

## Everybody Say Fiction

**P**amela Painter. As writing instructors go, I thought she was odd at first and more than a little scary. She had rules for her writing workshop that I didn't fully believe in—and young, ardent writing students with the whole world in front of them, puffed out and sure of themselves, need to believe, man. I mean this is art we're talking about here. Rules? For a writing workshop?

But there they were. Her strangest one, I thought, was that any rewrite you did on a story had to be done from scratch. In other words, if you had a twenty-three-page story and needed to add a sentence to the last paragraph on page 4, you would have to delete your entire story and start the whole thing over. She did not want you “hunting and pecking” around your draft adding what you pleased. And somehow she was always able to tell when this transgression happened. A good friend of mine, rushed for time, once handed her a story that he had fixed “cosmetically” and paid the price. I can't do justice to the upbraiding that took place and would rather refer you to the scene in *The Godfather* where Michael Corleone extracts a confession from his brother-in-law for setting up Sonny. It made your toes curl to watch such proceedings.

Another rule was that you had to read your story out loud before handing it in—the idea being that hearing

the story would sweat out any awkwardness in your sentences and ferret out any dreaded word repetition. I can remember getting a story handed back to me with the word “seemingly” circled in red five times on page 1. At the bottom of the page, scribbled fiercely, she wrote, “Read it out loud!”

For one class we were asked to bring Scotch tape and scissors. We didn't ask. It turned out that she wanted us to cut up our stories—our babies!—and move the pieces around to see what worked better where. I was never any good with scissors—being left-handed and all—but there I was, under Pam Painter's watch, cutting up my page 3 and moving chunks of it to page 7. Later that night when some of us went out for drinks—and there was a lot of that going on after class—I found a piece of tape stuck to my pant leg and another on the back of my shirtsleeve. I had tape everywhere.

Some things I enjoyed though. When she came across a word she liked the sound of in a student's story she would admire it as one would admire the full-blown works of Keats or Byron. The word itself didn't have to be extraordinary, just the sound: “Bob has used the word ‘avuncular’ in his story,” she'd say. “Isn't that a wonderful word.” And it wouldn't stop there. “Everyone, now, say ‘avuncular,’ ” she'd demand politely. “Come on, try it. A-vuuun-cuuu-laar.” We would all repeat the

word again and again. “Isn't that wonderful,” she'd say. “Isn't that wonderful.” You couldn't help but get into it with her.

I ended up liking Pam. She loved fiction and the teaching of fiction. And she liked to tell stories. My favorite one had to do with a friend (ex-friend now) who had the opportunity to get a book published and didn't want to put the effort in to make it happen. She came running up to Pam at a party after all this and Pam simply walked away from her. That's how seriously Pam Painter took the art of writing. She would always encourage curiosity, suggesting that if we ever met someone with a unique profession we should find out every detail about this person for future use in a story. She once told us about cornering an exterminator at a cocktail party, refusing to let him get away until she knew all about killing bugs and mice. The first time I met my father-in-law, who's a gynecologist, I had to restrain myself.

To be brutally honest, I realize that I can never hope to match Pam Painter's level of dedication when it comes to writing fiction. It's rare to meet anyone so purely driven in any pursuit, let alone writing. But if only a bit of her has rubbed off and somehow stuck with me, then I consider myself lucky. Now if you'll excuse me I need to find my scissors and tape.

—Dave Korzon