

ENGLISH 398: FICTION WORKSHOP

by Art Taylor

*Notes from Class & A Partial Draft
by Brittany Wallace,
Plus Feedback, Conference & More*

Exposition should be kept to a minimum.

Alistair Pearson is a professor of English—associate professor, technically, not sure why he hasn't gone further up the ranks. He's in his mid forties, slogging through most days, feels like he's on the verge of a midlife crisis. He's taught composition, intro lit, and creative writing at the same college for nearly twenty years; the hours are long, a professor's pay sucks, and those students . . . well, let's just say he's reached the point of feeling desperate for one of them to really care, to show some genuine enthusiasm, some true passion. A class should mean more than three credits closer to graduation, that's the kind of thing he says. While work has dragged him down, his home life doesn't offer any comfort because—

Remember: Show, don't tell.

Remember: Sharp prose as much as sharp plotting.

Professor Pearson types the last of the grades into the spreadsheet, a long slog through a stack of essays, now bleeding with red ink. Moving

Art Taylor got his start as a writer in our Department of First Stories in 1995. Since then, his stories have won three Agatha Awards, two Macavitys, an Anthony, and three Derringers. His “novel in stories” *On the Road With Del and Louise*, won the 2015 Agatha Award for Best First Novel. As we go to press, the George Mason University professor is nominated for another Agatha! ¶

the mouse, he notices the age spots on the backs of his hands—feels some small tightness in his knuckles. Imaginary? He's too young for arthritis. (Isn't he?)

Maybe carpal tunnel syndrome? Day after day at the keyboard, week after week, semester after semester—and how many years now? A paperweight sits on the shelf. Fifteen years of service, and a couple more years since, gathering dust atop that stack of manila folders.

He closes the spreadsheet, switches to email, sees his wife's name in the inbox, an exclamation point by it. Urgent as always. Something undone, done wrong. Some new outrage, and an apology needed. No, demanded. And what does he get in return? (How long since they've slept together?)

That's the question. Day after day again, week after week, and—another glimpse at those age spots.)

He succumbs to temptation, switches the window on his computer one more time.

RateMyProfessor.com—a weakness, he knows, this desire to see the three chili peppers there.

Hot, Hot, Hot, he thinks with a flush of heat himself: pride, embarrassment, self-consciousness? Some combination of the three, maybe.

Better than the nagging wife.

That old Buster Poindexter song whispers through his head—and then another bit of self-consciousness. Hot Hot Hot is a reference his students are too young to get.

An inciting moment is necessary to get a plot in motion.

Toward the end of his office hours comes a knock at the door. Brianna from his creative-writing class peers in, asks if he's busy. Lithe, coltlike, she takes her seat, carrying herself with a casual grace. When she crosses her legs, her plaid skirt sneaks up her thigh.

"I'm sorry to stop by," she says, "but . . . I'm having trouble with endings."

Professor Pearson nods—sagely, he thinks. "Most writers will tell you that endings are the hardest part. A blank page is one problem, getting started. But at least then all the directions are open. The story might go anywhere. But an ending . . . Did you know Hemingway wrote forty-seven different endings to A Farewell to Arms? You're balancing various strands of a story by that point, working against a reader's predictions and expectations, trying to make sure your resolution is—"

"Both surprising and inevitable." Brianna's smile has widened. "I know, Professor. I do pay attention in class."

She bites at her lower lip, her lipstick siren-red against her alabaster skin—chewing on some hesitation. "But that wasn't what I meant."

He cocks his head, lifts an eyebrow—his regular expression (overly aware about it suddenly) to encourage a student to dive deeper into the topic at hand.

"My last semester," she says. "That ending. And the big bad world awaits."

"Ah." Professor Pearson nods again. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding a job. You're sharp, you're a hard worker, a great student, a—" He shuffles through a folder. "Speaking of, here's your quiz from yesterday. An A, as usual." She takes it from him without looking at it.

"It sounds like you're writing me a recommendation."

"If you ever need one . . ." He waves his hand into empty air.

She glances away, takes a deep breath—steeling herself somehow, it seems. "Maybe I'm asking for something else," she says. "Maybe I'm recommending something for you."

"For me?"

"For us." She blushes slightly.

She's always been eager to participate in class discussion—that's what Professor Pearson would write if she asked for a recommendation. Her contributions to class are always thoughtful and confident.

"I've enjoyed having you as my professor," she says. "I enjoy talking to you. It's not just school I'm going to miss."

She sits in the front row. He would point this out as an indication of ambition, of leadership. The kind of student who challenges a professor to stay at the top of his game.

Professor Pearson adjusts himself in his seat. "I'm flattered but—"

"Won't you miss me, Professor?"

The kind of student I wish I had in all my classes. I'll certainly miss her when—

"Certainly. You're a fine—"

"More than fine, I hope." She dips one shoulder slightly, a move that has frequently drawn his attention in class and just as quickly made him embarrassed about looking her way. He wouldn't write that on a recommendation. "Don't you find me attractive?"

He thinks of the chili peppers on Rate My Professor. He wonders if she's given him one herself, her own anonymous recommendation of him. Inwardly, he shakes his head—then realizes he's matched the move outwardly.

"Even if I did, Brianna—find you attractive, I mean . . ." His wife's image springs to mind then—never eager, undermining confidence, a woman he was increasingly looking away from. "I'm married, Brianna. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that"—he hears his voice stumble—"that happiness."

"Wouldn't?"

"Won't." Firmly now.

She bites again at her lower lip, the lipstick holding fast, this time nothing hesitant about it. "Only a letter's difference between won't and want, you know"—and he's reminded of the cleverness of her submissions to workshop.

His mind lingers on that word submission.

How many different senses can you incorporate into a single scene?

Hints of perfume drift around her when she enters his office, swirls of honeysuckle, the scent even more seductive in close quarters than from her seat in the front row of class.

Her voice bubbles with bits of laughter; like the first pop of champagne, then turns velvety smooth.

Her scarlet nails brush the inside of

his palm when he offers her the quiz—the skin of her hand taut and fresh and unblemished against the age spots on his.

He watches her nibble that lower lip. He sees the lock of auburn hair fall from behind her ear to brush her cheek. He can't help but notice the ripple of mischief each time she smiles.

We have five senses—this is another of the things he says. Can you incorporate all of them into a single scene?

"I want," he begins, then thinks better of it, then says it anyway. "I want to taste you."

Her legs uncross as she leans forward, nudging that honeysuckle smell toward him. "Taste me where?"

Plot isn't an "and then" series of events; it's driven by causality and consequence and conflict—escalation each step of the way.

A kiss here and there leads to kisses there and there and there.

Almost being caught in the office leads to embarrassment and anxiety, which lead to encounters in the backseat of a Honda Civic (a professor's salary), which lead to muscle cramps, which lead to afternoons in a motel, which lead to unreasonable expense (a professor's salary), which leads to frustration.

His wife's work conference out of town leads to a weekend tryst on the conjugal bed.

A forgotten pair of panties leads to questions, suspicions, accusations—and what's this on the credit card about the Hideaway Hotel?

Each aspect of a short story should do more than one thing. Dialogue, for example, should reveal character while also pushing the plot forward. Every word counts!

"You're going to pay for this, Alistair,

and let me tell you, I mean pay. I'm going to bury you in trouble. I'm going to leave you with nothing. When my lawyer is done with you—"

Causality, consequence, conflict always.

Threats of trouble lead to thoughts of murder. Left with nothing means nothing to lose. The plot turns toward plotting, then a poisoning. Consequence leads to more conflict.

How do you bury a body?

Look at the Lester Dent model (PowerPoint on Blackboard): Pile more grief on your characters—again and again.

[Hey, workshop buddies—just some ideas here, 'k? Let me know what u think.]

The suspicious and bullheaded detective, chip on his shoulder about investigating at a university and not having a college education himself. But don't his street smarts make him sharper? "We can't find any evidence of your wife traveling to visit her sister. Her sister says she never expected her, hasn't seen her."

The college roommate, concerned, earnest, curious—her life potentially at risk because of that concern and curiosity and her chattiness. Will she spill the key clues to the cops before her own blood is spilled?

Some third character, complicating things. Maybe Brianna has a boyfriend interested in her, the jealous type, looking for revenge. Or a neighbor who caught sight of shadows moving, melding beyond the curtains the night the wife was out at that conference? Long before she disappeared for good . . .

Or maybe another piece of evidence: an angry letter the wife wrote to her husband, something for the police to

find? Or a letter to her attorney, if she got that far?

A story's resolution should be both surprising and inevitable.

?????

[Sorry for incomplete draft. Still working on this one, guys.]

Each student in our fiction workshop is required to provide written comments on *each* draft before class. Feedback should be constructive and respectful. Remember that your fellow students are giving you a little piece of themselves—and it's easy to lapse into negativity.

"Conjugal bed? What century are you writing in? And 'spill the clues before her own blood is spilled'? Give me a break."

"Completely derivative. How many times have we seen this story done before? And done better? James M. Cain relocated to a college campus might have been a nice mash-up except that it comes out like a bad Lifetime Movie of the Week."

"One-dimensional, one-note characters. The professor (in our class, not the one in your story) talked about having protagonists as desire and action—wanting something, doing something. But shouldn't they be fleshed out beyond simple animal urges?"

"Somebody's hot for teacher, yeah?"

Bolded on syllabus: A *post-workshop conference with me is required; failure to participate will impact your final grade.*

"Should I leave the door open or closed?" Brittany asks when she arrives for the student-teacher conference—not Brianna but Brittany, not honeysuckle but the scent of narcissus pushing ahead of her into the

room, not auburn hair but blond, not porcelain-skinned or coltlike but freckled and fuller-figured. But what difference does it make, given how the students surely read her draft?

“Open,” Professor Peterson says sternly—Peterson, not Pearson, a negligible distinction there too—and then reverses himself as sternly. “Closed.” He shakes his head. *Open* meant someone in the hallway might overhear. *Closed* meant someone might wonder what’s so private, why the secrecy, what needs hiding. *My door is always open*, this is something he’s prided himself on saying, to students and colleagues alike.

From the start, the conference is a lose-lose situation.

Brittany twirls around to close the door, her short skirt spinning briefly upwards. She smooths it down when she takes her chair—scarlet nails against the plaid. These last details she hadn’t changed for her submission to workshop.

Professor Peterson throws the printed pages of her story on the desk. “How are you going to explain this?”

Brittany sits up straighter—a puzzled expression playing across her face (playing? or sincere? Professor Pearson can’t tell). “But Professor, you told us to write what we know.”

“What you—” He sputters. “What you *know*? What are you trying to do? Expose us? Embarrass me? And, I hope you’re aware, someone might even read this as a threat against my wife.”

“It’s fiction, Professor.” She nudges a pair of tortoiseshell glasses higher on her nose. “And as we’ve said, even if your wife doesn’t make you happy anymore, the last thing we’ve ever wanted was for her to be hurt by all this.” She shakes her head. “It’s just a story.”

“Well, which defense are you going with? Whatever comes to mind? Because you can’t have it both ways.”

More puzzlement—definitely a role, he thinks. “But you yourself said that fiction is a process of transmutation—of transforming reality into something different, something more, ‘the imagination unfettered,’ wasn’t that how you put it? And I thought you’d be proud of me for including that whole Buster Poindexter thing, which you probably think I had to look up, but”—a wink—“as you know, I’m interested in older things. Mature beyond my years and all.”

“But—” He’s running his fingers through his hair, scratching his head. “But *no one* is reading this as fiction—not with *Brianna* here and *Professor Pearson*—”

“Brianna isn’t at all like me,” Brittany says. “Do I look lithe and coltlike to you?”

Professor Peterson pushes on. “Even if they pretended to read it as fiction, it was only because they were more discreet about this than you were. My God, you’ve made me out so lecherous.”

She shrugs, she smiles. “Well, in your case, not *too* much of an exaggeration, is it? What was it you said? Conflict is just amplifying the everyday—more drama, more conflict, more *more*?”

Her voice raises slightly, and he wonders who might be passing in the hallway outside, who might have heard her. *More more more*—the echo intentional or not? That first time in the motel room weeks before—and him the one crying out the words.

He shifts in his seat, unable to get comfortable. Already he’s leaned on the right arm of the chair and then on the left and then to the right again. He leans forward now, the

edge of the desk pressing against his middle—discomfort from all angles.

“Please stop quoting my lectures, Brittany. We’re not talking about crafting a short story now. This was . . . I don’t even know what this was. What did you hope to gain from all this? In front of the class, not giving me any warning, and—”

“You were away for the weekend when I wrote it—with your wife, remember? And you’ve told me lately no e-mails and no phone calls.” She crosses her arms, tilts her head slightly—a pose he’s seen from students before, finding some loophole in a syllabus, challenging a grade, thick with contempt.

“So this is punishment because I was—” He taps his thumb against the desk, then drums his fingers. “She’s my *wife*, Brittany. It’s not like I don’t spend time with her, like I can’t—”

“The deadline was approaching, Professor. The syllabus is *very* clear about being late. I didn’t want to jeopardize my grade.”

He throws up his hands, a bitter bark of a laugh. “You’re bargaining for a *grade*? I’m giving you an A, Brittany. You were *always* going to get an A.”

She straightens again. “I’m not *given* grades”—nothing remotely playful in her voice now. “I earn my spot on the Dean’s List, thank you very much.”

Brittany stares at him over the top of her glasses. He tries to meet her gaze, but breaks off first, looks around his office—a small space suddenly feeling smaller. The bookshelves stuffed thick with writing books, novels, and story collections he’s taught, stacks of printed lesson plans and grading books—small symbols of his dedication to his students, testaments to his reputation. The

fifteen-year paperweight catches his eye—even if Brittany hadn’t included it in her story—the memory of the university president shaking his hand, saying, “We’re proud of your accomplishments,” with such sincerity it was like he’d meant it. And then the photograph on the shelf just below it . . .

Professor Peterson turns back to Brittany.

“So what *do* you want? What is it you wanted to get out of . . . this?” He gestures toward the paper on his desk—rudely, he realizes, dismissive, if only he truly knew how to dismiss it.

“What we’ve always wanted,” she says—stress on the *We*. “I’m graduating. I’ll be free then. The department rules you’ve talked about, the university restrictions, none of that is going to matter anymore. We can finally be together.” She smiles, a more gentle tilt of the head this time, a few strands of blond hair falling across her glasses in ways that before had seemed entrancing.

He shifts again in his seat. Through the office door, the sounds of footsteps in the hallway, a heavy tread—the department chair’s footsteps, he recognizes them. He waits for the knock—half fearful and then more than half hoping. An interruption would at least put an end to the conversation.

The footsteps recede. A door further down the hallway opens, closes, then silence.

A glance at the photograph Professor Peterson had avoided—with his wife on their last real vacation, smiling, happy, for the camera at least. No, he corrects himself, truly happy then. He remembers the last night of that vacation, drinking mojitos on the beach at sunset. He remembers Sunday mornings lounging lazily in bed, and then Belgian waffles, and then their legs

intertwined on the sofa reading throughout the afternoon. And not just simple times like these. She'd earned the money while he'd toiled through grad school. She'd been there when his brother had died, consoling, comforting. She'd—

He realizes that all the memories are about her in relation to him—what she'd done for him, where she'd sacrificed. And then, more recently, when she'd stopped putting him first.

"Yes, I know we talked about it. . . . But . . . things are complicated. We've been together a long time, my wife and I, we've . . ." He picks up a pen from the desk, twirls it in his hand. "I have to think about the best way to, to break it to her, the best *timing* for that kind of . . . I can't just—"

Brittany is nodding, a nod that Professor Peterson recognizes as his own—the one he gives to students just before he disagrees with them on some point. That old pedagogical trick: Connect, then correct.

"Not *can't*, but *won't*?" She reaches forward, takes the pen from his hands, her fingers brushing against his. She lays the pen on the desk, sits back in her chair. "You talk in class about the importance of endings, but you seem to be the one having trouble with resolutions. Won't end things with your wife, don't want to give me up. All that talk in class about how important it is to bring a narrative arc home, how it takes vision and how it takes bravery, and meanwhile in the real world here, you—"

"Please," he says. "Please don't quote my own words back to me." His voice is soft now, less an order this time than simple begging. He starts to reach for the pen again, stops himself.

"All right." She's poised, a calm about her he finds troubling. "If not words"—she grins—"would you like pictures instead?"

The discomfort Professor Peterson has been feeling becomes a sharp pain now, jolting his whole body to attention.

"What pictures?"

"Of you." Brittany lifts her hand, looks at her nails, purposefully casual, it seems, but he's struck by the idea that she's admiring their sharpness. "Asleep in bed," she says. "Afterwards, I mean—the way men do."

"Of me?" He's still catching up.

"Of us, really." She flicks the nails now. "Selfies. You know how we millennials love our selfies." She holds her hand up as if angling an imaginary camera. Smiles. "Click, click."

Finally, he's caught up, sees his images posted on the Internet, sees his wife seeing the photos, sees— "So this is, this is all blackmail. What you can expose, unless I do what you want?"

"What *you* want," she says. "What *we* want. All that talk from you about how happy we'd be, how we would be together—as soon as I wasn't your student anymore, as soon as you could settle things." She taps those scarlet nails against the desk, picks up the pen she'd laid there, wags it at him. "Words have weight, that's what you told us. I wrote it down in my notebook. I believed you."

A student who listens, who pays attention, who treats a class as more than a few credits toward graduation? Wasn't this exactly what Professor Peterson had wanted? Wasn't this student in front him—all that attention and hard work and then more, more, more—*exactly* what he had wanted?

"I think you know what you need to do." Brittany points to the manuscript he'd thrown on the desk, pushes her story back toward him.

"You expect me to kill my wife?" His voice is nearly a whisper now, secretive, incredulous, seething. "For *you*?"

“For *us*,” she emphasizes again. “Whatever you do, it will be for *us*. But no, like I said, it was only a story. It’s bad enough to think about building our happiness on someone else’s unhappiness, much less on someone else’s . . .” She seems to struggle to find the right phrase, then pulls a finger across her throat. “There are other ways to end things. But if you make the wrong choice, other consequences for you, as you can imagine.”

Brittany stands as she says it, the way Professor Peterson always stands as a signal that it’s time to draw one of these student-teacher conferences to a close.

Reminder: Writing *is* revision.

Reminder: A story’s resolution should be both surprising and inevitable.

Anyone Not See This Coming?

Tuesdays with Tasha

by Tasha Levine, Class of 2019

GUILTY.

A verdict brought down, justice served, *they say*, but can one word really put a close to everything these last nine weeks have brought us? Story of the summer, *scandal* exploding all over social media.

I type that word “story,” but really it’s more than one—story after story, and every one thick with the tropes of this media-savage age. One more sorority sweetheart gone missing. One more party night that took a deadly turn. The story about the dangers of blacked-out binge drinking. The story about sexual assault on campus—on our campus, on all campuses, an epidemic. From keg stands to date rape, always with a blond girl and her fam threading through the middle of it, that’s the story that sells.

Then came the twist (dare I say

“plot twist”?) that swung the spotlight toward Professor Peterson, sus from the start, amirite, but too well tweeded, too Rate-My-Professor-eating-him-up, too respected-pillar-of-our-community with his *protesting* how he’d *never stoop* to doing anything *improper* with a student. And then that other cliché: the devoted wife standing by her man, “complete faith in my husband” (so she *said*), that same routine we’ve seen over and over with politicians and their wives—and isn’t academia a kind of politics too? (Probably an upcoming column there; note to my editor: I’m calling dibs.)

More stories still as the evidence piled high. The biggest one? Victim blaming, *that* same old. Brittany infatuated, Brittany’s imagination taking her into dangerous territory. Professor Peterson concerned about the content of her story, concerned about his wife’s safety. Professor Peterson confronting, then defending, then covering up—him the helpless one, thinking of his family first, and then things got out of hand. So *he* said.

Our sleepy college town, and then we *all* got woke.

I have to tell you, I’m still feeling restless.

That well-tweeded professor crying his eyes out as the verdict came down—does that screenshot of “justice served” help us close up this story (these stories)? How about him led away in handcuffs? Orange-jumpsuit time, but that won’t bring Brittany back.

It’s his wife’s tears that keep coming back to me, her standing by him even at the end, humiliating herself day after day with that same “We’re not a part of this, he would never have done this, this can’t be happening.” Had to be she saw the truth by the end, didn’t she? Had to be she

knew where this was going early on, no matter what she said?

Story after story after story, and many of us did know, did see—at least the loose outlines of the whole thing.

Even if we wish this worst-case scenario might have turned out different, the truth is that these things happen all the time—and women across our “fair campus,” my friends, my sisters, can’t we all attest to this?

A male professor’s gaze hanging on a little too long, straying a little south. That moment when the Father-Knows-Best friendliness turns toward flirtation (cue those Creeper Old Man vibes). And high key, we women play our role here too, too many of us, because isn’t that how we’ve all been *conditioned*?

My readers here have heard me before on these persistently patriarchal patterns of action and reaction—*that same story*, though I applaud the pop-up protests this summer against a campus administration determined too long to protect its own (*shame*). But instead of climbing up on that same soapbox, how about I turn this over to what other people have been saying?

From Thad Waverly, for example, who’d first informed the police that he knew Brittany was quote-unquote “hot” for Professor Peterson—all fidgety jerkers remorse at that second vigil for Brittany, the Call for Justice on Campus, but he meant well: “I could have told her he wasn’t going to treat her right, *anybody* could’ve told her that. But instead of making a joke about it, what I wrote on her manuscript”—more fidgeting here—“I keep thinking that maybe I should’ve said something, something about how I felt. But I’m just, I’ve just never been good with sincerity.” (Some lesson here for the men on campus too.)

From Mrs. Velma Radcliffe, the

neighbor who caught Brittany’s Miata on the Petersons’ street when Mrs. Peterson was out of town—glaring at Professor Peterson from the witness stand: “Never got a good glimpse of the girl. It was past dark, like I said. But something not right about it all, parking halfway down the street like that. Why not park closer? Why weren’t the porch lights on? I didn’t know for sure what was going on, but nothing good was going to come of it, I did know that.” (“None of my business,” she’d said, but lucky for us all that she took down the license plate, evidence piled on evidence.)

From Detective William “Butch” Bannister in his courthouse press conference, thick neck straining against the collar of his button-down, eyes unblinking in the glare of the cameras: “Peterson was quickly our only significant suspect here, and it’s gratifying to see him get what he deserves. While it’s the kind of word the professor might use”—a sneer on the word *professor*—“there seems some *irony* in the fact that those compromising photographs and those love notes in Peterson’s handwriting were all tucked into a manila folder in his own office, underneath that fifteen-years-of-teaching paperweight. Best we could determine, Brittany had hidden the envelope there herself—like if anything went . . . wrong, the evidence there would bring him down too.”

See the thread here? They all saw this coming, at least where it might end up.

My argument: Brittany knew it too, where this might be headed—feared it. That’s why she wrote *HERE* in big letters on that file folder, so no one would miss it.

Irony is right—that twist Brittany built in herself.

I’m glad she earned the last word. ●

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