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The Fiction Class

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Published by Headline Review

Extract

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First Class: Getting Started

'YOU'VE KNOWN THERE was something special about you for a long time, haven't you?'

Arabella lets the question hover over the classroom for just a moment. Eleven pairs of eyes stare back at her warily.

This is the first day of class, and they're not sure if she is mocking them. But she's not; she's absolutely serious.

'Ever since the third grade,' she goes on, because for some reason it always is the third grade, 'ever since the teacher chose your story to read aloud on Parents' Day. She was so excited by your facility with words. Facility! She even used that word in the letter she sent home to your parents inviting them to be guests of honor at the reading, although in my own particular case, my father couldn't come because he was in the hospital, and my mother didn't make it because she fainted in the school

hallway and banged her head on the water fountain and had to be taken by ambulance to the Nassau County Medical Center. If my mother let me down, there was always an ambulance involved; no lame scheduling conflicts for her.

'But anyway.'

Arabella pauses for a moment and surveys the class: eleven people staring down at their notebooks, terrified that if they make eye contact, she might call on them. She recognizes Conrad from last semester, and she is touched that he re-enrolled even though, especially though, she never felt as if they connected. Everything he wrote was about transsexuals – transsexual nursery school teachers, transsexual police officers, and so on. The obvious explanation was that Conrad himself was a transsexual. Not that Arabella would ever suggest such a thing; the etiquette of a writing class requires that everyone act as though what the author is writing is an absolute fiction.

'Teacher,' one woman cries out. Her face is flushed, and her white hair stands up like a Q-Tip. 'I have to share this. I won a contest in the third grade, and I've wanted to be a writer ever since. I can still remember the story; it was about plums and—'

'Actually, I won one, too,' another woman breaks in, this one young and thin and glamorous. 'Actually, it was in high school. First place. Five hundred dollars. End of story.' Her name tag says she is Mimi, and she shimmers with pride, and rightfully so, Arabella thinks. She's beautiful, with that type of toasted tan skin that never ages. She is obviously bright, and

she is probably a great writer. Probably better than Arabella – there's always one in every class. Her descriptions will be incandescent, perfect little nuggets of phraseology, and there will probably be lots of sex in her writing – the clinical type of sex with labias and clitorises and tongues going everywhere.

'Good for you,' the woman with the white hair says to Mimi, and Arabella is touched. She is always touched when people are generous.

A red-faced woman in the front row raises her hand.

'Yes, Pam?' Arabella says, squinting as she reads the name on the tag.

'I never won anything,' Pam says, 'not even a scavenger hunt.'

'That's all right. Neither did I,' Arabella responds, although that may have been the wrong thing to say. She can see Mimi looking at her, obviously wondering why she is paying money to take a writing class from someone who has never won anything, an unpublished teacher who is standing in the middle of a nursery school classroom in Manhattan surrounded by cutouts of snowflakes on the wall and occasionally interrupted by the thumping of an angry-looking bunny in a cage.

Arabella sighs and moves on.

'The point is that for many of us the desire to be a writer starts young, but then something happens, doesn't it?' Arabella asks. 'Maybe you found you couldn't get a job with your English degree, or you got married or had a baby or went into

law, because that's what English majors are supposed to do for money, and somehow that dream you had of being a writer went away. Or, even worse than disappearing, it came to seem like something foolish, something childish and self-indulgent – like wanting to be a fairy princess or a movie star.'

There is a lot of nodding now, which is encouraging. If Arabella can get the students to like and trust her and each other, the class will be a success. But she knows she must move slowly, carefully. A new class is a fragile thing. This is New York, after all; people are prickly, competitive, strange – which is why Arabella almost snarls in irritation when she notices two people in the front row whispering to each other. Nothing disrupts the mood of a class more quickly than people whispering.

'But here's the strange thing,' Arabella says, looking at the two whisperers as she speaks, hoping to shame them into silence. 'No matter how hard you've tried, you can't quite get that dream of being a writer out of your head. You still feel something special every time you pick up a book. You still connect to characters in ways you've never connected to people you actually know, and you still think there's something special about you even if no one else in this whole wretched world can see it. You know you're more than what you appear to be. You have to give it one more shot; you have to see if you can be a writer.

'Welcome to the Fiction Class.'

Unbelievable. The two of them are still whispering. She

glares at the two whisperers: an elegant gentleman and a woman drenched in a black shawl. Her name is Alice Dutton. Dark Alice, Arabella thinks.

'My name is Arabella Hicks,' she shouts, 'and I will be your teacher. Yes, I can see you smiling. I know it's a ridiculous name, but my mother loves Georgette Heyer romance novels and I'm named after one of her heroines. The real Arabella, the true Arabella, is married to the aristocratic rake Robert Beaumaris. You can only imagine how delighted my mother is that I'm thirty-eight and single.'

The class laughs at that, thank God. Is there anything more wonderful than having a class laugh at your jokes? Even the whisperers laugh.

'I'm fifty-five and married,' a woman in a red leather jacket calls out. Bonita Carbone. 'It's not all it's cracked up to be.'

'My girlfriend wants to get married, but I'm resistant.' This from Justin Szymanski, who has been sitting quietly, one of those boys on the verge of manhood. He could be anywhere from twenty to forty, and he's holding a copy of *Bleak House*. Arabella is tempted to tell him that's her favorite book, but now she notices that the elegant whisperer is smiling at her.

He alone is not wearing a name tag, and he is dressed more formally than anyone in the room. He is wearing a white shirt, white sweater, a soft navy blue jacket, and weathered jeans that hang perfectly against his legs. Arabella suspects his clothes were purchased just for this class, that he told a salesman at Brooks Brothers he wanted to look like a writer. She can tell he

is not a serious man; she imagines he is taking this class because it is too cold outside to garden. Either that or he is planning to write some thinly disguised memoir about the women he has known and loved.

Arabella looks down at her class roster; his name is Chuck Jones. She can almost hear what her mother would have to say about this man. 'A civilian,' she would call him, meaning he was not engaged in the battle of life. And a rich civilian at that, judging by the cut of his clothes and the air of self-satisfaction about him. Arabella has never liked people like him. It seems to her that if fate hands you money and health and looks, you are obligated to do something with them as a way of giving thanks. Not sit here like some self-satisfied letch, interrupting the class with whispering and making faces at the teacher.

'Excuse me.' A young woman is waving her hand. Her name is Ginger Clark, and she has added three exclamation marks to the name tag. She has a brand-new laptop in front of her.

'You have a question, Ginger?'

'Can we move that bunny? I've heard they carry avian flu.'

They all turn and look at the rabbit. His name is Thumper, although he is usually too exhausted to do much thumping. Generally he just lies there, sprawled out on his stomach, gazing out on the class with a jaded expression. He has the air of someone who has heard one confession too many, like a bartender at a cheap bar. Arabella is fond of him.

'The bunny stays,' Arabella says, 'but you can change seats

if you like. Now, should we get started with the first lesson?' But before she can begin the lecture, another student raises his hand, this one wearing a security jacket with a name stenciled on the pocket, a name that looks like Demon.

'Demon?' she says.

'D'mon,' he says, 'like the devil but without the e.'

'I see.'

'Will we be talking about how to get an agent?' he continues, and Arabella surprises herself by snapping back: 'No. This isn't a class about publishing,' she says. 'This isn't about making money. This is about learning to write.'

'Okay,' D'mon says, shrugging genially.

'I don't mean to be belligerent,' Arabella says. 'It's just that writing is something holy to me. Quite honestly, it's something I've been doing for a very long time and without any financial reward. I spend half my life copyediting annual reports so I have enough money to live. You can't think about success.'

'So we're not going to be published?' D'mon asks.

'Well, no, I don't want to quash your hopes. I just wouldn't plan on it.'

Again, Arabella is conscious of Mimi's eyes on her, appraising, analyzing. She wonders what this young woman is doing in her class; she seems more the type of person who would be in an expensive graduate program. Maybe she is looking for material for a book; maybe she's going to write an exposé about writing programs. The bunny begins to suck on his water bottle, and an insistent gurgling sound fills the room.

'Let's get started,' Arabella says. 'Literally, let's talk about how you get started writing.

'The writer Katherine Anne Porter told a wonderful anecdote about how she came to write the classic story 'Flowering Judas,' and it's worth thinking about as you begin to write.

'Porter was living in Mexico, and one night she went out for a walk. As she did so, she happened to pass the window to her apartment. There she caught sight of her roommate in an unguarded moment. The expression on her roommate's face was one of desperation. Until that moment Porter had never realized how unhappy this woman was and how desperately she loved the man with whom she was having an affair. The sight of the roommate in the window set up what Porter described as a 'commotion in her mind.'

'So, my question for you is, what sets up a commotion in your mind? What do you agonize about at night before you go to bed?'

Arabella catches Conrad's eye and blushes. She wonders if he would do better with a transsexual fiction teacher. His writing is good, yet superficial; he needs to go deeper, but there is only so far she can press him without sounding like a voyeur. *Can you try to explain why your character is so eager to wear his mother's panties?*

'So,' she continues, 'you need to try to figure out what topics obsess you. It might be something big, like war and peace, or it might be something small, such as the fact that

people keep cutting you on line. Or perhaps you think about Mr Right. I can see you nodding over there, Ginger. Or maybe you think about your mother; you wonder what sort of crisis is going to be going on when you visit her today. Is she going to accuse the nurse of stealing her engagement ring again? Is she going to be having an allergic reaction to some new medicine? Is she going to be convinced that the little old lady who sits in the corner and cries all the time is trying to cheat her at bingo?'

The elegant gentleman laughs at that and nods at her approvingly, but Arabella is not appeased. She is still annoyed that he was whispering, and she refuses to be seduced by his charms. She thinks, as she always does when she meets someone like this, of her father, a true gentleman who was confined to a wheelchair for his entire adult life and suffered for so many years without complaining at all. She has no patience for people who expect everything to come easily – which is why she became a writer.

'My point is that if you write about things that are important to you, you will find it much easier to get started. Write about the thing that sets up a commotion in your mind, and you will find that words come flowing.

'So here is the first exercise for the class. I'd like you to make a list of the five things that obsess you.'

The room is suddenly quiet. D'mon raises his hand.

'Do you have to have five obsessions?' he asks. 'Could it be four?'

'No,' Arabella says, just to be disagreeable. 'It has to be five. Hemingway would have had five, and so should you.'

D'mon nods and pulls out a pad of paper. Conrad doesn't move, and Ginger, who has already moved once to get away from the bunny, now asks if she can move again to be nearer the socket. 'I have to charge my laptop.'

Arabella shrugs, sits down at her desk, and figures she will let them have ten minutes to write. Then there will be half an hour more of class, and then it will be time to drive up to see her mother. She visits her every Wednesday. It's too bad that this semester the class she teaches is on the same day as her visits to her mother, but there is no point in changing it. Her mother is not flexible about these things. If you say you are going to visit on Wednesdays, then you show up on Wednesdays. You do not begin shifting things around. Once you begin shifting things around, you might shift yourself right out of a weekly visit; you might shift yourself right out to California and never visit her again. This is her mother's reasoning.

'All done?' Arabella asks when the time is up.

'So soon?' the woman with the Q-Tip hair cries out. She is a large woman and seems out of place in this nursery school classroom.

'The nature of obsessions is that you shouldn't have to think about them for too long,' Arabella says. 'They ought to jump right into your mind. Who'd like to read first?'

The class stares at her. There is a sullen intransigence about

them that puts Arabella in mind of a child at a dentist's office: no one seems willing to open his mouth. 'I know it's hard,' she says, 'but reading aloud is an important way we build up trust in the class. You'll be amazed at how easy it gets.'

She smiles at Mimi, confident Mimi, who shakes her head slightly. She nods at a sleek young man who is dressed all in black. His name is Byron Stark, and he hisses, 'no.' She glares at the elegant whisperer, thinking to shame him into reading aloud, but he smiles gently and looks away. Of course. Arabella is reluctant to press anyone too hard. This is the first exercise, after all, and she wants to respect people's fears.

'Would someone please read his or her obsessions?' she says. Ginger is looking at her laptop screen so intently, one might suppose she was about to enter the code to start a nuclear attack. Conrad looks like her best bet, yet she does not want to hear his list about transsexuals because she is worried that will scare everyone off. She automatically starts to fold her arms across her chest and then stops. Never show fear. The first rule of teaching.

The bunny begins to thump against his cage, and a little pinecone, stuck on top of the cage by some mischievous nursery school student, goes cracking to the floor, the noise making everyone jump. She will just have to call on someone.

'How about you?' Arabella says, nodding at the red-faced woman with low self-esteem. Maybe if she reads, she will be proud of herself. Maybe it will set a good tone for the class, a tone of overcoming obstacles. She does so want this to be a

successful class, with people reaching into themselves and coming up with something wonderful. And, anyway, she can see that Pam has drawn up a list of her obsessions. Arabella can see the list, can almost make out the words.

'Pam Mahoney?' she tries. 'Will you read for us?'

But Pam looks absolutely appalled. She clenches her hands into fists and presses them across her chest. She has quite literally locked herself into opposition. 'I can't,' she hisses through clenched teeth.

'Just one obsession,' Arabella whispers. 'Nothing big. Your favorite TV show?'

'No,' Pam murmurs.

There is a moment of silence, and then Q-Tip calls out, 'Why don't you tell us about your obsessions, Arabella?'

The class rumbles in agreement, and Arabella forces herself to smile genially at this rabble-rouser, this rebel, this cold sore on the healthy body of her class. She has the discouraging feeling that this woman is going to be getting her into trouble for the next ten weeks. She can almost picture the evaluation forms that the students will fill out at the end of the semester. *Was the instructor receptive to new ideas?*

'Of course,' Arabella says.

Now the class leans forward, probably hoping to hear something tantalizing. Arabella can feel them observing her, guessing her weight, thinking she should lose ten pounds and get a manicure, and wondering why she wears her hair that way. She wishes she had thought to brush it; she wishes she had

gotten it cut last week instead of staying home, at her desk, working on her novel.

'My first obsession is my mother,' she says, smiling slightly so as not to look too pitiful. 'That would probably be my second obsession, too. My third obsession is writing and writers, and most particularly Dostoyevsky who is, as far as I'm concerned, the best there is. Fourth would be Manhattan; I love the city and have never wanted to live anywhere else. And fifth . . .' Here Arabella pauses. Her last obsession would be illness. Her father had Multiple Sclerosis and her mother has Parkinson's, and she has often written about people who are ill and how they deal with the healthy world. Yet she can't bring herself to say that to the class. It seems too much like a bid for pity, as though she is begging people not to drop her class, and it also seems fairly sad. She is only thirty-eight; she should be obsessed with something fun – sex or shopping. She can't bring herself to say sex, not in front of a bunch of writers. They will all imagine her in bed.

'And my fifth obsession is shopping,' she throws out, shrugging slightly. The bunny seems to shrug back at her, but then he's a bunny in a nursery school so exclusive that the children have to be interviewed before they can attend. He has heard his share of lies.

Now she can breathe deeply. Almost done. 'So,' she says, 'I've gone. Now wouldn't someone else like to read what he or she wrote?'

The class twitches. They're tempted; she can see it. And

then she notices that the elegant gentleman is whispering again to Dark Alice.

'Excuse me, Chuck Jones,' she snaps, 'but is there something you'd like to share with the class?'

He grins at that, a boy's grin, and although he looks to be about fifty, she can imagine him playing soccer, scoring a goal. She pictures a long-legged boy with curly blond hair, the handsome father, the genteel mother, the easy life.

'Does it relate to your obsessions?' Arabella presses.

He laughs at that. 'I'm sorry. I was just telling Alice here that you're the cutest teacher I've ever had.'