DISCIPLINE AND PUBLISH: CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS, LITERARY MARKETS, AND THE SHORT STORY RENAISSANCE

by

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Discipline and Publish: Creative Writing Programs, Literary Markets, and the Short Story Renaissance

Abstract

By

ROBERT WELLING ADDINGTON

This dissertation examines the aesthetic revival of the short story in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Traditionally, the short story, most often published in the pages of mass-market weeklies such as The Saturday Evening Post, was understood as a primarily commercial genre written for money, not status. The growth of creative writing programs in postwar America offered a new institutional home for literary production and presented favorable circumstances for the short story’s revival: the brevity of the short story made it an ideal genre of fiction for study and composition in writing workshops, while the increase in the number of university-housed journals provided writers venues in which to publish and accrue prestige. By removing the short story from its position as a commercial genre, creative writing programs reframed the value of the short story and emphasized its aesthetic possibilities.

Creative writing programs helped create a renaissance of interest in the short story form that I trace through the examples of four figures: John Cheever, Gordon Lish, Lorrie Moore, and Lee Abbott. Cheever’s omnibus, The Stories of John Cheever (1978), helped reveal the commercial market for short story collections and showed that writers could
obtain literary recognition by writing in the genre. Gordon Lish’s editing of Raymond Carver’s stories, in which he applied his experimental literary tastes to Carver’s traditionally realist stories, created a new aesthetic for the short story—literary minimalism—that emphasized sentence-level stylics rather than details and characterization. Lorrie Moore’s first collection, *Self-Help* (1985), relates a tension found in creative writing workshops between self-expression and disciplined writing to the sense of a self in need of help found in self-help guides. That relation plays out in the pursuit of an aesthetic self—a self in an act of artistic creation—that Moore offers as an ideal mode for living a satisfying life. Lee Abbott serves as representational figure for what it means to be a working writer in the university. While never achieving commercial success, Abbott has found acclaim within creative writing programs, and his career reflects the possibilities available to academic writers.
Introduction

I.

Lamenting the lack of short story collections in 1964, the writer, editor, scholar, and short story advocate William Peden acknowledged “the short story in book form has with only occasional exceptions been a dismal financial failure and for decades book publishers were reluctant to publish collections of short stories by individual authors” (2). The short story, long a staple of mass circulation periodicals, foundered in a commercial book trade that privileged novels over their shorter siblings. By 1983, expectations had shifted, as Alfred A. Knopf’s editor-in-chief Robert Gottlieb revealed to the New York Times, noting, “Twenty years ago the conventional wisdom held that the publisher should shudder when an author said, ‘You’ve done three of my novels. Now I want a collection of stories.’ That is no longer the case” (Applebaum 35). The success of several collections, especially works by John Cheever and Raymond Carver published by Knopf, suggested that the literary marketplace was more congenial to short stories than it traditionally had been.

The shifting of commercial expectations for short story collections between the 1960s and 1980s is significant for it signals a greater reevaluation of the genre. This project focuses on that reevaluation: that short story collections came to sell well in the 1980s is no accident, but it is also only one aspect of a greater cultural shift that revived interest in the short story form. The short story, I argue, benefitted from the rise of creative writing programs that created new contexts, both market and institutional, for its production and dissemination and, consequently, revived interest in the short story form.

To assert that there was a revival of interest in the short story presupposes that the
short story had been to some extent marginalized in the field of literary production. From the 1880s to the 1950s, the short story was a commercially successful form, but that commercial success, if anything, led to a critical devaluation of the genre in general. Peden offers a reason for this devaluation, namely, that short stories appeared primarily in mass circulation magazines aimed at a general readership such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *McClure’s*. An association developed between the short story and their venues, such that “the short story became a piece of literary merchandise written to conform to the unsophisticated tastes of a rapidly expanding middle-class reading public”; stories conformed to editorial standards set by “publishers of magazines who were anxious to please as many subscribers as possible, and to alienate or offend a minimum number of customers” (3). In Peden’s synopsis, the short story’s reputation suffered by the genre’s presence in commercial venues with unsophisticated editorial standards. The short story was understood commodity, not an expression of artistry. Still, mass circulation magazines provided a major, and financially lucrative, forum for publishing short stories, and rehearsing their history briefly illuminates the contexts that help explain the importance of the short story’s reevaluation.

The short story found a home in periodicals for the obvious reason that their length situated well in a magazine format. The first boom in American literary periodicals occurred in the 1850s with the founding of *Harper’s [New Monthly] Magazine* (1850) and the *Atlantic Monthly* (1857) and continued in subsequent decades with the emergence of *The Century* (1881) and *Scribner’s Magazine* (1886). These monthlies served as the house journals of publishers that used their pages to market authors under contract (Ohmann “Diverging Paths” 103). The monthlies, which rarely made money on their
own, published excerpts and serials of novels and memoirs with the hope that readers would buy the full editions of such works (104). By the 1890s, magazines such as *McClure’s* began publishing fiction with the goal to sell magazines rather than books. *Ladies’ Home Journal* (1883) followed suit, but the stories it published under the editorship of Edward Bok were notable for their social and aesthetic conservatism. While *McClure’s*, under the editorship of S.S. McClure, established itself as a hotbed of then in vogue literary realism, Bok, according to Richard Ohmann, “sought to insure that the fiction pages of the *Journal* would not unsettle the complacency of its readers or grate against the high moral tone of its advice and crusades” (*Selling* 291). The stories in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* aimed primarily to entertain, to present an easy read that would not trouble the reader.

The formula Bok hit upon proved a success. While most nineteenth century magazines would have prided themselves upon a circulation of 100-200,000 copies, by 1900 *Ladies’ Home Journal* could boast a circulation run of 1,000,000 (Stevick 7). *Ladies’ Home Journal*’s success helped reveal the size of the market for periodicals with a fiction bent, and the turn of the century saw an explosion of magazines that featured short stories. Many of these magazines, such as *The Saturday Evening Post* (1897) and *Collier’s* (1888), published on a weekly schedule, and proved immensely popular enterprises. *The Saturday Evening Post* would emerge as the most significant of the weeklies with a circulation run of nearly 3,000,000 copies for each issue in 1930 (Reed 153). Bolstered by both high circulation rates and tremendous advertising revenues,¹ *The Post* could pay handsomely for content. In 1931, for instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald earned $18,000 for five stories in the *Post* while his novels’ royalties netted him only $439.07
While the mass circulation weeklies paid well enough to lure notable writers such as Fitzgerald to their pages, they failed to obtain the respect of literary critics: using the Best American Short Stories collections published between 1940 and 1963 as his mark of literary quality, Peden found that of the 625 stories reprinted in the anthology, only thirty-nine originally appeared in mass circulation magazines (The New Yorker notably notwithstanding) (19).

Issues of literary quality aside, the mass circulation weeklies dominated the short story landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. This period, especially the 1920s and 1930s, formed something of a Golden Age for magazine publishing and the short story prospered as a popular genre for readers. The 1950s witnessed a major decline in such venues. Postwar prosperity brought with it a major rise in overhead for magazine publishers, with printing costs rising by forty-four percent, paper by thirty-one percent, and postage—an important cost for magazines that relied upon subscriptions—rising by eighty-nine percent (Reed 213). The growth of television negatively affected the commercial weeklies as well. While television is often thought of as diverting the attention of readers by presenting a new media for entertainment, the real effect television had on magazines was on advertising revenue. Advertising firms, grasping the potential for television marketing, diverted funds from magazines to networks (216). The predominant business model for magazines had been to always increase circulation rates, but with advertising revenues failing to keep up with the rise in production costs, magazines, even those with large circulation rates such as Collier’s, folded (Abrahmson 110). By 1970s, of the nine major mass circulation weeklies, only Ladies’ Home Journal, Reader’s Digest and Time remained. The end of the Golden Age of magazine weeklies
closed the primary commercial market for short stories, but by this time, the short story
had found a new institution to support it—university-housed creative writing programs.

The short story, we will see, prospered in creative writing programs, and, because of
the new institutional contexts creative writing programs brought, shed its status as a
commodity object and came to be understood as a primarily aesthetic enterprise. In
asserting a reappraisal of the aesthetic value of short stories, I mean not to imply that all
short stories published during the age of mass weeklies (or even in the weeklies
themselves) lacked aesthetic value. Eminent American modernist writers such as F. Scott
Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner all produced short stories that met
high literary standards. That said, those writers’ reputations were principally derived
from their novels and the critical prejudice against short stories largely developed in
comparison to the novel. If short stories were primarily understood as a commodity, the
novel was understood as an art. The short story’s most useful purpose in a literary
culture committed to the novel was as training for writers, making it, according to Peden,
“the particular province of the young writer, the proving ground, as it were, between
apprenticeship and mastery” (8), between, in other words, the novice and the novelist.

II.

The cultural valuation of the novel over the short story is often, and somewhat
surprisingly, replicated in short story scholarship. Charles E. May, whose seminal
anthology, *Short Story Theories* (1976), largely founded short story studies, has argued
that although “the short story, pioneered by Poe in the early nineteenth century, is often
said to be a uniquely American invention, few American writers have ever been able to
make a decent living from the form” (“The American Short Story” 299). Perhaps worse,
May finds that most people “who do read fiction would rather read novels than stories. This has always been the case” (299). While acknowledging that occasionally a short story such as Raymond Carver can “arrive on the scene at the just the right time, with just the right voice and vision, to reignite interest in the form,” May, writing in 2012, appears dejected about the current state of short story writing (300). Carver initiated such a “resurgence of interest in the short story that critics claimed that the form had experienced a ‘renaissance.’ But after the death of Carver and the denigration of minimalism by critics, the short story once more languished in the shadow of the novel” (300). With the commercial market for short stories closing again, May implies that the short story itself has faded back to the margins of literary production.

Ironically, the short story remains, even post-Carver, a major form of literary production, at least in creative writing programs. May’s apparent equation of commercial success with literary importance is even more problematic given the short story’s pre-Renaissance history as a commercially successful though often trivialized genre. May’s work, like much of short story studies, understands the short story primarily through its relationship to the novel—it often languishes “in the shadow of the novel.” To assert the short story’s importance in relation to the novel, scholars have sought to establish the uniqueness of the short story form, often through strategies that seek to define the genre as distinct from its larger brethren.

While much of what appears in May’s *Short Story Theories* (1976), *New Short Story Theories* (1994), and Susan Lohofer’s collection, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads* (1989) offer definitions that express the distinctiveness of the short story, little consensus is achieved. Alan A. Pasco’s contribution to *New Short Story Theories*, “On Defining the
Short Story,” assesses much of the debate surrounding short story definitions and the lack of consensus. Pasco writes, “Compared to the novel, the short story has had remarkably little criticism devoted to it, and what theory that exists reveals few definitive statements about its nature” (113). Pasco offers a definition, a short story is “a short, literary prose fiction” (italics in original 118), that is vague enough to encompass many examples of the form. Pasco’s definition becomes problematic when he states that by literary he means “that the creation must be artistically fashioned, with the apparent intention of making something beautiful” (121), an explanation that defines the genre by intentionality as much as by form. Nevertheless, a short story’s simplest definition may well be a “short prose fiction,” but debate continues to wage on. For instance, the May 2012 issue of Narrative focused on the short story begins with a introduction by Per Winther titled “What IS the Short Story: Problems of Definition” that rehearses the various methodologies employed to define the short story genre.

While I understand the critical need to define the short story, it is a form that, like the novel, is difficult to describe in an encompassing mode since it undergoes innovations that challenge any highly structured generic definition—a grand unified theory of the short story seems impossible to assert. Winther notes that short story theorists such as Mary Louise Pratt and Norman Friedman have moved beyond essentialist definitions of short stories and instead of “insisting on differences in kind in genre definitions as the [short story] essentialists have continuously done,” they look for “differences in degree” between short stories and other forms (140). Whether essentialist or non-essentialist, such definitional strategies work to differentiate the short story from the novel in order to assert a distinctiveness—and, consequently, importance—to the genre. Short story
scholarship often aims at proselytizing for the form. As May writes in reflection about the original edition of *Short Story Theories*, the collection “was created to stimulate debate about the short story as a genre” (xv), implying that while the short story was a worthy object of scholarly study, debates about the genre had grown moribund by the mid-1970s.

In asserting a formal distinctiveness to the short story, short story studies has performed some perhaps important work: the novel has dominated discussion in English scholarship as it has dominated the literary market. That said, much of short story scholarship evokes a sense of inferiority about the short story that to some extent mimics the popular view of short stories amongst writers and critics. Such inferiority is, however, a social, rather than aesthetic, phenomenon. The short story is, by definition, short, but so is the lyric poem, and few writers or literary observers today position the lyric against the epic to declare the lyric a less valuable form even if the epic may well be a more impressive achievement. The short story’s perceived inferiority, whether as an art object or in its reception, is the result of social judgments that position the short story as a less valuable genre than the novel. Such a judgment is not inevitable, fixed, or universal—it is generated through certain institutional realities that function to create hierarchies of value.

In her brief study of high modernist short stories and prestige, Suzanne Ferguson observes that beyond questions of length, production and subject matter, there are two factors we should consider when grappling with the nebulous concept of generic prestige: “aesthetic complexity and refinement, and the elusive spirit of the times” (179). Ferguson asserts that most short story scholarship has focused on aesthetics, seeking the “turning point at which the short story became ‘modern,’ and somehow ‘better’ than it had been,”
but, as she notes, short stories have always been an aesthetically minded genre. For Ferguson, the more interesting pursuit is reflecting on the short story’s relationship to the “elusive spirit of the times,” the cultural shifts among readers that make them more amenable to short stories. She wishes to locate “what people of upper and middle classes of a particular time and place are interested in, what, as a group they are concerned about, and what they require from art to help them contemplate and feel” (179). Thus, Ferguson argues, the rise of the short story in the early decades of the twentieth century grew out of “the modern, highbrow audience’s acceptance of fragmentation as an accurate model of the world” (191); the modern short story, epitomized by James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, appealed to an audience already demonstrating the traits that would come to be associated with high modernism.

Ferguson’s conclusions, presented here somewhat reductively, are perhaps unsatisfying as any short study seeking “the elusive spirit of the times” would likely be. That said, her insight that prestige is a matter of both aesthetic and sociological concerns offers a means to expand upon the merely formal analysis that much short story scholarship engages in. The distinctiveness of short stories goes beyond their formal elements, and to appreciate this distinctiveness requires a consideration of more than aesthetic form. Ferguson’s “spirit of the times” is an inexact expression, but her inquiry is rooted in a desire to understand literature from a sociological perspective.

In the years since Ferguson’s 1989 study, scholars have rejuvenated sociological approaches to literature. James E. English assesses the mission of a new sociology of literature as providing “an account of literary texts and practices by reference to the social forces of their production, the social meanings of their formal particulars, and the social
effects of their circulation and reception” (viii). Scholars working in the new sociology of literature, which is more a persuasion or set of similar concerns than a singular (or deliberate) mode of scholarship, have approached literary studies through various focuses including book history, studies of literary value, and histories the English discipline itself. While methodically diverse, such approaches are united by their extra-textual understanding of literature: they all establish and explore the contexts for literary production and evaluation. Taken together, they provide a rich set of strategies that can illuminate the institutional conditions that led to a change in the short story’s prestige.

Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of art provides a model for understanding literary value and prestige. Bourdieu divides society into various fields, which are structured and contested spaces of social interaction. That interaction, for Bourdieu, takes the form of a struggle for various forms of capital, the accumulation of which leads to recognition in a field. Capital takes four primary forms: economic capital, “which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights”; cultural capital, which is “institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications”; social capital, which is “made up of social obligations (‘connections’)” (“Forms of Capital” 47); and symbolic capital, “commonly called prestige, reputation, renown, etc., which is the form in which the different forms of capital are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (“The Social Space” 723). The competition for capital in fields operates in what Bourdieu terms “an economy of practices,” that finds “all practices, including those purporting to be disinterested or gratuitous, and hence non-economic, as economic practices directed toward the maximising of material or symbolic profit” (Outline 183). Capital accumulation, whether
obviously economic (money) or purportedly disinterested (aesthetic value, for instance), functions within fields in a manner similar to, but not reducible to, markets in capitalism: Bourdieu conceives of fields having limited capital resources and the struggle within them is a social struggle to accumulate more than others.

As John Guillory has emphasized, Bourdieu’s use of markets does not reduce his concept of cultural fields to “a reflection of the economic,” for cultural fields have their own specific market logics that generate capital within them (326). Importantly, the various forms of capital are convertible: in certain situations, one’s cultural capital may be converted into economic capital, or vice-versa. That said, Guillory notes that there “is no formula for such conversions, nor can there be” (336); the conversion of capital in and across fields depends upon specific conditions within a given field.

Individuals in fields earn capital through various manners. Cultural capital, the capital that allows for aesthetic judgments, is accumulated through institutions such as schools wherein cultural knowledge and dispositions are inculcated through curricular decisions. Exposure to, for instance, the literary canon, provides an ideal to judge other texts against. For literary writers, perhaps the highest mark of distinction generates from their accumulation of symbolic capital, which determines their prestige amongst other writers in the literary field. Prestige, for writers, reflects various factors: while the winning of awards or receiving of critical praise increases prestige, also significant are the types of literary texts writers produce.

Literary productions, like other works of art, exist as symbolic goods—they are, according to Bourdieu, a “two-faced reality, a commodity and symbolic object” (“The Market” 113). As such, literary productions may create multiple forms of capital for
writers—a strong selling novel generates economic capital, but if that novel were also to win a major prize, such as the National Book Award, the novel would also create symbolic capital for the writer. Bourdieu notes that for symbolic goods “cultural value and their commercial remain relatively independent,” that prestige and sales are not necessarily linked “although the economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration” (113). In general, Bourdieu argues that there are two markets for cultural goods, a field of large-scale cultural production that is aimed at a popular audience, and a restricted field of production—often understood as “art for art’s sake”—that develops “its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors” (115). Bourdieu’s two fields of cultural production help to explain the generation of various forms of capital by symbolic goods: a book by John Grisham aimed at a mass audience will generate great economic revenues, but other writers and critics, particularly those with literary dispositions, will not take Grisham’s writing seriously as an aesthetic object—its symbolic capital will be relatively low. Conversely, an aesthetically complex book of poetry by Ben Lerner will likely garner critical praise and the admiration of fellow poets, but sales in the mass literary market will be minuscule compared to Grisham.

In broadly tracing Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural production and capital generation, we can begin to understand the complexities of the short story’s traditional cultural devaluation in the literary field. From the view of critics and other writers, the short story simply did not merit the attention of a novel: while many examples of short stories written for the restricted field existed—and many novels, perhaps most, were aimed at a
mass market audience—literary novels generated more symbolic capital for their writers in the literary field than short stories did.\textsuperscript{8} Partially, the short story’s status reflected its position in the literary market—short stories in commercial weeklies were viewed as lacking aesthetic value; readers were unlikely to buy collections making publishers reluctant to release them and, consequently, relatively few collections entered the literary market.

Given that Bourdieu’s fields entail a limitation in capital resources, including symbolic capital, the literary field’s devaluation of the short story for the novel may reflect such limitations. For a writer trying to accumulate symbolic capital in order to achieve recognition in the literary field, the investment of time spent writing a novel rather than short stories accords with the logic of the literary field. That presumes, however, that all literary practitioners participate in the same field, and in doing so, threatens to obscure more nuanced dynamics at work.

I contend that the rise of creative writing programs created a new field, or at least a subfield, of literary activity. Creative writing programs created a new market for literary productions differentiated from the commercial market: the growth of literary journals offered new venues for publication distinct from mass circulation periodicals. Literary journals emphasized aesthetic accomplishment; writers were no longer tied to the editorial standards of magazines aimed at mass readership. More significantly, creative writing programs created a new logic for recognition in the field. The accumulation of symbolic capital, we will see, benefits university writers in a manner much differently from writers existing in the commercial market.\textsuperscript{9} The field of academic literary production, while sometimes participating in the larger literary field, accommodates the
short story to a much greater extent than the literary has traditionally done. By altering the market contexts for the short story, creative writing programs allowed for a rejuvenation of the form, one that stressed the short story’s aesthetic possibilities.

The emergence of new markets for the short story created a revival of the short story that I think merits the term “renaissance.” Furthermore, the term “renaissance” is more encompassing than the aesthetically minded terms often employed to discuss short stories emerging from creative writing programs, especially “minimalism” or “dirty realism” and their slightly more derogatory cousins, “K-Mart fiction” or “MFA fiction.” That this period of short stories is often considered aesthetically unified is one of the larger myths surrounding the Short Story Renaissance. There was certainly a group of writers that rose to prominence bearing many similarities. Mark McGurl, collecting such writers under the sobriquet “the citizens of Carver Country,” notes that their stories gained prominence “under the banner of the ordinary, the modest, the minimal, and the real” (279-80). The commercial success of such writers certainly helped to create at least the illusion of aesthetic unification among contemporaneous short story writers and that success likewise proved inspirational to younger writers in the academy as they were progressing through creative writing programs. The influence of Carver and his peers is undeniable and hard to overstate, but short story aesthetics were not as monolithic as they are sometimes made out to be. As we will see in my discussions of Lorrie Moore and Lee Abbott in Chapters 3 and 4, characterizing all short story production under “the modest” or the “minimal” ignores the variety of formal play in short stories of this period.

That the Short Story Renaissance saw an arguably minor genre emerge as an important and even popular one makes it a worthwhile moment to study in American
literary history. The Short Story Renaissance is one aspect of a larger change in literary production brought forth by the rise of creative writing programs in the post-World War II era explored in Mark McGurl’s sweeping study of contemporary literature, *The Program Era* (2009). I will have much more to say about McGurl’s study throughout this project, but for now, I wish to point to one of the limitations of his work: the influence of the literary marketplace on writers. McGurl acknowledges that “the market is everywhere relevant to the story I will tell” especially in that he hopes to “illuminate and appreciate postwar American literature by placing it in this evolving market context” in order to examine how the university functioned to “facilitate and to buffer the writer’s relation to the culture industry and the market culture more broadly” (15). Arguably, McGurl is more interested in the university’s buffer than in the market: he admits to having little to say about the “nitty-gritty of writer-publisher relations” and “even less about such things as the corporate consolidation of the publishing industry” (15). McGurl’s focus is on the academy, and thus largely ignores the “nitty-gritty” of commercial publishing makes sense, if only because it would be beyond the purview of his study. That said, creative writing programs are never fully buffered from the commercial market and, even more important, they have created market-like mechanisms of their own that trade primarily in symbolic, rather than economic, capital. The Short Story Renaissance bridges both commercial and academic markets and in doing so helps to showcase the interplay between university-situated literary production and trade publishing that has become the model for literary success in contemporary America.

My project examines that interplay and delves into the nitty-gritty of writer-publisher relations and the corporate consolidation of the publishing industry in order to explore—
and help delineate—the evolving market contexts McGurl references. In particular, my interest lies in the evolving relationship of writers to the market and the effects of that relationship on their productions. I explore what it means to be a writer during a period in which the institutional pressures—and the institutions in which the activity of writing takes place—have shifted, and how that shift influences their literary output. The major literary beneficiary of the shift from writers depending upon the commercial market to writers being buffered from that market within the academy has been the short story itself. No longer required to aim for the skies by writing commercially successful novels, writers in creative writing programs could choose to concentrate on short stories even if there were no guarantees of economic reward.\footnote{In order to set up the discussions of the writers that serve as the main components of this project, I will explore in what follows the two major institutional contexts for the Short Story Renaissance, creative writing programs and the commercial marketplace. In doing so, my interest lies in not only describing their institutional features, but in their functions that affect writers and their writing. First, I examine the process of disciplining that occurs in the creative writing workshop. Then I turn towards a historical overview of the consolidation of the publishing industry in order highlight the manner in which such changes came to bear upon writers.

III.

As McGurl has argued, the rise of creative writing programs stands as “the most important event in postwar American literary history” (ix). Creative writing programs have, indeed, reshaped the landscape for literary production, and their ubiquity is undeniable. Beginning with the founding of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1936,
aspiring writers have entered the academy seeking to hone their skills and develop their talents under the guidance of established writers that, presumably, may offer insights and corrective suggestions that will shape the student’s writing into an acceptable form for publication. Arguments as to whether or not creative writing programs are an effective or even desirable development continue to wage, but no one can dismiss the popularity of the programs. What began with one small program in Iowa grew outwards, slowly at first but with accumulating momentum that became exponential. By 1975, there were seventy-nine programs in creative writing at the undergraduate and graduate level; by 2010, that number had increased over ten fold to 852 (Onishi “Recognition”). It would be dramatic, but not exaggerated, to suggest that nearly every writer of literary fiction to emerge in the past forty years has encountered some form of institutionalized creative writing programming.

Before the 1970s, the relatively few existent creative writing programs were making their influence felt. Flannery O’Connor had emerged from Iowa fully formed, while writers as varied as Ken Kesey and Wendell Berry had studied under Wallace Stegner at Stanford. The programs had also begun to provide teaching positions for writers with some degree of commercial success: Philip Roth and Kurt Vonnegut both held stints at Iowa. Commercial success aside, graduates of the programs often remained in the academy, gaining jobs as university professors and replicating the Iowa model at schools across the country. The seventy-nine degree granting programs in 1975 reached something of a critical mass; from that moment on, creative writing programs would become the main mode of training for writers in the United States. The sheer amount of literary production present in the academy was almost certain to seep into commercial
markets, and the Short Story Renaissance was the first major indication that this was occurring.

The Short Story Renaissance was unlikely to have transpired without creative writing programs. For one, the short story is the predominant genre in the fiction workshop: the brevity of stories makes them both easier to teach than novels and easier to submit to a workshopping process. Such focus on the short story genre has certain implications to the short story itself—it effectively reinforces the aesthetic possibilities of what was once viewed as a primarily commercial genre—but the focus also means that a greater number of short stories were being written and revised to a publishable quality. It should be no surprise then that the writers who gained popularity during the Short Story Renaissance (writers such as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lorrie Moore, Amy Hempel) were products of academic creative writing programs as both students and teachers. Arguably, their success helped to reinforce not only the appeal of short stories, but the appeal of creative writing programs: such writers could stay in school and concentrate on their writing until the writing achieved a quality that the market would reward without the risk of (largely financial) failure that a direct engagement with the market would entail. Since the vast majority of commercially successful writers of literary fiction of the past thirty years participated in creative writing programs at some degree level in the university, the Short Story Renaissance provides the model for achieving commercial success in the literary arts for subsequent decades, even as the commercial popularity of short story collections has waned. If the rise of creative writing programs is the most important context for understanding contemporary literature, then the Short Story Renaissance is a pivotal moment, a turning point in the
relationship between literary markets and literary production that finds literary production fully embedded in the university.

Creative writing programs have become the de facto mode of apprenticeship for aspiring writers, but the manner in which creative writing programs serve such a function—how they actually work to develop their students—has long been a discussion given more to speculation more than critical exploration. Partially, the lack of rigor in discussing the goals and outcomes of creative writing is the result of many writers general reticence to discuss their writing both out of a quasi-mystical fear that discussing writing impedes the supposed magic of the process, and because writers at times lack a conceptual vocabulary to describe what pedagogical acts they perform in a workshop. The critical principles at work in creative writing have, as Paul Dawson has argued, tended to “remain invisible and undertheorised” (88). In general, creative writing has lacked a metadiscourse about its pedagogical aims and procedures, being content instead to often uncritically follow the model set forth by the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

Since its founding in 1936, largely through the efforts of Norman Foerster, the Iowa Workshop has provided the template for nearly all workshop-based programs, but often overlooked is that Foerster understood the workshop not simply as a set of practices performed in an academic space, but as a legitimate academic discipline. As D.G. Myers notes in his history of creative writing programs, Foerster stressed the disciplinarity of creative writing; in Myers words, creative writing was an “effort of critical understanding conducted within the conditions of literary practice. It was the acquisition of a certain type of knowledge entailed in a certain type of practice” (133). The aim of creative writing was not to produce professional writers, per se, but rather to provide an
alternative means for students to study literature. As Myers details, Foerster used models developed from progressive education theorists such as John Dewey to conceive of a mode of engagement with literature that would essentially allow students to practice literature as an activity. Never intended to replace reading as a primary means to study literature, creative writing would provide a supplemental process based on the principle that to write literarily would reveal insights about literature itself. Arguably, creative writing continues to serve this purpose, especially at the undergraduate, pre-professionalizing level, and such a discussion of that purpose may provide a means to bridge the traditional animosity between the scholarly and creative sides of English departments. That said, the metaphor of the “workshop” employed at Iowa undercuts creative writing as an approach to studying the literary arts and emphasizes literary production as its primary activity. The metaphor of the workshop seeks to align creative writing with professional craft trades—say, furniture making—wherein a group of apprentices learn the techniques of production from a master craftsman.

The prevalence of the word “craft” in creative writing discussions is at once a relic of the discipline’s birth in the 1930s when, as Michael Szalay as argued, writers came to understand writing as a process of labor similar to the work of other laborers (55), but it also contrasts with Romantic conceptions of genius and inspiration. If writing is a craft, it is a learnable activity, and the workshop provides the space for the learning to occur. Joseph Moxley provides a functional description of a typical creative writing workshop: the teacher has a few students distribute manuscripts to classmates; the classmates comment on the manuscripts; the teacher “guides the discussion by asking questions relevant to the manuscript’s strengths and weaknesses”; instruction by the teacher
“regarding the writing craft” emerges from the discussions; copies of the manuscripts with commentary by students and the teacher are returned to the authors so that the authors may revise (xiii). Moxley’s description, while accurate, emphasizes the practice of the workshop but does not establish the pedagogical purpose of creative writing. Although the teacher explicates issues of craft, exactly what is being taught, especially since “craft” is, as Tim Mayers notes, “the most pervasive and ill-defined term within the lore of creative writing” (9). It is, in short, unclear what students should be learning.

The lack of a self-evident disciplinary knowledge in creative writing instruction and the vagaries of what constitutes “craft” find elaboration in Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice’s work on the lore of creative writing, by which they mean institutionally recurrent practices that have become “so deeply embedded” in the discipline that they are “all but invisible to those who teach and write in the world it scaffolds” (xviii). The prevalence of lore, such as the workshop clichés “show, don’t tell” or “write what you know,” is symptomatic of the lack of metadiscourse regarding creative writing pedagogy. Without that metadiscourse, lore itself forms a large amount of the disciplinary knowledge taught in the workshop. Since the upholding of lore has tended to replace critical investigations into pedagogical practices, the passage of lore from teacher to student serves as a default disciplining of the student.

In emphasizing that lore becomes circulated throughout workshops, Ritter and Vanderslice offer a troubling analysis of the practices of creative writing programs. But to the extent that creative writing programs have produced good writing and successful writers (and I think they have), their analysis seems only part of the story. While one of the greatest effects of creative writing programs is that they allow aspiring writers the
time to actually write (and presumably, practice in writing leads to better writing) the practices of the creative writing classroom must also have some positive influence on students that lead to the development of their skills. Creative writing programs are notorious for hedging that influence, though, and often shy away from proclaiming that writing can be taught and instead suggest, as Paul Dawson writes, that talented individuals can only be “nurtured in a sympathetic environment: a community of writers where the practical skills of literary craft can be taught, and where students can become better readers of literature and better critics of their own work” (11). Nurturing, however, is not synonomous with educating, or more appropriately given creative writing’s academic institutionalization, disciplining.

That Dawson points to students becoming better readers and critics is important, for that activity, he argues, serves as the body of knowledge that creative writing produces: for him, the disciplining of a creative writing program is not one of composition, but of literacy. Creative writing instructs students to “read as writers,” which Dawson understands as a reading process in which students “must attempt to recreate the process of composition as if they were the writer” rather than “trying to understand a finished work as critical observers” (94). The discussion of texts may reflect other modes of formalist criticism (especially New Criticism, which emerged contemporaneous to—and had influence upon—the writing workshop), but what separates creative writing is that “reading as writers” disciplines students to read not only exemplary texts assigned by the teacher, but to internalize “this form of criticism as a method of revision and editing and an integral part of the ‘creative’ process” that will lead a text to a completed (often publishable) form.
By understanding education in creative writing as the learning of a specialized literacy, Dawson goes far in establishing the type of knowledge produced in the workshop, but not necessarily the effect such knowledge has on writers and their work. In other words, Dawson does not define well enough what writers should be reading for in their work. For McGurl, creative writing programs seek to curb self-expression in writing, developing in its place values such as “impersonality, technique, and self-discipline” (147). I largely agree with McGurl on this point: if Romantic notions of writing portray the composition as a verbalizing of inner emotion—to, in short, “write what you feel”—then the creative writing workshop tempers this by aligning with modernist values of expression. T.S. Eliot’s objective correlative is key here. By replacing abstract words of emotion with an image that would generate that emotion in the reader, the objective correlative demands not so much an eliding of emotion but of a disciplined use of language. The writer must not only recognize the abstraction, but must craft language that conveys it while also recognizing that the phrasing is indeed capable of conveying the intended emotion. The writer must, as Dawson suggests, read the phrasing as a reader would and in doing so seek to recognize their control over language. That control over language forms perhaps the major component of disciplining in creative writing, especially as the control mitigates haphazard self-expression.

Hemingway, more so than Eliot, provides the model for disciplined self-expression in McGurl’s argument. As McGurl writes of Hemingway’s autobiographical fictions,

The combination, in Hemingway, of first person narration with a more or less rigorous application of the rule of ‘show don’t tell’ makes it clear that what is being restrained in the craft of fiction is, precisely, self-expression, enough of which must
remain to produce the aesthetic pleasure of its active restraint. (102)

Not all programmatic fiction showcases autobiographical expressions of the self, although McGurl notes that such self-expressivity remains an “essential element of the late modernist writing program aesthetic, providing a dialectical counter to the professional impersonality of craft” (102). Creative writing programs temper self-expression with discipline—writers learn to compose in a mode that, while individualized, meets criteria established by social institutions.

The literary market represents one such social institution. The market for writing is never unlimited, and thus creates certain demands upon the work that it accepts for publication. Writers, to succeed in the market, must adapt their writing to whatever demands the market is currently making on it. Such demands change and reconfigure as old markets close and new markets open. Creative writing programs created a new market for writing—an academic, rather than commercial market—that had not existed prior to their founding. That new market had profound effects on what it means to be a practicing and professional writer.

IV.

Prior to the institutionalization of creative writing programs, a fiction writer seeking to earn a living from the trade was beholden to the commercial marketplace. “Literary fiction” may be a contemporary marketing buzzword meant to distinguish a certain mode of writing from more popular and pulp styles, but books that make conscious attempts to be “literature” have long been a segment of the overall book trade market. Interestingly, literary fiction has also long been deemed a shrinking segment of the market. While more contemporary polemics, such as Andrew Shiffrin’s *The Business of Books* (2000), argue
that publishing’s need for profits leads to publishing houses taking fewer chances on
books that might not have commercial appeal, such accusations are nothing new. Writing
in 1904, publishing magnate Henry Holt feared for the future of the industry:

The more authors seek publishers solely with reference to what they will pay in the
day’s market, the more publishers bid against one another as stock brokers do, and the
more they market their wares as the soulless articles of ordinary commerce are
marketed, the more books become soulless things. (qtd. in Cosell 18)

Such conditions made it “more and more difficult to get books that are not ‘sellers’ fairly
before the public without an amount of advertising, drumming, discounts, and credits that
makes them unprofitable; or even, with all those risks, to sell them in profitable numbers.
Literature, in fact, is crowded into the cellar.” Holt’s comments point to the central
tension in literary publishing: books are considered both commodities and culture,
valuable both for the money they make and for their impact on the world.

In the immediate postwar period, publishing was seen as a so-called “gentleman’s
profession”: profit margins were small (sometimes as low as 1-2%) and publishers
believed they were performing a public service. As Larissa MacFarquhar has summed up,
“publishers were frequently willing and able to lose money publishing books they liked,
and tended to foster a sense that theirs were houses with missions more lofty than profit”
(“The Art of Editing”). Titles that sold well allowed publishers to take risks on books
unlikely to perform well in the market but that the publisher believed had a value beyond
economics. That publishers understood themselves as having “missions more lofty than
profit” obscures that there was profit to be made, but the self-perception of publishers as
above the vulgarity of economic gain allowed them to make profits while understanding
themselves as benevolent, even charitable figures in American society. Writers of literary fiction were the direct beneficiaries of publishers’ self-perception: they might receive a contract (and an advance) for a book that would go on to sell relatively few copies. That the publisher might expect the book to sell few copies suggests an arrangement closer to patronage than market capitalism.

Although publishers may have been willing to accept a loss on some segment of their catalogue, there remained profit to be made, and the postwar period offered excellent market conditions to make it. The newly prosperous and, thanks to the G.I. Bill and expansion of college education, newly educated middle class was a class of readers and the postwar period witnessed a massive boom in the publishing industry. Between 1947 and 1972, the number of publishing establishments roughly doubled from 648 to 1,205, while the number of books sold more than doubled from 487 million to almost 1.3 billion (Nord 509). The 1970s and 1980s witnessed another surge that is most notable for the number of new titles issued: of the 1.8 million new titles released between 1880 and 1989, almost half of them were published after 1970 (Greco 26). Partially, the sudden surge in new titles reflects that between 1972 and 1987, another thousand publishing establishments came into business (Nord 509), but it also, and perhaps more importantly, suggests the effects of the most significant change in the industry at that time: the corporate consolidation of publishing.

Between 1960, when Random House acquired Alfred A. Knopf, and 1989, at least 573 mergers and acquisitions took place in the publishing industry (Greco 51). From 1974 to 1978, when the Short Story Renaissance was at its nascent stages, the industry saw fifteen or more mergers each year (Coser 27). The effects of the corporate consolidation
are difficult to parse and precarious to generalize about. In their study of the publishing industry in the 1970s, Coser, Kadushin and Powell found that, generally, the major difference between pre-consolidation and post-consolidation publishing was an increased need to generate profits: “Books that are not profitable, no matter their subject, are not viewed favorably” (Coser 181). A publishing house under the control of a larger corporation is under greater pressure to generate profits than an independent firm, if for no other reason than the publishing house is making money for both itself and the parent company. Consequently, publishing found itself compromising its traditional values: if every book needs to make a profit, then publishers might be more reluctant to publish books they felt needed published for reasons beyond profit.

Profit concerns also meant that publishers focused on books they could be certain would sell well, leading to the rise of so-called “blockbuster” books. A focus on blockbuster books led to complications for literary fiction in the commercial market. John Brooks noted such a tendency in the 1970s. Speaking for the Authors Guild in the late 1970s, John Brooks argued:

It is not that fewer books are being published than formerly, or even, at least not provably, that books of exceptional merit are going unpublished. It is, rather, that such books are being squeezed out of sight by the conglomerate-hyped and -packaged best sellers, and not reaching the public they deserve, and that deserve them. (qtd. in Coser 29-30)

While he hedges the claim that fewer “books of exceptional merit” are being published (although he suggests this is the case), his argument that such books are being marketed less to the reading public—and, it follows, selling less than they might—would produce
that consequence. In particular, one would expect already successful writers (known properties so to speak) to benefit, for profits on their books would be more certain, while unknown or unsuccessful writers would struggle to get published. The recent example of Patricia O’Brien provides such a case: the author of five previous novels, the last of which sold a paltry four thousand copies, found her sixth novel rejected by publishers thirteen times. At her agent’s suggestion, she sent the novel to Doubleday under a pseudonym, and the novel was immediately bought (Bosman, “Patricia O’Brien”). O’Brien’s situation suggests that the name on the book may ultimately matter more than its content, but also that the market for any individual author may close if they fail to generate strong sales early in their career.

With the author’s name of utmost importance in predicting sales, publishers are quicker to publish established writers than unknowns. One effect of the blockbuster-conglomerate system is that established writers are provided larger advances, which means, as Coser notes, “there is now less money to go around for other writers” (30). Advances have long provided writers with income as they produce their work, and to the extent that money for advances became reserved for a relative few, those writers would need another source of income to survive. The larger advances for known writers make sense from a business standpoint though: with more and more titles being released each year, any factor that can make one book stand out against the others needs privileged. The author’s name, emblazoned on a cover in large font, serves as a powerful marketing tool.

To sum up the contexts of the commercial market in the late 1970s: corporate consolidation of the publishing industry meant that publishers needed to create larger
profits for their parent companies, which meant that, in addition to publishing more titles, they needed to publish books that they could ensure a market for and established writers were a better bet than unknowns. Advances were spent on established writers, so less famous writers needed income from other sources, and less money could be afforded to market books in order to establish unknown writers.

For an industry looking to cut corners, short story collections made a good amount of sense, since the stories were likely already produced (and published elsewhere individually), lessening the risk that a writer may receive an advance without ever finishing their book. The risk that higher ups in the newly consolidated publishing houses would seek to censor material was mitigated by the style of the short stories that centered on the domestic rather than the profane. As we will see in Chapter 1, short stories had an established writer—John Cheever—and the success of his collected stories suggested that short story collections could perform better on the commercial market than had traditionally been the case. Seeing this market for stories, publishers like Gottlieb sought out story collections. Perhaps most important, the writers of short story collections did not need to depend on the commercial market for their livelihood, for they already had jobs in the university teaching creative writing.

As the novelist Chad Harbach has argued, the rise of creative writing programs created an alternate, though often overlapping, literary culture to that of commercial publishing. Creative writing and commercial publishing present, Harbach states, “two complementary economic systems of roughly matched strength,” although he suggests that creative writing programs might actually edge out publishing. The closing of the commercial market for literary fiction, which Harbach locates in the subsiding of a mass
readership for it and the rise of new media that have sent publishing into “spasms of perpetual anxiety, if not its much-advertised death throes,” has left creative writing programs to pick up “the financial slack and then some, offering steady payment to more fiction writers than, perhaps, have ever been paid before.” These separate institutional contexts have created their own cultures each with its own canonical works and heroic figures; each has its own logic of social and professional achievement. Each affords its members certain aesthetic and personal freedoms while restricting others; each exerts its own subtle but powerful pressures on the work being produced.

The cursory overview provided by Harbach of MFA culture is accurate: social and professional connections are produced through conference attendance, swapped university-funded literary quarterlies, and festivals and readings paid for through endowments and discretionary funds; publishing in the academy is more about C.V. credentials than large sales; short stories provide the genre for both pedagogy and production, with the short story best suited for the “minute, scrupulous attentions of one’s instructors and one’s peers” in the workshop model of instruction.

Despite Harbach’s shrewd depiction of both creative writing programs and commercial publishing, his analysis ultimately turns toward cynicism regarding creative writing programs, which he hints may actually threaten literature at large. While acknowledging that writing for the commercial market has its drawbacks, in particular that a commercial novelist’s work “is shaped by the need to make a broad appeal, to communicate quickly, and to be socially relevant in ways that can be recreated in a review,” he also implies that such limitations are good for the novel and consequently
good for literature. Harbach fears that creative writing programs will further segregate literary fiction from the mass reading public, essentially destroying the commercial market for such works. Consequently, he fears that “no one with ‘literary’ aspirations will expect to earn a living by publishing books; the glory days when publishers still waffled between patronage and commerce will be much lamented” and “the book industry will become as rational—that is, as single mindedly devoted to profit—as every other capitalist industry.” Perhaps worse for a critic and novelist concerned with attracting a public readership, writers “even more than now, will write for other writers,” which, Harbach implies, will create a literature irrelevant to society. Harbach, a product of Virginia’s MFA program, reveals his implicit biases: aside from literature needing social relevance, Harbach rates the novel as an inherently superior form to the short story because of its larger public readership.

Since the short story reigns as the most important genre of study in creative writing programs—and since a good deal of reading takes place in creative writing programs—Harbach hypothesizes that “the oft-scorned short story may secure a more a durable readership than the vaunted novel” but his argument largely replicates the scorn and vaunting of the respective genres. The implication here is that the novel is the superior artistic medium, that even when it must give into the whims of the market at a given time, its breadth and social engagement bring it greater importance and prestige. Partially, the novel’s importance and prestige develops through what Harbach hints is a superior form of dissemination since the commercial market allows readers a seemingly broader access to works. In such a set-up, short stories, while central to creative writing programs, are marginalized from a greater public, for they do not sell well. Harbach’s veneration of
the novel against the short story is a social rather than an aesthetic argument. The novel’s superiority is not implicit in its genre, but in its social impact: it will have more readers, and in a time of great anxiety about the future of literature, the literary genre that promises more commercial success becomes the preferred genre.

If Harbach is correct in his suggestion that because of its prominence in the ever-growing field of creative writing, the short story now has a more durable readership than novels, we should not be too quick to dismiss the short story’s importance in contemporary literature. Still, even at the height of the Short Story Renaissance, few writers found commercial success. The lack of financial reward is directly mitigated by the economic buffer of creative writing programs: if employed by a university for a middle-class income, then writers need not concern themselves with sales of their work. Publishing in low-selling venues creates symbolic capital for writers in an economy of prestige and thus, writers in creative writing programs find themselves in a desirable position. Academic writers may pursue their artistic goals without concern as to whether their work will generate enough money for them to live. Institutional pressures remain—a writer whose work does not meet perceived criteria for literary achievement will not be published, and thus will likely not become employed in the university—such pressures may appear less strong to a writer buffered in the academy than to a writer dependent on the commercial market.

IV.

My project explores the short story at its moment of transition from a primarily commercial genre to a genre appreciated on aesthetic grounds as new market contexts developed for its production. In tracing this transition during the Short Story Renaissance,
the project is roughly chronological, but I offer neither a linear nor a comprehensive history of the time. Instead, I take a kaleidoscopic approach, with each chapter focused on a figure important to the story of the Renaissance or one that yields insights into the Renaissance’s importance.

Chapter 1, “The Stories of John Cheever,” substantiates Cheever’s collected stories, published in 1978, as the publication that opened up the commercial market for short stories. Cheever was a reluctant short story writer who published them mostly for money while he toiled away at becoming a novelist. I explore the development of his writing as a form of disciplining within a commercial market context that differs from that of the buffered creative writing classroom. Cheever sought—and eventually succeeded—in becoming a regular writer for The New Yorker. The narrowness of the literary preferences of The New Yorker forced Cheever into a developing a style that, arguably, made for less than great novels and led to his reputation as a “New Yorker writer.” I trace the development of that style across two of his early short stories, one rejected and one accepted, before discussing the effect that the collation of his work into The Stories of John Cheever had on reviving interest in the short story form both commercially and as an aesthetic form.

Chapter 2, “The Editing of Gordon Lish” examines the controversial editing of Gordon Lish, who first rose to prominence in the early 1970s as the fiction editor at Esquire before joining the editorial staff at Alfred A. Knopf in 1977. Infamously, Lish heavily pared down (and added his own words to) Raymond Carver’s short stories, especially those appearing in Carver’s second collection, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. Much of the discussion of Lish’s edits has revolved around the value or
the ethics of the editing, with many critics professing outrage that Lish took such liberties with Carver’s stories. I draw extensively upon typescripts and correspondences found in Lish’s archive at the Lilly Library as well as Lish’s own published fiction to account for Lish’s edits. Carver’s writing tended toward the realist mode, while Lish’s drew inspiration from post-modernism and formal avant-gardes. By applying some of his experimental tendencies to Carver’s work, Lish transformed Carver’s traditionally minded stories into subtly experimental texts that gave rise to the minimalist aesthetic that dominates conversations about the Short Story Renaissance. I document the reshaping of the stories through comparisons of Carver’s typescripts and Lish’s edits to express the extent to which Lish altered the original texts. I then discuss the influence that the commercial success of “Raymond Carver” had on writers in the academy.

Chapter 3, “The Self of Lorrie Moore,” situates Lorrie Moore’s first collection, *Self-Help*, within two apparently separate contexts: first, the professionalization of creativity found in creative writing programs; and, second, the commercial genre of self-help literature that Moore’s book satirizes. Those contexts are not as far removed as it would appear, however, with self-help literature contemporaneous to Moore’s publication often stressing an “art as life” mentality that recalls the creative writing dictum to “write what you know.” Creative writing programs have long had a mixed relationship with self-expression seeking to temper it while also requiring it; Moore’s stories portray a similarly vexed relationship with self-expression by showcasing characters that are predominated by their attempts to express themselves. Such self-expression by the characters becomes an aesthetic action: the expression of their self becomes their art, and their ability to do so offers an evaluative measure by which to judge them. The aestheticization of the self in
Moore’s stories provides a useful model for understanding the effects of academic professionalization on creative writers.

Chapter 4, “The Career of Lee Abbott” draws primarily from an interview I conducted with short story writer and Ohio State University professor Lee Abbott. While never a successful writer commercially, he has found success—and his writing has garnered prestige—through creative writing programs. Abbott’s career offers a template for what it means to be a writer in the academy: he is free to pursue the genre he pleases (short stories) and his vast formal knowledge of that genre reflects a life spent studying and teaching stories. Like many writers in the academy, the prestige he has accumulated has resulted not from sales, but from interpersonal interactions, publishing in respected journals, and participating in the academic lecture circuit. He has been able to transform that accumulated prestige capital into economic capital (the lecture circuit, for instance, pays well), but more importantly, his career reflects the possibilities available to writers buffered from the commercial market.

In my conclusion, I address the aesthetic value of short stories in the Short Story Renaissance. Although much of the reappraisal of the short story in this period resulted from a reconfiguration of its cultural value and its removal from the commercial marketplace, the short stories studied in this dissertation offer another sense of aesthetic value removed from social considerations. An aesthetic of creation that privileges the act of writing over the product of that act emerges in the literary practices and the stories of Lish, Moore, and Abbott. Rather than privileging the short story in its finished, published state, an aesthetic of creation celebrates the process of writing and the imaginative possibilities that process provides.
Chapter One: The Stories of John Cheever

I.

When Robert Gottlieb, Editor-in-Chief at Alfred A. Knopf, approached John Cheever about publishing an omnibus of his stories, Cheever expressed reluctance, explaining to Gottlieb that he did not see “why you want to do that; they’ve all been previously published in books” (qtd. in Silverman 339). For Cheever, the stories he wrote primarily for *The New Yorker* had minimal value: they were available to whoever wanted to seek them out and he wished to stake his literary reputation on the four novels he had published. Gottlieb, thinking a collection might capitalize on the success of Cheever’s most recent novel, *The Falconer* (1977), persisted. He offered to read every published story and select ones he felt worthy of including in a career retrospective (Bailey 583). Cheever acquiesced and *The Stories of John Cheever* saw publication in the fall of 1978, in time for the holiday book cycle. The book proved an immediate success garnering critical acclaim and massive sales and, subsequently, winning the National Book Award, Book Critics Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

Cheever had long fantasized about receiving a Pulitzer for his fiction. As early as 1957 he admitted in his journal, “I bemuse myself at three in the morning with the day I win the Pulitzer Prize” (82). Such bemusing occurred after the well-received publication of his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), a narrative endeavor that had taken Cheever the better part of a decade to realize. While he had been publishing short stories consistently in *The New Yorker* for over a decade, he felt short stories distracted him from fulfilling his greater literary ambitions. *The Wapshot Chronicle* signaled to Cheever that he might be taken seriously by a postwar critical coterie dedicated to the glorification of
the novel as the height of fictional form. He also hoped the novel would, as his biographer Blake Bailey notes, allow him to “liberate himself, at least somewhat, from the constraining label of ‘New Yorker writer,’” a designation he had found himself pegged with due to the frequency of his publishing in that magazine (222). He would remain known as a “New Yorker writer,” however, and for good reason: 141 of his 180 published stories appeared in the pages of that magazine (Warren 199). As far as his reputation went, Cheever continued, much to his chagrin, to be known more as a short story writer who wrote novels than a novelist who dabbled in short stories.

That Cheever’s reputation as a short story writer was understood as something to overcome is clear in the novelist Wilford Sheed’s assessment of Cheever’s career in 1969:

Cheever started as an avowedly minor writer, turning out small gems for *The New Yorker*, indistinguishable from all the other small gems in that magazine except for their exceptionally high polish and a certain wild gleam. Gradually his stories got better, shinier, wilder, and he managed to run some of them together into a couple of novels (*The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal*), which any author is advised to do who wants to be taken seriously. (*Conversations* 27)

Sheed’s assessment offers backhanded compliments: Cheever’s stories were “small gems” but Sheed undermines whatever uniqueness they may have by declaring them nearly indistinguishable from the type of story regularly found in *The New Yorker*; although Cheever’s stories got “better, shinier, wilder,” his novels were merely stories strung together rather than a singular, cohesive narrative. Most telling is Sheed’s assertion that writers need to write novels to be “taken seriously.” Sheed’s tone here may
be ironic and the passive voice of “any author is advised to do” ignores who is doing the
advising, but the failure to name an advisor may simply reflect a profound cultural
agreement: writers, critics, publishers, and (as their purchasing history suggests) readers
all seemed to agree that novels were the most important literary work fiction writers
could produce in the United States midway through the 20th century. Short stories,
understood as a primarily commercial genre, could earn writers economic capital, but to
accrue symbolic capital and the distinction it brings, writers were better off spending their
energies on novelistic enterprises.

The label of “New Yorker writer” was often invoked to dismiss Cheever’s “small
gems,” but in retrospect the association of authorial identity with the magazine seems
fairly positive. For one, the company kept is strong: J.D. Salinger, Frank O’Connor, and
Vladimir Nabokov were all publishing contemporaneously with Cheever at the magazine.
More importantly, New Yorker stories were consciously artful and its editors professed
higher aesthetic standards than most commercial magazines. Cheever’s development as a
writer, as we will see, was largely a process of trying to meet those standards: in a
process of disciplining similar to but distinct from those found in creative writing
classrooms, Cheever adapted his writing style to fit within the editorial expectations of
the New Yorker short story.

The Stories was a career retrospective and attempt at literary consecration, but its
importance extends beyond Cheever’s reputation: it helped spur a reassessment of the
short story as a both a commodity and an aesthetic object. The work’s high volume of
sales suggested to Gottlieb that short story collections could perform well in the
commercial marketplace, which led Knopf to actively pursue short story collections as an
economically viable possibility (Applebaum 35). Its perhaps greater influence, however, was on contemporaneous short story writers, particularly those learning the craft of the genre in the academy. With Cheever, aspiring writers found a role model, a writer who had garnered economic and symbolic capital by writing in the form. In this chapter, I trace the development of John Cheever from a burgeoning writer to a successful magazine fictionist to an acclaimed, and as he was often labeled, master of the short story form. I explore the aesthetic standards of the New Yorker short story before examining two stories by Cheever, an earlier one rejected by The New Yorker (“Frère Jacques”) and a later one accepted (“The Hartleys”), in order to show the evolution of Cheever’s narrative techniques as he tried to conform to those standards. I then explore how the act of collation that Gottlieb applied to Cheever’s short stories removed them from their original context and codified them under the authorial figure of John Cheever, an act that led to a reassessment of the short story form as culturally important. Cheever’s success with The Stories impacted the Short Story Renaissance by demonstrating the possibilities—artistic, economic, and cultural—of the short story to aspiring writers committed to consciously exploring the aesthetics of the genre.

II.

John Cheever serves as a bridge figure between pre- and post-World War II literary culture not only for the development of the short story as a primarily aesthetic object, but also in the process of developing as a writer. Cheever, unlike the vast majority of writers to gain fame in the postwar era who attended universities (and more often than not, their creative writing programs), ended his formal schooling at age 17 when he left Thayer Academy, an event he mythologized in his first published story, “Expelled from Prep
School” (1931). While the beginning of his career and the beginning of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop coincided in the mid-1930s, he would not become involved with the Workshop until 1973 when he accepted an invitation to teach there. He had never before taught, and reports from his students suggest he was not especially adept at it.

T. Coraghessan Boyle reminisces that Cheever “didn’t have much of an idea what to do as a teacher, and this was complicated by the fact that he was drunk much of the time, and yet he read our stories carefully and praised them if they were worthy of praise” (9). Postmodernism in the Thomas Pynchon and John Barth vein was the literary fad of that time and Boyle came to Iowa as a disciple of it. Cheever, however, “couldn’t make any sense of [Barth’s] The Sot Weed Factor and didn’t see that it was worth the effort of trying.” Instead, Cheever insisted to Boyle that “his writing was experimental too,” which Boyle only came to understand years later when The Stories appeared (9). Whatever Cheever’s abilities as a pedagogue were, what is worth noting here is that he understood his writing as experimental, which is to say, as aesthetically or formally innovative. Cheever’s statement to Boyle marks a significant shift in his appreciation for his own short stories: he emphasizes their aesthetic qualities rather than mentioning the money he made from them as he might have a few decades before when he was still writing and publishing with The New Yorker.

Cheever wrote short stories for money and this reality gave him a jaundiced view of them for he understood them as a commercial rather than artistic enterprise. While struggling to write his first novel in 1947, Cheever wrote to his friend John Weaver that he was facing “crushing financial blows” and had found himself “back in the short story business” (Letters 125). The phrase “short story business” is telling: unlike novels, which
Cheever appeared to view as autonomous from economic markets, the writing and selling of short stories is entirely a commercial activity, a business. He concludes his letter to Weaver by expressing his severe disdain for writing them, stating, “I want to write short stories like I want to fuck a chicken” (125). Despite this disdain, Cheever would spend close to another twenty-five years writing in the form while struggling to compose novels.

Cheever’s view of short stories as having primarily commercial value originates in the actual market for short stories that he encountered. Before creative writing programs and their journals introduced a new market for short stories based upon their aesthetic value, the genre was tied inextricably to commercial periodicals, in particular high circulation magazines. For a writer with literary ambitions, the majority of such magazines, *The Saturday Evening Post* prime among them, offered little in the way of prestige. The magazines paid handsomely; F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, earned around $3,600 for each story in *The Saturday Evening Post* and even in 1931—at the height of the Great Depression—he earned $18,000 for his Josephine Perry stories compared to the $439.07 he earned on book royalties (Watson 106). The stories in the mass weeklies were more magazine filler than examples of literary artistry; the finest examples may have been collated into Edward O’Brien’s yearly *The Best American Short Stories* series, but the majority of the stories were as ephemeral as the magazines themselves.

*The New Yorker*, which began publication in 1924, flaunted an elitism that distanced itself from the mass weeklies. It was a type of publication that, along with *The Smart Set* and *Vanity Fair*, George Douglas has called “smart magazines,” periodicals that “at least
superficially were designed for smart sets or social elites” (2). The imagined audience for smart magazines possessed a large amount of cultural capital. They were the kind of people who were “well traveled, well read, well acquainted” and “wanted to be entertained, but on an exalted plane; people wishing to sidestep the bromides and sugar-coated confection being dished out to a standardized middle-class by the mammoth mass-circulation magazines” (9). Smart magazines aimed for an audience that defined itself by its opposition to mass culture, an oppositional stance on display in *The New Yorker* founder Harold Ross’s infamous expression in a marketing prospectus for potential advertisers that the magazine “is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque” (qtd. in Yagoda 39). The prospectus displays a purposeful elitism but balances this with lofty goals about the magazine’s broader appeal; *The New Yorker* will not be concerned with what she (the old lady) is thinking about. This is not meant in disrespectful, but *The New Yorker* is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience and thereby will escape an influence which hampers most national publications. It expects a considerable national circulation, but this will come from persons who have a metropolitan interest. (39)

The doubling of elitism with high commercial expectations in the prospectus was a hallmark of the smart magazines that were interested in projecting a high-class lifestyle for their readership, whether that readership actually constituted upper tier individuals or not.

As Douglas points out, the “smart magazines were always general magazines intended to reach a sizable audience” (10), and the “appeal to an elite was always something of a mannerism or affectation: they needed to be ‘commercial’” (11). Ross
wanted *The New Yorker* to stand out among other smart magazines, especially *The Smart Set*, which he respected but had a low circulation, and *Vanity Fair*, which sold well but he found formulaic. He accomplished these goals by appropriating some of the caustic tone of *The Smart Set* (edited by iconoclast and malcontent H.L. Mencken) and presenting it in a slick format like *Vanity Fair* (144). To the extent that Ross knew he did not need to appeal to the old lady from Dubuque who read magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, it was because he knew a market existed for smart magazines and from the start imagined *The New Yorker* as the perfect amalgam of them.

Although originally conceived as an organ for urbane wit, its pages stuffed with cartoons and short humorous sketches from writers such as Dorothy Parker, by the 1930s the magazine had begun publishing fiction. The fiction, which developed into the “*New Yorker* story,” displayed an oppositional stance as well: as Thomas M. Leitch has argued, the *New Yorker* editors’ “sole aesthetic rationale” was to “depart as far as possible from the prevailing norms of the well-tailored anecdote” found in the mass circulation periodicals (138). Leitch notes that at first the stories were nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the magazine’s contents but over the course of the 1930s they developed a “deepening revelation of character that would become the hallmark of the second, wartime phase of *New Yorker* fiction” (143). That said, establishing exactly what defines a *New Yorker* story is a difficult proposition if only because *The New Yorker* itself never established exact editorial guidelines. Leitch argues that if “there is such a thing as a *New Yorker* story, it might seem to have arisen accidentally, without anyone’s special attention or intention, and without being identified as such” (127), although what we do know of
editorial preferences can help us characterize the *New Yorker* story in the negative, by what it is not.

While no one may have intentionally developed the *New Yorker* aesthetic, fiction editor Katharine Angell White was the most responsible for defining what the generic boundaries of their fiction would be. As Ben Yagoda explains, White believed that “plot, on the whole, was bad,” thus rejecting the plot-driven stories in vogue in the mass circulation magazines. Against this, White, with Ross’s oversight, published stories that stressed clarity, precision, detail and tough-mindedness rather than “flights of fancy, displays of emotion on the part of characters or author, or identifiable literary style, other than the faint irony of flatness—second-generation Hemingway” (153). White’s aversion to “literary style” is as an important a feature of her editorial preferences as her aversion to plot and emotions.

Janet Carey Eldred finds in her study of White’s tenure at the magazine that “Katharine White frequently had to explain that a piece was too ‘special,’ the euphemism for any piece that narrowly restricted the audience for a piece—too academic, too strangely particular, too literary” (48). While *The New Yorker* wanted fiction more unique and intelligent than *The Saturday Evening Post*, Eldred notes that the “*New Yorker* editors never confused their mission with those of the small literary magazines” because they desired a wider audience—and higher circulation—than the little magazines obtained (65). Thus, White rejected a set of stories by the arch-modernist writer Djuana Barnes because, she wrote in the rejection letter, “We are afraid that almost none of our readers would understand what you were getting at and it really is impossible for as small-minded a magazine as *The New Yorker* to publish a manuscript that is so subtle as
to be ambiguous” (qtd. in Eldred 48-9). White’s insistence that The New Yorker is a “small-minded” magazine seems overstated, but her characterization of the readership as unable to deal with subtlety suggests much about the imagined audience of the magazine. The New Yorker’s readers, while perhaps sophisticated, were not understood as especially nuanced in their tastes. The high modernism of Barnes would have presented too many challenges for readers looking to The New Yorker more for entertainment than anything else.

The New Yorker story offered a middle ground between the low cultural tales of The Ladies’ Home Journal and the high culture experimentalism of The Little Review. Leitch notes that contributors would cite “the frustration of action and moral decision which had been the wellspring of Joyce’s stories in Dubliners,” the “journalistic matrix” of Stephen Crane’s stories and the “deceptively casual anecdotes of Chekhov” as influences (139). Such stories hold much literary merit and were viewed as experimental upon publication, but by the mid-1930s, their experimental features had been absorbed into the literary mainstream.15 To copy the apparent casualness of Chekhov was not to follow Pound and “make it new,” but rather to stay on fairly safe ground while simultaneously differentiating the writing from overtly commercial stories beholden to plot. To the extent that Hemingway was an unarguable influence, he was also a commercially successful writer whose style was familiar to readers. What Eldred concludes about Ross’s New Yorker in general could be said about the fiction specifically: Ross presented readers with “middlebrow goods but convinced his readers that they were getting material much more sophisticated, much more innovative and artistic, much more rare” (70). The New Yorker story appeared to readers as culturally superior to the fiction in mass-circulation
magazines, but the editors were careful not to publish stories that would prove overly challenging for that readership to grasp. That the stories seemed to push at the edges of literary sensibilities gave them an air of sophistication that situated them within the collective editorial aesthetic of the magazine.

Although far from a radical development in the history of the short story genre, the *New Yorker* story was innovative in important ways. In eschewing both high modernist experimentation and low cultural commercial fiction, White guided the *New Yorker* story’s development into a middlebrow form capable of accumulating both economic and symbolic capital. The *New Yorker* story with its hallmarks of domesticity, succinctness and slice-of-life narratives would prove influential to later generations of writers, especially those in creative writing programs, but its middlebrow status as both art and commodity object made publishing with *The New Yorker* appealing to aspiring writers in the 1930s. Certainly, at least, the magazine appealed to John Cheever, a young writer with great literary aspirations who dedicated much of his apprenticeship to learning to write within the magazine’s editorial vision.

Cheever’s relationship with *The New Yorker* began in 1935 when he sold his first story, “Buffalo,” to the magazine (he actually met White a few days after sending the story) (80). After this initial success, though, Cheever struggled to compose a story that met White’s standards. White rejected the second story Cheever sent, “The Cameos” because she found it “too much the routine short story, the sort of thing the monthly short story magazines use rather than the sort of thing we use” (qtd. in Bailey 81). White’s decision that Cheever’s story was “too much the routine short story” suggests that Cheever was not yet able to differentiate between the types of stories *The New Yorker*
published and the types that mass-circulation magazines published. Understanding that difference and learning to write stories in the mode *The New Yorker* preferred would be the key development in his career that led to his success. It is a development that is also traceable through two stories Cheever wrote as he became disciplined into the *New Yorker* story genre, “Frère Jacques,” which was rejected, and “The Hartleys,” which was accepted.

III.

A year after he sold “Buffalo” and had “Cameos” rejected, Cheever held off on submitting more stories to White who had begun to worry that Cheever had deserted *The New Yorker*, though she hoped he had not (Bailey 86). Partially, Cheever’s absence from the magazine was the result of directing his focus—at Malcolm Cowley’s suggestion—on novel writing; unable to procure an advance from Harrison Smith at Cape and Smith, the publishers of Cowley’s novel *Blue Juanita* (83), Cheever wrote Cowley explaining that Smith’s objection to giving me an advance was that a short story writer and a novelist are two different birds and that no amount of stories I write will convince him that I’m a novelist […] I’m perfectly confident I can do the book and that it might even sell. But there’s no reason why anyone should believe me until they’ve seen it.

(*Letters* 38)

Cheever’s letter to Cowley, written in late 1935 or early 1936, reveals that Cheever had already begun obsessing over his reputation as a short story writer. While confident he could do the book, that he reports Smith’s claims of an essentialist difference between writers of the two forms signals that Cheever may have already had concerns about his ability to compose long narratives. While he expresses confidence that he can finish the
book, he acknowledges that no one should believe this possible until he does so. Such skepticism was in order: he failed to complete the novel and found himself concentrating on short stories instead.

In December of 1936, Cheever would tell Cowley “the novel is gathering dust and it makes me very sore. Sometimes I get it out at night and look at it and get excited about it but then I have to put it away in the morning and go back to my short stories” (Letters 41). Short story writing was quickly becoming both Cheever’s main form of literary production and his primary source of income. The New Yorker had returned as Cheever’s primary publishing target, sometimes successfully as with the story “Play a March” (Bailey 87), but oftentimes less so. White rejected his story “Frère Jacques,” commenting that “we don’t like this story of John Cheever’s at all […] It is meant to be very serious and sad and somehow the child mistress…seems more ridiculous than touching” (qtd. in Bailey 90). Cheever sold it to The New Yorker’s literary rival, the Atlantic Monthly, it was selected for inclusion in The Best Short Stories of 1939, and The New York Times review of that collection praised the story specifically, noting that it “really illuminates the contemporary scene” (90-1). While Cheever’s eventual success with the story suggests that White’s aesthetic judgments were not universally shared, her dislike of the story makes sense given The New Yorker’s preferences.

The story consists of a Russian immigrant and his younger lover engaged in dialogue about their poverty. The woman carries a bundle of laundry that she refers to as “Heloise,” a personification we learn was an old joke: “Every bundle of salt, sugar, corn meal, flour or laundry that she had carried, during the two years they had lived together, she had called Heloise and they had talked light and facetiously over it as if it were their
child” (“Frère Jacques” 34). Much of the story is rendered solely through dialogue with
the narrative voice appearing only occasionally in the story to establish contexts for the
reader, such as informing us that the woman is “very young” and the couple’s discussions
of Heloise were both a “strained talk” and “some of the tenderest that had gone between
them” (34). As the story proceeds, the woman’s imaginative personification slips into
pathos, such as when the man, Alex, suggests that the woman, unnamed, sit down and
enjoy herself: “‘I am enjoying myself, she said. ‘Heloise and I are having the time of our
lives, aren’t we, Heloise? Just a couple of bugs in a rug” (35). The woman’s direct
address to the laundry, along with the narrator’s note that she was “very young,”
infantilizes the woman, an effect that continues through the story especially when, after
Alex has asked her to be quiet so that he may read a newspaper in silence, she cries.

Her crying is a melodramatic turn that finds her exclaiming that she wants a baby in a
voice that, through its repetitive insistence, recalls that of a spoiled child: “‘I want one, I
want one, I want one!’ she cried hotly, turning to him” (37). The melodrama culminates
in the reader’s discovery that the couple is not married. Alex asks what difference
marriage would make, to which the woman says, “A human difference”; Alex responds,
“Don’t get sentimental” (38). Throughout the story, Cheever portrays Alex as a tough
guy in the Hemingway-mode forced to humor a naive partner. The end of the story finds
the woman singing the song “Frère Jacques” to the laundry bundle and concludes with a
narrative focalization on Alex; the narrative voice (positioned with Alex) reads: “If she
had been screaming and crying and drumming her heels on the floor, her words couldn’t
have held more finality and estrangement than the simple, persistent words of that song”
The story equates the woman’s singing of a lullaby with a temper tantrum and suggests that the relationship has run its course.

White’s dislike of the story centers on the unnamed woman, or as White labels her, the “child mistress.” White’s is a somewhat harsh assessment of the character: while the narrative works to infantilize her, she is apparently an adult. A reader’s opinion as to whether the story is meant to be “very serious and sad” or whether the woman “seems more ridiculous than touching” depends largely on whether the reader locates the narrative sympathies with the man or the woman. Arguably, given that the story closes with a narrative focalization on Alex, the narrative sympathizes with him. The woman is purposely presented as ridiculous; the story is not sad but bathetic. White locates the “child mistress” at the story’s emotional center, however, and this may explain why she rejects the story: New Yorker stories spurn melodrama and the tantrum that the woman throws in the story—the “I want one, I want one, I want one!” moment—is identifiably melodramatic with its sensational and exaggerated emotions. The story seems aware of this: it is her childish melodrama that Alex cannot stand, which may explain, from Cheever’s view, why he would send the story to The New Yorker, melodrama and all.

While White’s reading of the story implies an artistic failure on Cheever’s part, Edward J. O’Brien, the editor of the Best Short Stories 1939, sees the story as deserving major praise. In addition to reprinting it, he places three asterisks before the story’s title in the “Roll of Honor” appendix, which denotes that the story possesses the highest distinction he awards for stories that unite “genuine substance and artistic form in a closely woven pattern which such sincerity that these stories may fairly claim a position in American literature” (xiv). O’Brien’s awarding of three asterisks does not suggest how
he interpreted the story anymore than his awarding of three asterisks grants this or any
story the instant literary canonization he seems to believe it will. What the awarding does
suggest is that O’Brien appreciated the story both in terms of its content and its form; he
finds literary value in the story that White did not.

O’Brien and White’s editorial goals differ substantially: O’Brien seeks stories that
can “claim a position in American literature” while White seeks stories that conform to
editorial guidelines of The New Yorker. O’Brien may wish to classify Cheever’s story as
“American literature,” but that classification has a more expansive range than the narrow
genre of the New Yorker story. Whatever the literary value of “Frère Jacques,” it was not
viewed as a New Yorker story by the very person in charge of classifying it—Katharine
White. That Cheever submitted it to White, however, meant that he thought it would
fulfill her criteria. White’s subsequent rejection of the story indicates that Cheever was
wrong, a situation that has two consequences worth teasing out. First, Cheever reveals
that he is at least somewhat ignorant as to whether his story meets White’s criteria: he
misreads how White will read (or misread) his story. Second, he is not yet a “New Yorker
writer”; his stories do not necessarily position within the genre that The New Yorker
publishes and that he desires (as witnessed by his submission to The New Yorker) his
stories to occupy. To publish consistently in The New Yorker, then, requires two things:
Cheever must fully understand the generic limits of the New Yorker story and must
construct stories that satisfy The New Yorker’s editors.

Cheever’s eventual internalization of the New Yorker story was the result of his
relationship with the editor William Maxwell. Maxwell began his tenure in the
magazine’s art department but was moved to fiction in 1938, working under White but in
charge of Cheever. As Bailey tells us, Maxwell was not only more “persistent in soliciting Cheever’s work, but he tended to suggest revisions rather than rejecting stories outright” (98). Maxwell’s willingness to work with Cheever benefitted Cheever almost immediately: before 1939, Cheever sold five stories in total to The New Yorker, but by 1940, he averaged almost a story each month (99). Maxwell resigned his post in 1940 (he would return about a decade later and resume duties as Cheever’s editor), but by then Cheever was fairly entrenched with the magazine and would continue to publish regularly under his new editor, Gustave Lobrano (116). Although their initial association was brief, Maxwell’s willingness to push revision before rejection helped shape Cheever’s fiction towards its artistic maturity.

Maxwell was a successful writer himself, having written two novels, Bright Center of Heaven and They Came like Swallows, before his 30th birthday (Bailey 98-9). As a writer, Maxwell appears to have understood the nuances of editing and, if Cheever’s post-Maxwell production is any indication, Cheever learned much under Maxwell’s tutelage. Maxwell’s comments and requests for revisions are arguably as pedagogical as editorial: what Maxwell presented Cheever with was lessons in composing within The New Yorker genre, a compositional limitation that Cheever appeared to recognize as necessary for his growth. Although generally uninterested in Gottlieb’s arrangement of The Stories, Cheever forbid Gottlieb from including anything older than the “The Sutton Place Story,” published in 1946 (Bailey 583, Collected 1026). That story marks the beginning of Cheever’s mature period, when he had found his writing fully disciplined into The New Yorker’s standards. The stories in his omnibus appear roughly but not in exact
chronological order and the earliest ones show major stylistic refinements from his pre-
omnibus stories that reflect Cheever’s disciplining into the New Yorker story genre.

Such disciplining shows forth in the story “The Hartleys,” which bears comparison to
“Frère Jacques”: both stories center on an unhappy relationship in the throes of collapse,
both contain instances of melodrama, and both depend on a major turn of events at the
end for their narrative effect. The difference between the stories, as my analysis will
suggest, is that Cheever’s handling of the material situates “The Hartleys” more properly
into The New Yorker’s aesthetic preferences. The narrative story is only slightly more
complicated than “Frère Jacques.” Mr. and Mrs. Hartley (they are referred to only by their
surname) are vacationing at a ski resort with their daughter, Anne. The couple had been
to the ski resort eight years before and enjoyed it. Anne does not know how to ski, and
her father teaches her over the course a few days. A rainstorm closes the slopes and the
chairoffs, but a rickety towrope is used to take skiers up to the single open slope. Anne’s
arm gets caught in the rope and she is killed when her neck breaks on the iron wheel
rotating the towrope. If anything, the death of the child should produce more pathos and
melodrama than the Cheever could muster from an infantilized women and a bundle of
laundry, but this is arguably not the case and reflects the major stylistic difference
between the apprentice Cheever and the mature Cheever: the expansion and manipulation
of the narrative voice.

Throughout The Stories, dialogue is kept to a minimum, used to complicate and
reflect on events but not usually to produce the plot. “The Hartleys” begins with the third
person narrator setting the scene for the story:
Mr. and Mrs. Hartley and their daughter Anne reached the Pemaquoddy Inn, one winter evening, after dinner and just as the bridge games were getting underway. Mr. Hartley carried the bags across the broad porch and into the lobby, and his wife and daughter followed him. They all three seemed very tired, and they looked around them at the bright, homely room with the gratitude of people who have escaped from tension and danger, for they had been driving in a blinding snowstorm since early morning. They had made the trip from New York, and it had snowed all the way, they said. (58)

By beginning the chapter with narrative exposition (and the paragraph proceeds until it is about double the quoted except), Cheever can stress mundane occurrences such as Mr. Hartley carrying bags as “bridge games were getting underway” and render mundane what threatened to be sensationalistic, such as the “driving in a blinding snowstorm since early morning.” Rather than detail the drive, Cheever relays the information through an act of double mediation: “They had made the trip from New York, and it had snowed all the way, they said.” The story does not give us the exact words, but offers a paraphrase of what was said. Furthermore, the collapsing of the individual characters (Mr. and Mrs. Hartley) into the plural pronoun “they” signals a lack of differentiation between them. These narrative moves frame the story in the slice-of-upper-class life mode of *New Yorker* fiction. Here is a New York City couple like any other, their lives mundane and banal, likely both repeating the same dialogue about the snowstorm with whomever they converse. The Hartleys could be any given reader of *The New Yorker*.

Two-thirds through the story, Mrs. Hartley has an emotional breakdown that immediately recalls the young woman in “Frère Jacques” and her cries of “I want one, I
want one, I want one!’ The trip has not gone particularly well—Anne has refused to do anything without her father present—but Mrs. Hartley’s breakdown is only minimally preaced. We learn that the couple spoke mostly to Anne rather than to each other as if they ‘‘had come to a point in their marriage where there was nothing to say’’ (60), and that while the Hartleys were well-liked at the inn, ‘‘they gave the other guests the feeling that they had recently suffered some loss’’ (61), a loss that the text does not define. While Mrs. Hartley ‘‘seemed anxious to be friendly and she plunged, like a lonely woman, into every conversation,’’ we learn little of what caused the marital discord. Thus, when the maid overhears her crying to husband, the reader is not likely to anticipate the intensity of her grief:

‘‘Why do we have to come back?’’ Mrs. Hartley was crying. ‘‘Why do we have to come back? Why do we have to make these trips back to the places where we thought we were happy? What good is it going to do? What good has it ever done? We go through the telephone book looking for the names of people we knew ten years ago, and we ask for dinner and what good does it do? What good has it ever done? We go back to the restaurants, the mountains, we go back to the houses, even the neighborhoods, we walk in the slums, thinking that this will make us happy, and it never does. Why in Christ’s name did we ever begin such a wretched thing? Why isn’t there an end to it? Why can’t we separate again? It was better that way. Wasn’t it better that way? It was better for Anne—I don’t care what you say, it was better for her than this. I’ll take Anne again and you can live in town. Why can’t I do that, why can’t I, why can’t, why can’t I…’’ The frightened maid went back along the corridor. (63)
I quote in length here in order to fully capture the narrative devices Cheever employs that help this passage, I argue, avoid the melodrama found in “Frère Jacques.” The accumulation of Mrs. Hartley’s questions allows her to insist on her marital unhappiness, but by the end of the passage, readers find themselves removed from the volatility of the argument by the narrative’s refocalization on the maid.

Where “Frère Jacques” presented repetitive cries but intercut these with Alex’s reactions, here the story gives the sole voice to Mrs. Hartley. By framing the outburst through the narrative focalization of the maid, Cheever creates a distancing effect: we are removed from the fury of the situation, unlike in “Frère Jacques” in which the readerly position is within the frame of action. By distancing the action from the narrative position, the story undercuts some of the visceral force that a narrative position within the action would create.

Mrs. Hartley’s speech ends in a tripartite echo of the young woman in “Frère Jacques” but it shows a maturity that the young woman lacks. Mrs. Hartley’s constant questioning of “What good is it?” reflects a distance from her husband that is both temporal and psychological—her husband desires to return to the past, to recapture what they had lost. His desires are nostalgic, a hope to close distances, while she desires to create more distance, asking why “we can’t separate again?” The repetition of “why can’t I, why can’t I, why can’t I” reveals a desperation that the young woman’s “I want one! I want one! I want one!” lacks because, by giving Mrs. Hartley’s speech enough space in the narrative to build tension, the story allows her final words to take on an impact gained through the proliferation of sentiment that precedes it.
The narrative tempers the dramatic impact of Mrs. Hartley’s exclamations by redirecting focus to the maid. Within one sentence, the narrative shifts from Mrs. Hartley to Anne: “The frightened maid went back along the corridor. Anne was sitting in the parlor reading to the younger children when the maid went downstairs” (63). The removal of the maid—along with the reader—from the intensity of Mr. and Mrs. Hartley’s argument shifts the story’s tone from frantic drama to the mundane: the daughter is reading to children, unaware that her parents had been fighting. The story, rather than reveling in an intensity of emotion, moves to understatement. That understatement emerges again a page later when Anne dies. The exclamations of “Stop the tow! Stop the tow!” give way to her death scene:

But there was no one there to stop it. Her screams were hoarse and terrible, and the more she struggled to free herself from the rope, the more violently it threw her to the ground. Space and the cold seemed to reduce the voices—even the anguish in the voices—of the people who were calling to stop the tow, but the girls’ cries were piercing until her neck was broken on the iron wheel. (64)

Again, the narrative voice rather than the characters’ voices offers what was said; we learn that her “screams were hoarse and terrible,” but we are not given the scream itself. At the moment of death, the narrative again invokes distance: space reduces the anguish in the voices calling to stop the tow. Even the passive voice in “was broken on the iron wheel” works to distance the reader from the intensity of the action.

After Anne’s death, the story moves fully into understatement and shies away from displaying emotions. After a white space break that functions to provide a moment of extended silence, the story begins again: “THE HARTLEYS left for New York that night
after dark” (64). The couple refused assistance, preferring to follow the hearse to the city.

The story ends on a muting, mundane note:

When everything was ready, the stricken couple walked across the porch, looking around them at the bewildering beauty of the night, for it was very cold and clear and the constellations seemed brighter than the lights of the inn or the village. He helped his wife into the car, and after arranging a blanket over her legs, they started the long, long drive. (64)

The story flirts with sentimentality for a brief moment—the constellations may appear brighter because their daughter is in the heavens—but the final image of Mr. Hartley laying a blanket over his wife’s legs, the distance between them reduced to an intimacy brought forth by horror, is mundane and as simple as the phrase “long, long drive.” The story ends in understatement: what is surely a couple filled with immense, even incalculable grief, the narrative presents as essentially the same people they were at the beginning: nondescript, unemotional, banal.

By rendering such grief as mundane, Cheever seems to be almost parodying the New Yorker story’s tendency to understate situations. To engage in parody well requires a profound understanding of the forms being mimicked and mocked: for Cheever to have written a story that (perhaps lightly) parodies the New Yorker story means that Cheever had fully internalized the form and was able to understand the rules of the genre. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, “a good or great parodist has to have some secret sympathy for the original” (The Cultural Turn 4), and it would seem by Cheever’s willingness to continue publishing in The New Yorker and writing New Yorker-style stories, his sympathies for the magazine are clear.
Those sympathies were likely financially motivated, for *The New Yorker* had proven a reliable source of income. By 1947, Cheever earned between five hundred and one thousand dollars a story; Bailey estimates his yearly income at the time at around five thousand dollars a year, a somewhat modest income (the equivalent of around fifty-thousand dollars in 2011) that Cheever and his family had difficulties budgeting within (154). The Cheevers’ tendency to live beyond their means resulted in their asking for a number of loans from *The New Yorker*, which had a tendency to oblige (232, 276). Furthermore, Cheever had negotiated a “first look” agreement with *The New Yorker*, which paid him a yearly bonus to give *The New Yorker* the first chance to publish his work, which proved mutually beneficial.

In 1963, however, Cheever asked for and was denied a raise. Maxwell, again his editor, suggested to Cheever that he may want to leave *The New Yorker* for better pay elsewhere (320), advice Cheever took as he negotiated a deal with *The Saturday Evening Post*. The details of the offer, and his decision, are explained in his journal: “*The Saturday Evening Post* has offered me twenty-four thousand. *The New Yorker* has offered me twenty-five hundred, and I will take the latter, I’m not sure why. The important thing is to work and insist on fair wages for the work I do” (*Journals* 189). Given that Cheever spent most of his life in debt and verging on complete financial ruin, his refusal to defect to *The Saturday Evening Post* surprises: twenty-five thousand dollars for a man who claimed to be “harassed by indebtedness” would have offered much relief (189). His inarticulateness as to why he stayed points to several possibilities: his relationship with *The New Yorker* was longstanding and profitable, William Maxwell was an excellent
editor, but also, and most important here, the prestige of The New Yorker continued to outweigh that of The Post.

While the economic capital would have been greater with The Post, Cheever seems aware that the symbolic capital of The New Yorker was greater and he chose distinction over financial solvency. Thus Cheever would remain with The New Yorker even as his mode of short story was going out of style with the magazine, which was soon to embrace the postmodern experimentation of Donald Barthelme. Cheever, by the late 1960s, would find his mode of short stories unpopular with the magazine and it would take another decade and the publication of his omnibus before he would fully accept his role as a preeminent writer of short fiction.

IV.

The Stories of John Cheever would find Cheever reconsidering his relationship to the form, but throughout the 1960s, even as he continued writing short stories, Cheever worked to extricate himself from the label of “short story writer.” In an interview conducted following the release of his third novel, Bullet Park (1969), Cheever explains that “A writer is deeply intuitive when he writes. I don’t know anyone who gives a good diagnosis of his own work. Metaphysical aspects are better taken care of by critics. I’m not a sociologist, a philosopher or a moralist. I’m a novelist” (Conversations 34). The shift here from “writer” to “novelist” is instructive. By self-identifying as a novelist, as a writer of one specific form, Cheever appropriates the distinction that he perceives in the role of novelist.

In private, though, Cheever was much less certain of his abilities as a novelist. As he was finishing The Wapshot Scandal, he wrote in his journal “A great many people felt
that the ‘Chronicle’ was not a novel, and the same thing is bound to be said about this
[The Scandal], perhaps” (179). He was also not above understanding the novel as an
economic commodity in addition to a cultural form, noting in his journal that a review he
read of The Scandal “seemed to me less an attempt to judge it severely and to give it its
rightful place among books than to bring to it a determined generosity and enthusiasm
that would make the book a financial success and let us live in peace for a year or so”
(191). Yet, in the phrase “its rightful place among books,” Cheever senses that the
reviewer avoided a serious, aesthetic engagement with the text. Cheever desired not only
sales, but artistic achievement in the form; he wanted it to be more than a series of short
stories stitched together into a longer narrative and instead to stand as a formally cohesive
novel.

During a symposium about the short story in 1969, Cheever declared himself “rather
a retired short-story writer” offering that “the last story I wrote that I liked—I felt as
though it had been written out of my left ventricle—I thought, ‘I don’t want to write any
more short stories, because you don’t fool around’” (Conversations 17, italics in
original). He contrasts this with the novel, in which after the reader is hooked like a
ground feeding fish—“in the mouth”—the reader will
go on and on and on, for something like three or four hundred pages, sometimes eight
hundred pages. With a short story, you have to be there on every word; every verb has
to be lambent and strong. It’s a fairly exhausting task, I think. (17)
His claims of retirement are true enough—he published only four of the sixty-one pieces
collected in The Stories after the symposium—but, in a rare move, his description of the
differences between short stories and novels appears to privilege the short story form.
Earlier in the symposium he claims that the short story has kept “the novel on its mettle,” that the “short story, among its other virtues, has more or less kept the novel and poetry working […] In some ways the short story is still something of a bum; but it has to be very lively or it doesn’t pass” (13). Here, the short story is placed against the two other major contemporary literary forms, and its merits appear generated only by its interactions with those forms. Cheever appears to have a grudging respect for the short story: it is a challenging, “exhausting task” that, while a bum, can offer some mode of aesthetic pleasure although its true importance is in its relationship to novels and poems, which both offer more in the way of potential prestige.

If there exists an essential difference between the short story and the novel, it is one of length: by definition, a short story is short. Cheever’s opinions about the short story and the novel appear rooted in this difference: a short story exhausts in its brevity, while a novel may meander. That said, size matters to Cheever: a novel, Cheever offers, is “essentially massive, and is always reviewed as though it were something immense, although it might be eight hundred pages of trifling humbug” (13). A novel, through this purview, is more a presence of size than anything else: a short story extends across a relatively few pages of a magazine; a novel has weight, if only because it has mass.

The physicality of the novel mattered to Cheever; as he wrote in 1964, “I think I think of the book not as narrative but as bulk, texture, color, weight, and size” (Journals 199). The “book” in this case is again a synonym for the novel (he hoped “this day next year, to have another book done” [199]), but if physical largeness conflated with literary value, then Cheever’s acceptance of his role as short story writer following The Stories might have been assisted by the sheer bulk of that book. In fact, the size of Cheever’s omnibus
became a part of the book’s marketing. A full-page advertisement in *The New Yorker* on October 30, 1978, announces that “The definitive collection” contains “61 stories, 704 pages” (165). Arguably, to note that the collection holds 61 stories would be enough to label the book “definitive”; to also note the number of pages is to assert the collection’s importance by linking its achievement to long form narratives and the novel itself.

The 1978 Alfred A. Knopf fall preview advertisement in *Publisher’s Weekly* refers to *The Stories*’s publication as

A major literary event. In 704 pages, Cheever’s collected stories—the best of the matchlessly brilliant short fiction that has, along with his novels, secured his place among America’s great writers, a pre-eminence defined equally by the Wapshot books, *Bullet Park*, and *Falconer*—and by “The Swimmer,” “The Enormous Radio,” “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” and the 58 other magnificent and memorable stories written over three decades and now brought together at last.

By declaring the publication a “major literary event,” Knopf’s copywriters frame the publication as outside the normal operations of the publishing business and attempt to generate a historical importance for it. The mention of the page length again bears consideration: taken with the mention in *The New Yorker* advertisement, it becomes clear that the marketers are stressing the physical size of the omnibus with the assumption that such size impresses. The copy appears to stress the individual stories, equating “The Swimmer,” “The Enormous Radio,” and “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” as literary triumphs as important as Cheever’s novels by linking these stories and the novels together with a hyphen. The ending phrase “brought together at last” reinforces the collective over the individual: it is not only those three stories but also the “58 other
magnificent and memorable stories” that are equal to the novels. The suggestion is that by collating the individual stories into a single collection, that collection achieves the same level of prestige as a novel.

The collation of the individual stories into a collective works to reframe the experience of the stories by removing them from their original context, in this case the ephemeral pages of *The New Yorker*. In his preface to *The Stories*, Cheever acknowledges that many of the stories “first appeared in *The New Yorker*, where Harold Ross, Gus Lobrano, and William Maxwell gave me the inestimable gifts of a large, discerning, and responsive group of readers and enough money to feed the family and buy a new suit every other year” (viii)—a statement that again mixes aesthetic concerns with financial ones—but the physical book works to reclaim the stories from *The New Yorker*’s pages. The paratextual elements of *The Stories*, especially the dust jacket, function to appropriate the stories and unite them under the name of John Cheever. The front cover of the dust jacket, wraps a large silver “C” around the title *The Stories of John Cheever* and offers a visual metaphor of containment for collection: the “C” holds the title and through metonymic association, the stories in the book themselves, within the name Cheever. In other words, the dust jacket makes a claim for authorial ownership, for understanding the stories contained within the book as belonging to John Cheever. The back of the dust jacket performs similar work: here, a photo of a smiling and suited John Cheever occupies the entire page. The dust jacket, designed by R.D. Scudellari, lacks blurbs or other textual references that would threaten to proliferate associations beyond the central organizing figure of John Cheever. All references, all invocations, all meaning
is directed solely at John Cheever, which is to say that the dust jacket promotes *The Stories of John Cheever* as a solitary achievement and purposeful triumph.

To understand Cheever’s accomplishment as a purposeful triumph requires an obscuring of the publication history of the stories, since Cheever did not intend to find literary acclaim while publishing seemingly ephemeral works in *The New Yorker*. The short story collection itself, as a genre of bounded, repurposed and decontextualized texts, operates as an obscuring agent to the original production of the stories and actively cultivates a sense of purposeful cohesion within the text. The act of collation into a book grants the stories a permanence that their original incarnations as ephemera in periodical publications lack: the book says such stories are important as literary texts while a magazine says such stories are no more important than the journalistic features and advertisements and other periodical commonplaces (and are likely to be thrown out as quickly). That sense of permanence combined with the recontextualization of the stories allows the collection to produce to symbolic as well as economic capital by presenting the collection has having literary and historical importance.

*The Stories of John Cheever* is unique, however, in going beyond the act of collation directly from periodical sources, since the stories in the omnibus had already undergone that act in a series of smaller collections. While the smaller collections brought together several Cheever stories, *The Stories of John Cheever* makes a claim not only for the textual permanence of the stories but for the canonical permanence of their author. The collection builds upon the implication of the cover and binds the genre of the short story to the name John Cheever. Whatever concerns Cheever had in the past about being labeled a short story writer were suddenly irrelevant, for there was no escaping that label
now. Notably, Cheever seemed fine with this, especially with the reviews, sales figures and awards that followed the collection’s release.

*The Stories* showed that short story collections could sell well: released on October 23, 1978, it first appears on the *Publisher’s Weekly* bestsellers list on November 27 at number fifteen, the ranking accompanied by a note that “This new best seller, published October 23, has 70,000 copies in print after four trips to press” (68). Within six months, the book was on its sixth printing, had reached number four on the *Publisher’s Weekly* list and had 118,000 total copies in print (“Hardcover Bestsellers March 448). For Gottlieb, such success suggested that other books of short fiction were economically viable (Applebaum 35). As important as its economic success, by winning the Pulitzer Prize, Book Critic Award and National Book Award, *The Stories* suggested that short story collections could accumulate symbolic capital as well, a suggestion that helped to raise the status of the short story form.

The timing could not have been better: the explosive growth of MFA programs in the 1970s meant more writers were writing consciously aesthetic short stories often of a kind similar to those that Cheever had produced. That Cheever was not himself a product of higher education but instead found his writing shaped by the standards of *The New Yorker* shows that the emergence of the aesthetically-privileged short story in the 1970s had precedence. Cheever’s disciplining into a single genre—the *New Yorker* story—may have limited his skill set too much. At the same time, those limitations may have ultimately benefitted Cheever. Cheever developed a thorough knowledge of formal and aesthetic principles of the *New Yorker* story that allowed him to experiment within the genre and create stories that appealed to students as well as readers and critics.18
Although a reluctant short story writer while earning a livelihood from then, Cheever seems to have accepted or even embraced his identity as a short story writer following the publication of the omnibus. According to Bailey, he referred to *The Stories* as “the Collected” and was known to, if handed a ragged copy of one of his novels to sign, demand that the fan buy a copy of the Collected for him to sign instead (603). At the least, such actions suggest that Cheever felt proud of *The Stories*. He would die in 1982 of cancer, but in the meantime he inhabited the role of an elder literary statesman, a great (white and male) American writer that the world, Bailey tells us, “seemed in a rush to honor” (625). Cheever was more than happy to accept such honors, but more importantly, Cheever’s greatest literary success and fame came at the same moment that the Short Story Renaissance blossomed. Having one the most prominent literary elder of the time be known for his short stories surely helped give credence to that form as artistically valid and worthy of both producing and consuming. Furthermore, *The Stories* conveyed the possibility that the genre of the short story collection could produce both economic and, more importantly, prestige for their writers, which meant that writers—and their editors—could now produce collections that actively courted those forms of capital. The short story collection, rather a marginal genre that merely archived ephemeral productions could now stand on its own as an important literary form. The negative connotations of the “short story writer” label began to subside with Cheever, and writers could pursue the genre without Cheever’s worry that he was publishing in an inferior form.
Chapter Two: The Editing of Gordon Lish

I.

While the commercial success of *The Stories of John Cheever* revealed market possibilities for short story collections, its success also suggested that the short story need not be defined by its relationship to the commercial market. Cheever’s stories were recognized for their literary quality; they suggested that short stories and collections could create prestige for their writers. While Cheever’s bestseller may have made him the grand eminence of the Short Story Renaissance, it was his drinking budding from his time spent at the Iowa Workshop who would become the predominate figure of the Renaissance. In three short story collections published between 1976 and 1981, Raymond Carver would achieve literary celebrity and critical acclaim while popularizing what was came to be known as “minimalism,” a paring down of narrative features, such as descriptive language and characterization, that traditional literary realism requires.

The centricity of Carver to the Short Story Renaissance is a factor of both his enduring acclaim—he is one of the few writers an undergraduate might encounter in both a survey of contemporary American fiction course and in a creative writing workshop—and his significance to contemporaneous writers. Where Cheever’s success was prefaced upon a reputation built over several decades, Carver was seen as something new, as a writer whose success—and often, whose style—could provide a model for aspiring writers. As Lee Abbott told me, “I don’t think you can underestimate the importance of Carver’s success to a whole bunch his contemporaries and successors.” In particular, we can point to Carver’s second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), that arrived as the Short Story Renaissance was reaching its commercial peak. An
immediate success, the collection sold an impressive fifteen thousand copies in its first month of release (Sklenicka 370). Carver’s first collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976) had attracted attention, but *What We Talk About* with its laconic, enigmatic stories of working class lives would fully establish Carver’s prominence.

Carver was a beneficiary of the rise of creative writing programs in the academy. He met his first mentor, John Gardner, while an undergrad at Chico State University and received his first teaching appointment in 1971 at the University of California, Santa Cruz (he would go on to teach at Iowa, the University of Houston, and Syracuse University). That Carver emerged from academic programs to find success in the commercial market provided an example and even a role model for students in creative writing programs focused on short story composition. As Mark McGurl has noted, the appeal of Carver’s stories was a product of his academic background. Born working-class but educated during the postwar expansion of the university that celebrated the artistic triumphs of modernism, Carver showcases a tension between aesthetic cultivation and social inferiority that McGurl argues produces a sense of shame displayed within the stories themselves, a “resistance to the language of self-assertion” in the narrators and characters that provide a sense of “wariness and waiting and protective self-concealment” that ultimately displaces ambition (275). As such, “minimalism” serves not only as a description of the stories’ formal elements but also of their characters’ dreams and desires—and possibly of the writer’s own ambitions. We can read such a lessening of ambitions negatively, by either following John Aldridge’s disparagement of minimalism in *Talents and Technicians* for its failure to produce self-consciously important literature in the vein of postwar novelists such as Norman Mailer, or by making a claim that, given
the buffer from the commercial market that creative writing programs provide, there is no need for writers to be ambitious if they can find success in the market for academic short stories by writing stories similar to those already on the market. Either criticism of Carver and his followers such as Tobias Wolff and Amy Hempel ignores the importance of their innovations to the short story form. Minimalism, while not the only aesthetic available to short story writers in creative writing programs, has proven perhaps the most influential. Furthermore, minimalism represents the first major literary innovation developed at the intersection of academic and commercial literary markets.

Carver’s name has become synonymous with minimalism and for good reason: his stories, especially those collected in *What We Talk About*, offer a paradigm of minimalism’s tendencies towards brevity and austerity. To declare Carver synonymous with minimalism, however, requires an obscuring of the stories’ production. Formalist criticism that centers exclusively on texts risks drawing wrong conclusions about those responsible for their creation and, in the case of Carver, the wrong conclusions about the authorship of the stories bearing his name have major repercussions in understanding the development of and what is at stake in literary minimalism. Carver’s stories are the product of collaboration (often times unequal) between Carver and his longtime editor, Gordon Lish. Lish revised (or arguably rewrote) Carver’s stories, applying a heavy-handed editing style that excised much of Carver’s prose and, at times, added much of his own. The minimalism of Carver’s stories, as we will see, is the result of Lish’s aesthetic preoccupations with experimentalism much more so than Carver’s tendencies to write in a more traditional mode of literary realism.

Lish’s influence on Carver’s stories is great, and it may be because of Lish that
Carver became known as a short story writer at all since, in addition to short stories, Carver wrote poetry and had aspirations to write a novel. Lish, however, believed in the short story as an important form for it was the “art of efficiency, of compression, of economy, of doing everything right and of not doing one more thing that must be done” (qtd. in Blumencranz “Part Two” 62). Lish’s sentiments echo those of other short story writers, but he took the concepts of compression and economy to the extreme. As his own fiction shows, Lish was by temperament an experimental writer, more invested in literary postmodernism and avant-garde artificiality than in the tenets of realism, but he was also a commercial editor aware that there was a limited market for his preferences. That Lish’s greatest commercial success came not as a writer but as an editor points to the importance of Carver: their relationship was mutually beneficial both commercially and artistically. Carver benefited from Lish’s role as an editor because Lish helped to publish Carver’s stories. More importantly, Lish benefitted from Carver: the literary realism of Carver’s stories helped to temper the artificiality of Lish’s minimalist impulses and made what might otherwise remain a marginal experimentalism palatable to the reading public.

In this chapter, I trace Lish and Carver’s relationship and explore the importance of minimalism as it emerges through their collaboration. I set minimalism against realism by contrasting the literary principles of John Gardner with the experimental impulses found in Lish’s fiction. From those impulses, I extract Lish’s major literary concerns and, through a reading of the editing of two Carver stories, document the influence of those concerns on Lish’s editing practices. Finally, I explore the impact Carver and Lish’s minimalism had on aspiring writers in the academy in order to conclude that minimalism, although influential stylistically, is most significant for signaling that the short story had
become a consciously aesthetic literary form.

II.

Carver and Lish first met in 1969 while both were working for textbook companies in Palo Alto, California. Lish had arrived in California in 1959 to pursue, perhaps naively, a literary life in what he believed to be the literary hotbed of America: San Francisco (Blumenkranz “Part One” 57). He sought out Neal Cassady, worked as a teacher at San Mateo High School, and founded an ambitious literary journal called Genesis West that featured up and coming writers Jack Gilbert, Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen (61; 63). Denied tenure at San Mateo, Lish took a job with Behavioral Research Laboratories writing grammar textbooks that followed a behavioral method of programmed instruction (Blumenkranz “Part Two” 53), but, despite the steady employment, Genesis West foundered because of Lish’s financial problems (56). In Carver, Lish found a compatriot, another struggling young writer with whom he could talk and drink. In 1969, Lish became the literary editor at Esquire Magazine (where he nicknamed himself “Captain Fiction”) and immediately began requesting stories from Carver. McGraw-Hill hired Lish in 1974 to start an imprint of his own, and he reached out to Carver to publish a collection (Carver 11 Nov. 1974) that would find release in 1976 as Will You Please Be Quiet, Please. Lish left Esquire for Alfred A. Knopf in 1977 and remained Carver’s editor, publishing What We Talk About When We Talk About Love in 1981 and Cathedral in 1983.

Lish and Carver experienced a falling out over Cathedral, largely because Carver refused to let Lish apply his usual editing practices to the stories. The extent of Lish’s influence on the text of the previous collections had long been a rumor in literary circles,
but was first documented by Carol Polsgrove in her 1995 history of *Esquire Magazine*. Polsgrove’s discoveries were little noted by either scholars or readers, but a 1998 *New York Times* story by D.T. Max, “The Carver Chronicles,” exposed Lish’s role in shaping the stories for a mass audience. As Max explains, by the mid-1980s, Carver had embraced his literary fame without acknowledging Lish’s role, leading Lish to tell Max that he felt a “sustained sense of betrayal” about Carver. In 1985, Lish wrote to his good friend, the postmodern novelist Don DeLillo, declaring his wish to expose Carver, but DeLillo suggested that such exposure would be “too much to absorb. Too complicated. Makes reading the guy’s work an ambiguous thing at best” and that word of Lish’s editing will spread “the way it always does, and without conscious planning behind it. It will become a theme. It will be a thing forever attached to Carver’s back” (DeLillo 9 Aug. 1985). DeLillo’s council reflects concerns about the cult of authorship that the reading public embraces: to expose Carver would likely reflect poorly upon Lish for it would violate the popular assumption that Carver was the only person responsible for his stories, a notion of literary production that exerts a powerful dominance over both readers (and often scholars).  

DeLillo concluded the letter with advice for Lish to “take good care of your archives,” advice Lish may have taken to heart in making the archives publicly accessible. In 1991, Lish sold his archives—featuring his edits to Carver’s typescripts—to the Indiana University’s Lilly Library, an act that made the extent of his edits available to scholars.  

Since Lish’s role has come to light, much critical debate has waged as to whether Carver’s original stories were in fact superior. Although Carver’s widow, the writer Tess Gallagher, at first tried to block scholars from publishing studies of Lish’s edits (Max),
her decision to publish *What We Talk About* in its original form as *Beginners* in 2007 has made Lish's archives fair game for scholarly evaluation. William L. Stall and Maureen P. Carroll have argued that for Carver studies, "insofar as they address the issues raised by the Carver controversy, must redirect their attention from the editor to the writer. What did Raymond Carver write?" (3). Studies of Carver's stories since 2006 have largely followed this dictum by documenting exactly what Carver wrote and what Lish changed. The studies primarily concentrate on *What We Talk About* because the differences between Carver's original typescript and Lish's alterations are most obvious and apparently significant. Carol Sklenicka's biography of Carver documents the changes Lish made to many of the stories, while Enrico Monti has noted Lish’s changes to titles, syntax, lexicon, and endings in *What We Talk About*. Michael Hemmingson has offered the most specific accounts of Lish's changes to several of Carver’s stories that appeared in both *Will You Please* and *What We Talk About* and concludes that such “minutiae” “is undeniable proof of Lish engaging in more than just editing” (489). The textual concentrations of such scholars have shown DeLillo's prognostic to have become true: Carver scholarship must now take into account Lish's changes.

While I am sympathetic to Stall and Carroll's claims that it is important for scholars to determine exactly what Carver wrote, Carver's fame and influence emerged from the versions of the stories edited by Lish and released in Carver's lifetime. To understand the significance of Carver’s stories in literary history requires us to examine the possible reasons for and consequences of Lish’s edits, a subject that scholars engaged in textual explications of Carver’s typescripts have left unexplored. Through Lish’s editing, Carver’s stories as originally published offered a new form of literary realism that, while
proving popular, challenged many of the tenants of realism by minimizing narrative discourse and the details literary realists employ to establish fictional worlds.

Some recent studies of Carver have worked to place him into the realist tradition of literary writing, but to mixed success. Kerry McSweeney’s monograph The Realist Short Story of the Powerful Glimpse situates Carver in a literary tradition alongside three other writers of short fiction, Anton Chekov, Ernest Hemingway and Flannery O’Connor, who, along with Carver, are “committed to the realist representation of experience and share a belief in the importance and efficacy of the short-story form” (iv). Carver, as McSweeney demonstrates, understood himself as part of that tradition, but McSweeney tends to ignore Carver’s critics who found his work aesthetically unsatisfying for defying the standards of realism found in writers such as Chekov and O’Connor. Daniel Just summarizes such critical aversion as a misunderstanding of minimalist approaches: in comparison to the flourishing of postmodern literary techniques that preceded minimalism, “the minimalist short story was immediately seen as an apparently nonexperimental form of realist discourse”; critics failed to recognize the experimental qualities of the stories, misreading them as “unstylized and even clumsy” in their depictions of “the more prosaic aspects of everyday life” (304). Against such critics, Just offers a defense of Carver that emphasizes both the experimental and the realist impulses of the collection’s stories.

For Just, the uniqueness of minimalist fiction is that it juxtaposes the effects of realism with the collapse of linguistic referentiality, a juxtaposition that creates incongruous effects that baffled contemporaneous critics. As he writes, “This unification of austere realism with a meticulous concern for form is rather puzzling for most critics in that they cannot come to terms with a strategy that combines such contradictory
methods,” a unification that led critics to celebrate “less minimalist works for their poetic qualities” or reproach “the more austere stories for their deadpan aloofness” (315). Just’s defense interests both in that he notes the merging of realism and formal experimentalism that defines minimalist fiction and in his recognition that such a merger was largely ignored by critics who found minimalism a diminished mode of the realist tradition.

Just’s engagement with minimalism offers smart readings of the genre to which I will return and complicate by locating the experimental qualities of minimalism in Lish rather than Carver (Just offers the innovations as Carver’s own), but I wish first to trace the stakes in minimalism’s novelty. It is not simply that minimalism’s unification of realism and experimentalism is “puzzling” for critics, but rather that this unification causes severe reactions in critics for it intrudes upon one of the fiercest critical literary battles of the postwar period. While debates between realists and experimentalists may be nothing new to literary history, postmodernism and, in particular, its metafictional impulses revived the intensity of the conflict. Carver is an important figure in this debate because he sits uneasily between the two sides: he is, like his first teacher John Gardner, an established realist, but his published writings, edited by the experimentally inclined Lish, often betray his own proclivities.

III.

In Gardner’s influential *The Art of Fiction*, he declares that the writer’s “first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened” or are at least plausible given “small changes in the laws of the universe” (22). Gardner uses the term realism but usefully qualifies this by arguing that the realist’s “way of making events convincing is verisimilitude”; realist writing “in effect argues the reader into acceptance” of the story’s
reality through the use of details (22-3). Gardner’s view is inherently rhetorical: the narrative discourse of the story makes an argument for the plausibility of its extra-literary reality. For Gardner then, realist fictions are not directly mimetic but create an illusion of reality. Such an illusion is essentially dreamlike for Gardner, and dreaming serves as his central metaphor for the act of reading: we “carefully inspect our experience as we read, we discover that the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind” (30). Such an experience creates an investment in the reader, for we “read on—dream on—not passively but actively, worrying about the choices the characters have to make […] exulting in characters’ successes, bemoaning their failures” since in “great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul” (31). The dream metaphor thus serves two ends: it highlights the artificiality of the experience—dreams are not real life—but personalizes the experience as well. Dreams are an intensely individual experience (to recount them directly to others is difficult if not impossible), they exist outside the reality of waking life, and yet they can have real emotional or even physical effects on the dreamer (we may wake from a nightmare in a cold sweat). To equate reading to dreaming is to simultaneously acknowledge fictionality and impact, to make a case for reading’s importance that emphasizes that while literature is not mimetic to reality, it can affect the reader in reality after the act of reading is complete.

Reading thus serves a moral purpose for Gardner in that it “helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations” (31). Though only a verisimilitude of reality, fiction nevertheless engages reality. Given the gravity of fiction’s essentially didactic purpose in Gardner’s argument, we can understand Gardner’s tirades against metafiction, in which authors
disrupt the narrative world by inserting their presence into the text, as more than a stylistic opposition. In “bad or unsatisfying fiction,” the reading dream is “interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist” that snaps us out of the dream and forces us “to think of the writer or the writing” (97). Since mistakes can be corrected or forgiven, Gardner’s real concern here is with conscious ploys. Gardner points to John Barth as an example of writers who “make a point of interrupting the fictional dream from time to time, or even denying the reader the chance to enter the fictional dream that his experience of fiction has led him to expect,” a narrative technique that Gardner dismisses as “not writing fiction at all” (32). Despite its violation of readers’ expectations, Gardner expresses some sympathy for metafiction, for it helps to undermine the harmful effects of fiction. Gardner finds fiction dangerous since nothing “has greater power to enslave than does fiction”: it can make us sympathetic to dangerous characters such as Nazis or business tyrants or moral fanatics (87). That said, Gardner insists that metafiction is not fiction, that metafictional novels “are not novels but, instead, artistic comments on art” (italics in original 33). Fiction necessitates verisimilitude and creates dreams; anything else is either bad fiction or not fiction at all.

Although Gardner defines his mode of realism against metafiction, metafiction is not the only experimental avenue for writers to pursue when challenging the realist impulses of traditional fiction. Lish’s own fictions violate the tenets of verisimilitude but without the direct intrusion of the writer into the narrative. The violations in Lish’s short fictions, which will be reflected in his editing practices with Carver, present a different challenge to realism by deemphasizing the details that Gardner claims verisimilar fiction requires. If the outcome of the reading dream is to convince the reader of the verisimilitude of the
story in order to create an investment in the story by the reader, then the story requires at its base something to invest in. In realist fiction, this investment is usually made at the level of character. As Gardner notes, readers of realism should identify with the characters, should exult in their success and bemoan in their failure. Such a response foregrounds character as perhaps the most important feature of a story, and thus provides the compositional starting point for many writers of realist fiction.

Lish’s fiction dispatches concerns about character and instead foregrounds sentence-level stylistics as the most important facet of literary composition. Such concerns reveal themselves not only in his own stories, but also in his creative writing pedagogy. Reports from Lish’s former students present Lish as a harsh critic, unconcerned with his students’ emotional responses. George Carver (no relation to Raymond) notes that “Lish was not for everyone. If you came to be coddled, if you came for support, if you wanted a parent, you were headed for disappointment […] a woman passed out cold in one class” (Carver, “Lish, Gordon”). In “Lashed by Lish,” David Bowman recalls a workshop in Bloomington, Indiana, in which class consisted of “Lish’s talking nonstop for not less than three hours. Students did not get to ask questions.” When students did have a chance to speak, it was to read their stories. Lish tended to stop them after their first sentences in order to criticize them. Bowman made it to a second sentence of that read “As he spun, our judge yawned, showing us her fillings”; Lish immediately stopped Bowman to say “You used an adverbial participle. Never use adverbial participles.” The grammatical specificity of Lish’s sentence-level critique demonstrates a commitment to the smallest aspects of writing for which Lish and his followers have faced criticism. Sven Birkerts complains that such writing sacrifices social breadth for minimalized structures: “The
episode, the paragraph, the sentence, the phrase were the new units of composition,”
emphasized at the expense of the narrative whole (28). The format of Lish’s workshop
would indeed seem to emphasize such units, but such does not make Lish uninterested in
the story as a narrative whole, which will prove to still matter to Lish.

A more positive reading of a unit-based compositional process relates to Lish’s
concept of “voice.” Lish told Publisher’s Weekly that it is “not so much the material itself
as a voice I seek in the writers I want to publish” (italics in the original, Baker 59). Lish’s
vision of voice is not a channeling of the inner self so much as an individualized control
over language. That the writer must be in control of language shows forth in the very
pedagogical obsession Bowman lightly mocks: the first sentence. The writing process as
envisioned by Lish—indeed, what forms the basis of his narrative poetics—begins with
the crafting of the first sentence. The first sentence is “the catastrophic equation,” the
creation of which is a task that must

produce an illusion of the world beginning now…Don’t write until the totality of the
song is in your head as a total eruption…The sentence should not be a sentence that
communicates, but one that presents. Not a sentence about the world, but one that is
the world entire. (qtd. in Carver)

Lish insists here on ontological fabrication; the story should essentially begin with a
linguistic Big Bang that creates an entire universe in its wake.

It is not, however, simply the ontology of the story that is created in such an event:
like the formation of the universe from smaller units building upon each other, from
quarks to atoms to molecules to planets, the story builds forth from the explosion of the
first sentence by accumulating words into sentences into narrative. It is at the level of
words that the story is not only carried but that its imaginative possibilities are contained. George Carver’s reminiscence provides an example of this imaginative possibility. A man in the class submitted the sentence “The kid’s name was Bummer and we stole his house.” Lish wrote the sentence off as “predictable, its predictability augmented by the conjunction.” Lish then rewrote the sentence as “The kid’s name is Bummer and we stole his name” (italics in the original). The student’s sentence forces a narrative from the beginning; the reader will learn the how’s and why’s of the theft, and perhaps Bummer’s response. Lish’s revision gives attention to the most striking part of the sentence, the name Bummer, but more importantly, the replacement of “name” for “house” opens up the narrative and thematic possibilities of the story. A house is a physical object, whereas a name is a hallmark of identity: to steal a house lacks the narrative intrigue of stealing one’s personhood.

From the first sentence, Lish believes the entire story emerges through a process of writing that Carver summarizes as such:

You have your object and your first sentence. The first sentence is the object in motion. Keeping the object in motion was what Lish called ‘the consecution and the swerve,’ the consecution being the business of creating new sentences from elements of prior sentences; the swerve, the process of deforming of what was prior so as to avoid predictability in the work.

The process of deforming constitutes a negation; as Lish stated in Carver’s seminar, “The second sentence recurs the previous sentences, but revises. It moves to collect what is behind it, always with a difference. The form of the story will develop as a result of this procedure.” What Lish intends by “the object” seems to be largely synonymous with
subject-matter but is nuanced by the association with the “objective,” as if the crafting of
a short story were a mission to be undertaken. The recursion and revision of previous
sentences develops verbal repetition within stories, but these repetitions depend upon the
linguistic play of language to reformulate meaning in order to sustain the reader’s interest
through acts of surprise.

Lish’s story “Three” from his first short story collection, *What I Know So Far* (1984),
showcases the deforming effects of recursion and revision while diminishing the
importance of character. The first sentence “Three things happened to me today”
introduces an object (three things) and situates them within a time frame (a single day)
(86). The second sentence builds from the first stating, “One of them taught me the
meaning of fear.” The narrator offers that one event will be more important than the
others and that the tale will present a didactic conclusion: we will learn the meaning of
fear, at least as the narrator defines it. The third and fourth sentences revise the first:
“Actually, these were not things that happened to me. They were just things that
happened in my presence.” The phrase “happened to me” recurs from the first sentence,
but here we learn that the previous use of “happened to me” was an overstatement—the
narrator was merely present at the events. The fifth sentence builds from the fourth: “I am
not even sure how much of my presence was involved.” The sentence employs negation
to call into question the “presence” insisted upon in the previous sentence, and the
opening paragraph resolves itself in its final sentence: “Let’s leave it at this—I was there
when these things happened.” The paragraph is ultimately one of backtracking, in which
the narrator distances himself from the initial claim that things happened to him and
arrives at the more banal fact that he was merely an observer. Such backtracking likewise
has the effect of breaking off the reader’s sense of the story as a dream by disrupting the construction of the narrative, albeit without metafictional incursions.

The narrative of “Three” introduces the reader to the events the narrator witnessed. We learn that the narrator observed a pretty woman speaking about her dead lover and, later, a decapitated head sitting on a wheelchair in the subway that, as the subway came to stop, opened its mouth and sang the line “Way down upon the Sewanee River” in a baritone voice (87-8). The last line of the story presents not an observation but an event: “The third thing was I went home” (88). Left unexplained is which one of the things taught “the meaning of fear.” The central conceit of the narrative drops off by the end of the story, leaving the reader—referred to explicitly in the story as “you”—forced to make an interpretative claim.

Neither the woman nor the head appear frightening to the narrator. The narrator’s reaction to the woman is that her lover was a “lucky man” to have had her “even when she mentioned the funeral and said she rather enjoyed it” (87). The singing head does not inspire fear either: the narrator found the experience “Very thrilling, very theatrical” (88). No comment accompanies the walk home, however, and the sentence “The third thing was I went home” complicates the narrative if we take seriously the claim that the speaker was simply “there when these things happened,” that they happened in his presence though did not involve his presence. The claim may simply be a psychological one, whereby the narrator feels disconnected from himself walking home given the previous events of the day. The eventfulness of the walk home, an eventfulness given importance by its inclusion in the narrative, is undermined by the narrative presentation of the event. The reader is pushed into an interpretative bind: does the walk even matter
to the narrator or is it the thing that taught the meaning of fear? Speculative possibilities abound for the reader, but without more information, conclusions are difficult to reach.

The difficulty in reaching interpretive conclusions about Lish’s stories extends across those collected in What I Know So Far. The first story, “Everything I Know,” tells two versions of a narrative in the span of three pages. The first version, delivered to the story’s narrator by “the wife,” presents her reaction to waking and finding a potential rapist in her bedroom: terrified and speechless, she was “able to get to her feet and run. She ran out the front door. She said she ran three blocks to telephone booth and called the police,” leaving her son still in the house (4). The second version comes from her husband, who arrived home, saw the front door open, checked on his son’s safety and entered the master bedroom to find his wife gone. He called the police to inform them his wife was missing but the police told him not to worry, she was in a phone booth blocks from the house. The husband was afraid to touch the door to the bathroom, fearing the rapist was in there, but the man had already escaped out the bedroom window (5).

“Everything Thing I Know,” is as slight as its length: little happens; the intruder is not caught. The story, while suggesting that the events had an immediate emotional effect upon the couple, does nothing to explore what that effect was. The namelessness of the husband and wife works against making them recognizably unique while the lack of incongruity between their version of events makes it unclear as to why both versions are included. The final paragraph, though, calls the entirety of the story into question. The narrator explains,

I’ve told you everything I know. I’ve told it to you precisely as it was revealed to me. But there is something in these events that I don’t understand. I think there is
something that those two—no, three—aren’t telling me. I sometimes think it must be staring me right in the face, just the way the three of them were when the story was all finished. (5)

The narrator’s unease that there is something they “aren’t telling me” is matched by the reader’s sudden realization that there are four people in the room—the narrator, the wife, the husband, and a completely unnamed other. Is this the boy? The narrator in a reflection? A third witness to the events? The narrative leaves room only for speculation: the interpolative mention is the only mention provided in the story, and it leaves the reader wondering if there is something not being told. To understand the events of the story, to know what it is that the narrator knows and is or is not telling, requires an interpretative move that the story denies and thus, the reader is, as in “Three” and much of Lish’s short fiction, left again in an interpretative bind.

That bind is borne from an epistemological open-endedness that leaves important details a mystery to the reader. Flannery O’Connor offered that there “are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners” (103). Likewise for Eudora Welty, mystery is an essential component of short stories, the “first thing we see” and that to which “we return at last to see mystery again.” Welty discriminates between what she terms “the puzzle kind” of mystery that the reader must solve and the “mystery of allurement” that, upon better understandings of the story, “does not necessarily decrease; rather it simply grows more beautiful.” Welty’s view of mystery is an evaluation of a story’s appeal through the lens of a romantic conception of art—the story has intangible qualities that are instantly recognized as special or unique. While Welty undertheorizes the term, that she chooses “mystery” as opposed to “secret” or
“aura” bears exploring in the context of the short story genre. If short stories, like poetry but unlike novels, are about the concision of language and concision implies omission, then the choice of what to omit has major effects upon the story.

Hemingway’s “Iceberg Theory,” wherein the reader is able to understand the deeper implications of actions presented as surface level details, is perhaps the most famous theory of narrative omission, but one in which the narrative essentially presents a puzzle that the reader can presumably figure out. Raymond Carver seems to have Hemingway in mind when he discusses omission’s ability to create tension in a story: while tension forms partly through “the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story,” it is also created from “the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things” (“On Writing” 277). The difference between Hemingway and Carver here is one of resolvability: for Hemingway, omission places the reader as the agent of meaning-making, for “the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things [omitted] as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (Hemingway 154), while for Carver, details omitted shape the tonal qualities of the narrative without the reader necessarily noticing.

For Hemingway then, the mystery of the stories is resolvable, while for Carver the issue may not matter. In Carver’s versions of his stories much is indeed implied, but larger epistemological questions are largely answered: the reader can discern, more or less, the events of the stories and the importance of the events. Not so with Lish. The absence of certain details in Lish’s stories leaves them on uncertain epistemological ground. The uncertainties presented by “Everything I Know” arguably make the entire
world created for the story suspect. If, as Gardner claims, the “writer’s first job is to
convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened,” then “Everything I
Know” fails at that job. The narrator’s position in the story as mediator of an already
(twice) mediated event casts doubt upon the narrator’s reliability, a situation reinforced
by the story’s title which implies there is knowledge the narrator lacks. That lack and the
story’s contradiction in details directly mediated by the narrator, such as the number of
people in the room, further discourages the persuasion Gardner insists upon. “Everything
I Know” pushes believability to its edge; the world created in the story falls apart by its
end. The story moves from epistemological mystery to ontological uncertainty, a move
that, following Brian McHale, classifies as a break from modernism to postmodernism.

Such ontological effects situate Lish’s literary concerns closer to John Barth than
John Gardner. It may be no surprise then that Lish contacted Barth about publishing with
Johns Hopkins University Press. Barth, whose maximalist writings are often paired
against minimalism, met the query with excitement, thought it a “forehead-smiting idea”
and wondered “why didn’t I think of it first?” (Barth 16 Feb. 1982). It was not to be: the
Johns Hopkins Press Board, which did not include Barth, rejected Lish’s manuscript
(Barth 15 June 1982). 22 Lish’s query made sense, both because Lish had published Barth
while at Esquire and, more importantly, because Barth was generally sympathetic to
minimalism.

In his essay for The New York Times, “A Few Words about Minimalism,” Barth calls
the “new flowering of the (North) American short story” the “most impressive
phenomenon on the current (North American, especially the United States) literary
scene” (1). While the essay is often misread as an attack on minimalism—Barth does
chastise MFA students for defaulting to a minimalist style because they cannot compose highly-literate sentences—he places literary minimalism in a historical context that emphasizes minimalist movements in art as a corrective to the excessiveness of previous movements and pities readers too “addicted” to either “minimalism and its opposite” to “savor the other” (25). That said, we can find important similarities in the writings of Barth and Lish as both align against Gardner’s vision of literary realism. Barth and Lish use differing stylistic principles (maximalism and minimalism) to similar ends: they highlight the aesthetic dimension of narrative. Gardner is concerned with the aesthetics of narrative, but only in a manner that obscures the aesthetics. The goal of creating a dream for the reader necessitates that narrative aesthetics do not call attention to themselves, that what is artificial about narrative seems, at least during the act of reading, to be plausibly real. In contrast, Barth, through the narrative interruption of metafiction, and Lish, through the denial of a coherent ontology in the narrative, call attention to literature as a aesthetic construction. For Lish, the significance of literature as a construction may correlate to his experience as an editor since he knew well the constructive processes that literary composition requires.

IV.

That Lish tried first to place his own collection with a university press rather than a trade publisher suggests that he might have seen the limits of commercial viability for his own work since it eschews realism outright. Lish remains much more known for his editing than his fiction, but that editing often displays the same literary concerns found his stories. In particular, his editing of Raymond Carver reflects the experimentalism of his own fiction: he erases details, particularly about characters, that may be necessary for
the reader to fully understand the story. Those erasures, however, only temper the
classical realism of the stories—they never reach the ontological uncertainty found in
Lish’s fiction. Instead, Carver’s published stories express epistemological uncertainties
that reinforce and even develop a sense of mystery within the stories without fully
disrupting the reader’s engagement with them.

Lish’s editing of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* has attracted less attention than
*What We Talk About*, perhaps because the final edits were less dramatic. The stories in
*Will You Please* had found initial publication in periodicals, often thanks to Lish; the
typescripts of the stories show that Lish played a major part in shaping them. Lish had
long been an advocate for Carver, and had sought to place numerous Carver stories in
*Esquire* while editing its fiction. Lish’s attempts to publish Carver met mixed success,
largely because of disagreements with *Esquire’s* editor-in-chief, Harold Hayes. Hayes
outright rejected Carver’s story “Fat,” the first story Carver sent to *Esquire* (Sklennicka
186). Lish disagreed, thinking that story, as well as the second story Carver sent,
“Neighbors,” were, according to his marginalia, “great stories” and he threatened to “lay
down and croak” if neither was accepted (“The Neighbors” 2). *Esquire* did publish
“Neighbors,” while Lish used his connections to pass along “Fat” to *Harper’s Bazaar*
where it found publication (Polsgrove 241). Lish’s commitment to Carver’s stories, both
in advocating for them at *Esquire* and publishing them at McGraw-Hill (and
subsequently, at Knopf), is the primary reason Carver found success at all. Determining
personal motives is a suspect activity at best, but Lish’s commitment to Carver may have
been the result of Carver’s diffidence: Carver wanted success and was willing to subsume
his authority—and indeed his authorship—to Lish. In Carver, Lish had a writer whose
stories he could shape and a friend who was willing to defer to his judgments.

Lish’s editing of the stories that would appear in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* are as heavy-handed as those in *What We Talk About* although arguably less transformative. Both Lish and Carver were near the beginning of their careers and seeking to gain reputations, but neither was yet to master his craft. The typescript for “Fat,” the earliest story sent to Lish at *Esquire*, reveals the extent of Lish’s edits. “Fat,” which Lish received in 1970, is a formative story in the Lish-Carver relationship: the original version shows Carver’s talents at crafting a story with minimal plot, while the edits show Lish shaping Carver’s narrative into a proto-minimalistic framework.

The story’s plot remains unchanged between the Carver and Lish versions, with Lish’s editing focused primarily on the narrative discourse. The story features a waitress telling her friend, Rita, about an obese man who came to dine at the restaurant. After discussing the man’s dinner, the waitress reveals that when Rudy, the restaurant’s cook and the waitress’s lover, makes love to her, she feels fat. Rita is unconcerned about this and the story ends with the waitress telling herself “My life is going to change, I can feel it” (9). Lish’s editing is notable for two sets of decisions. First, he changes the story from past to present tense, which gives the narrative a conversational tone reflective of its status as an oral recounting of events. Second, Lish chooses to remove details that Carver has included to establish the verisimilitude of the story.

Carver’s original introduction to the man reads as follows:

He was the fattest person I’d ever seen outside of the movies, and I had to stop a minute to stare at him. His head was big and shaggy, though he was neat appearing and well dressed. But everything about him was big, his ears, his nose, even his lips.
His fingers especially got to me. When I stopped at the table near his to see to the old couple I had seated there, I looked over at his fingers holding onto the menu. They looked two or three times the size of a normal person’s fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers. (1)

Lish shortens the paragraph substantially:

This fat man is the fattest I’d ever seen. He is neat appearing and well dressed. Everything about him is big even if it is his fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person’s fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers. (1)

Excised by Lish are explanatory phrases about the man (the largest seen “outside of the movies”) and the old couple (who the waitress "had seated there”) as well as physical details about the man (“his ears, his nose, even his lips”). While alluding to characters from film or noting who sat the old couple at a table is perhaps irrelevant to the story and thus understandably excisable, the details Lish eliminates about the man are arguably those that help the reader to picture him. Gardner’s precept that the writer “encourages the reader to ‘dream’ the event with enormous clarity, by presenting as many concrete details as possible” would seem to insist that Carver’s description should remain.

Carver’s description is perhaps imprecise, but reasonably so: stating that the ears, nose and lips of the man are “big” is inexact though consistent with a narrative voice bereft of literary flourishes. The most striking detail in Carver’s description is the fingers, and Carver’s original version highlights this—the “long, thick, creamy fingers” description is Carver’s own. By excising the other details, Lish further emphasizes the fingers, making them not only the man’s most important feature, but also the only bodily
detail the reader knows about the man. The compression of detail effectively places more pressure on the fingers to provide the lasting image of the man in the reader’s dream; the strangeness of the “long, thick, creamy” description of them stands out stronger since they are the only visual cue the story gives the reader.

Lish’s editing of “Fat” works to cut the story down by paring any detail or event that could be thought excessive. Carver’s sentences ramble less in Lish’s edited version, and the story begins to develop a staccato rhythm that will predominate the prose style of *What We Talk About*. The story remains essentially the same, however, with Carver’s writing made arguably more focused by Lish. Ironically perhaps since Lish performed most of the cutting in Carver’s stories, within a year of editing “Fat,” Lish would write a recommendation letter for Carver to teach a poetry workshop at the University of California at Santa Cruz wherein he would call Carver “a carver, onomatologic notion intended” (Hall undated). In the same letter, he would declare Carver “by disposition a poet first and finally,” largely dismissing Carver’s talents as a fiction writer. Given the context—Carver was seeking a position to teach poetry—Lish’s dismissal may have been rhetorical. To take the claim seriously, though, sheds some light on Lish’s editing practices with Carver. Lish treats Carver’s stories essentially as poems: the linguistic compression he gives them places heavy emphasis on word choice and turns of phrase. While scholars have noted the short story’s compression of language to be more reminiscent of poems than of novels, Lish’s editing of Carver’s stories pushes such a comparison further by compressing details to an extreme that radically curtails narrative discourse.

That said, Carver’s stories, even post-Lish edits, remain in the realist tradition. While
Lish’s stories create ontological quandaries that call into question the worlds created within them, Carver’s stories profess verisimilitude and do not violate Gardner’s prohibitions about breaking the reader’s dream—the worlds created remain untainted by narrative trickery. That is not to say, however, that Lish’s edits do not affect the worlds created. On a stylistic level, Lish shortens sentences and disrupts transitions, creating effects in Carver’s stories that Just recognizes as “syntactic strategies” that “result in a story of stuttering slowness,” and that produce “an overall impediment to the act of reading” (312). The paring away of details undercut a sense of place and of character in the stories, and the motivations driving the characters are often rendered opaque. Mostly however, Lish’s edits cause epistemological disruptions that function to create a sense of mystery in the stories and it is this sense of mystery that becomes their hallmark and, arguably, adds to their popular appeal.

Lish had a great influence on Carver’s early stories, but that influence escalated with What We Talk About. Upon reception of what would be Lish’s final edits that massively overhauled the stories, Carver expressed revulsion and wrote to Lish that “I’ve got to pull out of this one” (July 8, 1980). That letter, the longest letter from Carver in the Lish collection, has become notorious in Carver studies for its pleading: in it Carver expresses his personal connections to the stories as stemming from his sobriety, worries that people have read previously published versions of the stories and would recognize major differences, begs forgiveness from Lish for asking him to stop production, and offers that his “very sanity is on the line here.” Sklenicka finds the letter “a lovable and awful performance” as he attempts to “explain himself with characteristic alcoholic self-blame and need for approval” (358). After apparently speaking to Lish on the phone the day
after sending the letter and learning that Lish would not restore the stories (359), Carver’s attitude toward the collection changed dramatically.

Two days after asking Lish to pull the book, Carver declared its new, minimalized form “a beauty for sure. It’s simply stunning, it is, and I’m honored and grateful for your attentions to it”; he proclaimed himself “thrilled with this book and that you’re bringing it out with Knopf” (July 10, 80). To publish with Knopf, among the most prestigious of literary houses, might have been too much for Carver to refuse, although he made two suggestions to Lish in regards to story specifics: he wanted “Herb McGuinness,” the cardiologist in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” changed to either Doug or “something else more Scotsman like” on account of his having a doctor friend named Herb McDonald, and he wanted the final lines of “Gazebo” that read “In this, too, she was right” restored. Lish acquiesced to both demands: the cardiologist in “What We Talk About” appears as Mel McGuiness, and “Gazebo” ends with Carver’s lines.

Carver’s requested changes are minuscule in light of Lish’s outright rewriting of What We Talk About. To take an informative, if most extreme, example, Lish cut the story “Where Is Everyone?” by about seventy percent and retitled it “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit.” Carver points directly to this story in his initial response to Lish, writing “I would not want ‘Mr. Fixit’ (Where is Everyone [sic]) in the book in its present state” (July 8, 80). The original version was in press at TriQuarterly, whose editors had submitted it to the O. Henry Award jury (Collected 997), and Carver’s desire to drop the story reflects his fear that versions would be compared.

The story, one senses, was also deeply personal to Carver. Written after achieving sobriety, “Where Is Everyone?” details the intertwining lives of three alcoholics: the
narrator, his wife Cynthia, and her lover Ross. The story is primarily a character study, with the narrator recalling a time about three years before the narration when depressed by his marital situation, he goes to his mother’s to stay a few nights. At the beginning of the story, he walks up the stairs to find his mother “on the sofa kissing a man” (Collected 761),²⁵ so he leaves. At the end of the story, he drives to his house but does not find Cynthia’s car there. He then calls his mother from a bar (he does not appear to have been drinking), and she invites him over for dinner. He comes over, puts on his deceased father’s pajamas, tells his mother about Cynthia’s affair and finds himself at the story’s conclusion on the couch watching television. On the screen is a war program with tanks and flamethrowers, but the man falls asleep only to awake “with a start, the pajamas damp with sweat. A snowy light filled the room. There was a roaring coming at me. The room clamored. I lay there. I didn’t move” (771). The story thus ends ominously, the narrator shaken by some unknowable force threatening him. Since the third paragraph of the story announces that “A lot has happened” since the events of the story and “on the whole things are better now,” we know that however ominously the story ends, that ending seems to signal a new beginning. It is difficult given Carver’s biography and the focus of the story to not read the ending as suggestive of an alcoholic reaching the lowest point before recovery and to understand its bleakness as tempered by the possibility of redemption.

The visit to the mother serves as the framing action for the character study portion of Carver’s story that accounts for about ninety-percent of the prose. We learn about Ross, an “unemployed aerospace engineer” his wife met at Alcoholics Anonymous, who had been married twice, shot in the leg by his first wife who also had him in court or jail
every six months or so for back child support. Ross, a graduate of the California Polytechnic Institute, had worked at NASA during the Apollo program but “fortune’s wheel turned and Ross’s drinking increased. He began missing work. Somewhere then the troubles with his first wife started. Toward the end he began taking the drink to work with him in a thermos” (767). After losing his job because of his alcoholism, Ross kept drinking and “commenced working on ruined appliances and doing TV repair work and fixing cars” (767). Though in love with Cynthia, Ross had impregnated a twenty-two year-old named Beverly; his two previous children named in the narrative (he had five or six in all), Katy and Mike, were teenage ne’er-do-wells and Ross believed Mike’s only chance for success was to join the service (766).

Ross is not treated unsympathetically in the story, despite what appears to be his general uselessness. While he tries to repair broken objects, his abilities were lacking: he “couldn’t manage to tune my wife’s car properly or fix our TV set when it broke down and we lost picture” (762). The narrator would “drink and make some crack joke to my kids about Mr. Fixit” (762), for the narrator “used to make fun of him when I had the chance” (767). Such denigrations of Ross were in the past, however. At the time of narration, the narrator’s opinion of Ross has changed. “God bless and keep you, Ross,” the narrator says, “I don’t hold anything against you now” (767). Earlier, the narrator makes a more strident statement of exoneration, stating “Ross, you son of a bitch, I hope you’re okay now. I hope things are better for you too” (762). The implications of the narrator’s reversal of opinion about Ross help explain why Ross is such a central figure in the story: the narrator, who the story implies is now sober, has delivered a forgiveness narrative to make amends for his past.
“Where Is Everyone?” is thus the story of an alcoholic in recovery wishing the best for another alcoholic. Sobriety and retrospection have allowed the narrator to cease negative judgments about Ross, to identify his own alcoholism as the cause of his initial harshness to another. The narrative presents much of Ross’s backstory because the narrative seeks to develop Ross as a complicated character in his own right; the story is about the narrator’s relationship to Ross and this relationship is symptomatic of his former life as a drunkard. That the narrator is in recovery casts the story in a positive light: the events recounted do not reflect the current state of the narrator. The context of alcohol recovery helps explain Carver’s personal connection to the material. Sklenicka notes that the story serves as a transition between Carver’s earlier and later writing, concluding that Carver “eschews distancing techniques and writes from a male, first-person point of view; by pulling the story close to himself, he’s able to show just how fragmented his life has become” (349). Sklenicka misses that the story is narrated by a recovering alcoholic, but seems correct to establish the personal stakes Carver had in the story—the narrator and Carver may have experienced quite similar circumstances.

The closeness between narrator and Carver helps account for his initial reaction to Lish’s version. Lish’s editing of “Where Is Everyone?” into “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” alters the story substantially and does away with much of the forgiveness narrative central to Carver’s version. Lish changes Cynthia’s name to Myrna, but more importantly, he excises the vast majority of Ross’s background, leaving only those aspects that cast him in a negative light, which is compounded by the brevity of details and sentence structures in Lish’s version. The physical description of Ross in Carver’s narrative is tempered with sympathy: “I never met the man, though we talked on the
phone a few times. I did find a couple of pictures of him once when I was going through my wife’s purse. He was a little guy, not too little, and he had a moustache and was wearing a striped jersey, waiting for a kid to come down the slide” (761). The photograph in Carver’s description creates distance between the narrator and Ross that softens the narrator’s contempt; that softening is expanded by the **pathos** of Ross waiting for a child to come down the slide. Ross’s size makes him unthreatening, but the undercurrent of fatherhood suggests he is, despite his alcoholism, a decent person. Lish shortens the description and changes the outfit: “Ross was a little guy. But not too little. He had a moustache and always wore a button-up sweater” (*Collected* 231). The assertion that Ross “always wore a button-up sweater” expresses a familiarity that Carver’s narrator lacks; Lish’s narrator has apparently seen Ross in the flesh on numerous occasions. There is no child or photograph to temper Ross’s description and rather than a jersey, Ross now wears a button-up sweater, although the impact of this sartorial shift is not immediately evident.

The sweater is referenced later in Lish’s version when the narrator mentions Ross’s younger lover. Carver’s presentation of Beverly, the twenty-two year old who Ross impregnated, works to humanize Ross. Carver’s Ross tells Cynthia that they are no longer sleeping together but she was “carrying his baby and he loved all his children, even the unborn, and he couldn’t just give her the boot could he? He wept when he told all this to Cynthia. He was drunk” (766). Lish cuts Carver’s words, and cuts to the chase: Ross “also had a little something on the side—a twenty-two-year-old named Beverly. Mr. Fixit did okay for a little guy who wore a button-up sweater” (232). Carver’s Ross has some moral values—he loves his children—and in a drunken state this fact makes him
vulnerable, hence the weeping. Lish’s Ross is more of a scoundrel, still apparently sleeping with Beverly, despite the sweater that the reader now understands should be mocked.

The mocking tone of “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit” separates it from “Where Is Everyone.” Lish’s narrator remains largely unrepentant. Although he professes to “wish him well now” (231), and that “I used to make fun of him when I had the chance. But I don’t make fun of him anymore” (232), the narrative complicates these claims. Such complication emerges at the sentence level. Lish shortens Carver’s sentences, ridding them of clauses and making them declarative. Carver’s single sentence “He was a little guy, not too little, and he had a moustache and was wearing a striped jersey, waiting for a kid to come down the slide” becomes three sentences for Lish: “Ross was a little guy. But not too little. He had a moustache and always wore a button-up sweater” (231). The commas in Carver’s sentence soothe while the periods in Lish’s sentences pound. As Enrico Monti has noted, the “breadth of some narrative passages in [Carver’s] original stories became a syncopated and fragmented rhythm in the published collection” (61), and, in this case, the syncopations function to unsettle the reflective voice of Carver’s original narrator. Lish’s narrator retains the anger that Carver’s has let slip away.

Nowhere do Lish’s edits change Carver’s story more than its conclusion. Rather than returning to his mother’s at the end, the narrator goes home where his wife Myrna makes him coffee. The story ends not with the narrator awakening from sleep at his mother’s, but with a scene between him and his wife: “‘Honey,’ I said to Myrna the night she came home. ‘Let’s hug awhile and then you fix us a real nice supper.’ Myrna said, ‘Wash your hands’” (231). Lish’s ending is enigmatic where Carver’s is ominous. First, it is unclear
whether the night referenced is the same night the narrator came home after leaving his
mother kissing a man or if some time has elapsed. Second, unlike Carver’s ending that,
taken in the recovery context of the story, suggests hope for the future, Lish’s ending
suggests that little will change in the narrator and Myrna’s life except a possible
acceptance of Myrna’s infidelity. Myrna’s command to wash hands appears to function in
two ways: it is an acceptance of the narrator’s request (to wash hands for dinner) but the
phrasing also implies that she wishes the narrator to move on (to wash one’s hands of her
and her infidelity). The ending presents two interpretative possibilities that while
simultaneous are not easily, or possibly, resolvable. Either Myrna’s command signifies
that their lives will proceed without change or else it signifies that their lives will alter.
Although the time of narration and the events narrated differ by three years, unlike in
Carver’s version, it is unclear in “Mr. Coffee” whether the narrator has sobered up. If he
has, then his lingering animosity towards Ross insinuates that the recovery has been a
mixed success.

The difficulty in interpreting the end of Lish’s version has implications beyond
reaching conclusions about the story itself and that reveals the differing literary goals of
Lish and Carver. In Carver’s story, the narrator has motivation for telling the story: he is
a recovering alcoholic making amends with his past. Lish’s narrator has no such
motivation: the narrative exists as if to spite Ross regardless of the narrator’s contrary
claims, but the reason for its existence, the need for the narrator to tell the story, has been
excised. Lish’s excision of the narrator’s motivation undermines the didactic or even
moral elements of Carver’s version. That much of the fiction associated with Lish
appeared to contemporary reviewers as exercises in style that betrayed realist fiction’s
commitment to the social imperatives finds expression in Sven Birkerts’s hatchet job, “School of Lish.” Birkerts, writing against the lack of “intelligence, moral seriousness and relentlessness” he finds in minimalist fiction, posits that if “fiction is to survive as something more than a coterie sport, it must venture something greater than a passive reflection of fragmentation and unease” (33). For Birkerts, minimalism was style sans substance and a misstep in literary evolution. Birkerts’s polemic ignores an important fact: minimalism, and Raymond Carver in particular, were popular. Readers apparently wanted passive reflections of fragmentation and unease, and writers found inspiration in the innovative narrative techniques they found in Carver’s published stories.

Sklenicka asserts that one “cannot deny—indeed there is no reason to deny—the powerful impact” of What We Talk About as a collection, that it takes Edgar Allen Poe’s argument that short stories should aim for a single effect and stretches that effect across the entirety of the collection (367). That effect is largely one of unease, but it is an unease caused by epistemological uncertainty. Lish’s paring down of Carver’s stories, as seen in “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” works to excise events, details, and, most importantly, character motivations that would allow for closure and interpretative certainties. The reader can sense that significant details are being omitted, that a mystery lies at the heart of the stories, but Lish’s edits work to make those mysteries unsolvable. The stories unsettle because the dreams they produce in their reading are anxiety dreams, dreams in which a monster may lurk outside the door but the dreamers cannot be certain since they have no evidence of such a presence except that they suspect it is there. The sense given by the stories in What We Talk About is that they are surrounded by such intangible presences, the textual absence of which unnerves.
V.

While *What We Talk About* proved popular, initial reviews were mixed and the critical backlash to minimalism was immediately apparent. Notable among the harsh reviews was James Atlas’s trashing of the collection in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Atlas declared the lives depicted in the collection as “narrow, starved of context. One knows virtually nothing about these people: where they’re from, what they look like, what they do for a living. They inhabit a featureless landscape” (96). Atlas desired a return to description, a more traditionally realist presentation of stories. Unknown to Atlas was that what he wanted was Carver’s original versions, for it is largely Lish that decontextualized the stories and removed from them the details that would give them the breadth Atlas calls for. Yet, the impact of the collection upon readers and, significantly, on writers suggests that the formal innovations of the collection, the very lack of contexts, the mystery that remains in the stories, were recognized and desired. In the second edition of Ann Charter’s creative writing classroom staple *The Story and Its Writer* (1987), she introduces Carver noting that his “skillful, quiet voice is a strong influence on a generation of young writers, making him America’s preeminent contemporary short story author” (1096). The stories she includes, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and “Why Don’t You Dance,” both come from *What We Talk About*, although his later and more narratively expansive collection *Cathedral* (1983) had been published. That Charters includes stories from what was perceived as Carver’s most minimalistic period for an anthology aimed at undergraduate students indicates the extent to which the “preeminent contemporary short story” writer’s fame and influence was bound in minimalism.
Carver’s marketplace success did not necessarily mean his influence would extend into the academy. Creative writing programs by and large did not, for instance, pursue the postmodern play of Thomas Pynchon despite the market success of his novels. Instead, outside of a few exceptions such as the program at Johns Hopkins (led by John Barth), creative writing programs have promoted a traditional mode of literary realism in their choices of exemplary texts for study and in their expectations for student productions. The pedagogical value of Carver’s stories rests in their uncertain position between traditional realism and innovative literary performance. The realist base of Carver’s original stories remains despite Lish’s edits, but Lish’s edits give the stories a mode of expression that makes the stories seem novel.

Given creative writing’s programmatic commitment to Pound’s “make it new” dictum that Carver himself references (“On Writing” 89), Carver and Lish’s minimalism provided an example of innovative possibilities for both realist literature and the short story form that had become ubiquitous in writing workshops. What tempered that innovation, or at least made it acceptable to programs that rejected most avant-garde impulses, was that the stories remained essentially realist: although Atlas might complain about the lack of contexts and details in the stories, enough of those remain intact for them to serve as useful exemplary texts. In fact, since Lish has whittled the stories down to a few notable details that are forced through linguistic compression to carry greater weight, the stories may become even greater pedagogical tools. The stories brevity—both in general and in detail—allows them to be broken down more easily for students who can see the techniques on display with greater clarity than in stories where those techniques are hidden in linguistic excess.

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If Lish has cut Carver’s stories down to their essence, to the few crucial details that can convey some sense of literary message, then it should be emphasized that Carver’s raw material matters. Carver’s success as a realist writer, as one who offers an accumulation of unique details to create a feeling of verisimilitude, provided Lish with a rich source for his own creative act. That the stories remained recognizably realistic, that they possess characters whose motivations might be opaque but who seem nevertheless to have motivations, allows the stories to both endear themselves to and challenge readers. The stories seem traditional and novel, recognizable yet mysterious. Those attributes help explain their importance to literary history. Before the rise of minimalism, the short story form was at a crossroads. Realist modes of narrative had grown stale, while the popularity of experimental modes was waning. In the unique combination of a realist writer’s stories with an experimental writer’s editorship, the short story form appeared revived, vital even, and readers, writers, and creative writing programs took note.

Perhaps more important than the specific stylistic innovations of minimalism is what such innovations represented to the short story form. Although Carver was a commercial success—and such success was undoubtedly inspirational to aspiring writers—minimalism concentrated on the aesthetics of short stories rather than their commercial potential. Both Carver and Lish were consciously concerned about the artistic possibilities inherent in the short story as a literary form. Even critics adverse to minimalism couched their critiques in aesthetic terms: rather than concentrate on the subject matter of the stories, they largely expressed concerns over the stylistic presentation of that subject. With the emergent academic market for short stories stressing the aesthetic value of stories over their commercial appeal, minimalism’s
suggestion that short stories could exist primarily as art objects shifted conceptions of the form. Although not all writers of short stories in creative writing programs would follow its tenets, minimalism asserted that experimentation in story composition was an option they could pursue.
Chapter Three: The Stories of Lorrie Moore

I.

As influential as minimalism was among MFA students, it presented only one manner of aesthetic innovation for the short story form. Lorrie Moore’s first collection, *Self-Help* (1985), offered linguistic compression as palpable as Carver’s stories, but that compression came from a comic rather than realist tradition of literature. Although originally written as an MFA thesis directed by Alison Laurie at Cornell, the collection little resembles most MFA program fiction at the level of form. The majority of the stories in the collection use second person narration in order to parody the self-help genre; the book, according to Moore, “attempted to satirize formally the idea of advice and a culture of advice, at the same time borrowing from a poetic tradition an intimate second-person address” (Gaffney, “Lorrie Moore”). In a glowing *New York Times* review, Jay McInerney found that the parody “of the self-help rap becomes surprisingly flexible and effective in Miss Moore’s hands” with “the narrative voice modulating between a generalized second person and a richly detailed indicative.” Just twenty-eight years old when *Self-Help* was published and already a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Moore epitomizes literary accomplishment in the MFA era: a writer who spent her apprenticeship in the safety of the university, found a career as a writing workshop instructor, and achieved recognition beyond the university through the popularity of her work with the reading public.

The choice of McInerney to review the book is itself indicative: a former student of Raymond Carver at Syracuse, thirty-year old McInerney was at the time the literary It-Boy after his novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), brought him instant fame. The
awareness that both Moore and McInerney show about the narrative address of the stories suggests that despite their youth, they possessed nuanced understandings of story structure and its formal elements. While experienced as writers, they were also experienced thinking about and talking about the decisions writers make in composing fiction: they were, in short, disciplined not only as writers but also into the modes of discussion found in creative writing programs.

Self-Help exists in a dual position, at once a satire of a certain strain of literary culture (the self-help industry) and a production of a different strain of that culture (creative writing programs). Those two cultures are not incompatible. Audiences for self-help books and literary works may overlap to some degree, but more importantly, they both reflect deeper cultural shifts: a turn towards the self, both as an aesthetic construction and as a vehicle for possible expression. In this chapter, I explore how in Self-Help the tension between self-expression and creative writing disciplinarity becomes resolved within an aestheticized self. I offer a reading of the story “How to Be an Other Woman” that identifies the protagonist as a self in need of help and then turn to an examination of the claims of John Aldridge and Christopher Lasch that present related crises in literature and the self. I then survey the history of advice literature and incorporate into it writing guides that conflate writing and the self. Finally, in a reading of two Moore stories, “Go Like This” and “How to Become a Writer,” I argue that Moore presents an aesthetic self—a self in a state of artistic self-creation—as an ideal borne from the tension between self-expression and artistic discipline.

I.

The first story in Self-Help, “How to Be an Other Woman,” introduces the formal and
thematic concerns that Moore will explore throughout the collection. The story uses second person narration to trace the sexual relationship between its protagonist, Charlene, and her lover, an unnamed and married systems analyst. The story is highly allusive to literature and other arts: the two meet “in expensive beige raincoats, on a pea-soupy night. Like a detective movie,” and proceed to circle and gauge each other “in primordial sniffs, eyeing, sidling, keen as Basil Rathbone” (3). While the story invokes film noir and Sherlock Holmes on its first page, the story appears at first to have little in common with detective narratives and more immediately in common with the allusions on its second page that finds Charlene reading a classic tale of adultery, Madame Bovary, wrapped in the jacket of a biography of Pillow Talk’s Doris Day. Yet Moore’s prose is notably controlled and allusions are never haphazard. As the story proceeds and traces the relationship between Charlene and her lover it becomes clear that the epistemological basis of detective stories—the reader’s quest alongside the protagonist to uncover knowledge—serves a metaphor for romantic relationships.

Charlene slowly learns more about her lover. He is married to an intellectual property attorney named Patricia. He is not particularly good at systems analysis because he is not “an organized person” (5). His medicine cabinet contains Midol, emory boards, two tubes of toothpaste, and “three small bars of Cashmere Bouquet stolen from a hotel” (12). Patricia, Charlene learns at the story’s climax, is not actually his wife: she is another mistress and he is married to woman named Carrie (21). The revelation that Patricia is a mistress, not a wife, serves on one hand as a detective story-like plot-twist in a narrative not all that concerned with plot and, on the other hand, as a traditional short story epiphanic moment that sees Charlene realize the relationship is bad for her.
Moore’s weaving of two distinct story genres—detective fiction and Joycean epiphanic fiction—into the resolution of “How to Be an Other Woman” showcases her use of duality as formal principle in the collection. Double entendres (risqué and not) abound in *Self-Help* seen, for instance, in Moore’s obsession with puns. In “How to Be an Other Woman,” Moore reuses a pun on “leisure suits” three times, its meaning altering in new contexts. The first use is found on a pack of matches Charlene gives the analyst: “Lucky’s Lounge—Where Leisure Is a Suit” (3). Here, the pun is sartorial, mixing the meaning of “lounge” as a drinking establishment with “lounge” as “lounge suit,” and compounding the “lounge suit” reference with “leisure suit.” Later, when Charlene asks what intellectual property law is, the analyst jokingly tells her that it is where “leisure is a suit” (4). Leisure in this pun references leisure activities—reading a book—while pointing to the book’s status as a text owned by its copyright holder that legal suits may be waged against. The final pun recalls the second: when asked what a copyright convention is, the analyst replies, “Where leisure is a suit and a suite” (10). The addition of “suite” keeps the original intellectual property joke intact while adding a reference to hotel rooms. Significantly, the joke about hotel rooms is made while the analyst is taking Charlene to his apartment for the first time. The story details his apartment with its “L-shaped living room bursting with plants and gold-framed posters announcing exhibitions you are too late for by six years” (10), and because of the break-up that ends the story, the story suggests a link between the transience of hotel rooms and the transience of lovers’ beds.

The prior puns likewise carry symbolic weight, in particular due to their references to the cultural commodities of fashion and books. Art objects in the story are not produced,
but consumed. Charlene’s relationship with the analyst begins by consuming cultural artifacts: they watch movies, attend concerts, and visit a museum where he leads her “through the Etruscan cinerary urns with affectionate gestures and an art history minor from Columbia” (4). The dates are less about engaging with culture so much as accumulating cultural capital that is cashed in for intercourse, such that after “four movies, three concerts, and two-and-a-half museums, you sleep with him. It seems the right number of cultural events” (4). Like cultural events, clothes play an important role in establishing the relationship. Charlene and the analyst both wear beige raincoats upon meeting and continue to during liaisons at Charlene’s apartment where they “lie sprawled on the living room floor” with their “expensive raincoats still on” (5). After the analyst falls asleep the first night in his apartment with Charlene, she immediately slips away from him to investigate Patricia’s closet, where she finds “beige blouses and a lot of brown things” as well as various shoes such as black pumps, blue sneakers, brown moccasins, and brown T-straps (11). As with the cultural events (and the contents of the medicine cabinet, which are delivered in a list), clothes here are about accumulation and are presented to the reader through accumulating words. It seems no coincidence that the analyst appears to be accumulating lovers, or that Charlene finds herself accumulating lovers as well when she begins to date a banker named Mark while still engaging in the affair with the analyst.

After her first date with Mark, Charlene tells the analyst that they went to see a Godard movie, and the analyst, rather than acting jealous, tells Charlene that she “should be doing things like that once in a while” (19). After Charlene leaves the analyst for good, she continues to see Mark, to whom she sends a birthday card. The story is unclear
whether Charlene and Mark have a promising future, although it hints that they do not.
The end of story finds the analyst calling Charlene at work to ask how she is. She stares out a window and, as she “always, always” does, tells him she is “Fine” (22). She is not really fine. A sense of psychological despair intrudes throughout the story, captured in sentences such as “Love drains from you, takes with it much of your blood sugar and water weight. You are like a house slowly losing its electricity, the fans slowing, the lights dimming and flickering” (21). Such despair remains at the story’s conclusion: the events of the story are ultimately unhappy, the comedy of its narrative discourse tempered by the sadness it presents in Charlene.

Charlene is, in pop psychology parlance, unfulfilled. She is unhappy with her life and her vocation as a secretary, which, she jokes, is more “like a sedentary” (19). Writing a list, Charlene notes that she is “Out of control” before questioning herself: “Who is this? Who am I?” (13). The identity crisis, Charlene implies, would end if she had “something to lift you from your boots out into the sky, something to make you like little things again, to whirl around the curves of your ears and muss up your hair and call you every single day,” something like a drug, or a man, or a religion, or a good job (13). Notably, the things she lists that might bring her fulfillment are all external to her self; they would alter her life by forcing changes to it, but the story offers little evidence that such changes would benefit Charlene. Neither her relationship with the married analyst nor her relationship with Mark appears to fulfill her any more than the consumption of cultural goods and events appear to make her happy. Of all the formal dualities found in Self-Help, the most important is also in many ways the most obvious: it is a collision of self-help literature and short fiction. While Moore acknowledges that the self-help aspects are
an attempt to “satirize formally the idea of advice and a culture of advice,” the collection is not exactly parodic. The characters throughout the stories in Self-Help are much like Charlene: they live lives of quiet (or not-so-quiet) desperation and seek out ways to better themselves. They are, in short, the kinds of characters who might well seek advice from self-help manuals.

Moore’s characters, often young, female, and living in New York City in the early 1980s, are recognizably part of their milieu. The concerns and fears they express seem drawn directly from the cultural zeitgeist they (and the collection itself) participate in. Charlene, the story implies, will never find self-satisfaction in the accumulation of material goods. The emptiness she feels is compounded by her lifestyle choices. When asked what she would want to be, she replies “what I really should have been is a dancer” (19), and, given the sense of an aesthetic self—one for whom life and art conflate—that will emerge in the collection, becoming a dancer may have been the correct decision for Charlene.

Instead of producing culture, Charlene consumes it, and the crisis of the self she experiences as a stunting of personal growth despite her desire to grow the self, situates well within a context of contemporaneous indictments about a version of the self that emerged in a post-1960s America. While a perceived crisis of the self helped to generate an expansion of the self-help industry, literary writing was sometimes understood as experiencing a crisis brought on in part by the rise of creative writing programs. Self-Help presents a response to both of those supposed crises by rendering visible the interconnections between them. In order to make clear Self-Help’s response, I will now lay out the contexts of both supposed crises, starting with literature before turning to the
crisis of the self and establishing connections between them that Moore’s collection will further make clear.

II.

Following in the wake of both modernism’s novelistic accomplishments and postmodernism’s ambitious responses, critics sometimes viewed the Short Story Renaissance as a waning of literary aspiration. In *Talents and Technicians* (1992), John Aldridge’s spirited denunciation of the previous decade’s trends in American fiction, he finds a general lack of ambition in writers and their work: “A significant number of the newer writers are remarkable for the magnitude of their differences from their immediate predecessors,” which might be expected, but Aldridge argues that the newer writers continue to be notable more for what they are not than for what they are. Not only do they seem unable or unwilling to take the large imaginative risks required to carry forward the modern experimentalist tradition, but nowhere in their work does one find more than cursory reference to issues that were such a major concern and constituted such a vital topical dimension of the fiction of Pynchon, Vonnegut, Mailer, Heller, Gaddis, and some other of the older literary generation. (35)

Aldridge’s is a complaint about decreased literary importance, but he frames it in terms of greater cultural shifts. Writers such as Mailer, Heller and Gaddis “had the advantage over their younger contemporaries” since they lived through “certain crucial events—the Depression, the second war, the anti-Communist hysteria of the Eisenhower-McCarthy era, the imminence of nuclear holocaust” that “touched and disrupted their personal lives” (37). Whether or not living through social upheaval represents an “advantage” is highly debatable and has a problematic implication that literature must engage with
reality, of interest is Aldridge’s claim that the events in fiction by younger writers “seem to occur without relation to any discernible context or consciousness of history” (37). Aldridge’s assessment of fiction lacking context appears hasty at least—Raymond Carver’s fiction, for instance, seems inextricable from the lower middle class culture of the 1970s—but such criticism bears similarities to contemporaneous critiques that asserted a waning sense of historical consciousness within American culture.

Aldridge’s critique signals Jameson’s critique of the larger milieu of postmodernism as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Postmodernism ix), but it also recalls Christopher Lasch’s slightly earlier critique of the turn in the 1970s from collective social politics to individualistic concerns in The Culture of Narcissism (1979). For Lasch, the “narcissistic mood,” wherein people “live in the moment” and for themselves rather than for their “predecessors or posterity,” reflects a “waning of the sense of historical time” and, ultimately, a retreat into the self (5). Lasch is no fan of this retreat, but he understands it not as some willful error so much as a reflection of structural shifts in the social order. The growth of corporate bureaucracies, in particular, unbalanced society’s “psychic equilibrium” by demanding “submission to the rules of social intercourse” but refusing to “to ground those rules in a code of moral conduct” (12). The appropriation of social authority by capitalistic institutions, Lasch asserts, has allowed for the growth of a hedonism that need not abide traditional moral codes. Lasch abhors such hedonism, but he seems more sympathetic to than scornful of those who embrace it: people are “overwhelmed by an annihilating boredom” and “complain of an inability to feel,” causing them to “cultivate more vivid experiences, seek to beat sluggish flesh to life,
attempt to revive jaded appetites” (11). Capitalistic bureaucracy has deadened the lives of Americans, and their recourse has been, according to Lasch, to seek out experiences that will resuscitate their sense of self. While sympathetic to the reasons for an inward retreat to the self, Lasch feels this retreat is a misstep: Americans would be better served working to rearrange the social order into something more satisfactory. For Lasch, an inward turn rails not so much against as within a damaging social order.

Although Lasch controversially views the retreat inward to the self as an extremely negative shift in the American character, *The Culture of Narcissism* remains important for its assertion that such a shift was occurring (or at least was becoming recognizably pronounced). That this shift to the self prefaced the Short Story Renaissance is consequential, and not because the short story is a diminished fictional form for a time of “diminishing expectations.” The shortness of form is much more the result of institutional shifts in literary production (the rise of creative writing programs) than an intentional desire for smallness. Still, the shortness of the form is important as a vehicle for the content of the individual stories. What Aldridge and others view as diminished ambitions on the part of writers is, in a more positive light, a domestication of literary concerns during a cultural turn towards the self.

Lasch notes some of the literary repercussions of the turn towards the self, particularly as it plays out in confessional impulses. He values “the best work in this vein” because it attempts, through self-disclosure, “to achieve a critical distance from the self and to gain insight into the historical forces, reproduced in psychological form, that have made the very concept of selfhood problematic” (17). Books such as Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself* and Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, “waver between hard-
won personal revelation, chastened by the anguish with which it was gained” and a “kind of spurious confession” that charms the reader but limits deeper personal insights (18). The lack of psychological interrogation Lasch desires is replaced, he argues, by a surface-level stylistics that denies rather than invites introspection. For Lasch, such denial reaches its nadir in metafiction. In Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, the narrator stops the story to offer a survey about the progress of the story and alerts the reader to changes made from the fairy tale, which Lasch claims “demolishes the readers’ confidence in the author” (20). Similarly, Vonnegut in *Cat’s Cradle* undermines the suspension of disbelief by insisting that nothing in the story is true thus, “waiving the right to be taken seriously” while simultaneously “escaping the responsibilities that go with being taken seriously” (20). Instead of abiding to their responsibilities—Lasch does not detail what these are but hints that fiction should challenge readers to evaluate themselves and their social role—writers prefer to indulge their readers, to entertain rather than to enlighten.28

Where Lasch sees metafiction as symptomatic of a narcissism that is itself an expression of a diseased social structure, Aldridge posits minimalism’s appeal as emerging of similar social realities. Aldridge diagnoses the condition as such:

we now inhabit a society in which human relations have become increasingly ephemeral and superficial, a society, in fact, of aimless transients who are often held together by nothing more than temporary geographical propinquity and who are perhaps most notable for being as migratory emotionally as they are physically. (57)

Such transience opposes a depth of community that a more sedentary culture might muster: people dissolve social and romantic connections as they remove themselves from one relationship to begin another. The short story, Aldridge claims, blossoms under such
a milieu: while novels require a continuity between persons and places, short stories can record “fleeting and sometimes meaningless encounters among people” who are “really not together at all but tend to observe one another in a bemused, vaguely distrustful way” (57). Aldridge’s critique of minimalist short stories is fair enough: the smallness of the minimalist short story is a proper vehicle for the smallness of the experiences they deliver. Such stories offer slice-of-life narratives, but to do so, they must slice-off many of the contexts and backstories that might hint at a greater importance. Aldridge finds that such slicing goes too far; in comparing Carver unflatteringly to Hemingway, he asserts that Carver’s characters “are so meagerly developed, so little information about them is given, that one has no knowledge of their history or their psychological condition beyond the fact that they are depressed by alcoholism, unemployment or divorce” (51). While the lack of information reflects Lish’s editing perhaps more than Carver’s writing, Aldridge’s claim stands as one that urges psychological profundity rather than surface traits in characters; while Hemingway withholds, what he withholds “is what his characters are unable emotionally to confront” (51), which grants them a depth of character that minimalist authors apparently fail to create.

The lack of character depth, rather than a failing on writers’ parts, may be a product of cultural shifts. Aldridge and Lasch both hint that such may be the case, but their antipathy towards both those shifts and the characters reflective of the shifts limits their analyses. Rather than dismissing the lack of depth, I want to take seriously the possibility that the characters created by writers in the Short Story Renaissance employ a new understanding of the self, one whose interiority is chastened and that comprehends the self as a character rather than a person—an aesthetic rather than an emotional entity. Or
perhaps more precisely, a self whose possible emotional shortcomings (often, for Lorrie Moore at least, in the face of trauma) are dealt with by embracing an aesthetic existence. The turn toward the aesthetic self is seen clearly in the literature specifically designed to advise people in achieving personal success, namely, self-help books, to which I will now turn.

IV.

Books advising personal conduct have long been an important aspect of the American book industry. Cotton Mather’s religious writings helped to frame the Puritan mindset, while Benjamin Franklin’s work converted such spiritual principles into economic principles that sought financial success. Franklin’s self-made man—early rising, hard working, frugal, and prudent—became a figural mainstay of Nineteenth Century advice literature. Horatio Alger’s books built upon Franklin’s image, offering morality tales about seemingly self-made successes in industrial capitalism. Franklin and Alger’s examples seek to motivate readers to live a certain lifestyle, particularly one that will benefit them financially in a capitalist society.

Another strain of advice literature centers not so much on lifestyle, but on instruction, often practical in nature. In “Howtoism,” the cultural critic Dwight MacDonald lists dozens upon dozens of titles that he divides into two types: the practical-technical that tell how to “make something definitive, like a boat, or how to engage in some vague and general activity requiring skill, like playing poker or raising dahlias” and the “theoretical-philosophical” that tells how to make “something indefinite, like love, or how to engage in some vague and general activity, like raising children or growing old”; of the two, he gives more credence to the practical-technical since those deal “with activities in which
know-how is what is chiefly required for success” (95). While MacDonald is skeptical of
the whole enterprise, he admits some useful books exist (108), and offers an insight into
the appeal of such texts: how-to books promote a particularly American view of leisure.
He suggests that in England it was considered “a bit ungentlemanly, if not downright
shady, to do anything too well,” in America “the rising tide of howtoism” functions to
professionalize activities people should pursue “for love, or for fun, or just for the hell of
it” for “that man in the American street” is “not at all convinced that there is any higher
motive for activity than success” (86). Any activity, it follows, is only worth doing if it is
done well, but the ability to do so is dependent upon the knowledge of how to do so. Self-
help books offer instruction to make the amateur an expert; they are a printed pedagogy
affordable to all.

The mode of education found in self-help literature tends to be objective-oriented
rather than humanistic: instead of professing an enrichment of life for the sake of
enrichment, self-help books proffer that life will only be enriched after success has been
achieved. The ideology of success that underlies self-help books is often less a matter of
self-mastery and more a matter of social recognition for achievement. Perhaps the most
famous and best selling of all self-help publications, Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends
and Influence People (1936), notably offers ways to restrain self-tendencies in order to
develop rhetorical strategies for “handling people.” Carnegie, operating under the belief
that all anyone desires is to feel important, recommends subsuming your own desires—
the desire to criticize, to discuss yourself and your wants—in order to inflate the ego of
your discussant. While Carnegie insists that in making the other person feel important
you should “do it sincerely,” meaning that you should actually be interested in them and
their lives; his reasoning for this is that if you do not appear sincere the other will distrust you. Carnegie’s claim is a matter ethos, of establishing goodwill, but ethos is as much a rhetorical construction as logos and pathos. As any good politician knows, sincerity as performance often establishes ethos as much as actual sincerity. That Carnegie’s book has been criticized as manipulative obscures that his major accomplishment is offering a system for presenting ethotic appeals to engender the trust of others. Success at sociality equates to success in the world, particularly in corporate business.

In an immediate postwar period that saw an increasingly bureaucratic business culture wherein the ability to manage others rather than produce material goods through labor is the fundamental activity, Carnegie’s rhetorical self-effacement makes a certain sense. But the sublimation of one’s ego in order to persuade others easily transforms into a sublimation of the self for the corporation: if Carnegie’s formulation for success is understood as the deployment of ethos for the greater good, then a bureaucratic culture would seem to present an easy slippage from that greater good being one’s personal success and that greater good being the success of the corporation. Or rather, in a bureaucratic culture, personal success is tied inextricably to the success of the corporation—the rhetorical self presented by Carnegie transforms into a corporate self, the eponymous “organization man” of William H. Whyte’s book (1956). While Whyte decried the lack of individualism in corporate culture, C. Wright Mills’s slightly earlier study, White Collar (1951), found the new class of bureaucratic workers essentially alienated (in a more-or-less vulgar Marxist sense) from their labor. By the late-sixties, the self was understood by both the growing counterculture and the mainstream as lost in David Reisman’s “Lonely Crowd”: Carnegie’s rhetorical subservience of the self had
morphed into the other-directed man, a self understood only by its comparison to others.

If the diagnosis of cultural critics was that the self had become disaffected, then the prescription provided by self-help manuals was to bolster self-esteem. Guides such as *I’m Ok—You’re Ok* (1967) and *How to Be Your Own Best Friend* (1971) offered a means to reclaim the self: as Steven Starker has noted, such “selfist” works of pop psychology sought to grant autonomy to the self against influences that subjugated behavior, such as parental and institutional controls, in order to produce an inner rather than other-directed construction of self worth. Starker notes that the key words of such works such as “self,” “autonomy,” and “freedom of choice” appealed to many disillusioned by “middle-class suburban values, status-oriented conformity and rampant materialism” and to those hoping to reject materialism “in favor of social idealism and political action” (118). Starker’s key words, as Lasch might be quick to rejoin, do little to counter the capitalist values professed in material accumulation: the hedonism Lasch opposes requires a “freedom of choice” as well as a privileging of the self above social idealism or political action. In other words, Starker’s values do not challenge a capitalistic social system from which they emerge: the self cannot claim autonomy if it exists within, rather than from outside, capitalism.

Starker’s desire for an autonomous self that exists outside of capitalism is not unique, and sometimes compounds with the perceived autonomy given to artists and their work. While the autonomy of the artist against capitalism is arguably more a myth spawned in Romantic ideology than it is actually existent, it is a potent myth that has long held popular appeal. Given a conception of the artist as autonomous, as outside materialist capitalism, it should be no surprise that the artist could offer an attractive figure for
disillusioned people to model themselves upon. As Micki McGee has suggested, living the role of artist need not confine itself to physical productions: people can, as much self-help literature urges to them to, make their own life their work of art. By 1979, a life-as-art mentality could be seen in Shakti Gawain’s *Creative Visualizations* and Barabara Sher’s *Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want*; Gawain, for instance, writes “I like to think of myself as an artist, and my life is my greatest work of art” (qtd. in McGee 92). Such a view of life would gain more traction in self-help literature in subsequent decades, but its appeal may lie in the absolute autonomy of the self it appears to offer. If art exists outside markets, then a self that is a piece of art should exist outside those markets as well.

As appealing as a self outside the market sounds, in a society under the totalizing control of capitalism, such a self is impossible. For one, and perhaps most obviously, to live in a capitalist society requires a means to finance life and support the self. In short, most people need a job. It may be no surprise, however, that since the 1970s, an increasing number of those jobs have been in creative fields. According to Richard Florida, such growth has led to the development of a new social group, the Creative Class, which he defines as workers whose economic function is “to create new ideas, new technology and/or new creative content” (8). As of 2002, Florida estimates that creative careers compose thirty percent of all employment, or about roughly 38 million Americans, a number that had doubled since 1980 (9). Florida accounts for this growth largely through transitions in technology (especially the internet), but he insists that what unites this “class” is not necessarily income levels or similarity of employment, but lifestyle: “Because we identify ourselves as creative people, we increasingly demand a
lifestyle built around creative experiences” (13). That Florida’s use of “class” seems to have no relation to previous understandings of class structure casts doubt on his authority as a cultural critic, what interests here is more what his claims suggest than their supportability.

Florida, like David Brooks in *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), very much wants to convince us that creative work is the present and the future of economic reality, that the “no-collar” workplace “replaces traditional hierarchical systems of control” found in the corporate capitalism disparaged by Mills and Whyte. Creative workers demand not just financial compensation but also “the ability to learn and grow, shape the content of our work, control our own schedules and express our identity through work” (13). It is not only the expression of identity that Florida implies is at stake in creative work, but the development of that identity and the nurturing of the self. The lifestyle Florida believes creative workers seek appears akin to a “life-as-art” mentality.

More traditional workplaces may stunt the self or cause alienation, but they do offer trade-offs—retirement packages, health insurance, and job security. Florida notes that the Creative Class is willing to do without such benefits: creative workers “trade job security for autonomy” (13). That Florida invokes autonomy here is telling, for it reinforces the illusion that creative work exists largely outside market contexts. Likewise, the workers Florida discusses remain employed by companies and institutions. What becomes clear in Florida’s account is that a likely increasing number of Americans want to perform work that is creative and promises to provide satisfaction for the self. The barrier between self and professional identity begins to break up in such a situation: while an accountant may perhaps identify his self with his weekend leisure activity (say, a golfer or fisherman), a
writer is more likely to understand both her livelihood and her life as that of a writer even if she is employed by a university in the capacity of a professor.

The growth of creative writing programs in the past four decades is both a part of the trend of professionalized creativity Florida notes and perhaps the trend’s most realized paradigm. With their housing in universities, creative writing programs offer the illusion that their activities can be autonomous from markets. Professors, while expected to perform certain institutional duties, remain free to write largely what they please since they benefit from the intellectual freedoms solidified in the structure of tenure. An important, if secondary, role of creative writing programs is to produce more professionals to feed the growth of creative writing programs and legitimatize their existence under the umbrella of literary studies.

Critics of creative writing programs are often quick to declare the replication of creative writing programs as their defining feature, but this seems a consequential feature rather than a primary motivation. English departments have recognized the terminable MFA degree as a minimal qualification to teach creative writing at the college level, and the MFA has thus allowed many people to enjoy careers as college professors engaged in both pedagogy and literary production. The professionalization of literary production is not new to this schema—the professionalization of writing dates at least to the eighteenth century—but what is new is the number of individuals involved. The commercial market at any given time will only support a much smaller number of professional writers than writers who seek to publish and professionalize; creative writing programs do offer a means for writers to live comfortably without submitting to the whims of market success. More important is that creative writing programs have professionalized learning to write.
Successful writing requires training, whether it be in an informal apprenticeship (Hemingway under Stein), within a commercial operation (Hemingway at the Kansas City Star), or under the institutionalized guidance of a writing instructor. Some writers may be able to develop their skills on their own, but even they require some guidance from others. In the era of creative writing programs, that direction has primarily come from writers working as pedagogues in the university, but prior to the growth of creative writing programs (and higher education in general), aspiring writers often turned to the only advice they could locate: creative writing manuals.

IV.

While manuals for writing instruction were nothing new, the 1930s saw a major growth in such manuals written by—and largely for—women. As D.G. Myers has argued, such manuals granted women “access to the institutions of literary education” and broke “down the barrier of official criticism” (141). Many of these manuals, such as Dorothea Brande’s Becoming a Writer (1934) and Margaret Widdemer’s Do You Want to Write? (1937) would, as Meyers notes, “now be shelved among the self-help books” (142). Brande’s book in particular, which remains in print today, interests for the principles it espouses. She presents her guide as a corrective to classes or prior manuals that temper their advice by circumscribing themselves within the cult of genius. A would-be writer, Brande notes, will face what seems an insurmountable obstacle as he seeks out instruction from professional writers:

In the opening lecture, within the first few pages of his book, within a sentence or two of his authors’ symposium, he will be told rather shortly that ‘genius cannot taught’;
and there goes his hope glimmering […] He may never presume to call the obscure impulse to set down his picture of the world in words by the name of ‘genius,’ he may never dare to bracket himself for a moment with the immortals of writing, but the disclaimer that genius cannot be taught, which most teachers and authors seem to feel must be stated as early and as abruptly as possible, is the death-knell of his real hope.

(6)

In good self-help fashion, Brande eschews formulations of genius to proclaim, “There is a sort of writer’s magic. There is a procedure which many an author has come upon by happy accident or has worked out for himself which can, in part, be taught” (7). Brande does not entirely withdraw the concept of genius from her conversation so much as claim that “the process of making a writer is the process of teaching the novice to do by artifice what the born writer [the genius] does spontaneously” (28-9); she uses the genius more as an exemplary figure to emulate rather than as a culturally rarified construction that no ordinary person could dare approach. Even without directly challenging the notion of a “born writer,” Brande’s account of the teachability of writing is more radical than the Iowa Writer’s Workshop’s hedging that it can do little more than nurture innate talent.

The major secret that Brande offers writers is that they must “teach the unconsciousness to flow into the channel of writing” (47), a secret that may seem more mystifying than usable, but she spends the majority of the text offering practical suggestions for literary production: write on an everyday schedule; honestly critique your writing; spend time performing practice exercises to develop skills. Needless to say, Brande’s conception of a writer—at least those made, not “born”—is largely that of a person trained to do a specialized form of work. The view of writing espoused is less
inspiration, more perspiration: like creative writing programs will profess, Brande understands writing as primarily a craft or a set of technical skills that may be developed by those willing to put in the effort to succeed.

Brande’s guide largely falls into MacDonald’s “Howtowism” strain of advice literature. More contemporary advice guides for writers, such as Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1995), often mash practical advice in writing with an attention to self-development not far removed from Franklin’s lifestyle guidance or self-help literature in general. As the subtitle of Lamott’s book makes clear, the guidance she offers goes beyond literary production; she offers ways to not only to write productively, but also to live as a writer.

Using herself as a model for the writerly life, she connects her writing advice to autobiography, pop culture, and the habits of other writers she knows to present anecdotal evidence that endears her to her readership. The book’s title, for instance, comes by way of a story from her childhood about her ten year old brother struggling to write a report on birds for school: “immobilized by the task ahead” her brother was incapable of composing until their father, a professional writer, “put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird’” (19). Lamott offers the story to her readers as she does to her students because, she writes, “it usually makes a dent in the tremendous sense of being overwhelmed” and gives hope in the face of desperation. The move here to issues of desperation is illuminating, for it shows Lamott’s concerns are not exclusively with helping students and readers to simply write. She offers that writing can be a “pretty desperate endeavor” in that it “is about some of our deepest needs” such as the need to make ourselves heard, to make sense of life, and to “wake up
and feel grown and belong. It is no wonder if we sometimes tend to take ourselves perhaps a bit too seriously” (19). Lamott’s advice here transcends the task of writing and delves into pop psychology: she hopes to influence not only the productivity of her readers, but also their lives in general.

Lamott is ultimately focused less on the mercantilism of writing and more on writing as a means to self-development. Lamott dismisses publication as the proper motivation for writing: “Publication is not going to change your life or solve your problems. Publication will not make you more confident or more beautiful, and it probably will not make you any richer” (185). Instead, she advocates writing for personal reasons such as to produce a text that may be given as a present or, most importantly, as means for writers to find their “voice.” By voice, Lamott does not specifically mean a personal style—a unique method of arranging words—but a reflection of one’s inner self. She offers that we “write to expose the unexposed” and that the “writer’s job is to see what’s behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words” but a writer cannot do so “without discovering your own true voice” (198). To write in someone else’s voice would make readers suspicious, which leads Lamott to proclaim you “cannot write out of someone else’s big dark place; you can only write out of your own” (199). Lamott echoes cultural myths that art is best produced from the somber aspects of existence and this serves as the basis for the self-help aspects of her guide. The implication of Lamott’s understanding of voice is not only that we find ways to write that others have not, but also that these methods are our own personal self-expression. In order to self-express, however, we must fully understand the self. Writing provides a device for self-analysis; to find a voice requires that we know where to look.
The creative writing classroom presents an inherent tension between self-expression as both a personal and public act and the disciplining of that expression into acceptable literary forms. As Mark McGurl has argued, the task of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in its early period was to curtail self-expression by means of the self-discipline of craft as seen in the stories of Flannery O’Connor, but during the 1960s a “pedagogic rhetoric of voice” emerged that reoriented creative writing (as well as other compositional programs) back towards self-expression (234). Partially, this reorientation revealed a compatibility between romantic and modernist understandings of voice and poststructuralist sensibilities, a compatibility facilitated by a shared subjectivism: the imperative to ‘find your voice’ reverses the epistemological directionality of the imperative to write what you know (about the outside world from personal experience), shifting attention explicitly (it had always been there implicitly) to the writing subject herself as the original and ultimate source of existential authority. So seen, this could serve as an existentially celebratory form (I make my own truth) of an otherwise melodramatically bleak postmodern skepticism (there is not truth). (235)

McGurl’s parenthetical that “I make my own truth” clashes with the claim that the “writing subject herself” is the “original and ultimate source of existential authority” in so much as an original and ultimate source of authority would seem to possess some essentialist truth that exists without being constructed. Leaving the possibilities of an essentialist truth aside, the slight discord in McGurl’s claim pairs well with a life-as-artist mentality for such a view of life implies that the self is engaged in a mode of self-creation. To understand the self as a work of art requires the self to be a construction and
the task of living to be the production of that self. “I make my own truth,” in selfish terms, means “I make my own self”; the self exists as a location for aesthetic construction.

That the act of writing can lead to a construction of the self, aesthetic or otherwise, embeds it within a liberal tradition of self-development, a tradition that has difficulty meshing with the modern university’s commitments to product, scholarly or otherwise. In other words, a creative writing program must defend itself in terms of developing the productive capacities of students rather than in allowing them to grow as people. Complaints of writing programs that they lack the intellectual rigor associated with traditional literary studies, that creative writing workshops are affective environments dedicated to improving students’ self-esteem rather than instructing students in objectively defensible techniques, reflect in some manner the perceived role of the academic institution in the lives of (primarily) young adults.34

The accusations of creative writing naysayers hold a certain amount of truth, especially at an undergraduate level (graduate level workshops tend to be more competitive and, consequently, can damage psyches as much as nurture them): creative writing workshops likely are more emotionally open environments than other classroom spaces. Indeed, the central tension of creative writing classrooms between self-expression and self-discipline may well necessitate at least a performative affectivity, but, perhaps more important, such an affectivity is encapsulated at the subject level of the very form produced in most fiction workshops: the short story. If so-called MFA fiction has a definable characteristic at the subject level, it is that of negative experiences. Divorces, cancer, trauma, drug abuse, death: such subjects present an immediate pathos that allows the reader to invest emotionally in a relatively short amount of time. That such weighty
subjects also suggest maturity on the part of the writer—a writer who is often new to adulthood—allow the writing itself to be taken (or mistaken) as the work of a mature, technically developed writer. These aspects of the creative writing workshop—self-expression, self-discipline, affectivity, and adulthood—are possibly the most pronounced traits of workshop writing. In the writing of Lorrie Moore, those traits become the dynamic principles that underlie and sustain her stories.

V.

By the time Moore, just twenty-three years old, matriculated into Cornell’s MFA program in 1980, creative writing had been fully institutionalized into a form recognizable today. The tension between self-expression and self-discipline remained (and remains) unresolved. The professionalization and accreditation of the MFA degree offered the promise of an academic career and allowed for some measure of autonomy in a creative field. The Short Story Renaissance was in full bloom, with the influence of new literary stars, in particular Raymond Carver, hanging heavy over aspiring young writers.

The work that Moore produced in the MFA program that she published later as Self-Help, both resembles and departs from short story aesthetics of the time. The work is a collection of stories, largely on the shorter side of short story length, and the subjects are largely domestic, primarily focusing on what Moore has called “feminine emergencies” (Gaffney “The Art of Fiction”). While given a feminine slant, the stories reflect MFA fiction subject matter: adultery (“How to Be the Other Woman”), alcoholism (“What Is Seized”), divorce (“The Kid’s Guide to Divorce”) and cancer (“Go Like This”). The stories brim with humor that tempers their general bleakness and distances them from the
downbeat seriousness of a Carver or Bobby Ann Mason story. Moore is, in Aldridge’s words, “addicted to the creation of clever and often very bad puns, zany one-liners, and other ludicrous dislocations of language” that “represent a rather bitter comment on the fact that language is no longer effective as a means by which people can cure their helpless inability to communicate with one another” (110). Aldridge may overstate the reason for the puns: it seems not so much an inability as much as an unwillingness to communicate that motivates the often evasive humor of Moore’s stories.

Moore is one of the only recent writers Aldridge praises in *Talents and Technicians*. He notes that while she writes about unhappy relationships, “she is such a fine writer that she could as easily write about happy ones and they would not be all alike. This is because she does with apparent ease what so few of her contemporaries seem able to do: she individualizes her characters […]” (106). Aldridge’s harshness in evaluating Moore’s contemporaries may be overstated, but he is right to see in Moore’s stories a striving for uniqueness in characterization. More precisely, the protagonists in *Self-Help* exist, like Charlene in “How to Be the Other Woman,” in a state of attempted self-invention. Their lives often wrecked by some event—a break-up, a cancer diagnosis, an injured family member—Moore’s characters set out to redefine themselves or otherwise take control of their lives. The characters are trying to help their inner self, and they do so with an agency that resembles a life-as-art mentality: they aestheticize the self.

An aesthetic self is most clear in Moore’s story “Go Like This.” In it, a traditional first person narrator, Liz, has learned that cancer has spread from her breasts to her body and that her death is inevitable. Liz is a writer by profession, having authored three children’s books with plans to write a fourth. The story’s first sentence, “I have written
before” signals that not only that she is a writer, but also that we should expect to read about her next composition. Instead of the fourth children’s book, however, we learn that “I am a writing a rational suicide” (67). Liz prefers to direct her death rather than to succumb to a body eroded by cancer, but what stands out is that she feels herself “writing” the suicide rather than “committing” it. It is one thing to control your future and another to compose it, for composition implies an aesthetic concern that control does not. She decides upon Bastille Day for her suicide as “a choice of symbol and expedience” (69); her teacher husband and her elementary school aged daughter will both be on vacation at the time, lending the date its expedience, but that she’s equally concerned with the symbolism of breaking herself free from her body hints that the composition of her suicide entails a certain amount of intentional artistry.

She envisions her funeral free of black, ties, hats, and coats, instead insisting that open-toed shoes and parasols will be de rigueur as well as “pastels, seersucker, flasks and vials of Scotch, cocaine” (69), a scene more boisterous than funereal but one that suggests the extent to which she wants to play auteur with her demise. She will announce everyone her plan beforehand since they have “seen others go like this before. They read papers, see the movies, watch the television broadcasts. They know how it’s done. They know what for. It’s existential. It’s Hemingway. It’s familiar” (69). Suicide itself becomes an already aestheticized action here, knowable from representations (newspapers, movies, and television shows). The mention of Hemingway is fundamental to understanding Liz’s motives: as one of the most famous of literary suicides, the implicit comparison invoked makes clear that Liz wants not only an artist’s life, but an artist’s death.
Liz is not alone in understanding her suicide as an artistic act. She gathers her friends together to explain her decision, which her husband asserts “will possibly be the most creative act Liz has ever accomplished” (73). Her husband’s assertion makes clear what Liz has implied though not fully asserted, namely that the suicide is intended as an act of artistry. Liz wonders if her husband “could be right,” but the question seems less whether the suicide would be a creative act so much as whether the suicide would be her most creative act. If so, then she has rendered her life and its end not simply an aesthetic achievement, but her masterpiece.

Her friends, artists and intellectuals themselves (a “parlor of painters and poets like the Paris salons” [74]), have mixed feelings about both her decision to kill herself and the artistry of it. William announces, “It’s crap, Liz. There’s no such thing as aesthetic suicide. You’re not going to be able to come back afterward and say by jove what a damn good job I did of it. You’ll make the Post, Liz, not the Whitney” (73). William points to a plausible absurdity of suicide as art, undercutting Liz’s performance by declaring it fit for a tabloid newspaper but not a gallery of high culture. He misses the point. An aesthetic life (or death) is about production, not necessarily the product. To live life in a state of creativity is to be engaged in the creation of the self-as-artwork, but the self is never a finished work. An aesthetic suicide for Liz is more about the creation of the event, the ability to define the “This” in the story’s title, than it is about the event itself as a static object, a cultural good. Her husband largely misses the point as well: while Liz considers that it might be her masterpiece, it is not until her husband mentions this possibility that the thought occurs to Liz. She appears too caught in the act of creation to worry about reception.
The end of “Go Like This” finds Liz carrying out her plan. Her last vision is of “a patch of droughted trees and string of wildebeests, one by one, like the sheep of a child’s insomnia, throwing in the towel, circling, lying down in the sun silently to decompose” (81). Hers is an unnerving vision, a highly aestheticized moment both in the scene presented but also in its use of simile, a move to figurative language that highlights the literariness of the death. It remains difficult to locate the story’s moral position about Liz’s suicide, partially because the first person narration keeps the authorial judgment at bay, but also because there is little in the story to ironize Liz’s decision. While there is William to declare Liz’s artistry bogus, and William’s wife Joanie who fears hell for Liz (73), neither of these positions is granted authority in the narrative. The strength and insistence of Liz’s voice overrules any opposition, and the fact that Liz will die anyway from the cancer means that her death is not a matter of debate. The linguistic artfulness of the final vision, as disturbing as it is, ends the story in a higher literary register than the prose that precedes it and suggests that Liz, the writer, has taken the correct action.

Where Liz embraces an aesthetic self through a creation of a life and a death, Francie, in Moore’s story “How to Become a Writer,” appears to fail in her self-creation. The story features the second-person narration of a self-help manual and the story is a satire of both such manuals and of creative writing programs. Part of the cleverness of the story is that it essentially aligns self-help manuals and creative writing programs: while Francie’s journey through creative writing programs is presented as a failed conquest, the narration of Francie’s failure functions to chastise Francie and offer a means of correction by highlighting that failure.

“How to Become a Writer” follows Francie from high school to post-collegiate
adulthood and the narrative trajectory offers something like a mock-bildungsroman: Francie’s quest for maturity largely flounders. We first meet Francie when she is fifteen and writing haikus to share with her unimpressed, “face like a blank donut” mother (119). During a high school English class, Francie abandons poetry for fiction where “you don’t have to count syllables” and gives her teacher a short story about an elderly couple “who accidentally shoot each other in the head, the result of an inexplicable malfunction of a shotgun which appears mysteriously in their living room one night” (119). Her teacher responds that while she has some nice images, she has “no sense of plot” (119). The accusations of poor plotting—often including sudden destructive deaths—will follow Francie through all stages of her writing education, but the essential joke is multivalent. Francie’s plot twists present a deus ex machina while likewise recalling the creative writing staple dictum of “Chekov’s gun” in which a gun that appears early in a narrative must be fired by the narrative’s end. That the shotgun “appears mysteriously” suggests a lack of narrative control in the story. Although fiction appears to Francie to lack the formal rules of poetry with its syllabic meter, fiction still has certain formal techniques that a writer must abide and Francie has great difficulty abiding them.

Francie’s formal issues hint at the central tension in of “How to Become a Writer,” a tension drawn from creative writing: the conflict between self-expression and writerly discipline. Francie’s inclination—much like Moore’s—is towards humor. She reimagines Moby Dick as a short story called “Mopey Dick” about a “menopausal suburban husband named Richard,” the first line of which is “Call me Fishmeal”; the story idea’s reception, however, is abysmal, with Francie’s roommate, “her face blank as a large Kleenex,” offering to take Francie out for drinks instead of directly responding to it (123). The in-
workshop reception of Francie’s stories are even more disheartening: following Francie’s reading of a story in which a man and woman blow up their torsos with dynamite and open a frozen yogurt stand with the insurance money, her classmates respond that the plot is “outrageous and incompetent” and someone asks if she is “crazy” (121). We only know Francie’s stories as relayed through the narrator (rarely does Moore provide Francie’s words directly), so we are at the mercy of the other characters’ evaluations of her efforts. That the consensus about Francie’s stories is that she is not a good writer requires us to seek why this is the case, and “How to Become a Writer” suggests that it is Francie’s failure to express herself in a disciplined mode that holds back the development of her craft.

The defining moment in the story reflects the defining moment in Francie’s life, a traumatic event that her self and her writing must contend with. Her brother, a Vietnam veteran, “came home from a forest ten miles from the Cambodian border with only half a thigh, a permanent smirk nestled into one corner of his mouth” (123). Moore foreshadows the revelation twice, introducing the possibility in the story’s first paragraph with a description of Francie’s mother as having “a son in Vietnam and husband who may be having an affair” (11), and recalling it again later at the end of questions Francie asks herself such as “Why write? Where does writing come from? […] If there’s a God, then why is brother now a cripple?” (122). The fullest description, with its visceral “permanent smirk nestled into one corner of his mouth,” comes after a creative writing teacher dedicated to writing from personal experience asks students write about what has happened to them. Francie remembers three things from the past three years of her life: she lost her virginity, her parents divorced, and her brother returned crippled. About
losing her virginity, she writes (the only moment in which we directly read her words), “It created a new space, which hurt and cried in a voice that wasn’t mine, I’m not the same anymore, but I’ll be okay” (123). About the divorce, Francie again turns to violence and a *deus ex machina* plot twist, writing a narrative about a married couple “who stumble upon an unknown land mine in their kitchen” and blow themselves up; she calls it “For Better or Liverwurst” (123–4). About her brother, she writes “nothing. There are no words for this” (124), an absolute failure of both self-expression and writerly discipline.

The three events she experiences have had an understandable impact upon Francie in that they all force her into adulthood. No longer a virgin, no longer able to accept the promise of everlasting love, no longer able to take comfort in the fairness of the universe, Francie finds herself—and her self—needing to take a step towards maturity. If the writing she produces about these three events are any indication, she missteps. Her contention that losing her virginity produced a “voice that wasn’t mine” that said “I’m not the same anymore” suggests the disruption to the self the loss of virginity produced through the creation of a new voice that reflects the self’s alteration. The possibility of transformation into a new, mature self becomes deflated by her story responding to her parents’ divorce. “For Better or Liverwurst” finds Francie repeating the immature, undisciplined plots of her earlier stories, as if she were avoiding reckoning with the event. That she has no voice at all in the face of her brother’s injury suggests her incapacity to deal with the event—she is literally silenced by it. She has no voice and cannot express herself; she can “find no words” (124) when it is the writer’s first and foremost duty to do so.
From the perspective of Lamott’s insistence that it is the writer’s job “to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words” (198), Francie fails in her task to turn her brother’s injury into a story. Whether Moore agrees with Lamott that writing is the process of discovering one’s inner, self-expressive voice is unknown, although “How to Become a Writer” suggests this is not, at least not entirely, the case. When Francie writes in what can be taken as her voice—the funny if violent narratives of domestic trouble—the story, or at least the characters in it, mock her. Moore satirizes creative writing workshops throughout the story, both in the banality of the questions asked in them (“‘But does it work?’ ‘Why should we care about this character?’ ‘Have you earned this cliché?’” [122]) and in professors’ differing modes of instruction (one semester a professor stresses “the Power of the Imagination” [122], while the next semester a professor makes students “write from what you know” [123]). That said, creative writing programs serve as the primary location for Francie’s development. Her failures as a writer emerge not from a failure of pedagogy, but from her failure to discipline herself into the pedagogical aims of creative writing programs. Whether or not the instructors and her peers gave her poor advice, Francie proves a poor student.

If, following McGurl, the writing subject makes her own truth through the apparatus of disciplined writing, Francie’s inability to write about her brother signals the undisciplined nature of her writing even more so than her reliance on violence to deal with divorce. The brother’s injury provided a subject to write from, to express herself about, but lacking the techniques and formal craft of a disciplined writer, she found herself unable to compose. She could not make her own truth, which is to say, she could not compose a self to present. By the end of the story, Francie has finished a manuscript
“more or less,” but it is unclear whether the manuscript is any good or if she even wants to be a writer. When asked if being a writer had always been a fantasy of hers, the narrator instructs Francie to say “that of all the fantasies possible in the world, you can’t imagine being a writer even making the top twenty” (126). Francie’s diffidence undermines her apparent success in finishing a manuscript: even if the manuscript indicates that her writing has become formally disciplined, its completion has done little to help Francie’s self. On the romantic date that ends the story, Francie’s companion, “with a face blank as a sheet of paper,” asks if writers often get discouraged, to which Francie replies that “sometimes they do and sometimes they do” and that “it’s a lot like having polio” (126). The date’s reaction is to smooth his arm hairs “all, always, in the same direction” (126), a response that suggests the evening is not going well, that Francie’s comparison of writing to having a crippling disease disparages her selfhood to the extent he loses his attraction to her.³⁷

Francie never takes control of her self; she is never able to be a writer, instead finding herself trapped in a process of becoming. Her journey towards a fully realized self, one that would allow her to express the self within the disciplined structure of writing, ends before she can accept her writing as a display of the self. She is more reminiscent of Charlene than Liz, unable to deploy her creative impulses into a construction of her self-as-artist. Although she writes, Francie’s undercutting of this as a professional decision leaves a fissure between her career and her self that reveals the shortcomings of her education: while she was working on her craft, she failed to work on her self. The implication of Francie’s failure is that the creative writing dynamic between self-expression and discipline should work symbiotically to develop both the craft and the
self—the writer’s voice and vocation merge into an aesthetic self, always in the process of positive self-creation.

That an aesthetic self emerges as an ideal in *Self-Help* shows that the collection’s title is not dismissible simply as parody. Against the vacuity of self that Lasch depicts, Moore’s text offers a means to self-fulfillment through creative enterprises. The didacticism of the collection, that we should aim to write our lives (including our deaths) rather than fill them with commodities or escape them through craft, situates well within contemporaneous self-help guides. The institutional centrality of “How to Become a Writer” suggests that beyond self-help guides, Moore’s interests were with education itself, particularly creative writing programs. The coupling of two forms of pedagogy—self-help guides and creative writing—asks us to equate their missions. Creative writing, Moore hints, is about more than developing talent: it provides a means to a traditional humanistic education in which knowledge and development of the self might (or should) be the principle goal. As a collection of formally innovative short stories that explores the self’s relationship to artistic creation within institutions of creativity, *Self-Help* provides an exemplary document of the Short Story Renaissance. The self it offers, the aesthetic self, is neither a Romantic profession of pure self-expression nor an instrumentalist declaration of pure craft. Instead, like the creative writing programs *Self-Help* emerged from, the text privileges a self that is both expressive and disciplined and that ultimately understands itself as an aesthetic object.

It is perhaps telling that Francie does not pursue creative writing programs after the undergraduate level (she enrolls in law school only to drop out). She appears to learn as little about the changing profession as she does about writing or her self. It is unclear
whether she submits her manuscript to either commercial or academic publishers (or if she submits it all), and her income seems to come from random jobs and cashed in savings bonds (126). Assuming that Francie is an undergraduate student in the mid-1970s, creative writing programs were experiencing a massive growth and pursuing an MFA may well have led to the stability of a university job. The opening of English departments to creative writing professors profoundly changed writers relationship to their work, not only in terms of their production, but also in their pursuit of a career. The removal from the instabilities of the literary market eradicated financial fears, but a new market of academic prestige emerged with its own forms of capital accumulation.
I.

The introduction of creative writing into English departments was less a reconfiguring of the academic system so much as the absorption of writers into that system. Writers seeking to become professors followed a similar institutionalized path to that of literary scholars: graduate education resulting in a terminal degree; a tenure-track position with set guidelines for promotion; an expectation to publish and teach; a progression through the professorial ranks from assistant to full professor based upon accomplishment. While departments adapted standards such as the genre of book required for promotion (a novel may hold value equal to a scholarly monograph), writers seeking to make a career in the academy largely played—and continue to play—by the academy’s rules.

For writers, an academic career offers middle class stability and removes them from the uncertainty of the commercial marketplace, but the institutionalization brings with it certain trade-offs that writers are often quick to lament. Writers must teach and participate in departmental bureaucracy, which are time-consuming activities that threaten to distract from literary production. That said, the emancipation from commercial publishing provides writers the freedom to pursue literary activities that most interest them. In the academic context, publication matters, but sales do not; a short story published in a prestigious if low-circulating journal may well carry as much weight on a curriculum vitae as a story published in *The New Yorker*. If anything, the accumulation of prestige matters more than commercial success for academic writers. Writers thrive in the university by succeeding in a prestige, rather than financial, economy.
Prestige matters in commercial publishing, but it functions differently in the academic market. As John B. Thompson has noted about the commercial marketplace, publishers seek to accrue symbolic capital by publishing writers viewed as prestigious: most publishers “see themselves and want to be seen by others as organizations that publish works of ‘quality,’ however that may be defined” (8). The symbolic capital gained by publishing quality and prestigious works allows a publisher to become one that “agents, retailers and even readers will be more inclined to trust” and can “translate directly into financial success” when a book wins a major prize that increases sales (8-9). As publishers have long known, however, publishing “quality” writers does not guarantee profit, and writers reliant upon the commercial market—no matter how well respected or reviewed their work—may have trouble paying rent. For writers, prestige may help (although it may hinder) their sales, but the commercial market is primarily a financial economy and success is ultimately judged by sales. Such is not the case in for academic writers who may find success in the academy without ever landing on a best seller list.

To substantiate my claims, this chapter presents a case study of the career of Lee Abbot, Emeritus Humanities Distinguished Professor in English at Ohio State University. Abbott is representative of many academic writers: he has accrued prestige and earned distinction in the academy without commercial success. His career parallels and participates in the programmatic growth of creative writing since the 1970s and illuminates the practices of writers in the academy. Abbott’s career likewise participates in the Short Story Renaissance; he has focused his writing almost exclusively on short stories and has never published a novel. I begin with a brief biographical section to introduce Abbott and frame his career within the Short Story Renaissance. I then
document Abbott’s reasons for pursuing short stories instead of novels before turning to a
discussion of short story aesthetics that highlights the experimentation found in Abbott’s
narratives. From aesthetics, the chapter moves to economics by examining Abbott’s
relationship to the literary market: Abbott published with commercial presses, but found
more success in academic literary markets. Finally, I explore the conversion of symbolic
to financial capital found in Abbott’s participation in the creative writing lecture circuit.
Throughout the chapter, I relate Abbott’s career to broader issues of creative writing
program institutionalization. While Abbott’s career is unique, as any individual career
would be, it allows us insights that we may generalize from: as a representative writer in
the academy, Abbott provides a first hand account of phenomena that any academic
writer would expect to experience and, in doing so, his career serves as a template for
understanding a writer’s life in the university.

II.

Lee Abbott was born in 1947 and spent most of his childhood in Las Cruces, New
Mexico and the nearby city of Deming provides the setting for the majority of Abbott’s
stories. The decision to set stories in New Mexico was conscious from the start, and
Abbott’s explanation points to his ambitions as a writer:

It’s the corner of the world I understand. I know its landscape, I know its people, I
know the names of the plants and animals, its architecture, I know its lingo. I thought
if I did become famous, I would become famous because of the acreage I staked out
as my own.39

Abbott’s use of New Mexico coheres with the “Write What You Know” dictum of
creative writing programs—he knows everything from its landscapes and people to its
architecture and lingo—but his thought that he might become famous writing about it points to aspirations beyond the academy. Indeed, as we will see, although he made his career in the academy, Abbott oscillated between the academic and commercial publishing spheres. Although he would find greater success in the academy than commercial publishing, it was not for a lack of trying.

After obtaining bachelor’s and master’s degrees from New Mexico State University, Abbott left the desert for the South and enrolled in the University of Arkansas’s MFA program in the fall of 1975. Abbott’s primary desire was to “write and to write well,” but with a wife and two sons he needed the means to support himself financially: “I looked around and the most obvious job that paid the bills was being a college teacher.” While the expansion of MFA programs since the 1970s has saturated the creative writing job market with an excess of candidates, in 1975, an MFA credential provided a viable means to obtain a university appointment.

At Arkansas, Abbott lived in married student housing for eighty-two dollars a month and formed a thesis committee directed by William Harrison of “Rollerbowl” fame and rounded out by Beat writer John Clellon Holmes and the poet Miller Williams. The Arkansas MFA program, started in 1965, was one of the more established programs at the time with full funding for all students. The most famous early student, Barry Hannah, had found success—and a National Book Award nomination—with his first novel Geronimo Rex (1972) and had gone on to cultivate a relationship with Gordon Lish through Esquire Magazine. Abbott knew of Hannah, but it played little in his decision to come to Arkansas. The program, with its small size and good reputation combined with the natural beauty of Fayetteville, swayed him to enroll.
With an MFA in hand, Abbott applied for professorial positions and took a job at Case Western Reserve University for the fall of 1977. He remained at Case Western until 1992, teaching a variety of undergraduate courses in creative writing, freshman composition, and American literature. As Abbott learned, writers in the academy may be buffered from the commercial market, but that buffer can come at a price, namely, the annoyances of belonging to a university and contending with its institutional politics. At Case Western, a university created in 1967 through the merger of Case Institute of Technology and Western Reserve University, Abbott enjoyed his colleagues and department but ultimately could not abide the administration. As he rather bluntly explains, “Case, every about two years [sic], just pissed me off. Somebody would leave the school fifty million dollars, it would go once again to the guys in lab coats. Meanwhile, we had a Spanish department of a person and a half.” The privileging of science and technology at Case Western left Abbott “frustrated and angry, and I started taking it home,” a situation he wanted to leave.

Relief came in the form of a job offer from The Ohio State University, which was developing an MFA program at the time. From 1992 until his retirement in spring of 2012, Abbott remained there, where he felt none of the frustrations of Case Western. In terms of his career, he feels “it’s the best move I ever made. Big English department, important university with some real clout, and they said yes to everything we wanted to do.” Abbott may have appreciated the better funding available for creative writing at Ohio State, but the move to a major state university enlarged Abbott’s symbolic value as well. Writers benefit from institutional affiliations as all professors do: the more distinguished the institution and academic program, the more symbolic capital the writer
earns. Furthermore, while at Ohio State, Abbott found himself helping to grow and eventually head one of the best-regarded MFA programs in the country, providing him a prestigious programmatic affiliation to augment the institutional affiliation.

During his career as a professor, Abbott published seven collections of short stories. Subject-wise, Abbott admits his range is not great. He possesses a limited repertoire of things that interest me: boys and girls together; fathers and sons; male friends; and this thing I call a sort of post-apocalyptic Mad Max-meets-Walt Whitman [story]. And that’s it! We’re done! So if you’re not in the mood for a pretty crooked love story, you’re just not going to read what I’ve got.”

Those four types of interests provide templates for Abbott’s stories, and his oeuvre largely offers variations upon them. In addition to Deming as a recurring locale, the stories feature recurring characters, which Abbott says is “kind of a way of having the novelist’s cake and eating it too and not actually bothering with the next one hundred thousand words.” Taken together, the stories’ regional obsession and linkage of characters present a coherent, nearly Faulknerian, literary world. That his stories share features does not trouble Abbott, for when you see his name on a story “you more or less have a pretty good idea about what fish that story is going to fry, and how it’s going to fry it.” Within such a framework, Abbott’s stories explore the nuances of characterization—the stories are mostly realist in nature—but they do so with an energetic and inventive display of language not always found in contemporary short stories.

Abbott’s “Ninety Nights On Mercury” is typical of most his stories. It is of the “boy-meets-girl” variety, and features Heath “Pokey” Howell (Junior), a banker at Deming’s
Farmer and Merchant Savings Bank as well as a Luna County commissioner, who has recently separated from his wife Lizzie. The story begins with Pokey at the Mimbrs Valley Country Club’s Valentine’s Dance, where he becomes enamored with a young widow, Betty Porter. Pokey offers that he was not drunk, just smitten. By her dress, which was blue as heaven’s bottom and at least four times more sparkly than a poet’s idea of nighttime; and by her legs, which were long as hope itself; and by her skin, which seemed to glow like moonlight; and by her shoulder, which was bare and which something crooked in me wanted to lick. (4)

The description of Betty offers a collection of similes that expresses Pokey’s exuberance for his paramour in a lyrical mode that elevates the figurativeness of the story and highlights a major feature of Abbott’s prose technique.

Abbot, as much as minimalists who are more apt to whittle their prose to the briefest of descriptions, concentrates his writerly focus on sentence-level stylistics, making them “rhetorically, pretty dense”; he finds it “exhausting to worry about sentences the way I worry about sentences.” As in Pokey’s description, many of Abbott’s sentences cram multiple clauses into a single unit. For instance, when Pokey and Betty remove themselves from the dance and into an unoccupied room at the Mimbrs Valley Country Club to consummate their attraction, Pokey offers that the world was coming back now, piece by piece—a screechy voice perilously close, another Uncle Roy tune I could sing two thirds of, the light in the farthestmost trophy case flickering, my cigarettes smashed in my shirt pocket, her weight on my thighs adding up pound by pound until, nearly out of breath, I had to shift” (5).

The clauses give a sense of urgency to the scene and the tone veers to the visceral rather
than reflective. While most of Abbott’s stories use the past tense and, as the narrators often make clear, retell past events, the stories recount such events as if they are happening—they are action-oriented stories. The visceral quality of Abbott’s stories, generated at the sentence-level, separates him from many contemporaneous short story writers such as Carver whose stories tend to be meditative in tone.

Although stylistically much different, Abbott does share with Carver a desire to explore masculine identity as it becomes fractured in a post-industrial milieu. Abbott’s protagonists, often men in their late thirties and early forties, feel the weight of their pasts—they are veterans and alcoholics, divorcés and poor parents. They, like Pokey, seek renewal, and also like Pokey, the promise of renewal frequently lies with a new lover. Betty and Pokey’s relationship moves quickly from casual to serious, but comes to a head when Betty drills Pokey with trivia questions, asking, among others, where King Solomon’s mines are, what the capital of Peru is, and what yogurt is made of (9). Pokey’s inability to answer the questions, taken together with the fact Betty’s deceased husband was a high school principal, function to unsettle him. He suffers a vision of Principal Marvin Porter, “cross-legged in the chair at the other end of the bedroom, an ironed hankie in the pocket of his sport coat and the answers to all questions on the tip of his tongue,” (10) a vision that forces an implicit comparison between himself and Marvin Porter. Pokey, a banker rather than an intellect, believes that despite Betty’s insistence that you “have to know stuff to get around. You got to have some facts. Some ideas,” he manages quite fine.

The questioning, however, affects Pokey—he appears to feel inadequate compared to Marvin Porter. Soon after, he learns that Lizzie is pregnant with their fourth child and
intends to keep it although they are to remain separated. The revelation puts Pokey in a
deepfer funk. Pokey’s masculinity has been denigrated by Betty’s questioning and
affirmed by Lizzie’s pregnancy, but he finds himself caught between the two, unable to
decide which woman he wants. Betty leaves him and calls him a coward, which he
affirms by noting she has stated “one final fact” (18). The end of the story finds a now
divorced Pokey visiting Betty months later to find she has taken on a new lover, leaving
Pokey denied and dejected.

Pokey’s visit to Betty finds the narrative perspective shifting from first person to
third, a subtle although impactful change. Early in the narrative, the story makes clear
that it should be understood as a (probably written) story, with Pokey announcing himself
to the reader as “your narrator” (4). Before concluding his story, Pokey directly
challenges the reader, “You think you know how this turns out, but you’re wrong” (18), a
narrative disruption that highlights the artificiality of the short story form. Likewise, the
disruption sets up the shift to the third person in the next sentence in which “yours truly
does go home, but it’s too late—‘Too too,’ the wife tells him” (19); that the sentence
reveals the shift to third person but leads into the shift with “yours truly” signals that
although the narrative will employ third person pronouns, the narrator remains Pokey.
The third person thus distances Pokey from the event he relates: he is removed from the
action of the scene. Given that the scene presents Betty removing Pokey from her life, the
narrative shift compounds the psychological distance Pokey feels at the end of the story:
in Abbott’s stories, a boy might meet a girl, but he is most likely to lose her by the end
and find himself alone.

Although “Ninety Nights on Mercury” ends on a melancholy note, Abbott’s stories
reject much of the dour mood popular among minimalists and other deliberately literary types that revel in dejection. Abbott’s stories embrace humor, but they exhibit an acute mastery of form: they are not light-hearted romps, but rather, as the narrative shift in “Ninety Nights on Mercury” shows, sophisticated narrative performances that situate into a consciously aesthetic mode of short story production that is the hallmark of the Short Story Renaissance. I will return to Abbott’s formal ingenuity, but first, I want to explore Abbott’s relationship to another facet of the Short Story Renaissance, namely the ability for writers to pursue short stories rather than novels. That Abbott has never published a novel is no accident: he wanted to concentrate on short stories, and the institutional changes brought about by creative writing programs created the opportunity to do so.

III.

Abbott’s freedom to pursue short story writing reveals one consequence of the shift in literary production from commercial publishing to the academy. Commercial publishing’s traditional desire to release novels meant that, financially, it benefitted writers to produce them—they were far more likely to sell their novels than their short story collections. To restate what I have explored in previous chapters, beyond the financial benefits, the novel in the commercial market generated more prestige than short story collections, partially because publishing houses, believing novels sold better than collections, publicized novels to a greater extent. Such a view effectively disparages the short story form—it is apprentice work, not a master’s piece—but more problematic is the assumption that successful short fictionists can write successful novels. As explored in Chapter One, John Cheever professed ambivalence toward the short story form, but his novels largely failed to garner the acclaim he hoped they would because, arguably, his
talents were better suited for the short story. As Abbott wagers, “I think Cheever and Eudora Welty are two writers who should never have been allowed to write a novel because their novels are nowhere as good as the vast majority of their stories.” Cheever’s collected stories ultimately brought him his greatest literary success, but that success occurred at the end of his career when the short story form was being reevaluated—and his collected stories was one of the reasons for that reevaluation. The short story’s reevaluation was also the result of a renewed interest in the form brought about by the growth of creative writing programs that accepted the short story as a worthwhile genre for literary production.

Cheever’s career provides a useful contrast to Abbott’s: Abbott was free to write short stories and expect them to garner him the prestige necessary for an academic career. That is not to say that Abbott never attempted novel writing. He attempted three early in his career at a time when the short story’s reputation in the academy was not as firmly established as it would quickly become. The first, written while pursuing a master’s degree at New Mexico State, was “written under the influence of too much Joan Didion” and was never shown to anyone. The second, the first 300 pages of which formed his MFA thesis at Arkansas, was a historical novel inspired by E.L. Doctorow and Gabriel Garcia Marquez that featured Pancho Villa, Blackjack Persher, and Ambrose Bierce. The third and final attempt was a pornographic novel. The inspiration for the pornographic novel was twofold: a friend had given Abbott’s wife a copy of the novel The Three of Us in which he had “underlined the good parts,” and then, soon after, one of Abbott’s students revealed that he had written and published three pornographic novels. After studying up on the genre, Abbott sat down to try his creative writing program disciplined
hand at smut. An abject failure—“God it stunk,” he concedes—Abbott abandoned his novelistic ambitions completely.

Partially, Abbott’s inability to write a novel comes from his assertion that he is “really easily bored,” and writing short stories allows him to move on from projects quicker than a novel would. More importantly, it seems the formal expectations of the novel hold little interest for Abbott. The decisions he would have to make in composing a long narrative offer no enticement. He explains his reluctance as such:

I’ll tell you what I tell my students when they sit down and say I want to write a novel. Tell me what your favorite novel is. Say your favorite novel is *Moby Dick*, just to pick one out of the hat. Do you know how much Melville had to know to write that book? Remember, there’s a chapter on knots, okay? So, I’m a child of the sixties, I’m really impatient, I want it yesterday if possible, and I cannot bear the thought of spending two, three or four years working on something that just turns to dust, that I don’t have the imagination to finish.

The commitment of time and resources a novel requires offers no appeal to Abbott, but also important here is the possibility that the novel would end up being abandoned. Having failed in his three attempts at writing a novel, he likely knows the possibility for abandonment exists; the smaller investment of time and energy to a write short story means that abandonment is easier to take if the story fails to reach a stage of completion.

The sheer length of a novel produces added pressures that Abbott likewise wants to avoid and, given his academic position, can avoid. He advises students that “they ought not write a story that only costs them the time to get it on the page,” that, in other words, a story requires a certain amount of investment beyond the initial drafting—a story, short
or long, takes time to properly develop, and a novel requires a much larger investment than a short story. Furthermore, for fiction to succeed—to be more than words on a page—Abbott believes there must “always be something at stake for the writer.” With novels, Abbott finds that “the stakes are really, really high. I feel that I might not have the courage to turn all the corners you need to turn in a novel without ducking or flinching or fudging.” Abbott’s sentiments strike at the imaginative and narrative possibilities for long fiction, but also that those possibilities can bewilder the writer.

Abbott appears to view novel writing as a kind of fistfight—he does not want to duck, flinch, or fudge against the novel’s onslaught—that he risks losing. The inherent machismo of such rhetoric threatens to conceal an underlying self-awareness, however. He understands his talents lie in short stories: “I think in a story I can call my own bluff because I’m really comfortable with the length, I’m comfortable with the possibilities, I’m comfortable with the rules such as they are.” Having internalized the formal elements of the short story, he is more inclined to continue exploring that genre than to change focus with a novel. That said, although he may prefer to work in the genre, the institutional environment in which Abbott works—creative writing programs—have allowed for Abbott to focus on the genre despite its commercial limitations. Abbott’s reputation, much like Cheever’s, developed from his success in writing short stories, but unlike Cheever, his reputation developed without the apprehension about whether a novel would be a better investment of his time. Instead, Abbott found himself free to explore and embrace the potential of the short story form as his primary mode of literary production.

IV.
An understanding of the short story that emphasizes its aesthetic qualities—that views it as an art object first—is one of the defining features of the Short Story Renaissance, and Abbott’s stories display a conscious aestheticization in their form. Still, accusations have long followed creative writing programs that the fiction they produce, especially at the MFA level, tend to show a standardization of aesthetic principles that leads to conformity in their participants’ writing. John Aldridge has argued that the workshop format itself causes such conformity for it instills fear within the participants that their peers or professors will not accept writing that ventures beyond a standardized model. Aldridge contends that “as a result of the democratization process by which critical decisions are reached in the workshop, distinctions are washed out or considered taboo,” which leads to a group-think aesthetic wherein “uniformity or homogenization of effects is made to seem a cardinal virtue” (24). Aldridge’s argument rests on an interpersonal dynamic of humiliation in the workshop: students do not want to embarrass themselves and will take precautions to nullify that possibility. The result of the workshop’s homogenization extends beyond the workshop’s walls, for these “washed out” stories find publication and enter a larger literary culture.

Aldridge’s premise that stories emerging from creative writing programs are nearly indistinguishable—an “assembly-line fiction,” as his book’s subtitle asserts—may be exaggerated. Abbott’s stories, with their verbal intensity and structural complications, differ greatly from anything resembling so-called MFA fiction. Abbott himself sees little conformity in such work: “I don’t believe in it for a second. I read a lot of stories in magazines, and I read a lot of stories from students. I don’t think it can be said that these things are more alike than not or that there’s some kind of formula.” Given that creative
writing programs generate thousands of short stories for workshop and publication each year, it makes more sense that the stories are more varied than similar if only because of the sheer quantity being produced.

There are, Abbott admits, certain tendencies that short stories may have and he has outlined these in his essay “Thirteen Things about the Contemporary Short Story That Really Hack Me Off.” The essay developed from a graduate level course he taught several times called “Form and Theory of the Short Story.” The guiding question for the course, in which participants read several recent volumes of *The Best American Short Stories* or *The Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, is whether “there is an aesthetic in the contemporary short story” (131). Abbott complains of a lack of workplaces in the stories, a lack of humor, a failure to “inhabit what the pointy-headed of another critical era called The Other” (132), a failure to exploit either an omniscient narrator or second-person point-of-view, a proclivity to stop action and rehearse a large amount of backstory or else a failure to provide key details of a character’s background, a habit of either ending stories too muted or with sudden epiphanies, and, perhaps most important in the context of Abbott’s own writing, a failure of sentence-level stylistics.

Abbott wonders if “contemporary writers have lost their appetites for the riches peculiar to our medium, language” (135). He ponders

Whither the complex compound sentence? The elliptical sentence, parallel structure, subordination, coordination—animals rarely sighted. I miss anaphora, chiasmus, diacope, metanoia. I yearn for zeugma, hyperbaton, aporia. Come back epistrophe.

Please. (135)

Abbott’s concerns about the contemporary short story thus vary from subject matter and
structural concerns to rhetorical performance and grammatical configurations. That Abbott emphasizes constructions such as zeugma, hyperbaton and epistrophe—figures more likely to appear in a class on classical rhetoric than in one on contemporary short stories—speaks to the extensiveness of his literary knowledge and hints at the stakes of his own fiction as a countercurrent to techniques fashionable in MFA fiction, particularly those of minimalism.

Abbott’s own writing works to counter the argument that creative writing programs produce conformist or standardized fiction. While the subject-matter of his stories may be limited, Abbott experiments formally with the genre. Sometimes, that experimentation is at the level of structure. As Abbott explains, “I’ve told a story backwards. I’ve told a story from the second person point-of-view. I’ve told a story in the omniscient point-of-view. I like to play with the features of the form.” A story called “Men of Rough Persuasion” experiments with structure and, most apparently, diction. Abbott had listened to an Elmore Leonard novel and another “just terrible” mystery book on tape, and found himself wanting to write some “tough guy” prose. He researched colloquialisms and the slang of literary gangsters as found in hardboiled fiction by writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. A break-through occurred when Abbott realized “I could make it [the slang] up. I could make up the talk.” The resulting story incorporates Abbott’s inventive slang and draws attention to slang’s potential as a literary instrument.

Abbott organizes “Men of Rough Persuasion” into three sections that present three scenes in the life of “the skel Harbee Hakim Hazar—Triple H himself—an Ur-Dravidian whose opening line of dialogue, addressed to his image in a mirror, is this: ‘Behold, dips and dewheads, the baddest, blackest bindle-bopper to bo your peep’” (113). In the story’s
first section, Harbee, employed by a crime lord known as “The Don,” murders the thief Terry “Little T” Blount on The Don’s orders. The second section finds Harbee, years later, taking Doris Hoom, wife of Ernest Hoom (nicknamed “The Neck”) hostage to ensure negotiations between his current employer (The Don has died) and The Neck proceed without incident; Harbee and Doris have sex. The final section follows Harbee as he enters his car to discover an occupant in its backseat, a woman named Margaret who, in addition to being Little T Blount’s daughter, has been hired by The Neck to dispatch Harbee’s life, which she does at the end of the story.

As Harbee’s first words make clear, the language of “Men of Rough Persuasion” is densely packed, often alliterative and difficult to parse. The story, acknowledged in the narrative as a “semi-sci-fi mystery” (113) takes place in New Cleveland, and its future setting places the story in Abbott’s “post-apocalyptic, Mad Max-meets-Walt Whitman” category. As such, the story participates in the roughly decade old trend of appropriating pulp fiction, the long-standing nemesis of creative writing programs, for literary fiction, a trend that Abbott surmises has resulted from literary writers having “grown weary of the backyard, the kitchen, the bedroom, and the barbeque” and having “turned their attentions to the dramatic possibilities inherent in war, crime, mystery, things that go bump in the night.” That said, “Men of Rough Persuasion” does little to embrace dramatic possibilities: its threadbare plot merely mimics those of detective fictions without building up a sense of mystery. Instead, the future setting opens up the linguistic experimentation by allowing the possibility for such language to exist.

“Men of Rough Persuasion” is a story largely about language itself, especially the compressive capabilities of slang. Harbee—whose name itself compresses into Triple
H—displays a talent for slang usage with “Behold, dips and dewheads, the baddest blackest bindle-bopper to bo your peep.” The nearly iambic rhythm generated by the use of consonance and two syllable words demonstrates an expressive, even emotive, felicity with language. For a reader encountering Harbee’s soliloquy in the story, it does not make much sense. The difficulty in parsing Harbee’s slang, which diegetic characters would instantly understand, emerges from a lack of context, either grammatical or definitional, for Harbee’s words. The gist of the sentence is clear, Harbee is giving himself a pep talk in the mirror proclaiming himself a tough guy, but the words he uses are unclear. What, for instance, is a “dewhead?” Are we meant to take “bindle-bopper” literally, which would be someone who hits (bops) a bindle (a bag carried by a homeless tramp or a homeless tramp that carries such a bag), or is “bopper” an allusion to bebop jazz (Harbee is, we learn, African American). “Bo your peep” seems to hint at sexual intercourse, but there is little to justify such a reading against a reading that understands it as an act of violence.

That the story is more interested in language play than in playing with plots of pulp fictions becomes clear when Harbee meets Margaret. Margaret was twelve when Harbee murdered Little T and was attending St. Mary’s of the Weeping Wood where she says she was “Vocabulary champ three years running” (122). The inclusion of her prowess with lexicon at first appears a non sequitur, a bit of character history casually tossed into the story. As she prepares to murder Harbee, however, Margaret continues to mention vocabulary, noting that legerdemain was one of her words and defining staphylococcus as any “of various parasitic bacteria occurring in grapelike clusters” (122). Vocabulary comes to a head at the story’s end, when Harbee utters his final word, zucchetto, a word
that Margaret notes is from the Italian meaning a “skullcap worn by Roman Catholic clergy” (124). There is little symbolic or narrative purpose for Margaret’s definitional activity; it does stall the execution slightly and reveals Margaret to be as linguistically intelligent as Harbee, but its inclusion appears easy to dismiss. If the definitions were meant to suggest she is Harbee’s linguistic superior, their purpose would serve a synecdochal function that would express her general superiority, a superiority reinforced by killing him. The delight the narrative takes in presenting slang with unapparent definitions challenges the value of knowing (or at least reciting) definitions, however. If anything, the story presents Margaret’s erudite lexicon as equal to Harbee’s slang vocabulary, an equality likewise found in their shared jobs as hired guns.

The equality given to Margaret and Harbee’s linguistic skills reveals a more subtle and yet more important purpose for Margaret’s rehearsal of definitions. Any given word has a definition, but to cite a definition is to express a meaning without the concision provided by the single word being defined: a single word stands in for a string of other words, and in doing so, essentially compresses language into a singular sign. The short story form necessitates compression of language in general, and the use of slang throughout “Men of Rough Persuasion” takes linguistic compression to a breaking point. Slang, especially created slang that has no identifiable referent, compresses not only plausible meanings but also possible meanings (perhaps at times an infinity of meanings) into one word or phrase. Given the play between definition-less slang and actual definitions presented in the narrative, the story seems self-aware of not only its own linguistic inventiveness but also of the pressures placed on readers through its compression.
The presentation of the narrative is itself an act of compression: in a set-up inspired more by Borges than Hammett, “Men of Rough Persuasion” is actually a paraphrasing (or retelling) of parts of a fictional novel called *The Gates of Hell*. Harbee appears in only three of the twenty chapters of the novel and is “almost lost” among the other characters, a collection of “gabbies and goombahs, fakelos and funnelheads, Catamites and hypes, rajahs and ringers, and can openers and Visigoths” that populate the book (113). In saving the “almost lost” character of Harbee and reconfiguring him as the central protagonist of the short story, “Men of Rough Persuasion” makes an implicit criticism of the (albeit fictional) novel: Harbee is a compelling character that the “author” of *Gates of Hell* has neglected to fully explore.

Such characters exist in many novels since a novel’s length allows for numerous characters to venture in and out of its narrative, but short stories, given their brevity, do not. Although short stories may have secondary characters that are not as developed as the protagonist, a story that overextends itself by introducing tertiary or quaternary characters will likely lack the narrative focus required of the form. In appropriating a minor character from a novel, “Men of Rough Persuasion” makes a slyly subversive statement about the capabilities of short stories and novels: while novels can certainly explore, complicate, and evolve characters, the brevity of the short story allows for an incisive study of character that compresses the complexities of a character into the few, central traits necessary for the narrative to progress. Compressing character for brief narratives resembles the compression of language required by a short story; that “Men of Rough Persuasion,” a story about the compressive qualities of language, also highlights the compression of character in short stories suggests that a meta-level argument is at
work that privileges such compression over the expansion available to novels. The story reveals that it is aware of itself as a literary form—it is consciously artful, and the argument it makes is one of literary aesthetics.

The story is, in other words, smart and deceptively so. Despite its apparent origins in pulp fiction, “Men of Rough Persuasion” betrays any resemblance it might have to commercially oriented writing—it is literary fiction, first and foremost. By making the story literary fiction, Abbott has increased its aesthetic value, but at a sacrifice: the story’s value on the commercial market is less than if it were straight pulp. Pulp novels—thrillers, mysteries and horrors—continue to sell well on the trade market despite concerns about the collapsing print industry. Commercial success for literary writers, always a rarity, has become, if anything, more difficult during the period of Abbott’s career, and offers nowhere near the financial reward that pulp writers can claim. In buffering writers from the commercial market, the academy has not only allowed writers to write in genres of their choosing but also—and arguably more importantly—the academy has created the opportunities for writers to actually pursue a career in writing.

V.

The borders between academic and commercial publishing are fairly porous, and writers cross back and forth between the two sides. Overall, such a relationship benefits academic writers: they can try for commercial success, but if commercial success does not come, they remain employed. Success in academic publishing, such as placing short stories in high profile journals, can open avenues into commercial publishing by gaining the attention of commercial publishers seeking writers to bring into the fold. That said, commercial and academic publishing remain distinct operations with their own processes.
Abbott’s career provides insights into both operations: he courted commercial success while finding greater success in the academy.

Perhaps the major difference between commercial and academic publishing is the process through which a writer submits work to an editor. For academic journals, the submission process is straightforward: having finished a story, the writer sends it directly to an editor. For commercial publishers, sending an unsolicited submission to an editor is unlikely to result in publication. Instead, a writer seeking a commercial publisher is best advised to seek the services of literary agencies, an industry that exploded in size following the massive growth and consolidation of publishing houses in the 1970s. While in the 1970s and before, as John B. Thompson has noted, an agent was an “optional extra for a writer,” in the course of the 1980s “the agent effectively became the necessary point of entry into the field of trade publishing” (73). Agents have taken on a gate-keeping function for publishers, with editors relying on agents “to provide the initial screening of projects: editors have, in effect outsourced the initial selection process to agents,” which leaves it “to agents to wade through the slush piles of letters, emails and manuscripts, trying to find the occasional gem” (75). Publishers have come to depend on agents to filter manuscripts to the point that they will often simply not consider work unless delivered by an agent.

Smart agents seeking talent keep an eye on the academy. Thompson quotes one anonymous agent who, when first trying to build a client list, made contact with a creative writing program:

I used a contact that I had with the director of one of these [creative writing] schools and I would say to him “Can I come up and talk to the students?” and we would go
out to dinner afterwards and he would tell me who was good and so on. (78)

Likewise, agents read literary journals in order to find writers with the hopes of signing them before another agent does (81). In short, creative writing programs create a situation beneficial to both their participants and agents, for they provide the grounds for such connections to be made.

Agents desire writers who will be commercially profitable—and most writers would likely desire this too—but commercial success is often unpredictable and never guaranteed. For Abbott, a lack of commercial success does not mean he did not try for it. While satisfied with his position in the academy and the buffer it provided to the commercial market, Abbott pursued commercial success. In the late-1970s, Abbott acquired the commercial agent Elaine Markson to help sell his books to publishers. He first broke through in trade publishing with his third collection, *Strangers in Paradise* (1986). Markson sent the manuscript to Gordon Lish, then still an editor at Alfred A. Knopf. After reading the manuscript, Lish called Abbott directly to tell them “Abbott, you’re fucking aces high!” Abbott was, he recalls, “really excited. That kind of enthusiasm! And I told Elaine. She said, ‘Oh yeah, this is a done deal.’ Never heard a word from them [Lish and Knopf] after that.” Following Knopf’s apparent rejection, Markson shopped the manuscript again, eventually landing it at G.P. Putnam and Sons.

Putnam would become Abbott’s publisher for his next three books, but the initial interest surprised Abbott for they were not known for taking chances on literary fiction: “They’re only interested in selling books. They’re not interested in reputations. Face sales and the big cheese.” Abbott came to learn that a new editor at Putnam named Stacy Creamer had read his work in magazines and gave Putnam an ultimatum: Putnam
publishes *Strangers in Paradise* or she resigns. Putnam relented and, as Abbott explains, “Back in the day, that sort of gesture meant something. So Stacy snuck me a few books. They kept paying me more money, and I kept selling fewer copies.” For his first book with Putnam, Abbott received a six thousand dollar advance. The book sold 2200 copies. The next book, *Dreams of Distant Lives* (1990), earned Abbott a ten thousand dollar advance, sold fewer copies than *Strangers in Paradise*, but in turn led to a fifteen thousand dollar advance for *Living After Midnight* (1991), which sold even less than *Dreams*. By the time Abbott offered them a fourth book, *Wet Places at Noon*, Abbott says, “even they got smart,” and declined it.

For Putnam to take a chance on Abbott in 1986 made sense: short story collections were still selling well at the time. By 1997, the major trade market for collections had passed and, given Abbott’s diminutive sales figures, there was little chance of *Wet Places at Noon* making a sizable commercial impact. Publishing is a business and books are the means to profit. While some readers and writers wish to ignore such a reality, Abbott accepts it, since books are, he acknowledges, “a product, and I don’t blame publishers for wanting to make money on their products. Believe me, I do not begrudge a hugely successful commercial writer. None whatsoever.” Commercial success is a difficult situation to come into, even when, as in the mid-1980s, it appeared a possibility for short story collections. Abbott was aware of such a possibility: “The market was suddenly viable (if it was, or if people perceived it as viable) once Ray [Carver] started having the success he had.” That said, strong sales were more anomalous than not for short story writers; those who performed well in the market were “notable exceptions,” according to Abbott: “I think Ray [Carver] made some money, I think Toby [Tobias Wolff] made
some money, Richard Ford’s made some money.” In the wake of Carver’s success
writers such as Wolff and Ford, as well as Anne Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason, Amy
Hempel and Mark Richard, acquired cache with commercial publishers, but such writers
represent a small fraction of those attempting to follow in Carver’s path.

Commercial success is almost accidental and results from a combination of factors
that align, or, as Abbott describes it, “things come together in a happy way and boom!
They’re making some money.” One of those factors that helps writers is the publisher’s
ability to publicize the writer’s biography, to in effect, create a brand around the authorial
identity. Abbott contends that during the height of short story collections, “you didn’t
need to be an alcoholic blue collar guy” like Carver, but “you needed to have a little
story” that would help differentiate you from other writers.

In general, Abbott believes market success is “the result of a whole lot of terrific
fortune. I’m not saying it’s a crapshoot. I’m saying it doesn’t hurt for the writer to have
some sort of interesting personal story for the publisher to sell. I’ve always said it doesn’t
hurt to be good looking.” Abbott’s contention that appearance matters makes sense,
especially with the publishing practice of placing authors’ photos on book jackets. As
Thompson notes, “in a media-saturated world where publicity can make a big difference
to the sales of a book, the physical appearance of the author and how telegenic they are
can become a factor” in whether a publisher picks up a book or not (86).

Appearance aside, “an interesting personal story” can prove a major asset in making a
writer attractive to publishers. Such was the case for recent Ohio State MFA graduate
Donald Ray Pollock, whose appealing backstory helped Doubleday market his first
and, as Abbott describes him, he is a “solidly blue collar guy: former alcoholic, married three times, and does come from a place called Knockemstiff, Ohio. If you as a publicist can’t win with that…” Pollock’s background led to profiles in The New York Times, The LA Times, Fresh Air and other major media sources—all of which seemed more interested in his life story than in his writing. The New York Times, for instance, noted his appearance, describing him as a “small, boyish-looking 56-year-old with short blondish hair, a bushy soul patch under his lip and a tattoo on his forearm that says ‘Carpe Diem.’ He speaks with a bit of a hillbilly twang, and his manner is gentle and deferential” (McGrath). Pollock’s hair and tattoo choices, as well as his speaking voice and mannerisms offer little insight into Pollock’s literary abilities, but as Abbott observes, publishers “aren’t selling the book, they’re selling the writer’s story,” and the more romanticized the image of the author created through publicity, the more attractive the writer is thought to be to potential readers.

Commercial success is ultimately dependent upon not only factors controllable by writers, such as the quality of their stories, but also factors beyond their control, such as publishing trends, appearance, and biography. The academy’s potential to remove writers from the commercial market while allowing them to continue writing and publishing holds an understandable appeal: writers need not appear on bestseller lists to make a living. Academic writers still need to publish, however, although they do so not necessarily to make money, but to earn prestige—symbolic, rather than economic capital, is at stake. The academy functions as a prestige economy, and the more prestige a writer can gain, the better they can succeed within the institutional logic of the university.

VI.
Despite not being a requisite condition, commercial success can provide a means for establishing prestige in the academy, and can lead directly to a teaching position even if the writer does not have an MFA. For instance, in the 1970s, the Iowa Writers Workshop hired the uncredentialed John Cheever based solely on his literary reputation, and Abbott suggests that such would happen today as well: “I’d hire John Cheever and he didn’t even graduate from high school.” The rarity of commercial success, however, makes such situations uncommon: most writers establish their reputations within the academy without the aid of best selling books.

In the place of commercial success, literary reputations in the academy develop over time, typically through the accumulation of publications. A reputation in the academy built on publication differs from reputations produced in the commercial market: it is the accumulated prestige of the publications, often generated by the prestige of the venues publishing them, rather than the number of sales those publications bring, that matter. In Abbott’s words, reputations are built “Story by story. Reprint by reprint. Workshop by workshop.” The development of a reputation in the academy is functionally a by-product of the institutional pressures writers face: tenure requires publication for advancement, and to the extent that tenure promotions are understood as reflecting reputations in a field, publication becomes a primary indicator of reputation. The academic publishing industry that developed through creative writing programs functions in a manner that, first and foremost, works to develop the reputation of writers.

Partly, academic journals specializing in short stories emerged to replace the loss of venues following the collapse of the mass circulation periodical market. These new venues emphasized quality and offered aesthetic and symbolic value for writers, but paid
little in the way of financial capital. Abbott’s career began after mass circulation short story magazines had folded, leaving, in his words “four or five, six magazines that pay real money. That was a terrible loss of a nice part of the market, but on the other hand, I think it was wonderful for the story.” Writers began publishing—and fueling a growth in—what Abbott calls “really handsome venues,” literary journals such as The Georgia Review, The Southern Review, and Sewanee. Such venues share a number of characteristics: fairly low circulation rates, university subsidization, and, importantly, a commitment to consciously literary writing.

The growth of literary journals that need not heed market trends for writing meant that stories no longer needed to conform to the in-house styles or expectations of commercial publishers, which Abbott views as a positive turn in short fiction publication: “I see the demise, if you will, of the story in commercial publishing having a real upside for writers like me and other people who have decidedly literary sensibilities.” The new venues “gave a chance to a lot of people who would never have made it past the threshold of The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Harper’s, Playboy, Esquire,” the last of the significant mass market magazines publishing fiction. With few commercial venues left, the chances of finding publication in them is small, and, for publications such as The New Yorker, the aesthetic may be too defined for many writers’ stories. Abbott acknowledges that while The New Yorker “prints some good stories” he has never sent them a story because he finds that “the stories I read there are so distant from the sort that I like to write, that I like to read.” For writers with “decidedly literary sensibilities,” the expansion of venues committed to aesthetic rather than commercial values opened up possibilities for the short story form by providing a receptive audience for writers’ explorations. Likewise, with the
chance of acceptance much higher than in the remaining commercial magazines, small journals allowed access to publication for writers who otherwise may be left unpublished. The journals provide an institutionally vital service for academic writers needing to publish in order to build their reputations and further their careers.

There are downsides, particularly economic, to publishing in small venues since, as Abbott notes, “They don’t pay a lot of money. Sometimes they pay no money.” However, Abbott identifies important benefits that publishing with small presses and journals provide, for “you get treated with respect, a real bond develops with you and an editor over time. You develop a readership out of that.” The bond with an editor is especially significant for academic writers. For one, bonding with an editor will likely make it easier to publish stories with their journal. Beyond the occasional journal publication, writers may benefit, as Abbott has, from editors whose journals also publish book series.

Abbott’s first collection, *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting* (1980), found publication with the North American Review Press, whose journal *The North American Review* had previously published Abbott’s stories. His second collection, *Love Is a Crooked Thing*, came about while Abbott served as a visiting professor at Washington University in St. Louis. He resided in University City, which was also where Shannon Ravenel, a series editor for *The Best American Short Stories*, was living. Familiar with Abbott’s work—he had been included in the 1984 edition of the series—Ravenel asked Abbott if he had a collection’s worth of stories to publish with Algonquin Books. Abbott gave her a number of stories and everyday they would lunch at her house where, according to Abbott, “We’d work on arrangement, cutting this and getting rid of that, etc. That was a marvelous experience.” Abbott’s reputation, constructed through publications and inclusion in the
prestigious *Best American* series, created an opportunity to work hands on with an editor, effectively side-stepping the writer-agent-editor progression of the commercial market. Similarly, his collection with the University of Iowa Press, *Wet Places at Noon* (1997), resulted from a conversation with poet and editor Paul Zimmer in which Abbott mentioned he had a collection ready to go (the one Putnam declined), but nowhere to publish it. Zimmer told him, “Let me have it,” and an agreement was made over a handshake.

While personal relationships with editors in the commercial market may well develop, the need for books to be financially successful limits the power of such relationships. In academic publishing, with its university subsidized journals and imprints, sales matter much less—or at least, expectations are much lower—which provides editors more freedom in publishing work they deem worthy of publication whether its marketable or not. Such an arrangement may lead to greater aesthetic freedom for writers, but as importantly, it allows writers greater opportunities to publish. With publication serving as the primary means to establish reputation, writers depend on the largesse of universities not only for their teaching positions, but also for venues in which to publish in order to secure and advance through the ranks of the professoriate.

Given that academic writers need to publish, but publication can be dependent upon relationships with editors, building relationships with editors is a key if difficult task to accomplish without prior publications. In other words, a writer with a prestigious reputation built through publications will likely have an easier time publishing than a writer with little reputation. Abbott, for instance, believes if he called a certain editor tomorrow to say that he has a collection to publish, it would likely get published based on
his reputation. A writer with a nascent career would be less fortunate: while Abbott could get a collection, he suggests that “one of my students who has maybe one or two publications and no track record, no reputation” probably would not. Fortunately for writers, there are ways out of the apparent catch-22: creative writing programs are constructed in a manner that allows interpersonal relationships to develop that, in turn, open opportunities for students.

Some paths to opportunities appear little different from pre-programmatic commercial publishing: an established writer (more than likely a teacher) may pass on writing from a beginning writer to an editor, or else a writer’s friend that has become an established writer or editor may publish or help to publish the writer. The growth of creative writing programs has increased such opportunities by bringing more writers into contact with other writers and editors. A single program can function as a networking hub, with various writers visiting for readings, lectures and conferences. Such occasions function to bring writers at various stages of their careers in contact with each other and allow writers to increase their social capital in the academic writing field.

Simply put, participation in creative writing programs means a writer will meet a large number of likeminded, literary folks. The larger the social network of a given writer, the more opportunities arise to publish, and creative writing programs exist—if only by circumstance—to provide their denizens with large social networks. Certainly, the aesthetic quality of writing matters: the better the writing, the higher the chance of being recognized by one’s peers. The ideal writers, those best positioned for success in the academy, emerging from a creative writing program would be those that have earned a large amount of aesthetic capital through the (perceived) quality of their writing and a
large amount of social capital through their efforts at networking.

While social networks play a vital role in emerging writers’ careers, they continue their import with more established writers. Abbott published his latest book, *All Things All At Once: New and Selected Stories* (2006), with W.W. Norton and Company because one of his former students had become an editor with the house. Beyond publication, social networks create opportunities for writers to financially capitalize upon their reputations through one of the unique features of creative writing programs with little to no parallels in commercial publishing—the lecture circuit. Invitations to read on the lecture circuit are dependent upon writers’ social networks and the symbolic capital they possess.

VII.

The lecture circuit, in which writers visit universities to give readings of their work individually or as part of literary festivals, has grown alongside creative writing programs. Where once it was mostly poets who gave readings and, as an undergraduate, Abbott found it “really, really odd to go to a fiction reading,” fiction readings have become institutionally established in the university and are now, as Abbott notes, as “common as poetry readings.” That the short story form lends itself to the lecture circuit format—a story usually takes from 30-45 minutes to read aloud, which roughly coincides with the attention span of a listening audience—provides one factor that has helped make fiction readings ubiquitous on college campuses: while a novelist may read an excerpt, the self-contained nature of a short story allows writers to offer a formally satisfying performance that concludes with a sense of closure.

Entrance into the lecture circuit works by way of invitation and most invitations
emerge from established contacts and relationships with other writers. Abbott has been responsible for inviting writers to read at both Case Western and Ohio State, and has made a habit of inviting writers he knows personally—or wants to know personally: “I was inviting people I knew or wanted to know. I had gotten to know Tim O’Brien, so I asked Tim to come. But the way it works is: you scratch my back, and I scratch yours.” The reciprocal exchange of invitations makes for an insiders’ club with varying shades of nepotism, but the quality of one’s work also plays a part in invitations—the higher a writer’s accrued symbolic and social capital, the better the chance for invitations. Abbott offers a typical progression for a writer: “Somebody likes your work so they ask you to give a reading and in response, as a thank you, you invite them and the two of you find yourself at a writer’s conference some place, and before you know it, your summer’s filled up” with lecture circuit readings.

The most substantial benefit of the lecture circuit to writers is financial—writers are paid well to read their work. As a supplement to university salaries, lecture circuit payments tend to exceed money made from book sales. Abbott admits that “most of the year people are paying far more to hear you read than anybody ever paid you to write,” a situation that twists the economics of writing and publishing away from the standard practices of the commercial market. As such, the lecture circuit differs greatly from its commercial publishing analogue, the book tour. Book tours are publicity driven: authors make stops at book stores to read from their latest publication with the hope that such readings will lead to greater sales. While a writer’s books are often available for purchase (and signing) at a university reading, the reading itself is the economic driver of the event. Subsidized by university grants, a writer visiting a university to deliver a reading
receives (often a good deal of) money for the event, as well as travel expenses and room and board.

Abbott participates often in the lecture circuit and was a featured writer at the 2008 Ohio University Spring Literary Festival that provided him a six thousand dollar remuneration. Of his participation in the festival, Abbott proclaims “there is no downside to this. Six thousand dollars to spend four days flouting my work, reading it to thunderous applause. My money is no good: people are buying me drinks and food, I got a place to sleep. It’s a wonderful racket!” Abbott found himself in the spotlight as a literary celebrity but, as his claim that “It’s a wonderful racket!” makes clear, he understands the lecture circuit primarily as a swindle, and a financially beneficial one at that.

Swindle or not, the lecture circuit represents the most direct conversion of symbolic capital into financial capital for academic writers: the accrued reputation and prestige of writers provide them resources that they may trade for money. Although they may not make much money directly off of book sales, academic writers who persist in publishing find themselves in a lucrative position once their reputations have amassed. That financial capital forms the end goal of writers makes sense, for it was also the original promise. Rather than play the poor odds of finding commercial success, academic writers accept the buffer of creative writing programs, along with the institutional restraints on their personal autonomy, for financial stability.

Writers, in other words, join the university on the promise that they may have a career, a prospect that is becoming less and less viable. The massive growth of creative writing programs that led to the Short Story Renaissance has perhaps reached its apogee:
the market for academics has become flooded and there are no guarantees of employment for graduating MFAs. If Ohio State were hiring, Abbott believes

We would not be looking at anyone with fewer than two books to begin as an assistant professor. And we’d have a pool of about forty for that. So God help the student I was when I was graduating, a kid who has, what I did have? Nine individual story publications at that time? OSU wouldn’t be looking at me. Competition is fierce.

The impact the oversaturation of the professorial market will have on future writers remains to be seen, but the current near-totality of literary production as embedded in the academy will likely continue until another system emerges to replace it.
Conclusion

In this project, I have argued that creative writing programs created new market contexts that led to a revival of the short story as a primarily aesthetic object. While occasionally interacting with the commercial market, the market for short stories has largely engaged in the prestige economy of the academy in which symbolic, rather than financial, capital is pursued. That new market, combined with the institutional focus on the short story as a pedagogical form worthy of study and production, reframed the social contexts of the short story form: what had existed primarily as a commercial genre published in mass periodicals was now understood as a worthy pursuit for literary artisans employed by the university.\textsuperscript{45}

To the extent that much of the discussion within this project has sought to coordinate the institutional shifts that allowed for the Short Story Renaissance, it has done so in order to outline the reasons for the short story’s resurgence. Writers in this period made a conscious decision to write short stories, and that decision was influenced by the contexts within which they practiced their writing. Writers, in these contexts, viewed the short story as a primarily aesthetic object, and the formal analysis of stories in previous chapters has illuminated the aesthetic forms they created. In conclusion I wish to elaborate on this claim to differentiate the aesthetic value of short stories from their institutional value.

For Mark McGurl, the value of creative writing programs in general is ultimately one of institutional value that he defines as “excellence.” Revising Bill Readings’s complaints about excellence as the university’s “meaningless” integrating principle that unifies an increasingly bureaucratic system, McGurl understands the “excellence” of the university
as an “index not of its functional efficiency but of its more or less impressive capacity to waste. Excellence in this view is a primarily aesthetic term, the guise in which judgments of beauty-as-superiority reappear in an otherwise efficiency-oriented university” (407). That McGurl defines aesthetics as “judgments of beauty-as-superiority” presents his understanding of aesthetic value as one of social recognition and distinction. Thus, McGurl argues that the benefit of creative writing programs to the university is that “writers contribute a certain form of prestige to the university’s portfolio of cultural capital” as they go about the “task” of producing “unconscious allegories of institutional quality” in their writing” (408). Writers strive for excellence in their writing, and that excellence is rewarded professionally through publication and prestige, which in turn, generates the university cultural capital for housing them. Such a symbiotic relationship between writers and the university is also, McGurl suggests, beneficial to literature itself. McGurl argues that “the tremendous expansion of the literary talent pool” brought about the growth of creative programs, combined with a “self-conscious attention to craft” that allows writers to realize their “elevated literary ambitions,” has created a perfect situation for literary production. He asks “is it not true that owing to the organized efforts of the program—to the simple fact of our trying harder than ever before—there has been a system-rise rise in the excellence of American literature in the postwar period? (409)

We are meant to answer that question in the affirmative—creative writing programs have made postwar American literature more “excellent.” But that begs a question—more excellent than what? Furthermore, is “excellence” as McGurl defines it—an aesthetic term, a “guise” in which judgments are made in the university—a useful way to understand literature? Put another way, is “excellence” what we want the value of
Excellence is certainly not, or not entirely, the literary ambitions of writers. As Lee Abbott said, he wanted to “write and to write well.” Writing “well” may require the social recognition of one’s peers (or editors) to determine whether that ambition—or excellence—has been achieved, but I want to take as seriously Abbott’s first claim that he simply wanted to “write.” Abbott, as my discussion of his career shows, is conscious of the prestige economy of the university, that generating symbolic capital matters. Within that system, however, Abbott’s literary practices defy common sense. If Abbott’s ambition is fame and fortune (financial or symbolic), then he would be better off writing minimalistic short stories that better conform to those that gained popularity, or stories that could find publication in *The New Yorker*, or else, he should have abandoned short stories altogether and written a novel, which arguably remains a surer bet to garner literary acclaim outside the academy. Instead, Abbott writes rhetorically dense, regionalist, and male-centric stories that have had, given his sales figures, a limited appeal. The institutional structure of creative writing programs has, indeed, rewarded him for his efforts, but one senses that, while a nice pay-off, such rewards were never Abbott’s motivation. Simply, Abbott writes the stories he wants to write because he wants to write them.

The institution of creative writing allows Abbott to write what he wants, provides the conditions for his work, and influences his literary practices. One, then, might expect to find traces of the institution in the aesthetics of programmatic fiction. McGurl certainly finds them: for him, the institution presents an inescapable system that reflexively enacts itself on the formal level of texts. All novels to emerge from campus writing programs,
McGurl suggests, are campus novels “of a sort” (47), and McGurl’s readings of texts seek to expose the programmatic underpinnings of their forms. Thus, he argues that Flannery O’Connor’s stories are “more than simply a product of the multivalent institutionalization of the value of painstaking craft” but “can also be read as passionate allegorical arguments for the necessary pleasures of the ‘discipline’ they so famously manifest”; while often understood as an enthusiast of Catholic discipline, for McGurl, the discipline that matters most with O’Connor is the disciplined understanding of writing she developed at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop.

Minimalism emerges in McGurl’s reading as institutionally fashioned as well. Lower middle class students entered the university and encountered the high modernist writings in creative writing classrooms. Minimalism emerged as a way to mitigate a feeling of shame in the creative writing classroom: fearing they could not produce writing on par with the exemplary texts of high modernism, students turned towards a minimalist aesthetic that “puts ‘mastery of form,’ a solid sense of completion, within visible reach of the student” (294). Minimalism thus serves as a form of “risk management”: the creative writing workshop functions as a “dialectic of shame and pride, since the shame of public ‘evisceration’ of one’s shamefully bad fiction is preparation for the eventual pride of publication” (293). The easy mastery of minimalist forms reduces the risk of producing shamefully bad fiction. To the extent that critics such as John Aldridge may fault minimalism for lessening literary ambitions, McGurl would appear to agree, although where Aldridge sees such lessening as a negative, McGurl sees it as a tactical, even positive, response to the institutional situation of creative writing.

McGurl’s readings of postwar fictions as allegories for their system of production are,
as in his claims about O’Connor and minimalism, often insightful. The readings also help to extend his argument that the value of creative writing programs is their institutional absorption in, and, consequently production of, academic excellence. Minimalism is an aesthetic form that students may quickly excel in producing. But while minimalism’s popularity in the creative writing classroom may well have resulted from the ease with which its form could be mastered—John Barth, we recall, chastised MFA students for defaulting to a minimalist style in order to avoid the difficulty of writing complex sentences—my exploration of minimalism’s roots in Gordon Lish’s experimentalism has suggested that minimalism is not, or not originally, a lessening of literary ambitions. Lish’s sentence-level stylistics have nothing to do with risk management. The ontological fabrication of the first sentence—“The sentence should not be a sentence that communicates, but one that presents. Not a sentence about the world, but one that is the world entire”—introduces more risk into the creative process. The stakes of world-creation are infinitely higher than in shame-masking. Lish’s castigating of the student who wrote “The kid’s name was Bummer and we stole his house” and the subsequent replacement of “name” for “house” is instructive: a story about stealing a house offers potentially less imaginative possibilities than the stealing of someone’s name.

It is that sense of imaginative possibility, the act of creation itself implied by creative writing, that offers a form of value removed McGurl’s social construction of aesthetic value as excellence. While much of this project has concerned itself with what happens to a piece of writing once it enters the literary market, I have also been concerned with the processes that allow for that piece of writing to exist. These processes are allowed for by the institutional contexts they occur in, but that does not imply that they are directed by—
or subsumed within—the contexts. If the university’s primary relationship with writers is to provide them a buffer from the commercial market, then what does this mean to the writers themselves? The short, but I think important, answer to this is that it allows them to write.

Writing is an action, and the value creative writing programs offer to writers is the freedom to pursue this act. The old question of whether it is better to write or to have written—is it the process of writing or the product of writing that matters?—seems especially relevant here. For Cheever, dependent upon the product of his process to find placement in magazines and pay his bills, the product trumped consideration of the process. His difficulty in writing novels, which he expresses as frustration with the process, as well as his pursuit of publishing with The New Yorker, hints at the extent to which he wanted to have written. Writing a short story is, he says, “an exhausting task” that he had given up by 1969 (Conversations 17). His view of the novel “not as narrative but as bulk, texture, color, weight, and size” (Journals 199) expresses text as pure materiality, as a product. Abbott, by contrast, speaks of writing, and particularly the novel, as a process much more than he does a product. He has foregone novel writing because he “cannot bear the thought of spending two, three or four years working on something that just turns to dust, that I don’t have the imagination to finish.” While finishing does imply an end, a product, his concern that he might not have the “imagination” to finish is telling. The stakes of novel writing are, Abbott says, “really, really high. I feel that I might not have the courage to turn all the corners you need to turn in a novel without ducking or flinching or fudging.” The imaginative possibilities are more numerous with a novel, the courage required to endure its process much higher. The
stakes of writing are the stakes in the act of writing: the novel, for Abbott, is a fight to finish, but it is the fight itself, not necessarily the glory of the championship belt, that matters.

If there is an aesthetic to creative writing that this project suggests, at least through the writers I have studied, it is an aesthetic of the creative act itself. In his reclamation of term *techne*, Henry Staten draws upon Kant and Valery to examine art through the lens of its production. The production of art requires a creative outburst of invention, but this is a formless outburst that must then be rendered into form through *techne*. The *techne* that is learned by artists amounts to knowledge of the practices (often cultural) of their art:

The form-bestowing power is coded by the long process of cultural evolution into the tools and know-how of social practices, from which it is picked up by individual practitioners [...] and without which, no matter how much aptitude they might have, they would be entirely helpless to bestow form” (231).

*Techne* bridges the divide between innate talent and structured writing; the disciplining of creative writing classroom is largely training in the *techne* of literary writing. In suggesting that *techne* provides a viable means to understand art, Staten reframes aesthetics from a discussion of aesthetic products to a discussion of the practices of aesthetic production.

In the writers I have explored, the practice of writing serves not only as method to discuss aesthetic productions, but becomes an aesthetic in the productions themselves. It is the *techne* of aesthetic productions that matter, not the productions themselves. Such an aesthetic emerges both in the description of the writing practices of Lish and Abbott, but also in the stories of Lorrie Moore. Liz, in “Go Like This,” is not concerned whether or
not an “aesthetic suicide” becomes enshrined in the Whitney or mocked in the tabloids—it is the act of creating it that gives her what pleasure she can have as her life approaches its end. Creative writing programs discipline self-expression, insist upon rules that, for instance, Francie in “How to Become a Writer” cannot abide, but such disciplining arguably adds to the pleasure of the creative act: the cultural knowledge embedded in techne, rather than restricting the formal possibilities of writing, adds to the pleasure of writing. To draw upon Abbott’s boxing metaphor, the pleasure of boxing is configuring the method to attack your opponent when you know that you cannot hit below the belt.

The short story seems particularly amenable to an aesthetic commitment to creation, to the pleasure of pursuing imaginative possibilities. The beginning of every new story’s composition offers an array of such possibilities—the world created is not yet defined, anything can happen. The short story’s brevity means that it can be written quickly compared to novels; it may be finished, and a new story, with all its imaginative possibilities in tact, may begin. The dedication required in novel writing can make such an undertaking tedious. Hemingway advised Fitzgerald that “You just have to go on when it is the worst and most helpless—there is one thing to do with a novel and that is go straight on through to the end of the damn thing” (Selected Letters 306). Novel writing can seem helpless, can be the worst, but a short story can always be abandoned before the finish with little repercussion.

The writer as a creator, or to use the parlance of creative writing programs, a crafter, is admittedly an ideal. In reality, writers in the academy must published, must strive for social recognition if they wish to flourish (or even remain) in the institution. It could be, however, that creative writers wish to imagine their working life as such an ideal. That it
may well be an imagined ideal, an imaginative possibility unto itself, seems to me a more worthwhile pursuit than institutional excellence. The value of the university to creative writing may be in allowing for such an imaginative possibility to exist within its institutional structure even as the ideal defies the product-orientated economy of prestige promoted within the university. Paradoxically, the university’s greatest buffer provided to creative writing programs may at times—during the act of writing—be a buffer against the university itself.
Although it sold only 300,000 more copies an issue, *The Post* exceeded its rival *Women's Home Companion*'s advertising revenue by 460% (Reed 153).

*The Saturday Evening Post* continued publishing, but switched from a weekly to bi-weekly and ultimately a monthly format.

See, for instance, Mark McGurl’s *The Novel Art*, in which he argues that Henry James “sought to claim the Anglo-American novel from the domain of popular entertainment and to argue for its potential as what he called ‘fine art.’ Exactly what it would mean to produce a novel that could be considered art would of course change […] but James’s conception of the novel as the appropriate vehicle for the aspirations of the artist would persist” (2).

A small irony of short story scholarships’ determination to proclaim the merits of the form in a culture that upholds the novel as the superior art is that György Lukács rated the aesthetic accomplishments of short stories above those of the novel. In *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács contends that the “short story is the most purely artistic form; it expresses the ultimate meaning of all artistic creation as mood, as the very sense and content of the creative process, but it is rendered abstract for that very reason” (italics in original 51).

Edgar Allan Poe’s 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, often understood as the foundational text of short story theory that establishes and defines the mode of fiction that we recognize as the “short story,” makes an aesthetic argument for the importance of Hawthorne’s work.

These are the focuses my project engages most directly with, but English provides two additional focuses, new media studies and readership studies, that are outside the purview of this project.

Presumably, the inverse of this could be true in certain situations. To the extent that economic success means that a work has become popular amongst those with less cultural capital than literary writers and critics, a critical backlash can occur.

In his diagram of the literary field for late-nineteenth century France, Bourdieu maps three genres of writing—drama, novels, and poetry—to show their relationships between audience and prestige (poetry has the smallest audience with the most prestige, drama the largest audience with the least prestige, and the novel situates between them). Short stories are notably absent, although Balzac, de Maupassant, and Verne (amongst others) explored the form. Whether that absence stands as a purposeful omission or not (the short story may not have represented a large enough segment of the literary field to include it), it suggests that Bourdieu, like others, devalued the form.

As Bernard Lahire has argued, writers may not have a constant engagement with the literary field, and instead “may leave the game for some amount of time to pursue other activities, before reappearing when a new book is published” (444); unlike “those people who experience their profession as a central and permanent part of their personality, writers who, for economic reasons, work a ‘day job’ have a cultural and ‘personal’ foot in literature and a material (and sometimes ‘personal’) foot outside of literature (the second foot freeing the first from dependence on market constraints)” (445). Creative writing programs reframe that relationship: while participating in the university as a professor may constitute a “day job,” it bears a direct relationship to literary practice. A writer’s
position within the professoriate depends upon the symbolic capital earned from publishing.

10 In his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories*, Tobias Wolff dismisses the possibility of a “renaissance” of the short story, writing, “to judge by the respectful attention this renaissance has received from reviewers and academics, you would think it actually happened. It did not. This is a rhetorical flourish to give glamour, even valor to the succession of one generation to another” (xii). Wolff contends that because writers such as Flannery O’Connor, Bernard Malamud, and J.D. Salinger were producing popular and acclaimed short stories during a supposed “dark age” of short story publication, that the short story never entered such a dark age. Wolff certainly has a point: even during the short story’s peak as a commercial form, many writers produced stories of high literary and aesthetic merit but they did so largely within a general field of literary production that privileges the novel above the short story. It is perhaps telling that O’Connor, Malamud, and Salinger published their short story collections only after they had established their reputations with novels.

11 This is not to suggest that economic success was impossible or undesired. That short story collections sold well in the early 1980s almost certainly led some writers to believe that they could find commercial success writing short stories.

12 Hemingway, as he does for many aspects of contemporary writing, provides the model for refusing to discuss the writing process. In a *Paris Review* interview, George Plimpton explains that Hemingway “finds it difficult to talk about writing—not because he has few ideas on the subject, but rather because he feels so strongly that such ideas should remain unexpressed, that to be asked questions on them ‘spooks’ him (to use one of his favorite expressions) to the point where he is almost inarticulate” (“Art of Fiction No. 21”)

13 In this light, Harbach praises Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) for being Franzen’s “most simply written” and “most complex and best” book, while ignoring arguments that the realist mode of fiction it displays might be a regressive, rather than a progressive, tendency.

14 Short story collections found commercial success in the 1980s, and it is unclear if Harbach accounts for this.

15 *Dubliners*, the most recent of the group, was already two decades old.

16 Cheever had published consistently in *The New Yorker* throughout World War II, but these were mostly war stories written while enlisted in the Army.


18 I do not mean to imply anywhere in this chapter that Cheever’s short stories for *The New Yorker* were standardized in any way. In fact, some of the stories, such as “The Swimmer” (1964) in which a man leaves a party, swims across all the pools of his suburb, and returns home after some unclear amount of time to find his family gone and his home abandoned, are strange. As Boyle writes of “The Death of Justina” (1960), it was “as dark and haunting a dream of a story as anything I’ve read by anyone.” Clearly, the *New Yorker* story was not confined to mundane stories about mundane sophisticates.
The obscuring of the editor’s role in literary production is often embraced by editors themselves. Robert Gottlieb has offered that the “editor’s relationship to a book should be an invisible one [...]” The most famous case of editorial intervention in English literature has always bothered me—you know, that Dickens’s friend Bulwer-Lytton advised him to change the end of Great Expectations: I don’t want to know that! As a critic, of course, as a literary historian, I’m interested, but as a reader, I find it very disconcerting” (MacFarquhar). Gottlieb wants no one to know what he told Joseph Heller or “how grateful” Heller is for the assistance, a desire that stands in sharp contrast to Lish.

I wish to thank the Lilly Library and its librarians for their generosity in both funding a research trip to the library through the Everett Helm Fellowship and for assisting me during my research period there as I gathered archival evidence for this chapter.


The collection found trade publication with Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, a company better known for their textbook division but that had previously published Lish’s first novel, Dear Mr. Capote.

That Lish had not completely developed his editorial style is seen in the editorial marks on the typescript: while he excises heavily, he has yet to adopt the use of a felt tip pen that would become his preferred editing utensil.

Since Carver’s version of “Fat” has yet to see publication, all page references to the story—including Lish’s edits—are from the typescript version in the Lilly Library.

Since Carver’s original version, titled “Where is Everyone?” and Lish’s edited version, titled “Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit,” have both been published in the Library of America edition of Carver’s Collected Stories, the page numbers refer to this edition.

It might also be considered that Carver’s subject matter—largely mundane, domestic scenes—helped the stories’ popularity since writing workshops have a programmatic aversion to complicated plot, which is viewed as the concern of genre fiction. In keeping with their basis in realism, the development of character and scene in the narrative discourse in programmatic fictions often trumps the sequence of events that the stories portray.

Problematically, in The Culture of Narcissism, Lasch locates traditional moral authority in “patriarchal” figures such as fathers, teachers, and preachers and appears to venerate such authority. Lasch’s cultural positions sometimes led critics to misread him as a political conservative akin to Allan Bloom. While certainly, as in Women and Common Life (1997), Lasch professes skepticism towards progressivism and feminism, Lasch’s primary antagonist was always capitalism (see, especially, Mattson, “The Historian as Social Critic”). To be clear, however, my use of Lasch does not signal agreement with his critique or his conclusions; I am more interested in that he articulates a turn to the self than in whether his diagnosis of a cultural crisis is accurate.

Lasch’s belief that literature needs to do more than entertain grants literature a social role it may not actually possess. In short, Lasch appears to perceive literature’s relationship to the social world as one of a moral didacticism similar in kind to that presented by John Gardner. Both Lasch and Gardner’s assertions are based in
assumptions that may or (more likely) may not be valid, but, in the case of Lasch, what interests me and furthers the argument of the chapter is that he understands literature as participating in the crisis of the narcissistic self.

Although as Micki McGee has noted, most of Alger’s characters “typically pursue a course of upward mobility through marriage to the daughter of a wealthy benefactor,” which makes them “made” by others (32).

Bourdieu does much to show that artistic autonomy is an ideological construct, brought about by “dissociating art-as-commodity from art-as-pure-signification” (“The Market” 114). Such is a false construct, since symbolic goods are “a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object” (113). See also Woodmansee, The Author, Art and the Market: A Rereading of Aesthetics.

Although, as Bourdieu and Passeron argue in Reproduction, institutions always seek to reproduce the institution first and foremost; to the extent that creative writing programs reproduce creative writing programs, the same could be said for literary studies in general.


From their website: “Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light.” It should be noted that the Iowa Workshop was founded two years after Brande published her guide.

That creative writing programs supposedly lack the rigor of scholarly courses and are predicated on self-esteem building finds formulation in supporters as well as detractors of the programs. McGurl presents creative writing workshops as offering “a vacation from the usual grind” whereby the “undergraduate writer becomes a kind of internal tourist voyaging on a sea of personal memories and trenchant observations of her social environment […]” (16). For a summary of skepticism towards creative writing programs that declares workshops a “combination of ritual scarring and twelve-on-one group therapy,” see Menand, “Show or Tell.” For an exploration of self-esteem in creative writing pedagogy, see Leahy, “Creativity, Caring, and the Easy ‘A’.”

The inverse of Chekhov’s gun, that if a gun fires by the end of the narrative it needs to be foreshadowed early so as to avoid a deus ex machina conclusion, applies here.

Given that these are Francie’s words, the reader may play critic and conclude that, while not terrible, Francie’s summation seems clichéd at best.

That she uses polio in the comparison may also reflect her continued inability to process the crippling injury to her brother.

It is not entirely clear when the story takes place, but given that she is fourteen when her brother is in Vietnam, the mid-1970s seem a reasonable estimation for the time of her collegiate career.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Lee Abbott come from an interview I conducted with him on 25 February 2012 in Columbus, Ohio.

The MFA program in creative writing at Ohio State regularly appears in Poets and Writers Magazine’s Top-50 MFA programs. As of 2012, Ohio State was ranked thirty-third.

This inadequacy might be understood as a lack of cultural capital.
Although Abbott only provides the title, he most likely refers here to The Three of Us, written by Fay Chandos and published in 1970 by Mills and Boon.

Case in point: Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections, a “blockbuster success” with, by 2010, three million copies in print (Bosman “Jonathan Franzen’s”), finished fifth on the 2001 Publisher’s Weekly yearly bestseller list behind a Stephen King novel, two John Grisham novels, and a novel in the Christian evangelical Left Behind series.

A more contemporary example would be Jonathan Safran Foer, who holds only a bachelor’s degree but teaches in the MFA program at New York University thanks to the success of his novels Everything Is Illuminated and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

The short story, despite occasional commercial success, is still viewed as inferior to novels by many, especially those outside of the academy. A January 2013 article on Gawker.com by Adrian Chen, while praising the work of George Saunders in the short story form, dismisses any claim that Saunders could be the “Writer of Our Time” because he has not written a full-fledged novel. Chen writes, “Fairly or not, the novel is the Super Bowl of fiction writing, and any fiction writer who hasn't written one is going to be relegated to runner-up in the annals of literary history.”

In the same letter, Hemingway chastises Fitzgerald for distracting himself with short stories, implying he should be focused on novels: “I wish there was some way that your economic existence would depend on this novel or on novels rather than the damned stories because that is one thing that drives you and gives an outlet and an excuse too—the damned stories” (306).
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