

**Can It Really Be Taught?
Resisting Lore in Creative
Writing Pedagogy**

Edited by

KELLY RITTER AND STEPHANIE VANDERSLICE

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Charming Tyrants and Faceless Facilitators

The Lore of Teaching Identities in Creative Writing

By Mary Ann Cain

For Lil, Judy, Judith, Steve, Toni, and (always) George

“[A] counterstory [is] a narrative that takes up a shared but
oppressive understanding of who someone is and sets out to shift it.”

—Hilde Lindemann Nelson,

Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair (69).

I already had a Master’s degree in Creative Writing but was on a quest for a teacher, one who wrote the way I wanted to write, who told the kinds of truths I was committed to, who had the power and prestige I secretly longed for. Yet I didn’t claim to be on a quest. Instead, I said that I “just wanted time to write” and “needed some time out” from the eight-to-five university civil service jobs I’d held since finishing my degree.

What I really wanted was a Mentor. Not a pragmatic, “showing-the-ropes” kind to guide me on how to publish my work, shine my reputation, and attract favorable attention and reviews. All that would be a bonus, but that was not the object of my quest. Instead, I wanted someone to help explain me to myself. That is, someone who could read my work and say, “Here’s what I think you’re trying to do,” and then suggest ways to do it better—or do something else. At that time, working on my writing and working on myself was more or less the same thing to me. I wanted a Mentor who understood that, who understood what I was up to and could show me how to keep going. Two years out of graduate school, I didn’t think I could keep going on my own. Like hot house flowers that lose their luster once transported to a less temperate climate, I found it difficult to sustain a writing life outside academia.

The writing teachers I'd had in the past, from high school through my M.A., hadn't been Mentors. Maybe they weren't able to be (they were all white, middle-aged men, with the exception of one female graduate teaching assistant, who went on for a Ph.D. and later committed suicide, and a visiting female poetry instructor who left the university after a year); or maybe they didn't think of teaching as mentoring. Instead, they offered "objective" readings of my work, uninfluenced by my intentions or desires. I had learned the Intentional Fallacy as part of my training in literary criticism, so at least I knew they had reasons to teach this way. They didn't ask me what I had in mind, and it didn't occur to me to tell them.

Perhaps it was this objectification of my work/myself that had stirred my post-Master's desire for the opposite: not to see my work/myself through a stranger's eyes (making me even more of a stranger to my work/myself than I already was) but through the eyes of a familiar. If my true abilities and talents were finally "seen" by the "right" person (i.e. Mentor), I would be able to live the writer's life I had often imagined, one less governed by 8 to 5, turning the work on and off on a predetermined schedule, and more by a continual romance with words, images, and ideas.

At that time Famous Author, whose star was rising quickly on the national scene, was the only living writer I knew whose work had claimed my unquestioned respect and admiration. Perhaps one reason I felt my teachers had failed me was because their work had seemed lesser in my eyes: not daring nor righteous enough, with one foot in the lyrical heavens or one in the humus of common ground, but not both at the same time. In contrast, even before Famous Author's star had risen, Famous Author's work was already mythic to me. It didn't hurt that Famous Author lived in the East but was from the Midwest. I, too, was from the Midwest, but was currently living in the West, a place familiar from family vacations and family roots, the setting of my boyfriend-later-husband's boyhood dreams. But I still dreamed of going East, home to the intelligensia, to artists and writers who were otherwise just names on bookstore shelves.

This quest still possessed me when I applied to the doctoral program at Eastern University, where Famous Author held an Endowed Chair. Despite cautions and disclaimers from the graduate director in the English department, stating that Famous Author only taught one class per year and that that class was limited to a few select students, and that my acceptance into the doctoral program was no guarantee that I would ever have a class with Famous Author, I was eager to pack up and leave the admittedly fragile security I'd established with my poet husband in the foothills of the Rockies and move us to a more distant view of much older mountains in the East. I rationalized the risks: It was a time-out from the deadening eight-to-five routine; as a fully funded graduate assistant, I would be *paid* to write. So what if I didn't get a class with Famous Author? But deep down I knew that's why I would go, for the chance. My life was being written by a familiar narrative—risking all for the sake of adventure and romance.

* * *

Myths are the stories that write our lives; they are the cultural narratives we live by. To be a writer, then, is to invoke a peculiar hubris, to act as if one is writing the story, and not the other way around. Educated to embrace this hubris, then, I could have hardly imagined that the story I was scripting for myself at the time was destined for unforeseen conflicts. As feminist literary theorist and poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis has noted, quest and romance narratives have been set into social opposition for women since the 19th century, when middle-class women's contributions to the overall economy were constrained to caring for husband, children, and home. In her analysis of British and American literature of this period, Du Plessis observes that the only permissible endings for women's narratives were either the marriage of the woman (thus firmly enfolded her into the existing social order) or death (by virtue of being outside the status quo). Thus, even as I imagined my life as a writer as both a quest and romance narrative, only two possible resolutions existed: forsaking quest in favor of romance (i.e. "marriage" into the existing social order, which I had already discovered could not sustain my life as a writer); or forsaking romance in favor of quest (which amounted to "death" in terms of foregoing a public "face" as a writer, since a women's quest was, literally and figuratively, "impossible" outside social convention). Ultimately, to make this move, I settled upon an uneasy "resolution"; I claimed my quest as a "time out" from my romance with conventional eight-to-five life, the quest reduced to a private deviation from social expectations, just for "myself."

* * *

My husband and I joined the English department at Eastern University as graduate teaching assistants; I was accepted as a fiction writer, he as a poet. Two weeks after we'd settled into our carriage house apartment, we attended the first meeting for teaching assistants. I expected to be told what books I could use, what syllabi to follow, what policies and procedures with which to comply. When I volunteered a comment about how to correct students' papers, I expected to be seen as serious and responsible. Instead, my statement was met with a question: Why do you want to do that? It wasn't a rhetorical question, i.e. Don't do that. It was a real question. Why *did* I want to correct student papers? I'd never seen it as a choice, but rather an inevitability: You teach composition, you mark errors. End of story. In the question, other possibilities asserted themselves. Memories of my own learning surfaced. No one had ever "corrected" my writing as an undergraduate or graduate student. A random error here and there, yes, but not the extended error hunt I was used to enacting as a teaching assistant in the Master's program.

That question was just the beginning of my introduction to critical terms such as "process approach," "critical pedagogy," "student-centered teaching,"

as well as critical and feminist theories that, in their questioning of unspoken assumptions about “the way things were,” helped prompt me to think about my work/myself in different terms. For instance, I could ask why I had come back to school and what I considered to be my work. Theory gave me language for my questions.

One answer to why I had returned to school was my quest for a Mentor. Once I recognized this quest, I started to doubt that this was the story I wanted to live by and for. Did I want to surrender my work/myself to a Mentor? Could I love someone so much as to forego any critical questioning? My current teachers were teaching me how to raise such questions, and the newfound freedom was intoxicating. This critical questioning of my work/myself and of others beckoned as a new quest.

During my second semester, when I was accepted into Famous Author’s class, I had lots of questions about and felt strong resistances to being/ becoming like Famous Author, submitting to the hegemony of name and fame that structured the writing world. Furthermore, my acceptance was immediately complicated because Famous Author’s class had been scheduled at the same time as a class I was already in, Composition Theory. I had already put several demanding weeks’ worth of work into this class and had enjoyed the challenges. Now just because Famous Writer wanted to teach the four-week course of ten “select” students at this time, I was expected to abandon my composition theory course and (most likely) delay my graduation and put myself into debt, all for the honor of four weeks with Famous Author. My quest of risking it all for my longed-for Mentor began to reveal its true perils.

Yet I had already given up so much, risked a steady job, the soul-stirring West, friends, familiarity, to come East. How could I not take this class? I’d always be able to say I had had a class with Famous Author.

But what if Famous Author didn’t match up to my ideal? I hadn’t thought of surrender as a dark side to this romance. What if I gave in and dropped the composition theory class to sign on with Famous Author? What if Famous Author turned out to be not a sympathetic familiar but a Charming Tyrant who insisted on surrender without question?

I had my doubts. I called the graduate director about the schedule. I assumed that Famous Author had neglected to consult students’ schedules before deciding when to meet. The graduate director was sympathetic but doubtful she could be of much help. Famous Author was not a member of the department; obligations to students were Famous Author’s call. I then called Famous Author’s administrative assistant to explain my dilemma.

“Just drop the other class,” she said. As if this was obvious.

I hung up. Famous Author was looking more and more like a Tyrant, and not even a charming one. My critical questioning kicked into gear: Why does everyone assume I should risk so much just to take this class? Even if I did see the irony (I’m not sure that I did then), it didn’t matter. I was in the grips of

the quest story that had scripted my life. My choices seemed limited: Either surrender to Famous Author's demands (the romance story resolved) or continue the critical questioning as my new quest (ending in the death of my public "face" as a writer).

A day or two later my phone rang.

"Hello, Mary Ann Cain?"

"Yes."

"This is Famous Author."

Silence. Fear and panic swarmed my thoughts.

"I understand you have a scheduling problem."

Of course, *I* have the problem, I thought. I *am* the problem. I was afraid to speak, afraid that, in my anger over being subjected to the tyranny of surrender, I would say something I might later regret. At the same time I was also ashamed yet pleased to be the "problem child." I had garnered Famous Author's attention, at least for the moment.

"Yes, I do. Your course was scheduled after I had already begun another graduate class." I politely used the passive voice, so as not to directly accuse Famous Author of insensitivity.

"My assistant was doing her best to accommodate my schedule. Unfortunately, it's too late to change the day and time."

Now the blame shifted to the assistant. Why hadn't she looked at the *students'* schedules? I was willing to let the assistant take the fall, since Famous Author did not offer to take responsibility. Wasn't that the assistant's job? I was willing to think so.

The romance story told me that I had to surrender, fully and without question, to the Mentor. The Mentor (and in turn, my work/myself) must be the one and only love in my life. It was all or nothing.

But in fact, this was not true any more, if it ever had been. I had other loves, including the comp theory and pedagogy classes where I was learning to question cultural narratives just like this one.

I decided to take the risk of saying this to Famous Author because I no longer believed I could work in total surrender, no matter how charming a tyrant my potential Mentor might be.

"It's just that I'm very involved in my other class right now," I began. "I've put a lot of time and effort into it, and I really don't want to give it up." There, I'd said it: *You're not the one and only*. Now I was the Problem Child par excellence. At least this was a story I was familiar with.

"What would you like to do?" Famous Author asked me. Me! I hadn't expected this. The romance story demanded I choose one love or the other. I had to think fast.

"Maybe I could attend both classes. I could come to your class for the first half and then go to the other for the second." I had no idea what my comp the-

ory professor would say about this, but I went on the hunch that he'd approve. Being in Famous Author's class was an honor that he was unlikely to dismiss.

"I can meet with you for a half an hour before each class in my office," Famous Author offered.

The prospect of sitting alone with Famous Author panicked me. What on earth would we talk about? I tried to imagine a conversation. When I couldn't, I started to doubt Famous Author's intentions. Was Famous Author just trying to placate Problem Child? Would Famous Author resent me for taking up precious time?

"I guess that depends. Are you going to hate me?" I was trying to make a joke, but it sounded more insecure than funny.

Famous Author laughed. Knowingly, I thought, reverting back to the image of Tyrant for a moment. "I don't resent it," Famous Author replied.

Could it be that Famous Author actually did feel some responsibility toward me as a student? Despite my fears of entering into such a conversation, I felt relieved. I had not been forced to surrender to a Charming Tyrant. I had surprised myself in this conversation, and so perhaps I could again, in person.

Several years later, I am telling a version of this story to my friend, a faculty member at Eastern University where I had attended. She was never my teacher, officially, but we sometimes talked about writing, and on occasion, she offered advice that I welcomed and found important. I am now Associate Professor at Midwestern University, a commuter campus for mostly local students. We are talking in front of a conference hotel in the Eastern city where I went to Eastern University, waiting for a cab to take us to a restaurant. My husband and I are here for the writers' conference that our friend has organized.

"That's the problem with the star system," I say. "You're forced to make these horrible choices. The students deserve more."

I go on to say how glad I am that Eastern University did not (except for Famous Author and the Famous Authors Reading Series) subject students to a star system, how hard I, as a teacher, work to be more of a Faceless Facilitator and less of a Charming Tyrant. Then the phrase, "how hard I work" brings on a sudden drain in energy, as if a plug has been pulled. I picture faceless students with crossed arms, a sign of their resistance to my "invitations" to work collaboratively, to write and revise with each other (and me) as readers and respondents.

"But you took the class with Famous Author because you wanted to know what Famous Author had to say," my friend replies.

I tell myself, I've rewritten that master narrative. I no longer want to become Famous Author. No Charming Tyrant, no matter how enigmatic or influential, was worth giving up critical questioning.

Sullen, anonymous student faces float before me, ghostly quiet in the midst of the car horns and squealing brakes in Eastern City. My students still clung to the Charming Tyrant myth; my work/myself was to show them how

to resist that story with their own counterstories. By being a Faceless Facilitator, I could assist in making their faces, voices, words more familiar to them, just as I had wanted to know my own work/myself more intimately. But standing out there in the cold, in a setting both familiar yet strange—once a resident, now a tourist in a downtown hotel of Eastern City—I felt the truth of my friend’s statement. Whether or not my students still wanted a Charming Tyrant, I couldn’t know for certain, but my friend’s words had prompted my recognition that I, in my facelessness, had actually become a Not-So-Charming Tyrant to them.

* * *

In *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*, Katharine Haake writes, “In the beginning I [located] one fundamental schism between writer-artists and writer-(artist) teachers. I thought of the former sometimes as mini-Shakespeares, and of the latter as dedicated worker-bee types” (4). Haake goes on to describe the tensions she felt when her own “worker-bee” identity was shaken as a new colleague who taught radical poetics in a “prescriptive” way captured the “attention and affection of her students” (5). This tension not only made Haake jealous, but left her feeling unsettled and anxious about her jealousy.

After eight years of teaching, I was struggling within these very contradictions. In embracing the critical questioning quest, I had sought to critique the figure of the Charming Tyrant (in other words, the mini-Shakespeares that writers were supposed to want to become) that had so powerfully shaped my choices as a woman writer. But to continue this quest, I had to sacrifice my place in the conventional social order of the writing world, to give up my public “face” and become a “worker bee.” Like Haake, I thought this sacrifice was important for my students so that they would not suffer the same either/or choices that I had in becoming a writer. What I didn’t realize in becoming a “worker bee” or, in other words, a Faceless Facilitator, following the kind of quest written by male teachers such as Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers* and Ira Shor in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, was that I had not changed the ending of the woman’s quest story. I was “dead” to the social order that my students lived within.

* * *

My memories of Famous Author’s class include little about the other students, of whom I can name only three. I do not recall what they said about my work or what I may have offered about theirs. I do remember that Famous Author did not allow us to bring copies or read other students’ work in advance. Famous Author insisted that we use our ears rather than our eyes to take in the work. I remember how difficult I found this and yet how valuable. I remember Famous Author being called away during the first class by administrators in suits, bearing armloads of long-stemmed red roses, a tribute to

Famous Author's recent Pulitzer Prize, and how Famous Author, after a polite but brief chat, reentered the classroom, laid the roses aside, and picked up where she had left off. I remember Famous Author talking about control and surrender to the work, comparing the writer to the director of a play, dealing with characters who, like actors, had their own ideas about how the story should go, but who ultimately had to answer to the writer as the one in charge of the script. I remember advice about agents and editors, and how to market a novel. I remember sitting in Famous Author's well-appointed inner office, in an upholstered chair, facing the mahogany carved desk and wing-backed chair Famous Author sat in, eavesdropping on a long-distance telephone conversation Famous Author was having with another, equally Famous Author. I remember feeling both irritated at having my precious half-hour eaten up by this phone call and utterly fascinated by the conversation, especially when Famous Author called the other Famous Author "girl" and used a nickname that indicated friendship of more than a professional kind. I remember when the day came for Famous Author to spend an hour with me to discuss my novel manuscript, the red marks I swore I'd never make on any student paper ever again slashed across inelegant sentences and imprecise descriptions. I remember my inability to take notes, fearful I'd seem somehow disrespectful but also wanting to use my ears more than my eyes for a change. Later, I remember sitting in the institutionally bland cafeteria of Eastern University, watching my blue ink blur into grey pools as tears splashed onto the notes I was writing. I remember the pain of hearing how Famous Author had so thoroughly entered my story, telling of its possibilities, possibilities which also spoke of its current failures. I remember thinking, I love this story she is imagining with me, but I don't have the guts to write it.

* * *

And as the cab pulls up to the wind-whipped entry of the conference hotel, and the doorman in his fancy epauletted coat snaps the cab door open, I know it's no accident that my students are faceless in my fears.

"I thought that's what I wanted," I say, once settled into the cab next to my friend.

Beyond the shadows of the hotel's overhanging roof, the usually grungy Eastern City sparkles in spring sunshine. All I can think about is, after eight years of teaching, writing, going up for tenure and promotion, and now nearly finished with my first sabbatical, how tired I am, how much a blur my work/myself have become. If my students are faceless, it's because I've become faceless to myself. Perhaps the Faceless Facilitator I'd championed as the counterstory to the Charming Tyrant was just the flip side to Famous Author's story of control and surrender. True, I did not want to be the object of my students' unquestioned reverence and slavish devotion. And yet if I were not to remain "dead" to the social order that my students lived by and though, I needed their respect and recognition—a Face, even if it wasn't one like Famous Author.

Famous Author had extended respect to me not by demanding I become another Famous Author but by retelling my story through a voice both intimate in its attention and yet strange in the powerful imagination that extended what I had already told. Nonetheless, in order to hear Famous Author's words as respectful and not simply another kind of tyranny, I had had to question the story that had brought me to Famous Author in the first place.

"But it scared me to death," I conclude. The cab jerks forward into hilly streets, climbing up out of the Hudson River valley towards the shining skyline of the state capital building ahead.

I can recall nothing in my memories of Famous Author's class that would have enabled such a questioning. Only in my courses on pedagogy, composition and rhetorical theory, critical theory, and feminist praxis did I develop a critical attitude toward the dominant stories that shaped my work/myself as a writer. But I also see how the counterstory of Faceless Facilitator had imposed its own tyranny on me and, in turn, my students, by insisting that I give "my power" as an authority figure "over" to students. No doubt some students read this move as disrespectful, since I still ultimately exercised the power of grading, curriculum, and deadlines. "Giving power" in a sense was a way of concealing power more thoroughly except, perhaps, to students most like myself—white, middle-class, female. And it was disrespectful to myself, hiding the fact that I had a "face," i.e. a viewpoint, and was exercising it in the ways I ran the class. Furthermore, white male students often challenged me for the contradictions they no doubt perceived, between Faceless Facilitator-cum-mother-nurturer and Not-So-Charming Tyrant who "dictated" collaboration and collective work. Even though I wrote, published my work, faced writing problems and challenges, I rarely discussed them, opting to focus more on a "student-centered" classroom, when the truth was that I was afraid of showing who I really was, for fear of being labeled, anything from "artsy-fartsy" to "femi-nazi" to "not a real writer" to "spaced out" to "unintelligent" to "crazy." Better not to show a face than risk being labeled.

Of course, the labels were there no matter what. The master narrative had written this ending of facelessness for me—a white middle class woman of the 20th century, on a quest for love and adventure.

* * *

Is it possible to write beyond the contradictions of romance versus quest in women's stories/lives? Can women write/live a story that does not suppress one story in favor of the other? Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers this possibility: "A critique of the ideologies implied in plots always involves some critical response to the rules of the world, since narrative structures are saturated in these rules. Such a critique can involve the visualization of the world as it could be" (179).

I think of Kate Haake and what she has already done to write beyond the ending of the master narratives of writing with her students/herself.

Kate,

Rachel Blau DuPlessis offers hope in a new kind of fiction in which a “collective protagonist . . . replace[s] individual heroes or sealed couples with groups, which have a sense of purpose and identity, and whose growth occurs in mutual collaboration” (179). I see your work and you in this way, as part of a struggle I face within and against my students, within and against the hegemony of the writing world, as something to which I must navigate through both control and surrender. Toi Derricote tells our counterstory, a future written beyond the ending, this way:

Combining our voices here, finding this harmony of purpose—in spite of vast and excruciating separations between us (my primal “self” and “other”)—is a revision of the creative act itself, not as an individual attainment but a dialogue of diverse voices, whose held complexities *are* resolution—perhaps even healing—are form. (22)

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