

I believe that voices from the margins matter. I'm from the Midwest and the spectrum of people—the land-and-cityscapes—and the stories that they all tell are important. I've also found that my own writing exists in the countless identities found throughout the region. I bring my Midwestern perspective to my classrooms and offer it as one element to the practice of diversity at the college level.

Giving marginalized perspectives a voice is the role of engaging, contemporary fiction and in my fiction workshops, finding that voice starts with open conversations about the value of an individual's worldview. My classes function around a short lecture on craft elements followed by longer, mediated discussions on how students wish or attempt to utilize elements such as setting, character, or dialogue/dialect. To promote this discussion, I try to answer their questions with open-ended questions in an effort to push them to their own answers. An example of this would be, if a student were to ask me, "Is the ending to my story good enough?" I would ask them if they have adequately resolved pressing acute conflicts in the story while hinting at possible resolutions for chronic conflicts. This dialogue keeps them focused not just on their own work, but on the concepts of craft as well.

I focus on what Krista Ratcliffe calls rhetorical listening which fosters empathy throughout the classroom by giving every student a platform from which to speak. With this established understanding of the stakes students have in the writing, I am able to transition the semester into robust workshops. For young writers, the workshop environment can be intimidating but I've found that my process of prepping empathy, even a little, leads to a group of writers eager to help each other grow.

As for the personal story I bring to the classroom, I ask "When and why did the 'working class' become the 'working poor'?" What does the world think of us and, for that matter, what do we think of ourselves? Are we the rural sugar beet farmer from Michigan's Thumb? Are we the homeless woman huddled in a tent under Chicago's Lakeshore Drive? Are we the migrant worker camped along a drainage ditch? I believe we're those and all points in between. I interviewed *American Salvage* author, Bonnie Jo Campbell, and she told me that, even if you're an artist, if you're from the working class, "you'll always be working class."

Throughout my career, my writing has focused on what it means to "get by," to get enough money or food or water to see an individual through to the next paycheck or merely the next sunrise. This idea of scarcity is present in every walk of life and I've found it is not only a well of creative inspiration but also a strong foundation for a healthy classroom dynamic. Now, as we move forward in a new presidency, one that has focused on the "us vs. them" narrative particularly of marginalized workers, I know my work for an inclusive classroom is all the more important.