



Craft in the Real World and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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Review of

Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*. New York: Catapult, 2021

Creative writing instruction can feel like a Strunk-and-White-hosted episode of *What Not to Wear*: dos and don'ts shared by teachers, mentors, friends, classmates, Twitter, and blogs, all with the supposedly good intention of making an author's writing look better. But those dos and don'ts leave the author poked and prodded, internalizing rules she may not even understand in order to avoid being singled out. Matthew Salesses points the floodlight on the whole endeavor of craft-based finger-wagging by rethinking what craft is in the first place. Salesses reframes craft as a cultural construct of audience expectations that reflect the power structures at play in society. Therefore craft suggestions, like dos and don'ts, are useless without explanations, without lineage. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* (Catapult, 2021) is a study in consciousness-raising. In this essential book, Salesses tasks writers with understanding how craft is defined (and when, and by whom) before deciding which of its rules to follow.

Craft in the Real World joins in rowdy and amiable companionship with other this-is-a-trap-burn-it-all-to-the-ground books for general audiences about the shaky foundations of fiction workshop lore, like Bennett's *Workshops of Empire* (2015) and McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009). Salesses' volume also contributes to a growing collection of generous, ground-breaking creative writing pedagogy books, like Janelle Adsit's *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing* (2017) and Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* (2021).

Salesses' text is grounded in the ideas that drove his popular four-part *Pleiades* series, "Pure Craft Is a Lie": essentially, craft is a cultural construct living in readers' learned expectations, and those expectations have been molded by the same power structures that shape canon: white supremacy, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and more. To teach craft divorced from its context, as if it is a neutral set of best practices, is to engage in and support an ideology of power, Salesses

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argues. *Craft in the Real World* is a wake-up call to those who need it, a megaphone for those who have been saying this all along while no one was listening.

I appreciate that Salesses approaches craft criticism as an educator, one who does not assume a monolith of students, who paves an accessible route to knowledge and skill. He is a generous and thoughtful teacher on the page. He educates, encourages, and pulls back the curtain on why things are the way they are. Part theory, part reference, and part pedagogical text, *Craft in the Real World* is applicable to creative writing studies scholars, prose writers, and teachers of creative writing in all genres. User-friendly to the max, the book is divided into sections that can be read or referenced separately from one another. Broadly, the first section proves craft expectations are culturally constructed; the second provides revised, more inclusive definitions of common craft terms; and the third concerns teaching, including a section of workshopping alternatives, sample syllabus statements, and a generous appendix of muscle-building writing and revision exercises. This is the kind of book I clutch to my chest and press into the hands of others, students and colleagues alike.

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In the preface, Salesses writes this gem, which should change every definition of craft in every classroom and handbook moving forward:

What we call craft is in fact nothing more or less than a set of expectations. Those expectations are shaped by workshop, by reading, by awards and gatekeepers, by biases about whose stories matter and how they should be told. How we engage with craft expectations is what we can control as writers. The more we know about the context of those expectations, the more consciously we can engage with them.

This is the central theoretical proposition: that craft, often presented as a neutral set of universal rules is, in fact, a collection of reader expectations fully reliant on that reader's lived experience. Put another way, as Salesses points out, "To learn craft is to learn how to use cultural expectations to your advantage." Contrary to the argument that "good writing is good writing," good writing is only good because of who says it is good; and therefore craft, too, is political because, uninterrogated, it represents the values of those in power.

This premise is well-documented: stroll through the 'writing how-to' section of a local bookstore or Google how to write a short story, and most of the advice will come back interchangeable. (Thanks, cultural hegemony.) For a brief rundown of the monolithic apolitical whiteness of craft manuals, check out the introduction to Steve Westbrook and James Ryan's 2020 release *Beyond*

Craft: An Anti-Handbook for Creative Writers. Though focused on craft books rather than classrooms, Westbrook and Ryan's earlier publication practically plays the herald trumpet for Saleses. *Beyond Craft* calls for an end the craft-book-writer's ideologically-driven propensity to "artificially isolate formal issues of craft from larger contexts, concerns, and functions related to writing." Sometimes a book will come along and you'll say to your friend, "See? This is exactly what I've been talking about!" I imagine Westbrook and Ryan had a similar reaction.

In addition to providing a theoretical shift in definitions of craft, Saleses also does a good deal of teaching about craft lineages. While many creative writing scholars and historians have contextualized the history of workshop within the white male privilege of Iowa, no one quite puts it like Saleses does when he reminds us that the gag rule was essentially developed so that white men up for workshop would be forced to stop talking for a minute and listen. Framing his argument through personal experience and the history of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where the MFA was concocted alongside an undercurrent of nationalistic imperialism, Saleses destabilizes the MFA origin story.

To illustrate his points, Saleses provides readers international and cross-cultural references to contrast what makes the craft principles of Western literature unique—and uniquely suited to a 20th century American nationalist ideology. For instance, a ruggedly individualistic emphasis on character choices descends from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which was a publication rebelling against Greek tragedians who repeatedly invoked godly interference through coincidence. At first, it feels arbitrary that character-driven plotlines, which seem like gospel according to US craft standards, derive from a 2300-year-old difference-of-opinion. Saleses reminds readers that character-driven plotlines also support the project of the individual, the neoliberal myth that we are all unique snowflakes that can choose our way, that have agency in the world, that have the power to make the right choices to save the planet or stop the pandemic. Likewise, a teleological obsession with the importance of the story's ending speaks to American imperialism's drive toward conquest. To illustrate these distinctly American craft expectations, Saleses includes a section on craft principles of Chinese literature, which showcases that Western dicta like "show don't tell" truly are constructs normalized by a certain audience and—*gasp*—are not shared across the world. Through the book's discrete sections, Saleses teaches readers over and over to interrogate where our rules and our lore-based pedagogies come from.

In the glossary section, titled "Redefining Craft Terms," Saleses suggests definitions of the most common craft terms. In *Re(Writing) Craft* (2005), Tim Mayers described craft criticism as "an interrogation of the prevailing definitions of craft." Not only does Saleses interrogate definitions, he also directly indicates where those definitions come from, who is doing the prevailing, and then posits new definitions altogether. Though, I should say, these new definitions are more like inclusive revisions that can be used to discuss work within any tradition without privileging a certain craft lineage.

These definitions allow conflict, for instance, to wiggle out from the pale grip of western aesthetic education. Defining conflict as “what gives or takes away the illusion of free will” does not mandate antagonists, combat, a fatal flaw, or even an ill-made choice. It veers conflict away from the protagonist’s moral growth and brings writers into awareness about character agency. As Salesses writes, “Straight cis able white male fiction has a tendency to present the world as a matter of free will. The problems are caused by the self and can be solved by the self. . . . Some lives are *mostly* dictated by circumstance, by fate or DNA or place or other individuals or what have you.” The takeaway here for teachers and writers alike is that we must understand where our definitions of craft come from, what kind of audiences and works they apply to, and whether we are entering consciously into the compact their definitions impose.

Following the theory and history, Salesses devotes nearly half of the volume to pedagogy, from alternative workshop methods that remove the cone of silence and empower the writer to a huge appendix of writing and revision exercises. This text is immediately useful for instructors. I plan on assigning “Pure Craft is a Lie” alongside Felicia Rose Chavez’s “Teaching Writers to Workshop” chapter (from *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*) chapter to introduce students to the complexities of providing suggestions to other artists. I’ll also adapt his non-directive frame sentences for students to use when commenting on each other’s work and incorporate his “banned from workshop” list complete with explanations of why certain phrases are banned (like “payoff”—because, capitalism). Beyond these immediate applications, Salesses sparked a desire to ask students what tradition they are writing in, and for what audience—an inquiry that pairs well with Chavez’s work.

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Despite the premise that “pure craft” is a lie, that western craft definitions are shaped by horrible systems of power and infuse in readers ideologies of imperialism, Salesses still works hard to educate readers about those very expectations. At times I wonder whether it is worth teaching craft at all. If so much of it is a remnant of violence and oppression, why should I engage, why should I subject my students to this violence? But *Craft in the Real World* does the work that Salesses observes writers of color in craft criticism must do: “catching up writers outside the dominant culture by teaching the cultural context that goes mostly unexamined.” Indeed, in this book Salesses teaches how craft expectations work so that writers can more effectively manipulate them while simultaneously acknowledging the systems of power that created those expectations. He challenges Western craft norms but also explicitly defines and explains those norms. This is what educational theorist Lisa Delpit (1995) calls teaching “the culture of power.”

As I read Salesses’ appendix of writing and revision exercises, I was reminded of Delpit’s framework. Many exercises focus explicitly on building muscles to engage in Western craft expectations.

For instance, one of the 34 revision exercises included is a style guide, along the lines of *remove adjectives and adverbs, avoid 'to be' constructions*. However, while enumerating these suggestions, Salesses also explicitly notes that this guide descends from “Western, Hemingway-influenced conventions” and that there are different styles and traditions available (which he also names). Throughout the 17 bullet points of this style guide, readers are frequently instructed that each is a cultural construct—as in, “This will also help make your sentences active (a cultural value)” —which comes from a certain western lineage, whether “Romantic poetry” or “John Gardner.” Moreover, Salesses explains at a granular level how such conventions work and why audiences expect them. At the heart of his exercises is a willingness to educate in the broadest sense of the term: both to decolonize the mind and to make explicit what may have been previously only implicit.

Although I wish all of the writing and revision exercises were accompanied by robust explanations, this eagerness to work within western craft norms while challenging them is a generative contribution. *Craft in the Real World* does not tell us to throw away craft; in fact, it reveres craft. Craft has filtered into the minds of readers via culture, and the more we understand about that culture of craft, the more we can control the impact our words have on the audience. So while initially I felt uneasy reading these how-to sections, I realized Salesses is teaching the culture of power in order to give more writers access to power. This is the paradoxical bind of teaching creative writing: we can't teach without imposing a culture of power. The paralysis of teaching creative writing is to either be an autocrat or to take the ‘do whatever’ approach because we know aesthetics are culturally-dependent.

To add to Salesses many numbered and bulleted sections—25 Thoughts on Craft, 11 Craft Terms, 4 Things to Grade, 9 Qualities of Traditional Chinese Fiction, 12 Purpose-Oriented Writing Exercises, and 34 Revision Exercises—I offer Lisa Delpit's 5 Aspects of Power, with revisions appropriate to this audience:

1. Issues of power are enacted in [creative writing] classrooms.
2. There are [craft] codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
3. The [craft] rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the [craft] rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

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Much of what happens in creative writing classrooms, from PhD programs to community centers, maps onto education terminology. Having students brainstorm, write, and turn in work (the ‘do whatever’ approach), may actually be closer to process-based instruction. As one high school educator described it, “I’m having students write... But I’m not actually *teaching* writing” (Panero, 2016). Explicitly teaching, practicing, and discussing craft tools, though, is skill-based instruction, which is often seen as more equitable for students from all backgrounds. Delpit warns that by following a process approach, teachers can “create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them.”

Salesses’ book inspires me to teach craft skills alongside process, but to teach those skills within their cultural and historical context. *Craft in the Real World* offers a culturally sustaining pedagogy and has important implications for a skills-based approach to creative writing instruction. As culturally sustaining educators Django Paris and Samy Alim (2017) ask, “What if the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but rather was to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their cultural practices and investments?” Salesses invites teachers to do both: to explore, honor, and extend writers’ own cultures as well as shed light on norms of the culture of power. Plus, it’s about time that white writing teachers stop needing to hear POC workshop trauma stories in order to actually believe power structures exist and do harm.

Like any great teacher, Matthew Salesses raises as many questions as he answers. And rightly so: students and scholars of creative writing should be more like charming four-year-olds, forever asking why of any dictum presented—because, as Salesses illustrates, there is an answer and it’s not what you might think. There’s an answer to the questions *Why do we do workshop this way?* and *Why does a short story need conflict?* and *What do you mean I can’t use words with four syllables?* Reframing craft as writing toward an audience’s expectations—including the politics of those expectations—brings to the surface so much that is unspoken and murky.

I look forward to the new scholarship this book calls for: more redefined craft terms, more options on the ever-growing list of writing workshop methods, more research into the lineage of craft teachings, more translations of international approaches to craft, and more opportunities to unearth the lore of creative writing so that we can better face and understand our own craft.

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