

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Session 4: Emotional Truth, Discussion of readings

Which stories did you like best? Why?

Liking and not liking stories: I hope you like far more than you don't like this semester but you can learn from all of them.

Often it is easier to learn from a story you don't like. When you like something you are along for the ride, not analyzing why it is working for you. When it doesn't work, you have a place to start asking why it isn't working. What did the author do or fail to do?

"Write what you **know**" is one of the great maxims of the field, but we have to define what that really means. You cannot limit yourself to writing **ONLY** about characters just like you. (Otherwise, you could only write your own gender, age range, ethnicity, and this would be rather limiting.)

So what does it mean to know, and what do you know?

- physical truth
(This is what you know from physical experience—how a place looks, smells, what scratchy wool or zero degrees feels like on your skin)
- emotional truth
(This is the central truth for a writer, the emotional reality of the "now" moment which the reader **MUST** accept. If the reader does not believe that moment of revelation/change, then the reader will not accept any part of the story.)

Writers lie to tell the truth – emotional truth lies in the cloak of fiction.

Fiction, that is, the act of embedding emotional truth in situation that never happened, is the way we find the courage to reveal that truth.

Writing is an act of courage.

It takes courage to express emotional truth. It means that you have to know yourself and be willing to put the depths of emotional reality out there where anyone can read it. Fiction is what keeps us safe, what lets us express and the audience experience that truth.

Psychologists say that people have experienced the full range of emotion by the age of six. You must trust your own emotional experience and believe that you have adequate understanding and memory in order to have something to say.

You need the courage first to be honest about your own emotional reality/experience, and then to express it. Honesty is hard because every character we write comes from us, the villains as well as the heroes. And we owe the villains as much as we owe the heroes, we must respect and understand their humanity, their motivations, their desires. Which means that we have to be honest about our own less-than-admirable desires, actions, etc.

Exercise

Think about your emotional truth (your incident from the last exercise) and the newspaper article you brought in (or a story that happened to a friend, or something you overheard in a restaurant). Take some of the details there to change your story in incident, while keeping the emotional reality. Start now, play, bring to me hard copy next week.

Point of exercise:

1. You see story ideas are all around
2. Good for necessary work (anthologies)

“Write what you know.”

“The Man to Send Rain Clouds” by Leslie Marmon Silko

Where did she get the idea?

What are the ideas?

How did she change the incident?

What is the story **about**?

What is the **purpose** of the story? (translating cultural ideas)

How does she use her own real life?

- knowledge of 2 cultures
- deep knowledge of **PLACE**

Did this actually happen? Is that important?

Who is the main character?

- 3rd person omniscient
- subtle layers of understanding
- Father Paul *knows* that he's being used
- Leon – greater use – not just for Teofilo but for all of them

Where do Silko's own life and experiences come in? (grew up on reservation, educated at Catholic schools)

“Barbie-Q” by Sandra Cisneros

this story ALL in the **details**?

Details – what is the most convincing? (“glitter wears off where her titties stick out”)

How many ideas?

What are they?

Characters?

What are the layers?

What is the story about?

What is the author's direct knowledge?

Did this actually happen?

Are there characters?

What is the emotional truth here? Truth vs. incident.

“Flowering Judas” by Katherine Anne Porter

Laura and Braggioni – both characters

- we see Braggioni through Laura's knowledge and he works as a frame for Laura
- Why the two characters?

What is this story about?

What comes from the author's reality?

Truth vs. incident

Her essay – how Porter writes

- spent 15 years learning craft so she *doesn't have to think about it*
- not linear, but creating Laura so that we get her moment