

DOING TIME

My years in the creative-writing gulag

By Lynn Freed



Lt took my first teaching job for me to understand what I really wanted to do with my life. I was just out of graduate school and considered lucky to have been hired, even temporarily, by a large university. And yet, from the first minute I entered the classroom, I was gripped by an old and familiar panic, something that had visited me since early childhood whenever I felt stuck in a situation in which I did not feel at home. I suffered what I can only describe as a loss of self, a loss that seemed to preclude all hope for the future, all freedom, all joy.

Looking back on that time now, I see that the malaise had little to do with the nature of the actual task at hand: introducing a class of undergraduates, composed largely of Viet-

nam veterans, to Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and a selection of English lyric poetry. Had the class been filled with classically educated literary enthusiasts, it would, I feel sure, have produced the same result, if a little more slowly. The classroom itself seemed to bring with it the threat of a life circumscribed by such classrooms, such desks, such office hours, falafel vendors and tenure committees and memos from the chair.

One day, walking out of the ugly building in which I taught and into the California sunshine, I stopped for a moment to look around at the students massing, the Hare Krishnas dancing, a drab woman professor making her way back to the English Department. I was twenty-eight years old, married, with a small child, and still I was asking myself the question I had been asking for as long as I could remember: Is this what you really want?

Many times over the years, and in any number of different circumstances, I had asked myself just such a question. But only now did an answer arrive without a hint of prevarication: *No*. This was *not* what I wanted, not now, not ever. Moreover, I knew in that moment exactly what I *did* want—what I had wanted, in fact, since ever I had dreamed of a future for myself, had I only been able to give it the legitimacy of words. I wanted to write and I wanted to travel.

Sixteen years later—with marriage, two novels, a world of travel, and a career as a part-time travel agent behind me—I was back in the classroom. The invitation had come from a large university in the Southwest that was offering me a decent sum to teach two semesters of creative writing. This time there hadn't even been a question of

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what I really wanted: I needed money. The modest advance on my last book was long since gone, the next book was hardly begun, and working full time as a travel agent would have paid little more than the cost of my travel, leaving me no time to write.

So I packed up my car and drove across the country to a city in central Texas. And then suddenly it was back to dips and chips on a Saturday night and Marvin Gaye with the rug rolled up. Not to mention "lay" for "lie," split infinitives, falafel stands, office hours, memos from the chair—the whole baggage, in short, of my new and unnervingly familiar patron, the academy.

Had marriage been this bad? I tried to remember.

Ma'am, said a C student, I just want you to know I'm shootin' for an A. He was a young man who seemed to suffer incurably, like so many of the others, from television ear. (*Son, I'm leaving. But, Dad, just think of Mom, think of what this will do to her. I am thinking of your mother, Son. Trust me. One day you will be old enough to understand all this.*) He was taking my Undergraduate Creative Writing: Fiction class to better sharpen his verbal skills, as he put it, but the fact was he was headed for law school. He needed the credits and he needed the grades.

I stared at him, wondering what my writing life would have been like had I become a lawyer. Lawyers certainly could work part-time. As it was, my writing had come to a standstill. Every time I switched on the computer, I remembered the student stories I had to grade. And then, once they were read, it was as if all the vigor had dropped out of my own desire to write. Writing felt like homework I was setting for myself in a subject of which I had long since grown tired.

Every day, letters arrived from my mother. "What are you writing?" she wanted to know. "Don't put your all into teaching, darling, or you'll regret it." She understood quite well what she was saying. Given greater talent than she had, she would have stayed on the English stage. As it was, she put much of her all into her acting school, kicking off her shoes and hiking up her skirt to demonstrate, yet again, to a hopeless student how to fall down a flight of stairs without killing herself.

In the office next to mine was R. K. Narayan, also visiting for the year. Recently he had become a best seller in India when one of his novels was turned into a television series. His office was filled with women in saris all talking at once—this one was a daughter, that one a daughter-in-law. They lived in a furnished apartment nearby, and all came to the university together, carrying marvelous-smelling food.

What are you doing about grading? I shouted at him. He was very old and quite deaf, and hardly seemed to understand why he was there in the first place. But I was in transports of exasperation myself, subject to the assaults and imprecations of students every time I handed back a set of graded stories. With every week that passed, I felt stupider, less sure of my right to be teaching at all, let alone grading. Perhaps, after all, the student writing of his father's "uncircumsided" penis was not to be faulted for his English if, as the story seemed to imply, he had suffered repeated abuse as a child himself. But then again, so what? Why did such a thing have to land up in my Undergraduate Creative Writing: Fiction class when it belonged more properly with social services?

How do you teach them to write? I shouted at Narayan.

Oh! Teaching! he said, laughing. Either they are reading my books or they are not!

I made my way back to my townhouse complex in the spirit of an outcast. It was ninety-eight degrees. My car had no air-conditioning, and my townhouse was infested with crickets. So was the one across the pool. My friend the handyman had told me that the redhead who lived there was a medical student and had two diaphragms under her bed, one on each side, both of which he had sprayed for crickets.

Gazing across the pool, with its dozens of crickets skittering on the surface, I wondered if things would have been easier had I become a doctor. Doctors certainly could work part-time. The redhead was home a lot, and men came and went there constantly. One wore an army uniform and carried a ghetto blaster. Another wore Bermuda shorts and a baseball cap turned around backward. When I had instructed the students in my class

to remove their baseball caps, they had complained to the chairman. He called me in and asked whether I would please relent. Things are different in this country, he explained to me. Students tend to wear hats the way they wear shoes. In addition, they have concerns about "hat hair." Perhaps I should consider the teaching evaluations they would be turning in at the end of the semester. Such things counted for future employment, he said.

At about this point it began to dawn on me that the inmates were running the institution. I might have known. I had arrived at graduate school in New York City in the late sixties, right at the onset of the Age of Relevance—a time when, as Isaiah Berlin lamented, a whole generation of youth confused crudity with sincerity. What I was encountering now was simply the logical result of that revolution—the supreme relevance of the self in an institution that had come to depend for its continuance on the pleasing of that self. It was a self that took its reference not from history, philosophy, and literature but from psychology, a variety conveniently adjusted to the pursuit of personal happiness.

It is one thing to understand the points of the compass, quite another to use them in order to find one's way in a life circumscribed by one's own refusals—the refusal, in my case, to consider permanent full-time employment, and the refusal to abandon the freedom to travel.

Once the year in the Southwest was over and I was back in California, I found myself again facing the problem of how I was going to earn a living. Freelance writing was all very well, but it was haphazard, unsuited to a temperament prone to anxiety. And so when other offers of temporary teaching positions started coming in, I would accept them. And then off I would go again—into the Rockies, up to the Pacific Northwest—to live for a few months in yet another sadly furnished apartment in yet another grim university town. Even though I never accepted more than one teaching stint per year, I found that the teaching itself was beginning to order my life. When I was free of it, I stayed home and wrote

like mad—fiction, essays, magazine articles, many of them involving travel. But then, sooner or later, it would be time to pack up again, to go off again to do my time somewhere else.

After a while, I joined the faculty in a low-residency MFA program on the East Coast. It didn't pay much, but, except for the ten-day residency itself, it allowed me to stay home, teaching by correspondence. And when I did have to fly off again for the next residency, it was to go into the company of friends.

Low-residency writing programs and summer conferences provide a sort of café society for writers, supplying what nothing else can, certainly not a university department: the chance to make friends with writers from all over the country, all of us doing time together for a week or two and then going back to our disparate lives. Most of the writers in such programs have other jobs—teaching or editing. Some don't need the money; they go for one another's company, for the audience of students, for the swapping of gossip, the give-and-take of sympathy about the travails of the classroom.

And so when, after some years, I was offered a permanent half-time professorship at a large university within easy reach of home, I took it with a backward glance at what I was leaving behind. Certainly there was no question of turning down the offer: the job came with tenure, full benefits, and a proper salary to live on. Café society or no, I was tired of struggling and longed for what I could only think of as peace. It had been ten years since I had taken that first creative-writing job in the Southwest, and I was tired of moving; tired, too, of worrying where the next job would come from and where it would take me.

On Open House Day in the new job, I lined up as instructed along one wall of a bare classroom with several other members of the Creative Writing division. We were there to be interviewed by the potential consumers of our wares. With writing programs thick on the ground, colleges and universities compete fiercely for students. Let's play up the climate, one of the teachers suggested as the students began to file in. Point out that we ride bikes here for most of the year, someone else said.

We. *Our*. Suddenly I felt as if I had

married the wrong man again. Working as a traveling teacher, even in a low-residency program, I had managed to maintain a rather outspoken position on the teaching of writing that did not, somehow, seem to be at odds with the terms of my employment. Now, however, I found myself stiffening with pride and embarrassment as my turn came to sell myself to the customers. I heard my voice—tight, clipped, resentful—and longed to bolt before things got even worse. But question time had come around and hands were going up. What is your workshop philosophy? someone wanted to know. Which writers do you most admire? What do you consider the benefits of an MFA degree? What have you published? What percentage of your students make it as writers?

The only students I have ever taught who were more ambitious than MFA students were domestic servants in South Africa. I taught them Afrikaans at a night school run by students at the university I attended. It was a hated language, but one they needed if they were to achieve a "school-leaving" certificate and, with it, the hope of a better life.

And now here was that desperate hope again, the hope brought this time to bear on making it as a writer in a culture mired in the worship of celebrity. Considering the odds for success as a member of a garage band or as an actor in an audition lineup, the odds for the writing student in an MFA program are not bad. All around us, after all, are the successes that have been generated by such programs. And if the books themselves often seem a little too clever, a little heavy on craft and light on substance—if books five hundred pages long, "discussing a subtle but allegedly profound shift within a relationship," seem to be "in," as a judge for a major fiction award recently complained—well, who, after all, has not experienced subtle and profound shifts? Who has not grown up? At least to the age of nineteen or twenty? Who, in a nation of immigrants, cannot go back a generation or two and find something that might pass for exotic? Ethnically engaging? Heartrendingly pitiful? Or even sublimely ordinary?

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Apart from regular MFA candidates, there are legions of other writing students, particularly in the summer workshops, casual workshops, low-residency MFA programs—people who have lives already established and are looking, in their workshops, for a teacher, a sponsor, or, at the very least, for the company of others who write. Doctors, personal trainers, screenwriters, professional gamblers, corporate lawyers, teachers, housewives, landscape gardeners, librarians, cod fishermen, TV executives—I have taught them all. And if there is not a wealth of talent among them, still it is here that one is more likely to find a kindred spirit and some real readers.

The average MFA student may read more than the average undergraduate student of literature—the sort of undergraduate who, in an essay on Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, can include a sentence that begins, "When Primo and the other campers came in from the fields at night"—but still a whole generation of would-be writers in the academy seems to have only the most cursory acquaintance with the literary canon. The contemporary fiction-writing student is more likely to be familiar with contemporary fiction, particularly that which has emerged from writing programs like his own.

It is here that I am most at sea. My reading of contemporary fiction is spotty at best, based largely on the recommendations of others. When I am asked which writers I most admire, I panic, I go blank. If I am lucky, I remember a few names, and, even then, the writers are likely to be either dead or about to be. All I can think of are the writers I haven't been able to stand—books I have hurled across the room, one of which took the corner off my dressing-table mirror.

Falling back on the greats is easier, far easier. I might start off a workshop with a bit of Proust, for instance. "The beautiful things we shall write if we have the talent are inside us, indistinct," he wrote, "like the memory of a melody which delights us though we are unable to recapture its outline. Those who are obsessed by the blurred memory of truths they have never known are the men who are gifted.... Talent is like a sort of memory which will enable them finally to bring this indistinct

music closer to them, to hear it clearly, to note it down."

A writer, I say, must have not only a story to tell but a story that he *must* tell. And, in order to do so, he must struggle to find a voice. Whether he works with or against the natural iambic meter of the English language, the writer must be in love with language, with the words themselves, the *sound* of the words on the page, the music they make in meaning. He must love them not so much in order to *express* the self as to discover a self, and, through it, his province, his territory, the territory of his story.

What do you mean by "voice"? they ask.

Trying to explain something I understand only sketchily myself, I resort to metaphors—a thumbprint on the page, the inimitable sound of Maria Callas. I pull out some opening paragraphs—Duras, Naipaul, Graham Greene, William Trevor. Listen to the music of the words, I say, the rhythms, the gorgeous way the rhythms and the meanings converge. They nod, they do see the point, they make notes. Most are already teaching writing themselves, to undergraduates. Most of them already think of themselves as writers and teachers.

I move on to a discussion of their manuscripts, reminding them that we are not in a therapy session, that the fact that they may like or dislike, approve or disapprove of, a character is not relevant to the literary merits or shortcomings of the piece at hand. The story I begin with is full of shortcomings, but it also delivers a line that has already made it into the burgeoning pool of such offerings among my writer friends—a pool that goes a small way toward redeeming the entire enterprise.

I read the line aloud: *Give it to me in the ass, Mom said. I could hear from her voice that she didn't mean it.*

The students look up nervously. They still consider me a bit Jean Brodie-ish, not to be counted on as a pal.

One could put this into internal monologue, I suggest. That might help to flesh out the character of the narrator. I read the line again, but as soon as I get to "ass," the class falls into an uproar of delight, and the writer, a dear boy trying to seem dangerous,

pulls his knitted cap down over his ears and forehead.

Questions? I say, to calm them down. How do you build a character with internal monologue? someone asks. How do you set up an unreliable narrator? How do you shape the narrative arc?

I shake my head. Despite all my years in creative-writing classrooms, I still have no idea how to pretend to unravel the mystery. These concerns are red herrings, I say. So are the relative merits of the first, second, third persons, active and passive voice. I tell them about W. C. Fields—how I had heard that after reading an analysis of his juggling he couldn't juggle for six years. They laugh. They know the feeling, they say.

And I feel like a fraud. Week after week in come their stories—some just committed to page, some rewritten so many times and under the aegis of so many different workshops that the writer himself has lost all sense of the authenticity of the piece. What can I do about this? How can I help someone breathe life into a flat and pointless piece of writing? I cannot. If there are teachers who know how to work from the abstract to the concrete, I am not one of them.

So what can I do in a world in which bad stories may well be written by likable people? I can forget the writers. I *do* forget them as I sit reading paragraph after paragraph of mediocre writing, my blood rising yet again at the presumption of an audience, *any* audience, for this, let alone the serious attention of an irascible writer with one foot nailed to the ground for the duration of the semester.

And then, one day, in comes a story with an opening paragraph so good that it fills me with a rush of hope, hope not so much for the writer as for myself. Reading on, page after page, I feel lifting from me the awful burden of having to take seriously a piece of writing that should be consigned to the bin.

The story is, in fact, the second draft that I have seen, and it has been completely transformed. The student has not followed any of my suggestions; he's done better, much better. I find

myself envying him his furious youth, his selfish, single-minded determination. Even though he is among the legions of students who are socially and conversationally tone-deaf, handing over his manuscript with, "Here is the story you need to read," a phrase that evokes instant rage in me and generally guarantees scant attention for the work, I cannot now help scrawling, *Wonderful! Brilliant rewrite!* as I reach the end.

The happiest teachers are, perhaps, those who are most comfortable in the role of parent or mentor. I am not. I might advise a good student to get himself out of the academy as quickly as he can, but I have no stake in his future beyond wishing him well. When yet another person says, But surely it is gratifying to come across talent? I have to say that it is more of a relief than a gratification.

I am not a natural liar. I find it almost impossible to pretend to admire a poor piece of writing, either in manuscript or in print, even if it is written by someone I like. Being asked to deliver a quote for the jacket of a bad book casts me into acute misery. I suspect that this difficulty, like so much else in my writing life, goes back again to my mother, to the unquestioning standard to which she held all art, the real despair she suffered when, having set up an acting school rather late in life, she found herself faced with the task of teaching acting to the untalented.

When, as an adult, I found in a Japanese piano teacher a woman of fierce and uncompromising standards, I felt immediately at home. Despite her almost incomprehensible English, she led me further toward an understanding of the art of the piano than all my years of childhood lessons had done.

As a piano student, I was not much different from any number of the writing students I was to encounter when I began to teach—an enthusiastic amateur. If there was a difference between them and me, it lay, perhaps, in the fact that I did not for a moment consider myself a pianist. Such a thing would have been both ludicrous and presumptuous in someone of minimal talent and inadequate application. I was taking the lessons because I loved to play, because I wanted to play better, and because a weekly lesson with

a master of the instrument forced me not only to practice regularly but also to play in a way that would make her less likely to push me off a cliff.

To my surprise, when my own child turned seven and I asked the teacher to please take her on, she refused. I never teaching a Caucasian children, never a Japanese neither, she said. Too middle-class, too looking-around. I teach a Chinese. Chinese understand excellence.

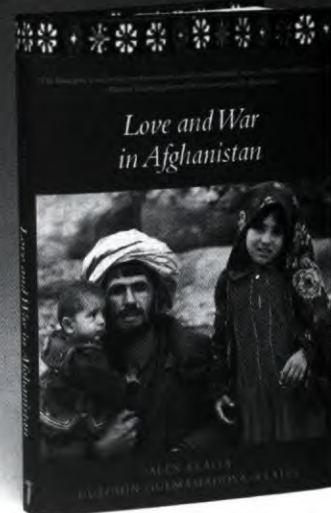
I was delighted with this. And so, after a decent interval, I brought up the subject again. And then again. When at last she relented, she did so with a few provisos: I must stop taking lessons myself (Never teach a mother and a daughter same time), the girl had to practice for a certain number of hours a day, and I should buy a grand piano for her to practice on. The old upright I'd had for years would only encourage bad habits, she said.

And so began my daughter's seven years with the only teacher she was ever to encounter who maintained a standard of perfection unadulterated by false encouragement. Within a few years, she was playing far beyond my own abilities. She was also, on the teacher's insistence, enrolled at the conservatory, taking lessons in solfège and the history of music. It was only when, as a teenager, she rebelled and refused to go on that I came to understand that, although she had a nice touch and a passable technique, she lacked what is essential in any art: a vocation.

As it turned out, that first creative-writing class in the Southwest had let me in easily: The students there did not envision themselves as writers. Most of them were taking the course only as a way to fulfill an English requirement. Subsequent university positions, however, took me right into the teeth of a culture of professional writing students, a culture that had given rise to what was fast becoming the cash cow of many humanities departments—graduate programs in creative writing.

A creative-writing program relies for its status on the relative fame of its faculty and on the publishing successes of its students. The publishing industry is quite alert to these possi-

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bilities—writing schools producing books that will be taught in writing schools at worst; at best, and with a bit of luck, breaking through into general readership. Generations of books have by now emerged from such programs, and the process has turned a number of unknown writing students and ex-writing students into household names, either liberating them, at least temporarily, from having to teach in a writing program or guaranteeing them a job in such a program.

That talent itself might have little to do with such success is neither here nor there. Talent is the naked emperor of writing programs. How, for instance, does one approach the subject of talent in a workshop that may well be devoid of even one student showing a hint of it? Mentioning talent serves only to make everyone nervous. (Do I have it? Does she? Anyway, who is she to judge? I just got a personal rejection from *The New Yorker*.) Mentioning vocation, on the other hand, is likely to make everyone feel comfortable. In a world that confuses the calling to write with the desire to be a writer, vocation is just another word for ambition.

When someone has a story accepted for publication, or a book proposal engages the interest of an important editor, it is as if an electric current of hope and envy has been run through the group. How can one quarrel with this? Or with the considerable advance that yet another student might be offered for a novel one finds unreadable? How can one tell student writers, most of whom place their trust in the efficacy of group learning, that unless they can turn themselves into solitaries, driven to ride single-mindedly over all obstacles, all reverses, all failures and discouragements, taking what they need ruthlessly, discarding the rest—unless they can become what it is, in fact, impossible to become because one must be born that way, talented or not—there is little to be gained by taking a writing workshop beyond a few years free to write, the blessing of imposed deadlines, and the company of other student writers?

One cannot. Or, at least, I cannot, not beyond telling them at the outset, even though they will not believe me—why should they?—that, to my

mind, writing cannot be taught. That workshops can be dangerous. That the best I can do as a teacher is to function as a good editor, to help a student train his ear so that he can come to edit himself. That unless the student plans to spend his life moving from workshop to workshop, he will need to be able to rely on his own ear. And that if he does move from workshop to workshop, he is doomed to lose his sense of hearing anyway.

But it's hard to hear ourselves, they say, when all we hear is your voice—

Start here! Sink this!
Where's the story?

I understand. I am in the same boat myself. With the classroom so present in my life, everything I write begins to sound like a teacher writing—intended, crafted, lifeless, and too clever by half. Teaching writing has returned me to the sort of cleverness I needed as a student of literature—searching for meanings, tying up loose ends. “There are many forms of stupidity,” said Thomas Mann, “and cleverness is the worst.”

Even when I open a book or a magazine, I find myself scouring it for things to point out in the classroom—a transition well-achieved, a change in point of view, a turning point, a leap into the future on nothing more than a brushstroke. Try this voice for yourselves, I might suggest. Copy it. See how she begins, right in the middle of the story? No groundwork? No explanation? Why not try that?

And yet, even as I say this, I know that, except for the very few, trying on another writer's voice will carry them only so far toward finding a voice of their own. For the real part of the journey, injunctions are useless. Lost myself in the language of injunction, lost for the real work of a writer—listening, writing, listening—my ability to disappear when I sit at my desk, to sink into that other world, beyond thought, beyond analysis, is gone. I have become both too clever and too stupid to write. What I am suffering—this cleverness, this stupidity—is the creative equivalent of an autoimmune disease. And it is ongoing. It lasts right up until the day I can emerge from the classroom and step out into the

future again. And sometimes for longer than that.

Meanwhile, in come the students during office hours, one after the other, and I long, despite myself, to be able to give them something to hope for. I wish I could tell the young woman sinking into the chair on the other side of my desk that she should turn her back on all this, return to her life as a physiotherapist, write as a hobby if she has to. What she is really after, it seems to me, is glamour. If I told her that the life of a writer is not glamorous, she would laugh. Without its terrors, it may well seem glamorous to her. But she knows nothing of such terror. She doesn't even have a clue that the story she is clutching in her lap is beyond anyone's help, that it has no voice, no characters, no story. She has paid a lot to be in this program, and I am paid to help her through it.

And I like her. She is personable, funny, polite, respectful. She doesn't send me emails that open with, “Hi there, pal!” She does not tell me how excited she is by her own writing, how gratified. Nor is she Heepish or bumptious. I have long since learned that modesty and good manners are not to be expected in the academy, a world in which students eat in class, answer their cell phones, leave the classroom without excusing themselves. This young woman commits none of these offenses. Nor does she ask me, as other graduate students have, for suggestions of “fictional novels” to read. She is not uneducated. And yet, sitting in my study chair the night before, her story on my lap, I forgot completely the pleasant young woman behind the awful story she had written. *Where's the story?* my pencil raged in the margin. *Who cares? Make me care!*

But how do I make you care? she asks now, taking a chocolate from the bowl I keep for just such occasions. I would rather talk with this young woman about anything other than her story—the environmentally friendly car she's just bought, the amusing mother on whom much of the story is based. But she doesn't want from me what she can have from her friends. She wants to talk, writer to writer. She wants answers. And she wants progress.

Progress. There is hardly a student who doesn't believe in it as a right of registration in the program, who doesn't assume that it goes hand-in-hand with encouragement. But how can I encourage this student when there isn't even a paragraph on which to hang an edit, not even a line? If there were, the result could be salutary, at least for the purposes of the workshop. I could have her looking up in delight at the sound of her own prose moving the story across the page. Other than palaver-ing on about the so-called writing process—quoting others, playing myself for the audience of the workshop—editing to effect is the only true delight that I know how to deliver, all I can teach that I consider worth having.

She flips through the pages on her lap. I mean, like, half the workshop thinks I should put the epiphany at the end, she says, and the other half doesn't. What do you think? Would it help if I factored in some dialogue?

I say that if I showed my work before it was sturdy enough to receive criticism, I would be as confused as she is. That this confusion is a hazard built in to the very idea of a workshop. I tell her what Donald Hall says: that the problem with workshops is that they trivialize art by minimizing the terror.

She laughs. Stupidity is not her problem; lack of talent is.

As it happens, she has caught me on a particularly bad day. I have just realized that the novel on which I have been laboring for eighteen months—the novel to which I was counting on returning when the semester was over—is hopeless, every sentence in it a lie. Who do I think I am, then, to fall into despair over having to take my students' bad prose seriously when I am in such despair over my own? Who, indeed, do I think I am? Balzac?

But I can't think of any other way to tell the reader what they must know, she says.

What he must know, I say. And never, never try to tell the reader anything! She looks up, alarmed.

And never, never use dialogue to deliver information! I hear my voice rising. If I could, I would tell her what is

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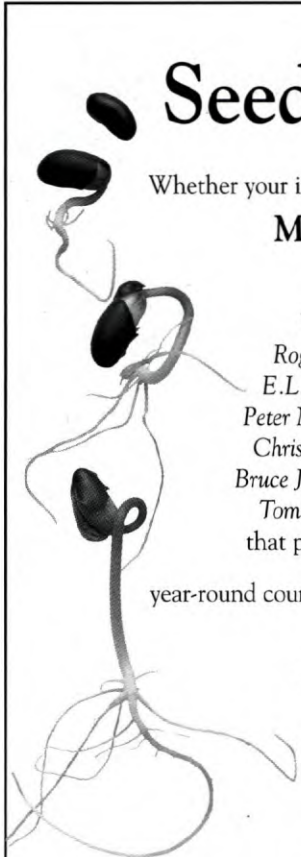
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SOLUTION TO THE JUNE PUZZLE

A	N	E	M	I	C	C	O	V	E	N	S
N	O	V	I	T	I	A	T	E	S	O	T
N	O	A	T	E	L	E	P	H	O	T	O
O	N	C	O	M	I	N	G	I	B	A	R
Y	T	U	F	L	A	S	H	C	U	B	E
P	I	A	N	O	W	O	R	L	D	L	Y
A	M	T	R	A	K	U	U	E	G	E	N
J	E	I	N	F	E	R	N	O	E	S	O
A	N	O	D	E	A	B	O	R	T	E	D
M	A	N	O	R	S	A	F	C	A	P	O
A	M	S	D	W	E	L	F	A	R	E	S
S	E	N	O	R	A	L	S	T	Y	N	E

NOTES FOR "NO GIMMICK":

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (*).

Eleven answers required the addition of the letters NO before they could be entered: NOvitiates; PiaNO; inferNO; aNOde; maNOr; seNOra; anNOy; NOontime; NOtables; ruNOffs; NOdose.

ACROSS: 1. *; 6. c.-ovens; 10. vitiates*; 11. *; 12. O(NCO-[m.]-in)G; 14. f-lash-cu-be; 17. P-I-a; 18. two mngs.; 20. *; 21. rev.; 23. infer*; 25. ad-E; 28. a-b(O-rt.)ed; 29. mars, two mngs.; 31. cap-O; 33. w(elf)are*; 34. sera, rev.; 35. Sty-ne(w).

DOWN: 1. a-NY; 2. on time (two mngs.); 3. E-vac(U.)ations; 4. hidden; 5. pun, sillier; 6. *; 7. *; 8. (s)tables; 9. *; 13. *; 15. two mngs.; 16. s(how)-our-ball; 17. pa(ja)ma's; 19. ruffs, two mngs.; 22. dose*; 24. o-RCA; 26. na(rev.)-me; 27. do-do; 30. homophone; 32. two mngs.

really troubling me: that I am being paid back for the sham I am taking part in week after week, month after month; that trying to explain what is essentially a mystery, I have shut the door on that mystery for myself. But to her, I am a successful writer with a job that leaves me time to write. I write, I travel, I teach. It is all she thinks she wants for herself.

Dialogue, I say more gently, is the poetry in the prose. It gives air to the narrative. They are well-worn phrases, phrases I have used over many years of this. In fact, they have lost their meaning for me, if they ever had any.

Air?

Pacing, timing, rhythm.

What about characterization? Doesn't that demote characterization to a sort of subset of color?

I give up. I might be settled into classroom life more easily now than I was before—my style defined, my injunctions at the ready—but I am at home in the way a foreign student, doomed to spend a season in a strange country, comes to feel at home. I have become a cartoon of myself for an audience of strangers.

Yet after every workshop the evaluations come in, and, to my continuing surprise, most are laudatory. I am praised for being encouraging. *Caring and sensitive*, they say. *Constructive. Inspirational*. Are they crazy? I might be pleased by the praise, but I am quite concerned that the job is turning me into a dancing ape. On the other hand, the ones who quarrel with my *harshness*, my *negativity*, have me angry and resentful. And so I am caught in the teacher's trap—the trap of wanting to be liked.

Performance can be a heady thing, especially with an audience of acolytes. Over the years, I have polished my classroom act into one that seems to work well, at least for the more resilient among the students, the ones who, like myself, feel swindled by false encouragement. Even so, they persist in being encouraged. And I, straddling the chasm between half-truths and half-lies, search for something to say that will leave us all morally intact. (Do you think we're going straight to hell for this? a fellow writing teacher asks, peering around my door.)

Hell, in fact, is never very far away.

Writing itself is a performance, a sort of magic act, played out in the dark, in silence. Trying to find one's way back to it after the public noise of teaching can take weeks or even months. Several times, between teaching stints, I have not been able to find my way back at all, so that when I do return to the classroom, I am angry and full of blame. And yet whose fault is it if I have made this bargain? My parents', for not having had the wherewithal to leave me a trust fund? My husband's, for departing an unendurable marriage? My own, for not having had the courage to trust my writing to see me through?

"Write without pay until someone offers pay," Mark Twain suggested. "If nobody offers pay within three years, the candidate may look upon this circumstance as the sign . . . that sawing wood is what he was intended for."

Before the burgeoning of creative-writing departments, writers who could not make ends meet by selling their books, or by writing reviews, or for newspapers, or for Hollywood, or by editing journals, or by marrying money, or by working in a profession of one sort or another—those writers would indeed drop out of the market. Not so now. Now most writers without independent means seem either to be looking for teaching jobs or complaining about the ones they have. And how would one fare without these jobs? Saw wood? Sew on buttons in the dry cleaner's?

Earlier forms of patronage make the academy seem mild by comparison, and also, paradoxically, more dangerous. Consider Machiavelli, for instance, out of favor with the de Medicis, furiously writing *The Prince* to get himself back in. Would he have been moved to write this masterpiece from within the cozy circle of patronage? More than this, would he have survived as a writer had he not, in fact, achieved his aim and had himself readmitted?

There are writers who are brought down by teaching, all the life gone out of their work. And there are writers who take up the work of editing other people's manuscripts, few of which are destined to make it into the light. To have to pretend to take seriously the job of improving an unworthy piece of writing because one is being

paid by the writer to do so is, perhaps, the most dangerous compromise of all.

It has always taken me a while to adjust to a new rhythm of life, particularly when that rhythm is not one of my own making. Still, over the years, I have come to understand that the freedom I enjoyed as a wife-and-mother who wrote and traveled was not much different from what I now have as a professor with half the year off to write—an illusion. And that what I still seem to be longing for, almost thirty years after I walked out of that first classroom of Vietnam veterans, is what I thought I had discovered then, in those few moments standing in the California sun—a shape for the future that brings with it hope.

But how much more future can one want for oneself? And how long can one go on wanting it? Most of my future I have already spent. Here I am at the beginning of what is left of it, in a splendid eighteenth-century chateau that looks out over lawns, roses, vineyards, fields of baled hay, and Lake Geneva in the distance. I have been invited here for a few weeks to work in the company of other writers, lifted out of my life and given back to myself. I unpack my clothes and go to the casement window to look out at the mountains across the lake. I am only at the start of my half-year free of the classroom, and already the weight of its claim has lifted. It began to lighten when the wheels of the plane left the ground and was gone with the first sip of wine.

I sit down at the beautiful desk of inlaid wood and read through my file of notes. I have set aside my novel and come here to write an essay. For the past months of teaching, I have been wondering how I would get down to the truth of the subject, where I should begin.

When I left teaching to become a travel agent, I write, I was just out of graduate school, married, with a child, and suffering acutely from a madness to be free. Being locked into any situation has always worked on me in this way. And yet, with this job, I wasn't even locked in. I was simply filling in for a professor who was suffering from a nervous breakdown . . . ■