

Reflection

It could be said that last semester I was more “fictional” and this one was more “factual.” I had generated narratives from my imagination, so this semester I wanted to experiment trying to bring my own life events into narrative form. I wanted to experience firsthand what the nuances between the two strategies were, and see if any meaningful conclusions could be derived from comparing them. I ended up learning a lot more than I anticipated. This was especially helpful since a number of workshops featured stories inspired by the author’s real-life events. I think you even distilled some of what I learned into a quote something to the effect of, “there’s a little bit of us in everything we write.” Of course; it’s simple in hindsight. How could that not be the case?

Generating a narrative from scratch gives you freedom of detail to cater the features and properties of the story to fit its “goal”, but as is often banally recited, “With great power, responsibility etc.” It’s like driving a stick instead a manual—you can get much more mileage out of it, but only if you *really* know what you’re doing. That’s about where the applicability of that metaphor ends. If generating fiction is like painting, then basing a story on real events (I guess some pseudo-creative-nonfiction) is more like a puzzle. Or several puzzles mixed together in the same box. You’ve got a bunch of disconnected pieces that already exist, but you need to figure out which ones fit, which ones are relevant, which ones are missing, etc. There’s also a spectrum to how much you can honor the source material (something that didn’t really occur to me until I took the helm). While real-life can be interesting and captivating in its own right—as with any conversion—some fat has to be cut and some truths stretched in order to properly imbue the form of a “story.”

Applying this realization to the stories we’ve read and the workshops, the fundamental lesson can be summarized with a classic Futurama quote, “*When you do things right, people won’t be sure you’ve done anything at all.*” I wondered to myself during each story, *could this be based on the author’s real experiences?* I think when the story is properly executed, you honestly can’t tell. A surprising example is *The Paperhanger*. I don’t want to believe the events of that story, but it was executed well enough that I could accept it if something like that really happened. So in typical Dao fashion, in falling down the rabbit hole of the opposite approach to finding a source for a story I have found my way back to the whole of the craft, which is a gratifying outcome. To distil this realization down to the most obvious kernel to take to my specific writing going forward is “Don’t focus so much on respecting the source. This is fiction, not journalism.” As for now, I think I’ve yet to strike gold in converting real-life to a good story.

Since we likely won’t get a chance to share much finality with you on the last day of class, I wanted to let you know how grateful I am for having the chance to study under such conscientious and passionate guidance. You’re one of the “realest” personalities I’ve been taught by. My writing had been some sort of effortless intuition prior to your courses, but you managed to expose the meat and tendons of the machine in a way no other English/writing teacher has for me. At first I was expecting these writing courses to be more of the same, but now I have awareness of careful execution that is invaluable. You’ve reinvigorated my interest in writing, and I expect you’ll continue to excel at what you do.