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ABSTRACT

Arriving college students find themselves unprepared for the demands of academic writing. Despite the sometimes condescending critical attitudes of its literary worth and the pressures of composition specialists to use nonfiction texts as instructional aids, detective fiction, like any fiction, favors the underlying characteristics students entering various academic disciplines need to learn to enter a professional discourse community and accomplish any of the communicative purposes that community requires. By putting readers into context specific situations and promoting interpretation and debate, novel reading enhances critical thinking and the ability to manipulate texts. Detective fiction, in particular, offers a number of features beneficial to the teaching of writing, such as: (1) consistency and integrity; (2) actors and agents with varying degrees of complexity; (3) a transparent prose style; (4) an integrated, rich, "fleshed out" narrative; (5) a sense of closure; (6) a recognizable perspective; (7) an ability and strategy to show important elements (setting/situation, actors/agents, dialogue/discussion, action/evaluation or recommendations) over telling; (8) a way to represent information and teach it over summarizing; (9) a notion of proportion; (10) an understanding of sophistication; (11) an understanding of how voice 'creates' the writer in readers' imagination and 'fictionalizes' the audience for the writer; and (12) a willingness to use, abuse, or confuse conventions. Genre fiction fits into the professional interests of those most frequently teaching academic discourse. It open up ways to talk about academic discourse and the peculiarities of its style. Teachers of writing know writing is writing, good writing is good writing, and to educate students about writing, teachers use whatever the student is doing. That is, people write from their imaginations; for a teacher to take away a writer's genre, focus, or perspective because of teacher prejudice will not help writers improve their writing. (Contains 10 notes, an overview of the presentation, and several appended exercises.) (TB)

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Neglected Genres of Creative Writing:

Why Care Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?

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I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. Umberto Eco, Travels in Hyperreality

Students arriving for their first experience of college often despair. As we all know only too well, they find themselves woefully unprepared for the demands of academic writing. Their secondary school training--even in the best of cases--hasn't introduced them to the rigors their college professors will demand. Their sense of audience is acute as it pertains to themselves, their friends, and--on rare occasions--their high school instructors. That sense, however, doesn't extend to the new audiences they must now negotiate: professional discourse communities from chemists to economists to nuclear engineering professions to [in increasingly uncommon cases] professors of English. What seems even worse is the mismatch between what a student sees about herself as a professional and the very real but unstated demands that a student's chosen discourse community puts on an individual seeking entry.

Compounding this situation is the reality of just who is teaching this novice to academic discourse the 'tricks' of the genre. More and more--and, all too many times without appropriate recognition or support--teaching assistants staff first- and second-year writing classrooms. Their knowledge of (or primary interest in) other discourse communities is limited, and the constraints on their time to learn the subtleties of academic discourse as a genre are significant. While well-meaning and conscientious, these novice teachers often never completed the course they're

ED 397 415

CS 215343

teaching, only hesitantly know (or can use) the terminology required for the course they now teach,¹ seldom share the jargon of other professional fields, and repeatedly find themselves relying on 'what the textbook says' makes for good writing or on 'what they feel' is good writing rather than assuring themselves of and teaching their students about specific textual elements common to more than one genre. Each of us who teach writing as a profession has had apprehensive students (or their overanxious parents) who want 'a real teacher' -- that is, someone trained in teaching writing -- as an instructor rather than 'a student teacher.' Explanations for these concerned folks usually fail.

This presentation works from a simple premise: despite the some times condescending critical attitudes of its literary worth and the pressures of composition specialists to use nonfiction texts as instructional aids, detective fiction--like any fiction or, for that matter, any writing--favors the underlying characteristics students entering various academic disciplines need to learn if they are to enter a professional discourse community and accomplish any of the communicative purposes that discourse community requires. In brief, this discussion argues that using genre fiction aids students new to academic discourse genres to get the 'feel' of writing persuasively, of tracking facts against assumptions, of assessing credibility, and of recognizing and responding to different contexts and imagined audiences. Even a cursory glance at this thesis shows just how obvious it is. After all, few if any of us fascinated by language, text, discourse, style, or creativity **haven't** indulged ourselves by reading scads of genre fiction. And none of us, I venture to guess, would argue with the tenet that the more an individual reads, the

¹New graduate students may appreciate the nuances of deconstructive hermeneutics but don't have a clue about the nature of metaphor, *ethos*, elliptical infinitive clauses, formal logic, or other aspects of writing--including, many Writing Program directors find, the basics of grammar and punctuation.

better writer that individual becomes. What we intuitively know--and what I'm asserting without any claim of originality--is that genre fiction in general (and detective fiction in particular) mimics the basic rhetorical concerns of written communication and that studying the genre can advance a college student's chances of recognizing and adapting more quickly to the prototypical criteria demanded in academic discourse.

The first pair of questions most writing instructors will surely ask are Why literary works rather than nonfiction prose? And, equally important, Why genre fiction rather than "Literature"? The first answer has been supplied repeatedly in older and more recent publications, but a quick response comes from Martha C. Nussbaum's recent study *Poetic Justice*:²

Novels . . . present persistent forms of human need and desire realized in specific social situations. These situations frequently, indeed usually, differ a good deal from the reader's own. Novels, recognizing this, in general construct and speak to an implicit reader. . . In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstances bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires-- . . . [Different readers noticing different items] suggests a further development. . . that the reasoning involved [in novel-reading] is not only context-specific but also, when well done, evoking in conversation with other readers whose perceptions challenge or supplement one's own.

(6-9)

That is, by putting readers into context specific situations and promoting interpretation and

²Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon P, 1995).

debate, novel reading enhances critical thinking and the ability to manipulate texts. Surely none of this surprises anyone.

Second, why detective fiction? Let me answer this point by posing another rhetorical question: What is it that persuasive [that is, **successful**] detective fiction, my particular weakness, offers readers and writers new to academic discourse? At least a dozen easily adaptable criteria including:

1. consistency and integrity--an essential to any good writing;
2. actors/agents, whether flat, round, three-dimensional, popular, marginal, or unusual, with varying degrees of complexity -- that is, the text gives the audience a yardstick for what it means to be 'human';
3. a transparent prose style--that is, a style that does not insist on saying how clever the writer is or, in the case of some academic disciplines, how seemingly complicated the field can be;
4. an integrated, rich, 'fleshed out', narrative-- that is, one with an identifiable plot [context for and sequencing of an academic discussion], situation [an understanding or recitation of relevant issues, a sense of place, context/culture], and actors/agents. In terms of academic discourse, no readers accept 'plot structures' [sequencing of information] so thin they're plain beneath thin, cracked, broken wallboarding of character and theme];
5. a sense of closure--that is, a sense that the end [the discussion, results, conclusion] somehow can tie most if not all dangling threads together. Whether writing informatively for academics and professionals or writing a whodunit, no communicative or effective writer leaves the audience hanging;
6. a recognizable perspective (i.e., point of view) and careful manipulation of

information (i.e., 'play fair' approach);

7. an ability and strategy to show important elements (setting/situation, actors/agents, dialogue/discussion, action/evaluation or recommendations) over telling;

8. a way to represent information and teach it over summarizing;

9. a notion of proportion;

10. an understanding of sophistication -- that is, ways to make academic discourse/text appropriate to the intellectual sophistication of the audience-- [the canonical authors of my childhood {e.g., Henry James, Joseph Conrad, George Eliot} didn't make sense until my teen years];

11. an understanding of how voice 'creates' the writer in readers' imagination and 'fictionalizes' the audience for the writer; --that is, and in cruder terms, readers will swallow almost anything as long as writer give them what they need to psychologically and emotionally accept the narrative--won't buy 'it's all just a dream/game/April fool's joke]; and

12. a willingness to use/abuse/confuse conventions to insure consistency and integrity.³

Moreover, students learning the expectations of academic discourse at times get the wrong sense about how well what they write acceptably fits the unstated requirements of their chosen disciplines. After all, as writing teachers we try to encourage students to write by letting them experiment, make errors, indulge in hyper corrections, and try new methods of invention, organization, and delivery. At the same time we hear our colleagues in other fields decrying that their students can't write and, by darn, it's the English department's fault. Those English folks

³Adapted from *The Riverside Handbook of Rhetoric and Grammar*, various issues of *Writer*, and *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*.

should have done their job teaching writing so that they can teach 'content'!

Consider it this way: Ever talk to a detective fiction writer or listen while a 'fan' discusses the shortcomings of that writer's latest offering? The discussion can quickly turn brutal! Professional writers know that genre fiction receives more harsh critical scrutiny, in part, because it's actually read. That is, the money in writing is in work labeled 'pulp' by literature experts because people devour it; hence, detective fiction writers know, if you're too thin-skinned for practical evaluation, if you can't take the heat of considered experts--the public--, you probably won't make a decent living. Much the same holds true with our academic colleagues across the quad.

Another point needs stressing in this discussion: genre fiction fits into the professional interests of those most frequently teaching academic discourse. Consider the point that detective fiction as a form of writing has been praised by literary theorists such as Umberto Eco, Jacques Lacon, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barzun--to name just a few theorists. The language games and manipulation of audience, purpose, and style in detective fiction are the stuff of rhetoricians and language theorists such as Chaim Perelman (negotiation), Charles Morris and Charles Sanders Peirce (abductive reasoning). These theorists and many, many others have figured out and are now arguing that the genre literature is enriched by, for instance, metaphor, by the ability to recreate the past {hence, add to perspectives on narrative} and recreate elements of other cultures, by its ability to encourage critical thinking/reading/writing skills {e.g., ability to reason from details, ability to hypothesize audience and audience's needs and meet/thwart them}. Aren't these the very facets of writing that most of us want our students to understand and, in the best of cases, easily employ in their writing tasks?

Other aspects of genre fiction open up ways to talk about writing academic discourse and

the peculiarities of its style. For example, new genre writers--particularly those with rich heritages of folk tales--have begun writing detective fiction even as they make their daily living writing functional documents. They take as a commonplace that folk tales and detective fiction share many characteristics, an important one being the relation between the real structure of a work and the structure that the readers/listeners expect. This commonplace underlies most if not all academic discourse. Furthermore it is a convention that suggests how to evaluate whether a text is well-written for its audience and purpose or just a 'stab in the dark.' Any genre work's appeal dwells in the knowledge of and respect for the code of conventions and norms fixed by genre that a writer has. The best of these novels are not exact reproductions of preceding works but are the freest improvisations that most rigorously conform to the formula. As many investigators of academic discourse **as a genre** are concluding, the same general criterion holds true.⁴

One other point about detective fiction pertains to this discussion: changes in genre/popular fiction have come from within. That is, changes in language or text have historically come from those who use the language constantly, who immerse themselves in texts (oral or written), who freely and, at times, joyously manipulate the language for their communicative purposes. Detective fiction enjoys this tradition: experiments in the genre have opened readers to additional styles (e.g., minimalist), writers (e.g., Paul Auster, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Ishmael Reed), cultures (e.g., *The Ghost Singer*, *Things Fall Apart*), etc. Seeing these innovative manipulations within the general criteria of the genre is an eye-opener to many who dismiss genre fiction as unimportant. For instance, several complaints about detective fiction as

⁴See, for example, John M. Swales' extensive review and discussion in *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990).

a 'conservative' genre that, in describing behaviors and social settings, protects the status quo and promotes stereotypes of various groups, of different professions, of women, etc. Harsh genre critics contend that (in particular) 'older works,' from the tea-and-crumpets mysteries to the ism-laden hard-boiled, need corrective commentary. But doesn't reading anything help writers develop the ability to do more than 'come down on the side of giving writers the benefit of the doubt'? Don't we want writers to learn from what they read--rather than merely 'buy into' a work?

Finally, teachers of writing know writing is writing--good writing is good writing--and to educate students about writing (its processes, products, or a balance of both) teachers use whatever the student is doing. That is, people write from their imaginations; for a teacher to take away a writer's genre, focus, perspective because of a 'teacher prejudice' will not help writers improve their writing. Such actions sure won't encourage newer writers, those who have backgrounds other than Miss Marple's small English village or Marlow's mean streets, to take the formulaic genre and liberate it.

"Theory, like mist on eyeglasses, obscures vision," Charlie Chan

For the moment, let's entertain the idea that teaching the criteria of one genre can help us teach students the basics of another genre. And, let's accept that writing successful contemporary detective fiction requires

- tight plotting
- abilities to spice text with puzzles and to let readers think they found the answers
- ability to place the ordinary (e.g., everyday working person) within extraordinary circumstances

- establish and sustain a perspective.

With these basics, it's possible to start students on exercises to play with the genre. Consider, for instance, the following drill⁵

⁵Taken (shamelessly) and adapted from a suggestion on WRITERS-L, #44 in Anne Bernay and Pamela Painter's *What If: Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*.

Take a die and roll it to pick one of each of the following:

First Character

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------|
| 1. soldier | 2. subway guard | 3. swimmer |
| 4. telephone operator | 5. ticket taker | 6. waiter |

Second Character

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| 1. prostitute | 2. PR agent | 3. reporter |
| 4. riveter | 5. seamstress | 6. sheriff |

Place

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. restaurant | 2. fish market | 3. wrong restroom |
| 4. art museum | 5. bus depot | 6. mortuary |

Object One

- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. tuna fish | 2. bowling pin | 3. gardenia |
| 4. ceramic frog | 5. map of New Mexico | 6. locked 1-year diary |

Object Two

- | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. six gold thumbtacks | 2. opened envelop | 3. piece of wire |
| 4. key | 5. lump of coal | 6. stick of dynamite |

Adjective One

- | | | |
|---------------|------------|---------------|
| 1. gilded | 2. fitted | 3. pliable |
| 4. gluttonous | 5. unkempt | 6. conclusive |

Abstract One

- | | | |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1. absolute | 2. artistic | 3. bipartisan |
| 4. mental | 5. economic | 6. theoretical |

Take your seven bits and do something with them.

Now, think about what practice students could have if you substituted terms from a student's chosen academic discipline.

So what? Again, my point and conclusion are obvious. If we're trying to encourage observation and critical thinking at the same time we're introducing students to the type of writing needed in academic discourse, turning to standards such as genre fiction and creative writing strategies seems reasonable as one tool--among the many we have--to introduce the concept of genre, to get students to think with critical evaluation, and--maybe, just maybe--get

excited about what they're doing. Thank you.

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Overview of Presentation

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Detective fiction in particular and genre fiction in general offer

1. Consistency and integrity;
2. actors/agents--whether flat, round, three-dimensional, popular, marginal, or unusual--with complexity;
3. transparent prose style (i.e., a style that does not insist on saying how clever the writer is);
4. integrated (i.e., rich, 'fleshed out') narrative (i.e., plot, situation, sense of place,, context/culture) and actors/agents;
5. a sense of closure (i.e., ties all dangling threads together);
6. a recognizable perspective (i.e., point of view) and careful manipulation of information (i.e., 'play fair' approach);
7. a means of showing (setting, actors/agents, dialogue, action) over telling;
8. a reliance on representation over summary;
9. a sense of proportion;
10. a hint at sophisticated versus unsophisticated discourse;
11. a means of identifying a voice that 'creates' the writer in readers' imagination and 'fictionalizes' the audience for the writer; and
12. a strategy for showing the willingness to use/abuse/confuse conventions to insure consistency and integrity.⁶

II. Changes in genre/popular fiction have come from within and opened readers to additional styles, writers, cultures, etc.

III. Teachers of writing know writing is writing--good writing is good writing--and to educate students about writing (its processes, products, or a balance of both) teachers use whatever the

⁶Adapted from various articles in *Writer and Writer's Digest*, *The Riverside Handbook of Rhetoric and Grammar*, and *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*.

student is doing.

Writing successful contemporary detective fiction requires

- tight plotting
- abilities to spice text with puzzles and to let readers think they found the answers
- ability to place the ordinary (e.g., everyday working person) within extraordinary circumstances
- establish and sustain a perspective

Consider, for instance, the following drill as a writing assignment⁷:

Take a die and roll it to pick one from each of the following groups:

First Character

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------|
| 1. soldier | 2. subway guard | 3. swimmer |
| 4. telephone operator | 5. ticket taker | 6. waiter |

Second Character

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| 1. prostitute | 2. PR agent | 3. reporter |
| 4. riveter | 5. seamstress | 6. sheriff |

Place

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. restaurant | 2. fish market | 3. wrong restroom |
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Object One

- | | | |
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| 1. tuna fish | 2. bowling pin | 3. gardenia |
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- | | | |
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| 1. six gold thumbtacks | 2. opened envelope | 3. piece of wire |
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| 1. gilded | 2. fitted | 3. pliable |
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⁷Taken (shamelessly) and adapted from a suggestion on WRITERS-L, #44 in Anne Bernay and Pamela Painter's *What If: Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*.

Take your seven bits and do something with them.

Additional Exercise:

For a course in Argumentation and Persuasion:⁸

Many of us were *glued* to Court TV during the O.J. Simpson trial. For writers, such fascination isn't unusual. In fact, some writers spend much of their research time sitting in courtrooms and talking to lawyers--only to end up using very little of what they discover. The camera over the jury box, however, is a different kind of research in that it makes writers (and all spectators, for that matter) look at a trial from a new angle. One can *see* in O.J.'s face that he did it; nonetheless the man knows the camera is beaming that close-up face to quite a few people paying close attention. Simpson, however, also knows that there's a difference between truth and justice and that he may not indeed be "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt." Consider it this way: when Simpson declares he is 100% innocent **of the charges**, he is telling the truth. But he still killed them.

Writing Lesson: Show, don't tell. You can tell my readers O.J. is guilty, or you can show them. Describe O.J. in such a way that readers will see what you see⁹. As you brainstorm for this assignment consider what you see in O.J.'s eyes and mouth and the way he holds his head that makes you see guilt or innocence. Describe it so that readers will see it too. Persuade them. And don't forget to have fun with this!¹⁰

⁸Suggested by Doug Anderson [KDAnde@aol.com]

⁹The show-don't-tell attitude makes detective fiction what it is today. Additionally, in mystery/detective writing the guy-who-done-it is often a character who appears long before the reader knows he done it. For a writing class ask students to consider points such as How are you going to describe him or her? Think about using the description you wrote of O.J. as a model for your own detective story.

¹⁰See also Wendy Bishop's two books *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing* Urbana: NCTE, 1990 and *Something Old, Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change* (Carbondale: SIUP, 1990).