University of Miami

M.F.A. Fiction Portfolio

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Compassionate Omniscience: An Analytical Response to The Barracks Thief

Tobias Wolff has been described as a generous author (Kendrick, 1985), a quality evident in his Vietnam War era novella The Barracks Thief. The book employs shifting points of view and a varying level of omniscience limited not by traditional literary standards, but according to the needs of the characters and the ownership of the story; omniscience is parceled out in order earn sympathy for those characters who need it the most: protagonist Phillip Bishop, Phillip’s father, Guy Bishop, and Phillip’s fellow new recruit Lewis, the barracks thief himself.

The novella begins in third person, first inhabiting the mind of Guy Bishop, Phillip’s soon-to-be-absent father. Wolff acknowledges his flighty nature from the start. “He was a man who had always gone from one thing to another, place to place, job to job… woman to woman” (9). By the second page, Guy has fallen for another woman and abandoned his wife and two sons. Yet the chapter opens with a moment of tender vulnerability, the one thing in his life that, for short while, has the power to still him, a memory of his children: “But when he sat in the dark between his two sleeping sons he felt no wish to move” (9). This contentment in parental love may be short-lived, but it makes Guy both relatable and sympathetic, as does the fear for his children’s safety that this immense love evokes. The omniscient point of view gives us access to Guy’s innermost motivations—his struggle with suicidal thoughts, his concern for his family even as he prepares to leave them—and it is this understanding that creates empathy in the reader.

Still in third person, Chapter 1 moves into the mind of Phillip, the novel’s protagonist during the summer after his father’s departure. Again through the use of omniscience, the reader is permitted to see his less altruistic acts with a more three-dimensional lens. When Phillip shakes his younger brother Keith without stopping, he is frustrated at the dissolution of his
family, his mother’s fragile emotional state, and his brother’s overwhelming grief (10-11). When he throws rocks through the windows of cars, he has just realized that he is friendless and alone (12-13). The first chapter provides the context of Phillip’s behavior and origins of his pain. Thus when he suddenly enlists in the Army during Vietnam, we know why he’s so anxious to get away that he could not wait for the Marines’ recruiting office to open (22).

Having earned ownership of the story in Chapter 1, Phillip becomes the narrating character for the remainder of the novella (with the exception of Chapter 5). The use of the first person provides the reader with an even closer level of omniscience, and this time it is limited to Phillip. His narration is necessary to establish his authority over the story and to keep the reader’s sympathy for a character who refuses to help find his missing younger brother, stands by while his friend gets badly beaten, never speaks to him again after his dishonorable discharge, and romanticizes the day he could have died in gloriously useless blaze. Because we have intimate access to his hopes and fears, to every twist and turn in his psyche, even his more malevolent acts are relatable.

This argument applies doubly to Lewis, the thief and the protagonist of Chapter 5. The chapter is written in the third person limited perspective, preserving the most intimate level of access for Phillip who brings the book to its close. Yet this section of the story could belong to no one but Lewis, as he is the only one who knows the truth of his motivations. Lewis is perhaps the story’s least likable character. Both aggressive in his manner and weak at his core, Lewis has a trigger temper and a penchant for petty vengeance. He lashes out at friends and foes alike—the friend who doesn’t feel like going to the movies after an emotionally trying day, the teacher who tries to help him despite his anxieties, the prostitute he undercuts. Lewis is the one who cocks the rifle when the deputy chief comes to warn them about the fire. Not someone likely to evoke a
reader’s sympathy or our narrator’s, though eventually he does. Through omniscience, Wolff
gives us so much more. Lewis is a little bit slow to understand, often coming to conclusions
about his decisions after the fact. He is lonely and frightened, desperate for approval, confused
about his identity and desires. While his actions may not earn the approval of many, by the
novella’s end, he has certainly gained the reader’s compassion.

By making unconventional choices and varying both perspective and levels of
omniscience, Tobias Wolff renders a world of infinitely human characters, as full as they are
fallible.
Works Cited


Excerpt, *Dolores Springs*

Here I Am Sending Serpents among You; A Prologue

It wasn’t hard to find one. Every time that Tara went outside to light a cigarette or hang the blankets or dump the trash into the burn pile, she looked for the earth-colored coil, listened for that telltale shake. And if you went hiking through the brush behind the trailer and climbed the foothills like they were doing, you were bound to run into some big ones.

Her husband Jake was out in front with his buddy Randall at his side, plowing ahead without looking back. Like they always had with Jake’s little brother, Bobby. Tara was having trouble keeping up. Jake was in his Red Dog motorcycle boots, and Randall had actual bull-hyde snake boots that came to just below his knees, a present from an Uncle he sometimes hunted with in West Texas. Tara, still carrying extra girth from the second pregnancy five years back, was in sneakers. But the kids were down the road at their Grandma’s for the night, and Tara was ready for something. She didn’t own any snake boots.

They saw their first snake early on, sunning on a rock where the grade was just beginning to tilt up. But it was just a baby, no longer than a foot, and Randall was after a much bigger rattle.

“Make sure you give her space,” Randall said. “The young ones empty their venom when they bite.” Jake adjusted his cap and grinned at her, sun lines bursting around his eyes. He’d just turned twenty-one when Tara got pregnant at seventeen. He was square-shouldered and baby-faced, a bit of the devil in his eye that she liked. She was skinny then, a rodeo girl fond of big bangs and tight bedazzled shirts, tighter jeans. When they married two years later, she was pregnant again but not far enough along to show.
The mesquite and scrub brush thinned as they went higher, but the trail twisted, and Tara struggled just to keep her feet. When she caught one foot on a rock, the other slid on the dry, packed earth and went out from under her. And then she was on the ground, ass covered in chalk-yellow dirt, looking into the deep shadow beneath the overhang of a boulder which, thankfully, was empty. Jake was laughing hard now, with Randall hissing at him to be quiet but smiling just the same.

Tara pushed herself upright, and he let it drop. “Like you ain’t never hit the ground before,” she said. Jake just kept on smiling, and Randall looked away while Tara slapped her ass clean.

Up they went with the sun higher in a sky so blue it really looked deep, like you could get in it if you wanted. Tara’d never gone to the ocean, couldn’t swim if she did, but she wondered if it was something like this. Longhorns dotted the plain below. The trailer from this height was no bigger than a stick of gum. The guys spooked a jack rabbit who took three feet of air before he disappeared. And they hadn’t seen a snake since that first one. It made her nervous. Because they were up there, all right.

Each July when the monsoons came, the ground was too dry to swallow all that water. It came in downhill torrents, swelled the river to its banks, flooded low-lying houses and fields. And it washed the snakes down in droves.

Ahead, a rocky dome loomed above them. As they entered its shadow and followed the trail around its base, the two men slowed, and Tara had to stop short. Stepping gently, heel-toe, they came around to where the sun split the darkness and stopped so still she could hear both of them breathing: Jake’s slight smoker’s wheeze, Randall’s slow and measured ins and outs. She moved closer until her face was between their two sun-warmed arms. And what she saw made her sweat go cold.
Maybe there were fifty of them. Maybe a hundred. Or maybe, more likely it seemed to her then, they had by some unnatural act been fused into one muscled and hideously writhing beast. Tara wanted to go back. She wanted to turn tail and run. But it was like she had no choice, only stillness, a kind of reverence demanded deep in her bowels. Their long bodies entangled, at rest but for the slightest motion—the drift of a cloud on a windless day, almost a trick of the eye—and she couldn’t tell where one ended and another began, how many heads it had, how fast it could move if it wanted. Even the Devil himself had only been one.

Tara didn’t see Jake raising his gun until Randall put a hand out to stop him.

“Not here,” Randall said.

Off to her right, the shake-shake-shake began. And then she could see there were more, even, than she’d known, beyond the serpentine mass, much closer to her. A coiled Diamondback lay not five feet from her sneakered toes, its middle thicker around than her short fingers could reach.

Jake swiveled, the barrel of his shot gun pointing at a smaller snake, maybe four foot long, just starting to raise its pyramid head.

“Back,” whispered Randall. He pressed his wrist to the muzzle and met Jake’s eyes. Then they were moving backward, Jake’s shotgun still raised and Randall’s .32 as well. Tara held to a fistful of each one’s shirt, her eyes on another set of eyes, black and wordless, as the chorus of rattles grew louder.

They kept moving until the den was out of sight.

When Tara let go and turned to face front, she’d made sweaty tissue-flowers on both men’s T-shirts. She started to laugh, a desperate, breathless sound. When Jake, then Randall, turned to look, she covered her mouth.
“Oh sweet Jesus,” she said. “What the fuck was that?”

Randall started laughing too, but Jake’s mouth dipped into a frown.

“I had a clear shot,” Jake said.

Randall shook his head. “Too close. Western Diamondback’ll defend its territory.”

“What’d we come here for?” Jake said, and Randall sighed.

When they came across a midsize adult halfway down the hill, Jake kicked up a boot-toe full of dirt, cocked his gun as the snake rose, and blew its head off with a single shot. It landed. Its jaws were opening, closing, trying to strike.

Tara’s gut twisted and the heat rose to her face, but she swallowed and brought it back down.

“Don’t touch the head,” said Randall. But Jake stuck a twig in its still-moving jaws and picked it up. He thrust it toward her, and Tara flinched. If Bobby were here, Jake’d be chasing the little faggot down the hillside. He let Randall carry down the meat.

Back at home, they’d started a fire, sat down in folding chairs, and opened some beers. Tara watched Randall split the snake’s belly and clean it, cut it into sections, wrap it in tinfoil with some beer and barbeque sauce and toss the whole mess in the fire.

“It’s not dangerous?” she said. “To eat?”

“Nah,” said Randall. “Don’t carry venom in their meat. They aren’t immune.”

Jake was squinting at the fire. He took a pull of Jack from the bottle and chased it with his beer. His shotgun leaned against his hip.

“Sorry,” Tara said to Randall. “What do you mean?”
“Rattlesnake can’t bite itself;” he said. “It’d die.”

Jake, whose only true tenderness was reserved for his children, turned to them and grinned. “But we can bite them,” he said.

Tara stilled her shaking leg.

As it turned out, she didn’t like the meat at all. Dry like over-cooked chicken and muddy like the catfish Jake and Randall sometimes brought home, drunk and beaming, after a day on the Rio Grande. And it was tough and chewy, almost like cartilage, near the spine.

The sun was down, and Jake was wearing his camo jacket now. Randall wrapped the rattle in some tissue and stuck it in the pocket on his chest. She’d met him first, on the circuit when he was still riding broncs. But they’d never so much as kissed, and six months later, he’d been Jake’s best man. Tara sometimes wondered if she should’ve married him instead.

This was in April, four months before Jake and Randall took a 12-pack and the inflatable raft they’d picked up at Walmart out on a swollen river, and Randall fell overboard and drowned. Jake was looking at the sky when he told her, and Tara stood beside him on dry land. He didn’t go under right away, Jake said, and just at first, Randall didn’t look scared. And then, he was farther downstream. Jake took up the paddle quick, he said, but the raft was light. The current was strong. Randall dipped and came back up, Jake said, and he was visible still as he took mouthfuls of the rigid brown water until his arms stopped flailing, and his body disappeared. Until his arm caught on a root a mile down the bank, and they fished him out, his white shirt stained with mud. Tara’d fought to keep the horror from her face, but she felt it spreading like a stain. And when Jake finally turned away from that wide blue sky and back to her, he must have
seen it there. He wouldn’t talk with her about Randall’s death again. And she couldn’t ask: right at first, for just that moment when Jake didn’t know, had he laughed?

But Tara hadn’t been there, hadn’t seen it. What did she know? That she was two weeks late and hadn’t told her husband. That Randall was dead, dead, dead. And that a rattlesnake could strike without sinking its fangs in. It’d put its poison in her after they’d shot it, peeled its skin away, cooked and ate it. She remembered that night, how she shook her hands and feet, slapped them like a newborn, trying to wake them up. And they’d all laughed about it around the fire, her and Jake and Randall, though she was terrified in a way she’d only been once before, when her first son was born and she knew she must be dying. Except that this time, death hadn’t hurt at all. It was just a quiet numbness creeping up Tara’s limbs. And no one else had felt it but her.
Process Note

The decision to recommit myself to the writing life came easily, but the idea to pursue that life in a new way—in graduate school—began hesitantly, a toe dipped in cold water. I took a couple of workshops as a non-degree student at the University of New Mexico. I studied for the GRE, began revising my stories incessantly, read every faculty publication I could find at the Albuquerque public library. I wanted not just a coveted place in an MFA program but the right place. When I got the call from University of Miami, I splurged on a cross-country plane ticket and came to visit. The campus was beautiful, the students welcoming, the faculty impressive. It felt right, but there were so many factors to consider: uprooting and the distance, the return to academia after a nearly ten year hiatus, my lack of experience in the discipline. Eventually, of course, one has to dive in.

Before the MFA at UM, revision was not my strong suit, and my writers’ group had fallen by the wayside. My first novel—the first pancake of a novel—was overwrought and underplanned, but it was the earliest articulation of the themes that obsessed me and the questions that compelled me to write: accountability and causality, tenderness and violence, history and the freedom of future, circumstance and choice. And when I reached the end of that draft, there was a new idea brewing, inspired by a true story of violence close to home that I couldn’t shake. This horror and the need to understand it sparked the project I described in my application letters, now the novel draft I am submitting as my thesis.

As a reader first, I came to recognize certain qualities of the work that stayed with me. I wanted to write a novel with the inexhaustible particularity, the humor, and the resonance of Annie Proulx. Interconnected narrators and storylines intrigued me, but coupled with an urgent pace and an inevitable end as exemplified by Phillip Meyer’s American Rust. I hoped to craft
justifiably compelled characters common to the genre-bending authors of psychological mysteries such as Tana French’s detective series and Peter Hoeg’s Smilla’s Sense of Snow. I wanted to create a world as richly detailed and deeply excavated as Eleanor Catton’s New Zealand, Dorothy Allison’s Carolinas, Jane Smiley’s Iowa. My aims were as high as my inspirations, and my influences continued to expand.

During my two years of coursework at UM, I read broadly in a wide range of genres and styles. I engaged with work from a craft perspective, explored new forms, and took the opportunity to experiment. Taking poetry courses for the first time provided context and understanding to an additional mode of expression. It helped me to hone a new critical lens with which to examine my own work and interact as informed-participant in another facet of the literary community. My professors were consistently open about their own writing processes and experiences. I was encouraged to think not only about the aims of my work and its effectiveness, but about its impact on the world and its place in a larger tradition. My cohort was thoughtful, supportive, and diverse in their approaches. I owe much to their insight.

When I first started work on my thesis project, I had a very vague idea of the end and little understanding of the shape it would take, but I knew where. Dolores Springs is set in a fictionalized small-town of the same name, the center of an impoverished, rural ranching and mining community that borders the Rio Grande in Southern New Mexico. As landscape came first, and character was born of that, the work began in rather free-form explorations of these elements. The shape occurred organically, in vignettes, each one told from the perspective of a particular character. Inspired by Danticat’s Claire of the Sea Light, I began in an attempt to duplicate this compelling juxtaposition of the real and the unbelievable. The first few sections incorporated a semi-supernatural occurrence particular to the geographical setting (the numbness
Tara feels after eating rattlesnake meat in the Prologue, or the snake den itself; the glass emerging from Leti’s skin in Chapter 2). It was intriguing, but it wasn’t enough.

Since setting was so intrinsic to the birth of the piece, at first, I thought the book was about the town the stories took place in. I moved from character to character out of personal interest; one character’s perspective caused me to wonder about that of another, and it kept me writing, but it was difficult to connect one section to another without a broader scope. Six chapters in, the book began to take a larger shape in my mind. The multiple viewpoints felt intrinsic, but I wanted to keep the feel of a novel. I also hoped to explore the violence within the story from a wide angle perspective and at close range. Uncertain of the plotline or the larger themes, I stopped to reassess, to build the skeleton of the book. I spent the summer reading and pushing on, collecting pages. My advisor, Professor Manette Ansay, was invaluable. She has a knack for asking the right questions, and she believed in the project from the start. With each new step that I took, she helped me to see ahead, to articulate my vision, to deepen and refine, and she left the big answers up to me.

As the writing and early revision process continued, I started to imagine each chapter as the narrating character’s reaction to another character’s actions in a previous chapter. I became aware that, rather than telling the story of a place, I was trying to tell the story of family born of that place, and that the novel should be concerned not only with the characters as individuals, but with the precise and shifting dynamics between them. I settled on six separate perspectives spanning three generations of a single family. I realized, too, that if I wanted the book to read like a traditional novel, it needed to move like one does, with logical narrative links between the chapters and smaller and longer arcs propelling the reader through.
The multiple points of view requires many layer of arc: there needs to be an arc in each chapter, an arc for each narrator from their first chapter to their last (most have between three and five), and the chapters need to be placed in such a way that their order is also serving the larger narrative arc of the novel as a whole. One way I have attempted to do this is by ensuring that the essential story developments that take place in the sections between a particular narrator’s installments have an impact on that narrator. For example, in the first chapter, Tara is pregnant and considering her options. In the second, the reader knows when she comes to see Leti that she is unenthusiastic about parenting and considering an abortion, so when Leti offers encouragement in the form of monetary support for Tara’s expanding family, and Tara is forced to go elsewhere for help, the reader is in on the secret. I worked, too, to create contextual linkages and moments of recognition for the reader by weaving in small physical details with their own arcs, like the chicks aging in Vera’s yard.

The project is ambitious in terms of the intricacies of its interconnections. I used numbered chapters to indicate a linear movement in time. The act of counting suggests a prescribed order and a building-up to something. I incorporated chapter titles both in order to alert the reader to the presence of an omniscient narrator and to act as guide or roadmap, to help orient the reader to the progression of story events within each chapter and thus more easily connect them.

The novel opens with an accidental death, and closes with a killing, one brought about by a chain of events in which each character participates without anticipating its outcome, one inspired by true events. In the novel version, Hank pushes his wife Selma in a drunken rage, causing her to hit her head. Believing her dead, Hank panics and locks Selma into the trunk of her own car, where she dies the following day of heat exhaustion before the rescue parties can find her. This created several problems for me in the book’s crafting, particularly in regards to
form. The character who dies is not one of the six rotating narrators, nor is her killer. Since none of the narrating characters is present when the violence occurs, relaying the details of this pivotal event proved problematic. Because my focus is on a more indirect form of culpability, I was and am resistant to the idea of giving her killer the power to narrate. I planned from the start to give Selma a section of her own in the moments leading up to her death. The problem with this approach was two-fold: her narration was unprecedented, and it set up the expectation of her rescue and risked breaking the reader’s trust. I intended for the scene to be horrible, but not gratuitous, particularly because story elements based on true events demand a sensitive handling. Ultimately, I decided to omit this POV section in favor of a non-numbered fly-on-the-wall piece delivered by a removed and objective narrator. This brief section entitled, “A Little After Ten P.M.,” moves backward in time to reveal the events of that night. I hope to have handled the violence with a degree of emotional distance without shying away from the tragedy and to have raised questions about culpability in the reader’s mind.

After some initial uncertainty, I feel confident about book’s shape. I believe that the use of rotating and interconnected narrators will serve the novel’s longer arc, that the numbered and non-numbered titles will help to orient the reader and alert them to the presence of the omniscient narrative voice, and that the shifts in the final section, first to an objective narrator’s perspective, then backwards in time will emphasize the tragic and complex nature of human violence. It is as broad a problem as it is particular, as diffuse in its origins as it is personal in its enactment and its impact. In this book, I am aiming to show both. I hope that the structural and stylistic choices I’ve made along the way will serve the novel’s larger intent.

My knowledge of both the characters and the world they inhabit has deepened during the drafting and revision. Their place in history and the impact the past has had upon them is also
becoming clearer, an important widening of the close lens the perspective employs. I plan to highlight the region’s relationship to Spanish colonialism, Native American resistance, religious crusading, Manifest Destiny, and land and water rights. I want to explore the reverberations of these conflicts moving through history and into the particularity of each individual character born of that heritage and acting in the town’s present-day. I believe the incorporation of a broader history will lend another dimension to the novel’s treatment of accountability and causality. I’ve discovered other themes along the way: sexuality and social morés, faith and the ability to question, the aftermath of trauma, all of which deserve a full exploration. There is much work yet to do, but this program has given me the confidence and skills I need to surmount those obstacles that arise.

Annotated Bibliography, 2013-2015

Mariel boatlift; Cuban immigrant families with American-raised children; multiple POV; non-linear: story in Cuba, present story with two daughters who turn out to be sisters (one a baby who had been believed lost at sea). Some narrative trouble.


Memoir, utilizing refrain and photography. Casual telling of wayside violence. Personal history and recovery.


Parallel romance narratives: Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms; Clara’s fictive biographer and her forthright but fickle love interest. Partial epistolary, diary entries. 1st and 3rd.


24 hours during wedding, omniscient POV, relationships beginning, dissolving, mending. Domestic violence.


Short story collection set in rural Wisconsin. Pieces stand alone and work together as a portrait of place, examination of family. Mother finds son’s collection of lingerie. Younger brother kicked out of sister’s home by abusive boyfriend, finds solace in a sex worker’s dog.


Baker’s relationship (or lack thereof) with John Updike, whom he finally meets and lies to. Free Big Mac for $5 worth of coins. Talks around and around.


Short story collection by one of the founding editors of Monologging.org. Guns of Gaza, cheats with best friend’s wife, American Thanksgiving.

Colloquial and intellectual essays on writing and culture. Against Epiphanies, Sonja’s Last Speech (Chekov, Double-Voicing), Dysfunctional Narratives (talk shows, crime shows), Regarding Happiness.


Ann Arbor, Michigan; author as narrating character; interesting metatextual references; multiple POV; divided into 3 sections: beginnings, middles, and ends. Problematic flat characters: magical drag queen psychic and generous, black, church-going doctor.


Story of a family, hunger as emotional need and artistic (musical) passion. Violin.


Terribly depressing (bouts of alcoholism, hatred for family, gay affairs) with moments of profound and moving insight.


Mrs. Wapshot going on her outing. Seamless internal monologue. Didn’t finish.


1890s Creole Louisiana, ambivalent wife and mother ‘awakened’ by love for a man who is too afraid to break with convention, has affair with another guy, (naked) suicide by drowning.


1950s housewife; spans her life before wedding until after husband’s death; told in titled vignettes; ends with Mrs. Bridge trapped in garage.

Ville Rose, (imagined) seaside town in Haiti. Fisherman dies, search for the body. Claire goes missing, search for her. Shifting narrators, semi-magical realism (frog plague, menstrual blood in mouth), teenage rapist with a child, gay lover murdered by police, father trying to give his daughter to the wealthy woman in town.


Novella in lyrical narrative poems; Fidelito, born in the Philippines, comes to United States. Death of father. Coming of age told through attempt to fly. 3 parts.


Poetry. Lover’s death and author’s impending death during the AIDS epidemic.


Dyer trying to write about Lawrence. Living abroad, travels to his hometown and other places, gets distracted. Portrait of the neurotic writer’s mind. Looking up at himself writing in a window in Paris.


Story of a NJ girl from an immigrant family (2 orphans) who travels to Paris. Stays in a hostel owned by Miss Havisham. Falls in love with a dying boy. Leaves him to go home.


Capitalism comes to Romania; octogenarian love triangle, satirical fairytale.


Short story collection set in NY, Puerto Rican diaspora, with some recurring narrators and characters. Story from the perspective of an abuser.


Zuihitsu book written in the months following Hahn’s mother’s sudden death.


Possible stigmata; omniscient POV; set in nunnery; utilizes signage, titles, proper names of Masses, and letters within the text. 3 parts? Moves forward in time at novel’s end.


Disjointed, non-narrative autobiography. Connected through loose refrain and form repetition.


“The Most Girl Part of You”: boy whose mother commits suicide, sews girls name into his thumb, joking as foreplay. In the Tub (Video), In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried (dying friend).


Dysfunctional social worker, doomsday libertarian, little boy raised beyond society’s reach.


Poetry. Sitting alone at the kitchen table at night.


Semi-autobiographical novel. Educated mixed-race protagonist, Helga Crane tries to find a place where she belongs. Ultimately trapped by marriage/family. Set in: Black Southern University, Harlem, Copenhagen, rural, religious Deep South.


Short story collection. Girl serves as matchmaker for best friend in Japan, whose father is a beleaguered statesman failing at disaster relief. Story predicts future.


Physicist from a utopia founded on communal ideals (no pay, no ownership, no possessive pronouns, etc.) visits the motherland to work on a theory of time. Becomes embroiled in the revolution taking place. Returns home, but bring someone from a third world with.


Lyric memoir exploring the discovery of a lost identity through dance, travel, and sexual encounters.


Collage novel. Trip back to the Philippines. Missed connections, displacement. Postcards, first person, 3rd, etc.


Poetry. Heartbreak, travel, sex, love, cross-cultural borders and boundaries.


Semi-satirical nautical slave narrative.

YA; young Nepalese girl sold into sex slavery in India; short, titled sections; some poetic line breaks; problematic 1st person POV


Community within a community, ostracized by de facto segregation. Friendship between two women disrupted when one adheres to prescribed role that the other rejects. Crazy wise man. Heavy symbolism deftly deployed. Humor, absurdity, playfulness, mixed with extreme violence and despair. Interesting handling of a long time span.


Extended, stream-of-consciousness (but circular logic) treatise on running and the writing life.


Storyteller (elephant hanged), The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game (mother who attempts suicide, father who learns dissatisfaction in life). Didn’t finish.


Lyrical novel inspired by historical events. Politician abandons love interest in a sinking car. Cyclical but maybe overly graphic. Girl becomes an archetype rather than an individual.


Aftermath of the Holocaust. Mourning. Set in Miami. Turning the retirement narrative on its head.


Simultaneously too stylized and too high concept. Avoid quirky token characters without origin stories, as they engender stereotype.


Biography of the relationship between Ann Patchett and Lucy Grealy. Insight into the writing life and the pitfalls of insecurity and addiction.


Poetry, found. Assembled pieces of autobiographies to create the story of the Hollywood bound with shifting race, gender, experience, etc.


Prescriptive reading for various elements of writing. Time conspicuously absent, says Manette.


Abandoned young girls whose absent Aunt returns to their small town home to care for them when their mother disappears. Didn’t finish.


“Victory Lap,” about the two preteens in suburbia, one of whom saves the other from a kidnapping and nearly kills the perpetrator. Making the normal strange.


King Lear set on Iowa farmland. Domineering and sexually abusive father. Feud and loss of farm. Setting detailed, evocative, and integral to the novel’s world.

Gay NM poet from Cruces. Colloquial and narrative. Explores border as a place and identity.


Autobiography, prose collage. Sexual becoming, alcoholism, loss and recovery. Power of audience; Written for her daughters.


Lyric essay. Story of becoming, sexuality. Beautiful and incredibly dense. Wade visited Maureen’s class and was extremely approachable and bright. At FIU.


Retrospective child narrator; Sheriff father, powerful grandfather, doctor uncle raping women on the reservation. Loyalty, guilt, culpability, community.


Shifting omniscience accesses unlikable characters in sympathetic moments, creating empathy. Nontraditional story arc. Anticlimactic ending. Explosion that could have been. (Fire by the ammunition stores. Vietnam from the barracks.)


Notes to self. Very thoughtful, stream of consciousness. Woolf is deeply affected by criticism and very harsh on herself.

Story of one woman’s day, life and death. Modernism, stream of consciousness style.

**Graphic Novels**


Black and white, heavy-lined drawing style. Autobiographical. Story of family from the POV of an epileptic child’s older brother.


Beautifully illustrated adaptation of the epic poem.


Lovecraft stories adapted by a variety of authors and illustrators in a range of graphic styles.


Chimpanzee soldiers (medical experiment) take in an abandoned U.S. soldier in the thick of the Vietnam war.


Pride of lions escaped from the Baghdad zoo search for food and face enemies in the city. Eventually killed by U.S. army. Based on a true story. Brutal violent (rape) and terribly sad.