

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 3

1 Dead Poets and Wonder Boys 11

2 Beginnings 34

3 Work in Progress 60

4 Forging a Self 85

5 The Limits of Rhetoric 106

Postscript: On the Job 122

Background Readings 133

References 143

About the Author 149

Index 151

INTRODUCTION

Teaching writing is not a glamorous job. Our days are occupied with essays and books, classes and committees and office hours. If there is an image that sums up what we are about, then it must be the stack of student papers waiting to be read and commented on, set next to the laptop alongside the pens, post-its, folders, and coffee cups cluttering the desk. Ours is a busy if quiet line of work, bookish by definition, filled with words and ideas more than actions.

And yet writing teachers are familiar figures in the popular imagination—playing key roles in novels like *Push*, *Up the Down Staircase*, and *Old School*, movies like *Dead Poets Society*, *Freedom Writers*, and *Educating Rita*, and plays like *Oleanna* and *The History Boys*. As a college writing teacher, I'm interested in what such books, movies, and plays have to tell me about my work. How do others understand what I am trying to accomplish? How do they represent the experience of learning to write? How can I draw on the scenes and stories they offer in rethinking my own work with student writers?

Before outlining my plan for answering those questions, let me quickly note two things this book is *not*. First, it is not a critique. There is a long tradition of complaint among academics about how our work has been represented in popular culture. The usual criticism is that popular books and movies tend to sentimentalize good teaching as hinging on an ability to connect with students as persons and very little else. And so, as one academic critic after the other has pointed out, teacher features tend to gloss over real problems of gender, race, class, and authority in the classroom, since the only thing that really matters, it would seem, is that the teacher *cares*. The professional,

the political, and the intellectual are all subsumed by the personal. We are left with a popular view of the ideal teacher as the friend and hero of students that many real-life teachers find almost impossible to accept.

There is much that is admirable about this scrupulous refusal of a flattering image of ourselves. There is also something off-putting about it. For when we resist the role of the teacher as the person who cares, who inspires, who goes the extra mile to reach students, we are in effect telling the rest of the culture that, once again, they've got it wrong, that they should really want a *different* sort of teacher. We do not, it quickly becomes clear, much appreciate having others tell us how to do our work. By distancing ourselves from the images of teachers in the media, we reassert our authority over what should count as good teaching.

For an example, we might turn to Dale Bauer's smart and influential 1998 essay, "Indecent Proposals," about how college teachers are depicted in movies. Bauer begins by discussing *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), a Hollywood romance in which Barbra Streisand, improbably cast as an Ivy League professor, vamps and flirts her way through a set of lectures to infatuated undergraduates. What might we as teachers have to learn from this campy portrayal of our work? Not much, it turns out. Instead Bauer argues that what we really need to do is explain to viewers how such movies misrepresent our work, thereby "redeeming our own images from the trivialization they suffer on film" (315). The real lesson is thus not for us as teachers but for the culture at large—which has once again confused the political with the personal and the personal with the erotic, so that our teaching "is now represented as a sexual proposition" (302).

But can we only learn from popular texts about teaching by resisting what they have to say? Teaching is indeed difficult and complex intellectual work; it should not be reduced to a simple matter of effort and caring. Fair enough. But while such criticisms are correct, they are also familiar and easy. For instance, one of the very first episodes of the witty TV sitcom *Community* begins with a hyper-animated community college teacher who,

like John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, urges his class to stand on their desks to see the world anew. “Why not?” he shouts. As if in response, one of the cheap, plastic-and-metal, prefab school desks comes crashing down under the weight of the student teetering on it. “She’s okay. Go to the nurse. Seize the day” fusses the professor, quickly dismissing the class (“Introduction to Film,” 2009).

But if TV sitcoms are already mocking the loopy, earnest passion of teachers in the movies, then we would hardly seem to need academic critics to belabor the point. Besides, there seems less to gain from describing what’s wrong with popular images of teaching than from trying to glean some lessons from them. Or to put all this another way, my hope is that the texts I look at in this book will serve not only as objects of analysis but also, as I. A. Richards put it, as *machines to think with* (2001 [1924], 7). What I find most useful in Richards’s phrase is not the noun—although do I like the idea of a text as a machine or tool—but the preposition: What might it mean to think not just *about* a text but *with* it?

Second, I don’t have much to say here about the crowded and pleasurable genre of the academic novel—with its depictions of the twists and turns of professorial careers, rivalries and affairs, campus intrigues, and even occasional murders. There’s been a good bit written about such fiction already; Elaine Showalter’s *Faculty Towers* (2005) is a fairly recent and representative example. To my eyes, her study mirrors not only the appeal but the limits of its subject. It is perceptive, witty, and learned—but almost completely uninterested in the actual work of teaching. We usually see the faculty in academic novels as they circulate from their book-lined studies to conference halls, administrative meeting rooms, cafés, bars, and bedrooms (often not their own)—interrupted by only an occasional visit or two to a classroom. All that is part of their escapist allure. But while, like many professors, I’m a fan of the academic novel, my focus here lies to the side of this genre, since my interest is not in books or movies about academics per se but in depictions of teachers and students at work together on writing.

Hence my title: *The Work of Teaching Writing*. There are hundreds of novels, plays, and films that deal in some way with either writing teachers or students. My interest is in the much smaller number that show them at work together. This has involved me looking for texts that imagine the actual writing done by students. In novels this often means “reproducing” what a student has written, although, of course, the novelist has to first write the text before quoting it—as when we read Precious’s journals in *Push* or the stories of the students in *The Writing Class*. In movies and plays, such moments often involve a character reading aloud from a student paper—as in *Oleanna*, *Freedom Writers*, or *Educating Rita*. I am drawn to how such scenes frame a key moment in teaching. A student writes something. A response is called for. The teacher can no longer simply inspire, exhort, lecture, or entertain; they now have to do some real work.

In the chapters that follow, I look at how that work has been depicted in current novels, films, and plays. I believe that as teachers of writing we have something to learn from studying not just theories of discourse or rhetoric or pedagogy but also stories that depict the lived experience of teaching. I suspect that most of us who decide to continue to teach writing throughout our careers do so, in strong part, because we enjoy the actual doing of it—the assigning and planning and commenting and talking—as the work unfolds from class to class, week to week, semester to semester. I want to see what imaginative texts can show us about that experience.

In chapter 1, “Dead Poets and Wonder Boys,” I try to set the tone of this approach by looking at what we might learn when we take a generous rather than a skeptical view of how recent movies have depicted the teaching of writing. I argue that there’s much to gain from shifting our focus from how teachers are portrayed to how the actual work of teaching is dramatized. And so the films I end up finding most compelling are those—like *Educating Rita* or *Misery*—that show teachers not simply inspiring students to write but actually responding to what they have to say. I’m interested in moments of conversation, of back-and-forth exchange.

In the next few chapters, I look at how the work of teaching has been depicted at different stages of the writing process. In chapter 2, “Beginnings,” I turn to how several playwrights and novelists have represented the problem of helping students take on what are, for them, new ways of writing. One of the texts I look at closely is Alan Bennett’s marvelous play *The History Boys* (2006), in which we encounter a student who wants to know which of his teachers he most needs to please—the one who wants a reflective and “thoughtful” response from him or the one who wants him to be surprising and “smart.” But the real challenge for student writers runs even deeper. They need to figure how to enter into a new discourse, how to become thoughtful or smart or anything else, without having to check the persons they used to be at the door. Another text I look at, David Mamet’s *Oleanna* (1993), dramatizes the painful failure of a student to do so—and of a teacher to help her. But two classic novels of teaching in New York City—Bel Kaufman’s *Up the Down Staircase* (1964) and Sapphire’s *Push* (1996)—offer us some powerful insights into how teachers can build on the ways with words students bring with them to school. Both books suggest that to challenge students we must first respect them.

In chapter 3, “Work in Progress,” I look at several scenes from novels in which a teacher helps a student develop a piece of writing. These are scenes that focus not on the beginning stages of drafting a text but on the later work of revising it. The key issues center around agency. How much should students defer to the authority of their teacher as they make changes to a text? When should teachers insist on their expertise? Several books and plays imagine this relationship in terms of erotic submission: The student must become not only the teacher’s disciple but also their lover. Others view the relationship more as one of master and apprentice—as when, for example, in the novels of both Jincy Willet and William Coles, a gruff taskmaster of a teacher leads students through their paces while still demanding they produce original work. And most hopefully, a few novels—Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* (1992), Antonio Skármeta’s

The Postman (1985/1995)—imagine the teaching of writing as the slow development of a friendship, a collaboration.

I continue this exploration in chapter 4, “Forging a Self,” where I look at four remarkable novels that center on what happens when doubt infects the working relationship between student and teacher, writer and reader. The plots of Curtis Sittenfeld’s *Prep* (2005), Francine Prose’s *Blue Angel* (2000), May Sarton’s *The Small Room* (1961), and Tobias Wolff’s *Old School* (2004) all hinge on instances of deception in writing—and yet in each case we are made to feel sympathy for the young person who has chosen to deceive or plagiarize. These four novels suggest that a sense of self is not something that already exists, that a writer needs simply to express in their prose, but something that must be achieved, created, earned. They also show how teachers can hinder the attempts of students to forge this sense of self on the page when they present themselves as models rather than coworkers. But they also offer a more optimistic view of the teaching of writing that is founded on a close attention both to craft and to the person behind those words.

In chapter 5, “The Limits of Rhetoric,” I take a step back from this close analysis of students, teachers, and texts. For the first time in this book, I look closely at two imaginative works that do not feature “student papers.” And yet, ironically, both of these works present themselves quite literally as lessons in rhetoric, in writing. The first text is Plato’s *Phaedrus* (1995). This is also a step back in another sense, since unlike the other works I look at, which have all been composed in the last 50 years or so, Plato’s dialogue is about 2,400 years old and remains a foundational, philosophical text. But still, and whatever else it might be, the *Phaedrus* is also an extraordinary one-act play that presents a conversation between a student and teacher that seems, to my ears at least, uncannily similar to those that go on in many writing classrooms today. The second text is Peter Dimock’s *A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family*, a moving novella whose troubled narrator reworks yet another classical rhetorical treatise, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, in a flailing attempt to come to terms with his family’s involvement in the Vietnam War. In

my view, both Plato and Dimock end up showing that teaching writing cannot be reduced to the presentation of a general system, that teachers must instead root their work in the particular aims of the students they are working with. (I'm convinced that Dimock does so purposefully; about Plato, I can't say.) In that sense, the *Phaedrus* and *A Short Rhetoric* argue for an attention to student work. They suggest, that is, that the teaching of writing is grounded not in presentation but in careful listening and response.

Why, then, is it so hard to do well? In my postscript, "On the Job," I look at three recent novels—Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* (2015), Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1997), and James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale* (2001)—that highlight the routinely oppressive workloads of most writing teachers. Each of these novels offers a ground-level view of how difficult it is for good teaching to flourish in bad working conditions. Unless you're a hero or a martyr or very lucky, it's almost certain that there will always be more students with a claim on your attention than you have time and energy to offer. These books hint that what we need are not better theories of rhetoric so much as better ways of offering teachers the time and support they need to do their work with thought and passion.

In focusing on depictions of students and teachers at work together, I hope to call attention to such everyday aspects of teaching writing. I am aware that the material contexts of that labor are rapidly shifting—as less and less of the work of teaching now involves, in a digital age, a student and teacher looking together at words on a page. We are as likely to be exchanging online responses to video essays as scribbling comments in the margins of student papers. But I think the dynamic Plato dramatized in the *Phaedrus* still holds. A student produces some work. A teacher responds. Together they try to formulate some insights into writing. My aim here is to see what fiction, film, and drama can tell us about that moment, that exchange.

When I began this project, I thought I'd find a fair number of similar studies to consult—given that the teaching of writing still takes place, for the most part, in English departments, which are

filled with people who are also teaching about stories, plays, and films. But that hasn't proved to be the case. There's a good bit of writing just to the side of my interests—studies of the academic novel, articles about individual texts or authors—and I briefly review that scholarship in a closing section on background readings. But as for tracing how novels, plays, and films have imagined teachers *at work* with students on their writing—there, for the most part, I've needed to chart my own course.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the line of thought I pursue in this book is not always straight. I've let my thinking follow the lead of the texts I've read and watched. But I hope that in doing so I've also been able to make the case that while teaching writing does indeed depend on connecting with students as individuals, this connection needs to be made on an *intellectual* level. What distinguishes the teaching of writing is that our ideas come to life in the work of our students. My goal is to think with some novels, movies, and plays to see how we can make that happen.