

The 2011 Tomales Bay Workshops

October 19-23, 2011

Fiction/Nonfiction: Getting Words on the Page--the Right Words in the Best Order with Dorothy Allison.

Writing is always a two-stage process. There is the glory of creation, inspiration and starting a draft. Then there is the hard work of revision, attention to detail, and throwing out whatever does not move the story forward. We will begin with your inspired drafts and put our efforts into the art of making your story as powerful and effective as it can be. Along the way, we will try some exercises designed to provoke you to moments of useful inspiration.

Poetry: Going to the Edge. Coming Back. with Jon Davis.

“Learning seeks abandon,” Robert Duncan said. For Federico Garcia Lorca, writing a poem is like “going on a nocturnal hunting trip in an incredibly distant forest.” Jules LaForgue claimed to have “eaten the fruit of the subconscious.” In each case, they’re talking about poetry as exploration, about preparing oneself well then entering unknown territory, about abandoning hope to discover hope, about risking failure. There’s always a chance you will make the mysterious and incomprehensible more incomprehensible by opening yourself to language and image and the chaos of imagination, by allowing the experience of the poem to sweep you up. And, of course, not all poems need to engage such athleticism, yet one difference between the average, journal-ready poem and the one that “takes the top of your head off” is this element of risk. But how do we make this trip? What do we bring with us? Using a series of prompts, we’ll explore these and other topics.

All Genres: The Interior Journey--Reading and Writing as Spiritual Disciplines with Fenton Johnson.

This workshop will address memoir and journaling as means of deepening our writing and our interior life. We will discuss how reading and research can complement the contemplative experience. We will devote particular attention to vivid figurative language as a way of enriching our encounter with the world, on and off the page. Writers who may be included in the reader: Anne Lamott, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, Bashō, Augustine of Hippo, Kathleen Norris, Hildegard of Bingen, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Sor Juana Inez, Theresa of Avila and Pema Chodron.

All Genres: The Imagination to Improvise--Writing the Beginning with Melinda Moustakis.

Sylvia Plath said, “Everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise.” In any genre, writing the first lines or first scene can seem especially daunting. How does one begin a poem or a story or an essay? How do writers find inspiration in the world around them? We will focus on the practical ways writers improvise in order to spark the imagination and create inspiration. Sometimes it’s the familiar things in the backyard of our minds that we have to look at again with fresh eyes. Sometimes we need to try something new and outside of our usual subject matter. We will explore both the familiar and the unexpected through writing exercises and the discussion of the elements of craft, supporting each others’ unique perspectives and voices along the way.

Fiction: Suspense and Momentum with Benjamin Percy.

This workshop—open to the novelist or short story writer—will open each day with a craft lecture (exploring issues of structure and momentum, among other topics) and then move into constructive discussions of students' manuscripts. We will also hammer out short exercises, talk about the business of writing, and study excerpts from writers such as Tim O'Brien, Flannery O'Connor and Tobias Wolff.

Memoir: The Artifice of Memory with Danzy Senna.

We will explore the art of remembering—that is, how memoir, by necessity, must employ fictional techniques in order to succeed. What we choose to leave out is as important as what we choose to put into our narrative. How do we create suspense in memoir? How do we create a complex character out of the fragments of what we remember of a person? Where do we draw borders around a picture and why? How can the white space and the silences speak to the reader? Through exploring these questions and others as they apply to our work, we will hope to come to a deeper understanding of the perils and the potential of the genre.