

## **Help Build!** **Or, Talking About Work in Progress**

By Andy Duncan (@Beluthahatchie) for Week One, Clarion West 2021

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The heart of the six-week workshop is passionate engagement with new work. If you respond to your classmates' writing in positive, expansive, encouraging, and inspirational ways, the ensuing conversation will be positive, expansive, encouraging, and inspirational for everyone. Even you!

Think of your comments not as theses nailed to a wall in the public square, but as conversational openings that invite comment from your classmates, including the author. You're basically making observations and asking questions. Every piece could invite dozens of observations and questions, though you'll probably have time to discuss only a few during class. Some will occur to multiple readers, others only to you. Here are a few examples of this conversational approach:

- "What I really admire here is ..."
- "The first time I read this story ... Then I read it a second time, and ..."
- "The narrative voice in this story is interesting. Who is telling us all this, and what's their stake in things? One possibility could be ..."
- "The title of this text is interesting. What does it imply, and to what extent is that implication fulfilled, or reversed, or complicated, in the story? One reading could be ..."
- "I'm curious to know how other people read this particular scene, this particular moment, this particular exchange, this particular line in the story. Here's why ..."
- "Here's something I noticed. ..."
- "How might this story be different if ..."
- "What do you all think about ... / Have you all thought about ..."
- "Could this element be doing more for the story? For example, ..."
- "Do you have a particular audience in mind for this story? I can see it doing well with ..., and this is why!"
- "I could envision this story in a certain magazine, or a certain anthology, or a certain publisher's fall list, and here's why."
- "I'm fascinated by the language of this story, and here are some examples."
- "This story reminded me of another story (or novel or film or TV show or comedy sketch or news story or essay or discovery or innovation or trend or folktale or myth or song or artwork or quote or earlier point made in class, etc.), and here's why I say that."

Crucially, these examples all avoid the assumption that this story needs fixing, and you're just the right person to do it. It may well have problems worth noting – as even published, award-winning stories often do – but don't go in with hammer already in hand, focused exclusively on nails. You need to see the story whole, including its opportunities.

Above all, you are never, ever trying to psychoanalyze the author, who is doing just fine, thanks. (And how are *you*?)

What you *are* trying to do is share your individual reading experience in all its complexity, by discussing the things that you find both more and less interesting, resonant, powerful, noteworthy, admirable, intriguing, etc. This isn't a workshop to fix things; it's a workshop to build things. So **help build!**

### **A Few Comments Best Avoided**

Here's some language that experience teaches is best avoided, because it can introduce problematic tensions into a workshop. These can range from slight awkwardness to outright insult, depending on a host of factors of which the speaker may well be unaware.

Please note that all these are very commonly heard in formal writers' workshops and informal critique groups; they wouldn't be on the list otherwise. In fact, you may have used some of these yourself, saw no harm in them, and will be surprised to see them on this list. That's OK. Only recently have many of us begun to reflect on the downsides of traditional workshop language, and to try more inclusive alternatives.

Moreover, if you or classmates fall back into one of these well-worn grooves occasionally, that's OK, too. We're all learning together, and making mistakes together, as part of a supportive community. No one in the cohort should feel obligated to police these matters, but everyone in the cohort is welcome to kindly redirect the conversation as needed, and to privately contact the instructor or Clarion West staff with any concerns.

- Dogmatism/arrogance: "Fiction doesn't work this way." "Fiction should not work this way." "This story isn't science fiction." "Even fantasy has to have rules." "Here's how comedy works." "This wouldn't happen in real life." "You must change this one thing."
- The implication the story is not the property of the author, but written on commission for you, the demanding client: "Here's what I want you to do." "I need some closure here." "I'd like this to happen." "You're not giving me what I need."
- Similarly, prescriptive critiques that tell the author exactly what you think the story should be doing, rather than offering it as an option: "This story needs a flashback here." "You should add more description here." "The ending should do this instead." If the student has not requested prescriptive feedback, please avoid it.<sup>1</sup>
- Irrelevant self-absorption in general: "I'm not your ideal audience, because I don't usually read this sort of thing." "I would have written the story this other way." "I don't like this character."
- "This story reminds me of a long anecdote about myself." At various informal points this summer, classmates will bond by spontaneously swapping such stories, but generally not in the classroom.
- Capitalist language that suggests the story is merely a commodity, its value set entirely by the marketplace: "You haven't earned this." "This scene has no payoff." "You would profit by doing this."
- "Show, don't tell" and other anti-exposition prejudices.

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, a classmate may request prescriptive feedback. But please avoid it if it's not specifically requested.

- “This reads like a comic book/video game/fanfic” when meant as a negative criticism that dismisses entire genres and communities.
- “This is too sentimental/melodramatic/tear-jerking” and other dismissals of emotion.
- “You can’t possibly write about this topic without first reading this classic novel on the theme” and other gatekeeping assertions. (Note the contrast with the very positive “I really think you would love Novel X, as it has some thematic overlap, but don’t worry, it’s very different from what you’re doing here.”)
- Cutesy, impenetrable slang terms copied from spec-fic workshops and fans of the 1980s or earlier. The Turkey City Lexicon and its kin are easy to find online and have historical interest, but they began as abrasive in-jokes for a subset of an already insular field, and the jokes have worn thin.
- “This could be a novel.” Usually this is meant as a compliment, and it might be gladly received by an author thinking along those lines, but it also could be terror-inducing for authors who are none too confident even about short lengths. It also implies that novels are just expanded short stories, rather than a separate form. A better wording might be: “If you’re considering writing more about this character/world/theme, here’s an idea.”

### **How To Offer Expertise**

You may have specific, personal knowledge of a topic, a place, a time period, an activity that your classmate is writing about. That may be very useful for the author to know, but be careful not to claim veto power over their creation (“I’m here to tell you it wouldn’t happen like this”) or to assume they don’t also have specific, personal knowledge of a topic. They may be an expert simply because of their identities. If you position yourself as an expert in someone else’s culture, for example, this might come across as a microaggression.

If you still feel you have something to add, it’s best to offer help and be open to the author saying, “No thank you.”

Examples of good ways to offer help include:

- “In your author statement you ask for resources on asexual romance. One of my partners is asexual, and they’re open to me sharing their contact information with you.”
- “You’re calling this creature a soucouyant, but as a native Trinidadian, I feel that what you’re describing is much closer to a classic Transylvanian vampire. If you’re interested in making it more Trinidadian, I can help you with that.”
- “You probably don’t know this, but I actually grew up on a farm, something like the setting of your story. If you’d like to quiz me later, one on one, just let me know.”
- “My sister’s a competitive fencer and talks about it ALL the time. If you need any details for this training sequence, I’m happy to make introductions. Just let me know.”
- “I’m so happy that you’re writing about a meteorite! I’ve read so much about them, it’s embarrassing. Anytime you want to talk meteorites as you work on this, let me know.”

Whether such help is wanted, or even needed, is up to the author. Don’t fret if they never tug your sleeve. Some writers obsess about researching the tiniest details; others don’t. That meteorite may be purely metaphorical or poetic, a thing not of silicates but of syllables. And at

this point, the author may be more interested in who this character *is*, what this character *wants*, or how this character *sounds*, than in which surfboard or tax loophole or metro station they use.

### What About Cultural Expertise?

The most complex questions of expertise arise whenever a writer seems to be trying, but to various degrees failing, to represent a culture not their own. Cultures are determined by a host of factors, a few of which are race, gender, religion, class, language, age, ability, geography, income and education. These are crucial to our individual self-images, our composite identities, and it's human nature to notice, and resent, whenever one or more of these building blocks is marginalized or misrepresented in any way, for example through stereotype, appropriation, romantic illusion or condescension. Suppose a manuscript gets *your* culture wrong?

First of all, if a depiction is upsetting to you, you have every right to be upset. Just as importantly, no one in the workshop bears any unique burden to educate their classmates. You may not want to say anything at all, and that's OK – you may even decide to abstain from finishing the story or commenting on it. Or you may decide to share your concerns privately, with someone not the author. For example, you may want to give the instructor and workshop staff a private heads-up, to alert them to a cultural issue in that day's text, even if you preface it with, "I'm not going to say anything in the group, but." You may have spotted a great discussion opportunity they would have missed otherwise.

If you want a specific action taken, it's best to work with the staff and instructor to address an issue before class. At any time, a staff member can intervene and talk with an author, or even – in a more extreme situation – suggest that a story receive private feedback rather than being brought to the table. While your classmates are there to support you, be careful about building alliances "against" an author and/or creating a mob mentality around a piece.

You also have every right to voice the issue yourself, in group discussion and/or notes to the author. In phrasing your response, please keep in mind what we said before: We're all learning together, and making mistakes together, as part of a supportive community. Assume the authors are people of good will who want to get it right, and respond in kind. Point out an example or two in the text, explain what the issues are, suggest some good models, and offer to talk over some possible avenues of exploration later.

What if you think the text, or the discussion of it, may get someone *else's* culture wrong? Be an ally simply by raising the possibility and suggesting that the author solicit feedback from members of the population being written about. Whatever your good intentions, you don't want to claim expertise you don't really have. Avoid sweeping assumptions about another culture, and don't claim kinship because you once worked with, or went to school with, or dated someone from that culture. Be wary, too, of co-opting the discussion to talk about your own marginalization; whatever their similarities, apples are not oranges. And always remember that others in the group may be much better placed to speak on a given culture than you are.

In other words, while cultural expertise is obviously a FAR more important type of expertise than, say, expertise on orbital Lagrange points, that's all the more reason to handle the discussion in a positive way, and how we handle those less fraught conversations can be good models for

the bigger conversations as well. As always, though, how the author responds – if at all – may be out of your hands.

Keep in mind, too, that an excellent way to raise these enormous issues in a workshop setting is to become an advocate for texts that handle them sensitively and well. Whenever authors have gotten something right, laud them in front of everyone, point out specific examples in the text, and explain why this is a big deal! Positives can be teaching moments, too.

### **A Final Note: Line-Edits, “Corrections” and Happy Accidents**

Yes, we all sometimes need help with minor line-edits involving spelling, grammar and so on, but very rarely should this be a topic of group conversation. Exceptions may include a passage that could be read multiple ways, or a punctuation mark that seems an important clue to meaning.

If the author specifically has asked for line-editing help, this most often can be given privately, via manuscript notes. A little goes a long way: Point out, say, a comma issue on the first few pages, then stop. You won’t have time for line-by-line edits, anyhow, and such close attention may be misplaced on a first draft of a piece that is far from achieving even its final shape, much less its final wording. Someone may be paid to do those line-edits, long after Clarion West.

Keep in mind, too, that what seems to be an error might actually be a clue, an opportunity, a breadcrumb, a door left ajar. These are worth pointing out, if you can do so positively. *Coraline* began as a typo for “Caroline”; Neil Gaiman found himself wondering who this Coraline was, and what she was trying to tell him. Creativity is a series of happy accidents.

**Good luck to all! Now, go help one another! Help build!**



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