

CLOSE READING FOR CRAFT

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What I hope to portray is a multi-decade effort at Yale to create the country's best academic culture for teaching nonfiction writing within a university. I'll focus on the sort of writing that many of us read in significant nonfiction books as well as in magazines including the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*. It's writing that seeks to be profoundly creative as well as profoundly true.

Because I have been based at Yale quite steadily since 1970, when I arrived as an undergraduate, this room in which I am speaking, now filled with emeritus faculty, surrounds me with intellectual influences and friends who have helped shape all my work as both teacher and writer.

Seated to my right, for example, I see Professor Kai Erikson. I recall being strongly influenced, when I was beginning some of my early writing, by his book *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. In 1977, soon after its publication, I was setting out to do research, traveling partly by horseback and floatplane, in a remote community that seemed vulnerable to destruction: a sheep-farming community, the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic Ocean offshore from Argentina. (That country's military dictator would invade the Falklands in 1982, starting a hideous war.)

Professor Erikson, aware of his book's influence on me, agreed to meet. I recall saying that the Falklands' insular community of shepherd families, threatened by geopolitical actors that knew little of their pastoral lives, seemed so deserving of honest portrayal that I was going to have a hard time writing about them in a way that did not seem to be writing for them. Professor Erikson, replying to the idea that these shepherds could not readily speak for themselves, said something (as I recall) close to this: Someone has to do that work for them.

That conversation gave early impetus to my sense that giving voice to the voiceless, to the unheard or ignored, can be a life's work—both as a writer's goal and as a teacher's goal.

Before going far back in time to depict a few early moments in my trajectory toward those goals, I want to stop briefly in the 1980s to depict one enduring impact,

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while I was working in China, of my Yale years as a student in our English department in the 1970s. As an undergraduate, I was fortunate to take the splendid Shakespeare lecture taught by Professor Alvin Kernan. He introduced us to the great literary critic Northrop Frye, whose work pushed me to ponder the ways that Shakespeare's dramatic energy emerges thanks to dramatic structure.

I believe all of Kernan's students felt energized by Frye's concept of the "green world" – a fertile place of imagination and indeed revolution, often seen in contrast to a greyer and grimmer city. In Frye's riveting *Anatomy of Criticism*, he argued for structural affinities between Shakespeare's plays and the "medieval tradition of the seasonal ritual-play" – a tradition that gains energy from the ever-revolutionary circling of the seasons including the inevitable fading of autumn and quickening of springtime. As Frye told us, "the green world charges the comedies [of Shakespeare] with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter." This "drama of the green world," he continued, celebrates the "ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land." Kernan's teaching of Shakespeare celebrated, alongside his students, the quickening warmth of spring as it supplants the fading chill of winter.

Then in the 1980s in China, about fifteen years after studying Shakespeare with Kernan, I found myself, as a nonfiction writer, stepping into a drama that propelled me out of a grim city to a vital green world and then required me – for dramatic reasons, as Kernan and Frye had led me to understand – to return to the grim city I had been forced to flee. This drama began mid-May 1989 in Beijing. Months before, I had convinced *Smithsonian* magazine to send me to China to travel for many weeks to write an article about the role of the bicycle in Chinese culture. We had agreed that I would explore on bicycle through Chinese cities and countryside, finding people to interview about how the bicycle affected their lives. So far as I could gather, no one had written a wide-audience article about the then-ubiquitous Chinese bicycle as a shaping and enabling force.

I awoke for my first morning in Beijing on May 15, apparently the first day that a million people went to demonstrate in Tiananmen Square. That day accelerated an upsurge in the democracy-oriented protests that would lead the Chinese military, on June 4, 1989, to enter the square and kill many civilians.

Well before those killings, I spent sunny days in May within and around the exuberance of Tiananmen Square. Often I bicycled alongside groups of demonstrators, sometimes interviewing one or more as we rode side by side. Their thousands of bicycles proved powerfully liberating. Unrestrained by the Chinese government's shutdown of Beijing's subways and normal transport, demonstrators using everyday bicycles and oversized tricycles could easily transport food, people, and information amid the din of revolution in the air.

Then the Chinese government declared martial law and forbade foreigners to visit Tiananmen or talk to students. It sent its army in a first push into the city, but citizens peacefully blocked its way – as I saw when I rode my bicycle to the city's western

edge to meet some soldiers. To stay in Beijing, I then decided (and later wrote), was to endanger anyone I met. I decided to travel out from the capital and return later, in order to talk about bicycles in a time of greater calm and, I hoped, greater freedom.

In late May of 1989, I traveled west by train to continue my bicycling research, as I had promised *Smithsonian*, in a provincial capital and then in rural areas abounding in emerald rice paddies traversed by water buffalo. This literally green world of rural China, I soon felt, emanated spiritual richness that felt deeply moving—offering a sense of high-spirited people devoted to independent work that seemed to permit living beyond the reach of urban command and control.

Beijing felt far away on June 3, 1989. That day I was exploring—at the urging of my faculty host at a rural university—the pilgrimage trails and monasteries of a holy mountain named Emei Shan, purling with waterfalls and rising to a height above 10,000 feet. As I awakened early on June 4, 1989, in a monastery's spare guest room on the verdant flanks of Emei Shan, the word was reaching us by radio about the killings in Tiananmen Square. Young monks were rushing around in horror.

Also that day, at the campus of the provincial university that was my base (almost 1000 miles from Beijing), students ran to the city center in horrified solidarity with the young victims in Tiananmen. Those provincial students were beaten by police, I gathered, as they reached the city center.

The American State Department urged me to leave China immediately. At the point when I was deciding whether to yield to American pressure to depart, I was thinking about Northrop Frye. The dramatic shape of Shakespearean comedy and romance, he had argued, required that its characters travel from the city out to the green world (perhaps to the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or to Prospero's island in *The Tempest*, or in my case out to rice paddies in the foothills of a holy mountain). But then—crucially for the drama—those travelers to the green world needed to return, likely with new insight, to the often-grey city.

I remember feeling commanded by the structure of the drama I had entered. I remember thinking: I am caught up in one of the globe's great literary structures. It shaped Shakespeare. Now it's got me. Here is how my article ends:

...Finally I decided to return, to what just days before had been the world's most exuberant city.

Again I rode its leafy boulevards, but no excited voice at my shoulder asked what I thought of the students. No banners waved. No people smiled. All faces seemed as if carved, years ago, in soft stone—at once fixed and badly weathered.

Each evening, Beijing television proudly showed the now-barren Tiananmen Square, cleared of all students and, for that matter, all life. Understandably, the TV cameras did not show what people in Beijing had seen: citizens trying to stop tanks by shoving bicycles at them, flatbed tricycles

turned into ambulances for slaughtered children. Less understandably, the cameras often began their pan across the square with an image of a pile of crumpled bicycles.

That odd image haunted me for months, long after I had left China. Only slowly did I realize that the government had chosen that scene precisely. The government cameras wanted to show more than a few crushed machines. They wanted to show crushed dignity, crushed humanity, crushed freedom—so much that the bicycle means in China.

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And then, in my article's final paragraph below, I think you can feel the arrival of what Frye calls the green world's seasonal "victory of summer over winter" and perhaps its "triumph of life and love over the waste land":

And finally I realized that of course the old men who cling to power in China would want to show off the crumpled bicycles of the young men and women who had called for freedom. How terrifying it must have been, to those old men, to see millions of young people cycling toward them—so independent, so alive, so free—all those wheels turning and turning beyond the control of fear or fiat. Of course those old men would want to crush the cycles of the young. For they would know too well that history itself runs in cycles—sometimes foreign horses [an early Chinese phrase for the bicycle], sometimes self-running carts [a later Chinese phrase for the bicycle], always wheels of change. How sad: Four decades earlier these same old men, seeking to "raise the people's dignity," had set rolling the cycles of modern China. And then in a few days of a Beijing spring they sought to crush, all at once, cycles and dignity and change together. They might as easily have sought to stop the circling, round the sun, of earth's revolution. For as each spring comes round, the old fade and the young quicken. And every day throughout China, the wheels of freedom roll.

That vision of "earth's revolution"—in which "each spring comes round" and "the old fade and the young quicken"—flows directly from Professor Kernan's teaching of Shakespeare at Yale.

Now I want to cut backward in time, toward early inspirations for telling under-told stories. Here is an autobiographical start: "I was a posthumous child." (Those are the words of *David Copperfield*, via Charles Dickens.) Or, put another way, I was "half an orphan." (That's a phrase I first heard directed at me by my beloved Linda Peterson, whom many of my emeritus colleagues know as a longtime professor in our English department, and whom I'll return to a few times as part of this discussion of intellectual influences.)

My version of what Dickens meant by "posthumous child" shaped my early days. My father died before I was born, three months after marrying my mother. She had no inkling how to find a job that would also let her tend a child—a classic problem of the

1950s and today. Job seeking led her, when I reached age three, to take me away from the world she knew, which happened to be focused in a dark parental apartment in America's biggest city. Off she took us to an odd version of the green world.

My home became a twelve-family town, a three-mile bicycle ride from the nearest store, located on a sandy peninsula south of the former whaling city of New Bedford in Massachusetts. My mother moved us there to get a teaching job in a rural private school that had been (I was often told) at risk of failing. She chose the school because its headmaster, convinced she would be a good teacher of the sort he badly needed, agreed to a deal: Although I was only age three in her first teaching year, 1954, the school would allow me to sit quietly at the edge of a kindergarten classroom full of five-year-olds. That was my day care.

For our first winter in our small town, my mother rented a room for us both in an apartment that we shared with another single woman above a garage. Then my mother rented what had been a warming hut for a greenhouse. Eventually she rented a former outbuilding constructed by a dentist (resident only in summertime) so that his kids could play ping pong away from his main house.

Our town's life felt sharply seasonal. In summer, we were not-rich townies in a quite-rich summer town. In addition to our small home and those of about a dozen families, it had scores of other houses, often sprawling and porchy, that got used only two to three months each summer. My year-round friends and I were some of the town's summer workers. My earliest paid jobs included tending clay tennis courts, removing seaweed from a beach, and, once I had a driver's license, driving the town's blue Ford tractor to pull gang mowers around a golf course. This summer town, I came to realize, was nice to its townies. When I wasn't mowing the golf course or sweeping the beach, I could swim or golf as much as I wished.

As fall arrived and most of my town's houses emptied, my mother and I went to school. I understood that part of our job was to help our school survive. Indeed, each day we helped convene the school. Every morning, after driving from our little town in my mother's Ford station wagon, we picked up students at their homes and took them to our school building. It was if we assembled that school each morning and disassembled it each night. The lore of my childhood was that we had to do our best every day to keep our school populated. And my mother often reminded me that the school was generous to me. I attended for free because I was the child of a teacher. She was earning about \$150 a month.

Probably the most important lesson I learned in those days is that working mothers exist in full-time overload. My mother, for example, had no minutes to read to me through the teaching year. She was preparing her classes in math and English and social studies – whatever our little school needed. As a result reading came to me as scattershot. I recall trying to read the so-called *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* when I was perhaps ten years old and being utterly confused. Back then, I could not know that disorientation was a reasonable response to its fragmented form.

A bit of scattershot reading that reached me, one January in my tiny town, would have ongoing influence. It was a 1965 article by John McPhee, in the *New Yorker*, called “A Sense of Where You Are.” Its focus seemed minor. It profiled a college basketball player whose craft was distinctive. (The neighbor who handed me the article had seen me bouncing a basketball.) The profile’s authorial challenge (as I see it now and intuited then) included creating a sense of worth where others might miss the worth—creating distinction and a sense of value in the craft of someone who was little known. McPhee was evidently cranking to make the article succeed. I began to think that words could create worth out of the unknown.

Beyond generating my sense that words create worth, McPhee’s article offered what I came to see as a general theory of craft (albeit posing as theory of basketball) that later reached me as a theory of writing. Reduced to one of McPhee’s sentences, his lesson was: “Most basketball players appropriate fragments of other players’ styles, and thus develop their own.” The inference seems obvious, at least in retrospect: “Most *writers* appropriate fragments of other *writers’* styles, and thus develop their own.”

That theory of influence evidently lacked anxiety. I found it winning. I feel lucky to have encountered it via McPhee well before I met its more vexed version in Harold Bloom’s influential 1973 book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, onto the pages of which I scribbled many undergraduate disputations. McPhee’s concept of non-anxious influence would become important for all my teaching here at Yale.

As McPhee’s 1965 article appeared, my rural school was running out of classes for me. Our school stopped at ninth grade. That led to a problem, which appears in odd form in my notes for the talk that has become this essay. A subhead in those notes warns me: Probably Skip Since You Have No Time To Explain How You Jumped From A Near-Failing Primary School Into America’s Best-Known (At The Time) Private Boarding School. But instead, speaking to a room full of Yale colleagues and friends, I decided I shouldn’t skip that odd story.

Although our teachers hoped our students might win admission to impressive secondary schools, the route seemed obscure. But in the fall of my sixth-grade year, when my mother was wondering about future schooling, a slender path revealed itself thanks to a cover story that appeared in *Time* magazine. It featured what *Time* depicted (hedging slightly) as “the nation’s best prep school: Massachusetts’ Andover.”

Here is the opening paragraph of the *Time* cover article, and reading it now I hear the voice of my mother’s unironic optimism:

In the next two months...teen-age boys and their parents all over the US will tremulously collect the credentials—IQ scores, grades, test results, recommendations, interviews—needed to apply for admission to what they are sure is the nation’s best prep school: Massachusetts’ Andover.

My mother was pleased to see “IQ” and “test results.” Since I was a student in an obscure school, I benefitted from that era’s national tests. The *Time* article continued to words my mother might have worried about:

Many applications will come from Eastern boys with good primary education and some wealth and social standing.

But then *Time* turned toward my mother's hopes:

But not all. Even now, Andover alumni are searching slums and back-country towns for bright boys who may have little money and position but who "need" Andover.

Soon afterward that article began talking about scholarships. My mother liked the idea that I could be one of the boys from "back-country towns" who would get sought by Andover. When I arrived there, though, I found few others. While I was there, my universe expanded as if propelled by a big bang. I came to realize that Yale was the place I hoped to enroll next, mostly due to the vitality of its English department.

When I arrived at Yale, my inspirations quickly became faculty members in English and particularly Leslie Brisman (teaching the poetry of John Milton and teaching the Bible as a form of literature) and Alvin Kernan (teaching Shakespearean drama). I've spoken a bit about Kernan, and I'll say more about the impact of Brisman in a moment. My greatest educational pleasures came from faculty at the core of the English department.

In the summers following three of my four undergraduate years, I wrote for professional newspapers, first in Massachusetts and then in California. Knowing this, my senior-year adviser in the English department, a lecturer named Alice (Sunny) Miskimin, told me about the teaching of another lecturer, whom she presented to me as somewhat marginal to the English department but perhaps useful to me. He was William (Bill) Zinsser, the head of Branford College, who was teaching one spring-term seminar, English 69 (later English 469) in nonfiction writing.

In my final semester at Yale, I found Bill's course revelatory. The way that Bill taught nonfiction writing would influence my sense of how to teach and (more subtly) how not to teach. Bill's core method for teaching nonfiction writing was this: He would introduce us to nonfiction work that he admired (by S.J. Perelman, perhaps, or Joseph Mitchell, or Joan Didion), tell us why he liked it, and encourage us to create work along similar lines. That method was good (it emphasized extensive reading as a route to effective writing) and perhaps not ideal (it could slide toward prescriptive). While I was loving the invitation to write based on what Bill showed us in our readings, I missed the exploratory expansiveness that I had found in other courses in the Department of English. I missed Leslie Brisman's steering us to create our own close readings and interrogations of phrasing in the Bible and the works of John Milton. And I missed Al Kernan's navigating us toward complex structural readings as we engaged Shakespeare.

Although Bill Zinsser taught his nonfiction seminar for only a few years, it came to feel legendary for a number of young nonfiction writers who rightly revere Bill's guidance. Those writers include Christopher Buckley, Corby Kummer, Jane Mayer, and

Mark Singer. Being a course of legend, it also had an unfortunate side: It rejected most students. Bill had space for fifteen students and was forced to turn away, in some years, ten applicants for every one he admitted. I came to worry that students from weak educational backgrounds were at high risk of getting turned away, particularly since Yale in the 1970s had no introductory courses designed to prepare them for a course like Bill's. Decades later I was still hearing from rejected students who felt a lingering sense of reduced opportunity because they were not admitted to Bill's solitary course.

The problem was major. As a university we were lacking courses for teaching the craft of nonfiction writing and also lacking a method that many faculty could use for teaching that craft. Further, as a university we were bemoaning that lack. Here in 1976 is soon-to-be Yale president Bart Giamatti, writing in the *Washington Post*: "many Yale students cannot handle English — cannot make a sentence or a paragraph," wrote Bart. If we doubted his critique, he invited us to "ask anyone who reads student writing."

So there we were, in the mid-1970s: Yale had a fine writing course turning away ten students for every one it admitted. Yale also had a university leader, soon to be president, using a national forum to deride our students' writing.

As I approached graduation in 1974, I encountered a surprise invitation, thanks to Bill Zinsser. Although I had worked for quite a few professional newspaper editors, and although I had a job at one of their papers in California to begin right after graduation, I knew that the best editor I had ever met was Bill. In late spring of my senior year, he offered me an apprenticeship. If I accepted, I would work with him as the number-two editor and only staff writer on a magazine that he was then editing, the *Yale Alumni Magazine*. The job had opened because Bill's current apprentice had just won a job as a staff writer at the *New Yorker*. Both Bill and that young writer, Mark Singer, came to me saying the apprenticeship would help me shape a writing career.

One downside was that this new job made me associate editor of a magazine that was under pressure to serve as a university house organ. Bill Zinsser, however, was resisting that pressure. He argued that the magazine was funded by alumni (not the university) and owed alumni an independent window on life at Yale. As the magazine's only editorial employee besides Bill — whose other jobs included being head of Branford College, writing for publications including the *New York Times*, and teaching the seminar that had helped me and other Yale students — I wound up doing much of the writing that asserted our independence. As an example, I wrote a mildly probing article about Yale's fundraising tactics. One leading fundraiser depicted what he called his white-knuckle theory: At the moment that you tell a rich alum how much you want as a major gift, he said, you glance at his knuckles. If those knuckles don't turn white, you didn't ask for enough money. Some alumni magazines might not have published that theory.

During that apprenticeship, I continued writing for other professional publications including the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. My goal was to break into freelance writing, which I did starting in 1977.

Soon I was traveling on an assignment for *Portfolio* magazine to rural Mexico, where I began writing (and taking photographs) about the sacred art of an indigenous community, the Huichol, in a roadless section of the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains. I took my tent and walked from village to village doing interviews.

That work among the Huichol led to an assignment in 1978 from *National Geographic* to travel, again with my tent, to the Falkland Islands off the southeast coast of Argentina in order to portray life in another little-known community. I had already been influenced by Kai Erikson's writing, as I've said. And, in a move influenced by my close reading for Leslie Brisman, I carried another book in my bags—a book that I planned to read repeatedly in the Falklands. It was *The Pine Barrens*, John McPhee's wonderful 1968 book on another remote community. Continually rereading *The Pine Barrens* while doing my research had two effects: It allowed me to write a good article, far better than the one on the Huichol for which I had no model. And it started me toward a teaching method that I would soon put to use.

In 1979, I received the unexpected chance to teach at Yale. I owe this also to Bill Zinsser, then in his last year as head of Branford College. He had been following the challenges of my work on distant mountains and islands as a freelance writer, often unable to receive mail. (A then-painful example: *National Geographic*, misunderstanding my complex travel plans, once mailed many rolls of film to me at the wrong country in South America; that expensive film was lost to us.)

Bill believed that I needed a base from which to continue freelancing, and he proposed one: As part of a new Yale program, I should become the first writing tutor to be based in Branford College. I would have, he said, a challenging but also limited time commitment, twenty-eight weeks a year and ten hours a week, helping Yale students become skilled writers. I would get a good space to work, one of two faculty offices in a three-room suite with a shared common room and working fireplace. In the second office within the suite I would have a fine colleague, a third-year assistant professor in the English department. So, starting in that office at Yale, I spent good parts of almost every day with...

[A note to readers of the printed version: As I read aloud the words above, to an audience of emeritus faculty, I heard multiple voices saying the name "Linda Peterson." She was a friend and colleague to many.]

...Professor Linda Peterson. Those good parts of every day with Linda—perhaps the most important influence on my intellectual trajectory—continued for thirty-five years, including years of happy and collaborative marriage. Many colleagues here are also longtime colleagues of Linda, who wound up chairing our English department for years.

Linda's work ethic was a model for me. As her friends know, that ethic continued passionately into the last month of her life. In June 2015, she finished her final book, *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*—which she had made sure was populated with new essays by young scholars. Based on Linda's analysis of how

quickly her long-managed cancer could progress before it would kill her, she worked deliberately through early and middle 2015. She finished editing the page proofs of that final book so that they were complete ten days before she died in late June. As some of her friends in this room recall well, only after Linda and I had sent those pages to Cambridge University Press did Linda permit me to inform colleagues that Linda would die within a few days. To close her professional life, Linda chose to complete her work on behalf of the book's young scholarly contributors, whom she refused to disappoint by leaving behind an incomplete book. I recall Linda saying, sometime in her final ten days, that she had decided to die "in harness" while doing the best job anyone could have in this world. Her generous commitment to colleagues, young and old, had been life-shaping to me from the days we first met in the late 1970s.

Back then when Linda and I began to work together from our shared base at Yale, my writing work dominated my days. As time went on, I wrote for publications including *American Heritage*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Republic*, *Russian Life*, *Sierra*, *Smithsonian*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the books division of the National Geographic Society, the website of the BBC, and also the opinion pages of *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, and the *New York Times*. Some of that writing led to book writing, which I'll describe in a moment.

For my beyond-Yale writing, many Yale colleagues influenced me profoundly. I recall a fine lecture by J. Hillis Miller on metaphor, for example – discussing ways in which the camel was and was not "the ship of the desert" in order to interrogate what metaphor could and could not convey. And over time I was influenced by the written work of Yale colleagues including Anne Fadiman, Beverly Gage, Bill Cronon, David Quint, Dick Brodhead, Edmund Morgan, Elizabeth Alexander, Harold Bloom, John Boswell, Jonathan Spence, Lanny Hammer, Louise Glück, Mary Miller, Richard Deming, and many more. And I've already described the ways that Al Kernan's lectures sent me back in 1989 to a grim and potentially dangerous Beijing right after the killings in Tiananmen Square.

The writing that I was doing led to a surprise invitation in 1983 from Professor Patricia Spacks, who soon would become our department chair, to teach a seminar in introductory nonfiction writing. The course, which everyone called English 120, had an unhelpful title, "Modern Prose: Advanced Writing," which we would eventually improve. (The word "advanced" was apparently a warning signal to first-year students: Only if they had quite-high scores on pre-college scholastic aptitude tests would we welcome them to register for our "advanced" English 120.)

In spite of its unwelcoming title, English 120 did a fine job improving the writing of undergraduates, and it was open to all students in their sophomore through senior years. The course, which was taught in multiple seminars that used a unified teaching method, had been developed by young faculty members in the English department including – most ongoingly – Linda Peterson.

The course's biggest oddity, I believed, emerged from what was paradoxically one of its greatest strengths: Its method over-depended, I thought, on the guidance—sensible but inherently limited when prescriptive—of one how-to book: *On Writing Well*, by Bill Zinsser, a book that more or less repeated the lessons of the seminar that I took from Bill in 1974. Over a few years, including after I became “course director” for this multi-seminar course, our teaching group worked to improve our method.

We sought to eliminate vestiges of by-the-book prescriptions such as, from Zinsser: “Simplify, simplify.” Influenced strongly by the English department's methods for engaging with literary texts, we taught our students how to read closely and thus discover strong strategies that they wished to emulate in writers whom they admired—and in future might come to admire, in any field and form. Our openness to all fields was crucial, I felt. Based on our emerging method—reading well in order to write well—one could teach oneself to write for the science journal *Nature*, for example, or for the policy journal *Foreign Affairs*. A fine reader, that is, could learn to savor the fine writing of any field and thus learn to write well in any field.

As Linda and I and our teaching colleagues worked to strengthen the close-reading component of this course, which was expanding to the point that it was teaching more than a quarter of Yale undergraduates, I wound up coining a term to define our developing method: “close reading for craft.” I coined it while preparing for a meeting with colleagues in 2001. (Here is an embarrassing admission: Soon after that phrase started to help our teaching, I wondered if it really was my coinage. A Google search confirmed it was.) Once we had that term, we could speak more clearly about what distinguished a Yale method that helps students become strong writers—writers building on the influence of others while also building afresh. (Defining that method led us soon after to give our English 120 course an improved title: “Reading and Writing the Modern Essay.”)

In the same years that our introductory teaching was strengthening, our nonfiction teaching had a surprising problem in its upper levels. Our department's teachers of advanced nonfiction writing in the mid-1980s, including very talented Peter Matthiessen and Robert Stone, were not assigning readings and thus could not engage in any close reading for craft. Further, neither Peter nor Bob seemed to be enjoying their nonfiction teaching—as I heard from each multiple times in the halls of the English department. Then, a few months ahead of the 1988 fall semester, after a summertime resignation by Peter Matthiessen, I was invited to replace him as teacher for our pinnacle nonfiction class (English 469).

As I prepared my teaching for that semester, I recalled a moment with Peter circa 1987. He had stopped me in a hallway near our classrooms to tell me, excitedly, that he had a student that year who could actually write. Then he wondered aloud whether Yale would be upset if Yale knew how he found this student. I said I couldn't imagine why. Peter then explained that he had met a guy walking on a street in New Haven,

thought the guy told interesting stories, and invited the guy to join Peter's seminar. The guy, so far as I could tell from Peter's narrative, had no other connection to Yale.

Our teachers for our advanced nonfiction courses, I had come to believe, were dissatisfied because they were not assigning readings that could offer inspiration to undergraduates. Given the chance in 1988, I injected close reading for craft into our top-level seminar, and I also defined some new goals (including control of dramatic structure and of authorial persona) for what students might achieve. Students and I found this instantly exciting. At about this time, also, some new national competitions arrived, and Yale student nonfiction writing began to become, at least as judged by those awards, the most honored in the country. I am going to leave hanging that assertion – “the most honored in the country.” I'll return to it later.

In the early years that I was teaching upper-level nonfiction, I began researching an article for the *New York Times Magazine* that would lead me into a long-running book project. My *Times* article portrayed work by the legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon to challenge sexual harassment in the workplace. It received extra attention because it was published on the same weekend in 1991 that Anita Hill, during confirmation hearings for Justice Clarence Thomas, began to depict behavior she had experienced when working for him.

Responding to that article, a few legal scholars urged me to think about a book. My focus on one trailblazer had failed, they argued, to give credit to many other attorneys who had shaped the 1970s-onward battle against sex discrimination in the law. I agreed. And for the book I might write, I had a fine model – the first book written by one of my Yale teachers, Anthony Lewis, a columnist for the *New York Times* and a Pulitzer winner for his coverage of the Supreme Court. That book, *Gideon's Trumpet*, portrayed a seeker of justice imprisoned by a legal system that he had found unresponsive until he challenged it and changed federal law.

Another Yale influence as I began my book – *Equal: Women Reshape American Law* – came from my ongoing professional life with Linda Peterson. Linda occasionally told me stories that influenced me – although they're not in the book, and I never investigated them separately – as I gathered narratives of America's legal battles against sex discrimination.

One story depicted the opening moments of Linda's interview for a teaching job at Yale. It took place with a committee in a hotel room during the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in, I believe, early 1977. Linda had done her undergraduate work at Wheaton College in Illinois, which may have stood out as a less elite college than some attended by other job candidates. The first member of Yale's interview committee to ask a question was Professor J. Hillis Miller, who began (as Linda recalled) with a comment that was approximately: When I was a student at Oberlin, I believe I heard that Wheaton girls were easier to get to know than to get into serious conversation.

Linda's memory of her reply was: "Well, Professor Miller, the Oberlin men I've known have been fully capable of serious conversation." The interview proceeded. Did Linda's Yale job, I still wonder, hang on her quick-but-mild wit in brief thrust and parry?

A second story emerged from one of Linda's first Yale faculty dinners. It honored Professor W. Jackson Bate of Harvard's English department. One of Linda's pleasures that day had been to guide Bate around campus. At the evening's dinner, the event organizers seated Linda next to one of her senior colleagues, Professor Harold Bloom. In a story that Linda retold only rarely, and without relish, Harold insisted that he would cut the beef on her dinner plate into morsels. He apparently wished to spear each morsel with a fork and, in view of the assembled faculty members, feed each to Linda. My memory is that Linda could not keep Harold from using his knife on her beef but did parry most of his forking.

Research for *Equal* was influenced in yet another way by life imbedded in Yale's community. Every chapter, I decided, required access to documents that no scholar had yet worked with. Because I was researching events from the preceding few decades, every chapter would thus require me to find original material that had not yet reached an archive. Some key documents were stowed in garages or basements or kitchen cabinets.

The epitomizing example (and challenge) became getting documents depicting the legal work of the most important twentieth-century litigator for gender equality, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her pivotal litigation began in the early 1970s, when she was a professor at Rutgers Law School. Before asking to meet her, I did all the interviewing and document gathering that I could manage, including with help from some of her earliest allies, and I read public documents such as transcripts of her oral arguments.

By late summer of 1994, as Ginsburg was preparing for her second term as a Justice on the Supreme Court, I was ready to send her a letter requesting time to talk. At this point in her career, she was not speaking publicly about her past activism. Years would pass before young admirers began romanticizing her as "Notorious RBG."

What I knew in 1994, encouragingly, was that Justice Ginsburg enjoyed discussing fine points of legal argument. The core of my letter to her, which I mailed to the Supreme Court in mid-August, offered a question about her first presentation to the Supreme Court, in 1971. It had achieved what came to be seen (though not at first) as a major victory. My key question was this: Was I right to believe that the key to this victory lay in a section of her argument (via brief to the Court) in which she had, as I put it, laid a trap for the Court? I proposed that she laid the trap by offering three legal choices. They lay apparently on a continuum. The middle choice apparently might effect almost no change — thus making the middle choice quite easy for an all-male Supreme Court to accept. Within that middle choice, I suggested, she had imbedded language designed to seem banal but designed actually — if her trap sprang

successfully and the Court accepted her language – to effect accelerating change in anti-discrimination law. As we both knew, Chief Justice Warren Burger later repeated her language. Thus he sent the law sliding down a slope that was contrary to his intentions and good for hers. In writing to Justice Ginsburg, I felt sure no one before me had made the argument that she had set a trap.

In a response that came as quickly as possible, after my letter traveled by first-class mail to the Court, I received a phone call from Ginsburg’s assistant saying, basically: The Justice would like to meet you, and would some day next week be good?

I arrived with a list of questions designed to be similarly surprising to Justice Ginsburg. Over a few hours, as I unspooled my questions, she did her best to answer. Then, before I could ask for access to documents, she surprised me. As the afternoon grew late, after everyone but the two of us had left her chambers, she said approximately this: To do this history as well as you wish, and to answer the sorts of questions you’re raising, you need access to my files from those days.

She then explained that, when she joined the Supreme Court a year earlier, she had been permitted to move a mass of unsorted files to a storage room in the basement of the Court. She had no time to review them. They combined litigation files, such as drafts and meeting notes, along with her personal correspondence with other attorneys and with clients. She proposed a system: I was welcome to have a key to that storage room and work in it as long as I wished, drawing on whatever I learned, so long as I didn’t impose on the staff of the Supreme Court.

The trust she showed opened the way for my book *Equal* to attempt its task—to become the defining legal history of women fighting for equality in the late twentieth century in America. On its publication-day event, hosted by Rutgers Law School in 2009, Justice Ginsburg’s keynote address began by calling *Equal* “far and away the most accurate account of my endeavors in the 1970s” and a “magnificent achievement.” I was overwhelmingly relieved.

I want to close with a focus on Yale and a return to an assertion that I left hanging earlier—that Yale student nonfiction writing has become, based on national awards, the most honored in the country.

By the early 2000s, we had a clear method (close reading for craft) but not yet an upper-level nonfiction writing program. Still, thanks I believed to our use of close reading for craft in many introductory nonfiction classes, and also to an abundance of campus publications edited by students, we had moved far beyond Bart Giamatti’s 1976 despair that Yale students “cannot handle English—cannot make a sentence or a paragraph.” By 2004, writing by Yale students was dominating the one national competition open to all nonfiction writing by American university students, run by the *Atlantic* magazine. In the contest’s first eight years, through 2004, Yale student writing received a third of all awards—far more than went to any other university.

In 2004 and 2006, two significant gifts provided what we needed to start building a program. One gift came from Paul Francis, Yale ’77, who revered the teaching of

Bill Zinsser. Dick Brodhead, after convening a small committee in his role as dean of Yale College, brilliantly offered the position of Francis Writer in Residence to Anne Fadiman, who has become I think the best teacher of nonfiction writing in America. The other gift – \$1 million from Steve Brill, Yale '72 and Yale Law '75, who had founded *American Lawyer* and Court TV – in 2006 allowed us to support two courses in the English department and also to create the invaluable Yale Journalism Initiative, which provides students with astute guidance and internship funding.

We started adding superb new seminar teachers including Bob Woodward, Yale '65, of the *Washington Post*; Carl Zimmer, Yale '87, of the *New York Times*; Sarah Stillman, Yale '06, of the *New Yorker*; Susan Dominus, Yale '92, of the *New York Times Magazine*; and many more. Most of these teachers have been lured, I believe, by the excellence of our students and not by our salaries, which have rarely been high for this teaching. At the extreme is Bob Woodward, who in many years met with one session of a seminar taught here by Steve Brill and then agreed to teach his own seminar in the English department; Bob repeatedly refused to accept a salary for teaching at Yale, and recently he gave money to support students via the Yale Journalism Initiative.

In the years beginning circa 2010, a concept began to take shape within the English department that supports the larger program of creative writing, of which this nonfiction teaching is a component. The concept is that our department teaches, for those students who wish, a form of close-reading synergy – an opportunity to combine strong criticism of literature with strong making of literature. The concept's clearest early articulation came from Professor Langdon Hammer in his time as our chair of English. In a memo that Lanny circulated in 2011, he argued for meshing Yale's long tradition of teaching the history of literature with a new tradition of teaching writers to create literature. This fine meshing would, as Lanny put it, help carry Yale's long literary history onward "into the present day."

Among the pleasures of the nonfiction part of this teaching is that students can enjoy a liberal education, immersed in whatever Yale departments they find fascinating, that will help them move very successfully to professional work as writers at national publications including the *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and on and on.

As I've said, the good reputation of young Yale writers of nonfiction emerged partly through Yale students' domination of national contests that emerged to honor student nonfiction writing in America. Twice in the recent past, in 2010 and 2015, Yale student writers swept every prize in the year's premier national competition for college-level nonfiction writing.

In the 2010 contest, run by editors at the *Atlantic*, Yale students finished first, second, and third. This capped a rise in which Yale students, during more than a decade, took over 40 percent of first prizes and 30 percent of all the *Atlantic's* nonfiction awards. (Some of this writing, as part of another distinctive Yale synergy, was written in English classes and then published in extra-curricular publications such as

The New Journal and the *Yale Daily News Magazine*.) A year after the Yale sweep, the *Atlantic* retired the contest.

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The 2015 sweep came in a successor contest, begun in 2009 and judged by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). It offered ten awards in 2015, and Yale students took 100 percent (ten of ten). The contest's coordinator told the *Yale Daily News* that judges were uninfluenced by Yale's reputation for "tremendous nonfiction creative writing" because judges had been unaware of student names and college names until judging was complete. In the next year's contest judged by NCTE, which offered five awards, Yale students took 80 percent (four of five). That lifted Yale students' nonfiction success rate above 55 percent of first prizes and above 40 percent of all awards in the contest's history. The organizers retired the contest.