands the importance of speeding through the boring parts of a story and slowing down for the good stuff. We refer to this as pacing and often talk about it in terms of plot. But let's explore the importance of exercising patience in other elements of novel writing as well. How does it apply to set ups and pay offs? Dialogue? Character arcing? Setting and reversals? It's vital to try and "get the math right" in our novels.

IN CAHOOTS WITH THE READER:

EXPOSITION 101

Susan Fletcher

It's often said that writers create fictional worlds, but that's only part of the story. In truth, reader and writer are in cahoots; together, they co-create a world. This lecture will explore the art of exposition, including techniques that entice the reader to join in the act of creation. Through writing exercises, the audience will be invited to co-create as well. **Core Topic:** Setting

BRING ON THE VILLAIN

Mark Karlins

Antagonists play a crucial role in fiction. They can set the story in motion, motivate the hero, and lead the hero to develop various aspects of himself. In many ways, without antagonists there is no story. Antagonists can also be significant in their own right, and the truth of it is, what could be more fun than creating a character your reader will love to hate?

We will explore a number of issues. How do we make an antagonist believable? When are “flat” antagonists highly memorable and just what a story needs (and how do we keep them from falling into caricature)? When is an evolving antagonist more needed? How do various elements, such as dialogue, gestural detail and setting, amplify our understanding of the antagonists?

Antagonists are at times the most memorable characters in the story. We remember them because of their passion and intensity. We remember them because they often provide not only worthy foes for the hero, but because, through their actions and their very existence, they pose large metaphysical issues. They can allow us to see that what is at stake is profound. **Core Topics:** Character, Setting, Theme, Writing Process

NO JOKE!

HUMOR’S CAPACITY TO SUBVERT AND INTERROGATE CULTURAL IDENTITY ACROSS THE AGE RANGE

Uma Krishnaswami

The staple elements of identity narrative—self-awareness, overcoming prejudice, belonging, finding voice—have traditionally served the expressed social goal of cultural assimilation. In this lecture I’ll explore the potential of humor to blur once accepted boundaries of identity and belonging, and to inform story in structural ways as well as at the rhetorical level of words and sentences. In addition to drawing on my own experience writing against conventional assimilation tropes, I’ll show the complicating and subversive effects of humor in a range of titles: the *Anna Hibiscus* books by Atinuke, Julia Alvarez’s *Tia Lola* books, and selected *Ruby Lu* and *Alvin Ho* titles by Lenore Look. I’ll also refer to *The Neddias* by Daniel Pinkwater, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. The distorting and reflecting effects of the humorous mirror can be found in each. Each exemplifies a different place of fusion and ambiguity; each refuses the linear convergence presupposed by assimilation theory. **Core Topics:** Genre, Middle Grade, YA, Theory

ONCE OR TWICE UPON A TIME OR TWO: THOUGHTS ABOUT REVISIONIST FAIRY TALES

Julie Larios

Using Stephen Sondheim's play *Into the Woods* as a starting point, let's examine the assumed structure of Western European fairy tales: a wish, a quest filled with obstacles, the fulfillment of desire and subsequent return home "before dark," with life lived "happily ever after." Cinderella gets her Prince Charming, Jack climbs the beanstalk and comes home rich, the baker and his wife have a child at last. But are there more complex, intriguing and modern narrative possibilities? What do scholars such as Jack Zipes and Maria Tatar say about the classic work of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and H.C. Andersen or about new writers like Angela Carter and Gregory Maguire? Let's look specifically at Jean-Claude Mourlevat's novel, *The Pull of the Ocean* (a modern re-imagining of the tale of Tom Thumb) and a collection of new tales, *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me*, edited by Kate Bernheimer (founder and editor of *The Fairy Tale Review*.) **Core Topics:** Genre (fairy tales), Plot/Structure

THE NOVEL IN VERSE

Martine Leavitt

A lengthy whine about my process writing a novel in verse, followed by my ideas about the debate over the form. Finally, for those of you whom by now I have failed to discourage, some thoughts for writing your own. **Core Topics:** Genre, The Writing Life.

FINDING THE WHITE HOT CENTER OF YOUR MYSTERY/SUSPENSE/THRILLER

April Lurie

How do you crack open the emotional core of your story when there's so much *stuff* going on? How can you reveal the inner lives of your characters while setting up pieces of a puzzle? What do your sleuth and villain really yearn for? We'll examine three dimensions of suspense stories, digging deeper with each level until we find that white hot center. Works I'll explore include: *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* by Stephen Sondheim, *Tenderness* by Robert Cormier, and *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead.

THE AUTHENTIC SELF

Elizabeth Partridge

How can you trigger and reclaim memories of strong emotional feelings you had as a child and young adult? How do you use these in your writing? What can be shifted to a character who has a different gender, race, or religion? A character who lives in an earlier historic time or different country? Includes prompted writing shorts. **Core Topics:** Point of View, Theme, The Writing Life/Finding Story

BEYOND TREE AND CHAIR: CREATING A DYNAMIC SETTING

Mary Quattlebaum

How might writers move beyond generic details and flat description to convey a more dynamic sense of setting, one that helps to reveal character and advance story action? We will consider point of view, sensory impressions, figurative language and the character's interaction with and emotional response to landscape as ways to create a unique fictional world. Finally, we will explore our own personal landscapes as a means to discover new possibilities for our work. **Core Topics:** Setting, Character, Writing Process/Revision, Point of View

WRITING THE CRITICAL ESSAY AND THESIS: A HANDS-ON APPROACH

Leda Schubert

Building on Shelley Tanaka's very useful presentation (January '09; recommended homework), we'll examine several picture books through assorted critical lenses, check out secondary sources, and see how we might structure an essay or thesis. A short reading list will be sent out in early December. All students are encouraged to attend, even if you think you'll never write another essay (dream on). Bring paper/pen/laptop. **Core Topics:** Critical Writing, The Writing Life, Voice, Writing Process.

SAY, WHAT?

Rita Williams-Garcia

Your characters are engaged in conversation, but what on earth are they saying? We'll visit the gymnastics, subtitles, and rhythms of meaningful dialogue and complete a five to ten minute exercise after the talk. In preparation, during your daily travels press your ears to the air and snatch one spoken phrase of dialogue from an unsuspecting subject. It can only be one phrase or sentence, and I ask that you don't embellish. **Core Topic:** Dialogue

☆☆☆ Graduating Students ☆☆☆

THE AUTHENTIC OTHER: WRITING ABOUT A CULTURE THAT IS NOT YOUR OWN

Skila Brown

Last July, Coe Booth and An Na challenged us to think about the issue of writing about characters who belong to a culture other than our own. I will be continuing that discussion in this lecture. Let's pinpoint what we can do to authentically and accurately write about another culture, taking a close look at books that have succeeded, as well as those that have failed. **Core Topics:** Character, Point of View, Setting

CAN'T FIGHT THIS FEELING:
FIGURING OUT CATHARSIS AND FINDING THE RIGHT ONE FOR YOUR STORY

Amy Rose Capetta

Did you feel satisfied the last time you closed a book? Or were you filled with righteous anger or delicious doubt? Chances are, it's because the author knew her way around a catharsis. This is the writer's strongest tool when it comes to creating a lasting emotional response—and it's time to demystify it!

In this lecture, we'll build our own, craft-focused definition of catharsis, exploring examples from picture books through the young adult novel. We'll get a grasp on catharsis so that when we go to create our own, we have a strong knowledge of how this abstract concept functions in actual stories, and a wide range of possible forms to choose from.

Core Topics: Plot/Structure, Theory/Pedagogy

PRACTICAL OMNISCIENCE

Lindsay Eyre

Forget all the definitions, forget all the rules. How do you write from the omniscient point of view? And why would you want to? Come and be convinced. Recommended but not required reading: *Kalpana's Dream* by Judith Clarke, or *Saffy's Angel* by Hilary McKay. Core Topics: Point of View, Voice

TOYS IN STORIES AND TOY STORIES: WRITERLY USES OF CHILDREN'S PLAYTHINGS

Erin Hagar

Toys might be the most powerful "things" we can give our characters. Toys have preloaded, universal meanings (a two-wheeler = freedom, for example), yet the way a character interacts with her toys tells us much about her individuality.

In this lecture, we'll explore how toys (or memories of toys) can reveal more about our characters. We'll also examine stories with toy characters (an important part of the children's literature canon), and discuss ways to maintain the internal logic of these realistic fantasies. Core Topics: Character, Genre (realistic fantasy), Middle Grade

SLIPPERY FISH AND ELECTRIC EELS: CRAFTING THE HEART OF TRICKSTER

Laura Jensen

What is a Trickster? Think Jack Sparrow. Tom Sawyer. Puss in Boots. Jack and the Beanstalk. Trickster is wily, slippery and often too lucky for his own darn good. But he can also be an exasperating, irritating -- yet strangely engaging -- character to write about. This lecture should make crafting a Trickster a little bit easier on everyone. Core Topic: Character

IMPROV AND THE WRITER:

A DISCIPLINE-HOPPING PERSPECTIVE ON CHARACTER, PLOT, AND SCENE

Maggie Lehrman

In improvisational theater, two or more players stand on a stage and create characters and scenes spontaneously, with no pre-planning. Every improviser, from those just starting out to such improv luminaries as Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, Amy Poehler, Mike Myers, Bill Murray and many more, learns a set of "rules" they internalize to bring a scene to life. What are those rules, and why do they work? As we examine—and play with—the improv tradition, we will consider how scenes are built and inhabited and how we can apply these methods to our writing in practical, craft-based ways. Participation in group exercises will be encouraged but not required. Core Topics: Character, Plot/Structure, Setting

"BETWIXT AND BETWEEN": CHILDREN, GARDENS, AND MIMETIC EXPRESSION

Meredith Lewis

Gardens have made many famous appearances in Western children's literature, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). Located somewhere between the home and the true out-of-doors of the field or woods, the garden is both a little bit wild and a little bit tamed—similar, perhaps, to the child. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the garden motif in writing for children, critics have been slow to focus on gardens as an essential metaphor for our ever-shifting theory of childhood or to examine the significance of the garden to the genre of children's literature itself. In "'Betwixt and Between': Children, Gardens, and Mimetic Expression" I will discuss the essential and variant "meanings" of the garden in children's literature, and the ways in which the garden has been used in past and contemporary history to narrate theories of childhood. Core Topics: Setting, Theme, Theory, History of Children's Literature

TANTRUMS, FITS, AND FAINTINGS OR HOW TO MAKE A MEMORABLE SCENE

Stefanie Lyons

What separates a good scene from a great one? And what can I do to take my scenes from good to great? We'll explore the key elements that make a scene sing by focusing on a scene in Christopher Paul Curtis's novel *The Watson's Go to Birmingham—1963* in the chapter titled, "Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death." **Core Topics:** Writing Process, Structure, Voice

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Rebecca Maizel

Beauty. We all want it. We see it in our everyday lives and in all-encompassing media. But what does it mean to create a beautiful character in a Young Adult novel? What does it mean if your character is not beautiful? What implications does this choice have beyond the page? Does your work include a Manic Pixie Dream Girl? Perhaps you've created a Mary Sue? Let's investigate the messages we are sending by creating beautiful characters. Together we'll look at four novels: John Green's *Looking For Alaska*, Catherine Gilbert Murdock's *Dairy Queen*, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, and Jerry Spinelli's *StarGirl* and decipher the messages we are sending to young people through the main characters of our novels and their conflicts. **Core Topics:** Character, Point of View, Theme

ON BEING A SENSATE

Kristin Quisgard

As writers, we must resist the urge to describe things as we assume them to be and not as we would if we were exquisitely and childishly attentive. We get used to seeing the same old world the same old way, but as writers, we must retrain ourselves to pay attention. During this lecture, we'll use hands-on practice, anecdotes, specific writerly advice, and literary examples to help us think about how we can contemplate and interpret our world through sensory impressions. The anecdotes and examples of student writing that I am using in this lecture will also show how putting your MFA to work in elementary education is a wonderful alternative to teaching in a college or high school. **Core Topics:** Theory/Pedagogy, Voice, Writing Process, Writing Life

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? MAKING YOUR FICTIONAL YA ROMANCE REAL

Mandy Robbins

Today's YA bookshelf is not only overflowing with paranormal romance, but even the supposedly realistic, contemporary novels often feature romance storylines that just ring... false. What's the psychological appeal of the supernatural romance, and should we be indulging it? What is it that drives us to write some kind of romance into almost *all* of our stories in the first place--and why are we compelled to idealize it? My aim is to promote critical thinking rather than give absolute answers.

This multi-media lecture will be an entertaining reflection on our motives for writing romance in any genre of YA novel. It will also be an exploration of possibilities and techniques for achieving deeper meaning and resonance in our own fictional romances. Passing knowledge of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series and familiarity with Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty* trilogy will be helpful. **Core Topics:** Theory/Pedagogy, Writing Process/Composition/Revision, Young Adult, Character

EXPLOSIONS, FIGHTS, CHASES: HOW TO AVOID MAKING AN ACTION SCENE BORING (BECAUSE EXPLOSIONS, FIGHTS, AND CHASES ARE NOT INHERENTLY EXCITING)

Kristin Sandoval

Although sometimes we think of explosion, fight and chase scenes as inherently exciting, as the title suggests, they are not. Novels are not movies, and without the visuals, authors have to work harder to make their action scenes interesting, and tension filled. This lecture will examine how to avoid a rote recitation of the physical action unfolding (since that's boring), and examine the techniques authors use to make reading an action scene as exciting as watching one. **Core Topics:** Young Adult, Plot/Structure

DEVELOPING CHARACTER THROUGH REVISION:
EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION OF *BECAUSE OF WINN-DIXIE*

Rachel Smoka-Richardson

Kate DiCamillo says, “Lots and lots of revision is the key to honing any story.” During this lecture, we’ll examine the first three drafts and the published version of *Because of Winn-Dixie* to see how DiCamillo developed memorable characters like India Opal Buloni, her daddy the preacher, Winn-Dixie, and Gloria Dump. We’ll also discuss how we as writers can use these techniques to strengthen our own drafts. As an added bonus, we’ll get a rare glimpse into the mind of DiCamillo and her own insecurities and fears about the writing process. **Core Topics:** Character, Revision/Writing Process

MIRROR, MIRROR:
HISTORICAL FICTION AS A REFLECTION OF THE PRESENT

Niki Whearty

“If you want to understand a period of history, don’t read the contemporary fiction written during that period, but the historical fiction” – Jill Paton Walsh. The three YA novels *Johnny Tremain* (1943), *My Brother Sam is Dead* (1974), and *Chains* (2008) are all stories about the American Revolution, but each also delivers a distinctly different narrative of the times in which it was written. In this talk, we will focus on the skill of looking in two directions when we write and read historical fiction. How can we, as writers, take inspiration from historical events to tell stories that are true to the past, the present, and ourselves? **Core Topics:** Genre: (historical fiction), History of Children’s and YA literature, Setting

HOW TO MAKE THE READER ROOT FOR YOUR HERO

Brian Williams

This lecture examines ten techniques to make your hero more likable and will help the reader cheer for them. We will be exploring the heroes from the books *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli, *Holes* by Louis Sachar, and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. With these examples in hand, you will return to your writing desk with tools that will enhance your hero’s journey and help you write a compelling main character. **Core Topics:** Character, Writing Process, Young Adult

THE LOADED GESTURE:
YOUR CHARACTERS DON’T HAVE TO SIGH ANYMORE

Amy Zinn

Francine Prose said, “Properly used gestures . . . are like windows opening to let us see a person’s soul . . .” This lecture will discuss how to avoid the use of cliché body language in your writing. I will show by example how a simple gesture can say many things at once and then delve into the various techniques trusted authors utilize to give their characters’ gestures some pep. **Core Topics:** Character, Voice.