Carlo Rotella in Conversation with Scott Saul, Art of Writing, November 19, 2019

Timothy Hampton: So maybe we should start. Welcome everybody to the Townsend Humanities Center. My name's Timothy Hampton. I'm the Director of the Center and I'm delighted to welcome you to this event. One quick self-serving announcement, which is that on Wednesdays at noon, the Townsend Center runs a program called Book Chats, and tomorrow we'll be featuring Sugata Ray from the Art History department talking about his new book on climate and art in early modern India, so that will be great, and you don't have to read the book to come.

Timothy Hampton: Today's conversation is in the context of the Art of Writing program, and I'll say a bit about the Art of Writing program just for a second, and then I'll introduce Scott Saul, who'll introduce Carlo Rotella.

Timothy Hampton: The Art of Writing program is now in its fifth year, and it celebrates writing as a teachable art on the Berkeley campus. The program trains undergraduates to become excellent writers in a variety of genres and fields. It prepares graduate students to become skilled teachers of writing and fosters lively public engagement with the written word.

Timothy Hampton: The program is supported by the Mellon Foundation, by the Kaufman Distinguished Chair in Writing, and by various private donors to the program. So we're happy in this context, in the context of the writing program, to have this event today. I'll turn it over now to Scott Saul, who is professor of English at UC Berkeley. He's the author of *Becoming Richard Pryor* and *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*. He's a member of the founding advisory board for the Art of Writing, so he's been with us for a while, and he continues to teach a popular Art of Writing course on cultural criticism.

Scott Saul: It's really my pleasure to welcome the writer Carla Rotella in a discussion of craft, how writers, musicians, athletes, and others cultivate their talent. A professor of American Studies at Boston College who has also been a Boston Globe columnist, and a frequent contributor to The New York Times Magazine, Rotella is himself a consummate craftsman.

Scott Saul: Whenever I see his byline pop up in The Times Magazine, or the New Yorker, or Harper's, or any of the many venues to which he has contributed, I know that I'm in for a special treat and experience offered nowhere else in magazine journalism, whether he's writing about a masterful child psychiatrist or boxing champion Floyd Mayweather Jr. or the Chicago focusing, or HBO auteur David Simon, or the question of whether kids should have tablets in schools. I know that the pros will be chiseled but fluid, imaginative yet meticulous.

Scott Saul: Every figure and every place will come vividly the life conjured through a deft weave of well-chosen details. Not infrequently, the seemingly indescribable, a lightning quick fencing match. The play of ambivalent emotion over a face gets precisely described, the action parsed by an observer who seems to take in absolutely everything. And perhaps most distinctively, for journalists tend to be drawn to the surface of things where they often remain, there will always be an idea, pulsing beneath the pros giving life to it.

Scott Saul: In every world that Rotella explores, there are stakes — artistic stakes, emotional stakes, historical stakes, political stakes — and it's his genius to draw those stakes out of the stories that he fashions. A lot of those stories are about craft, which is why we'll be tackling two larger questions about craft today. First, how do people get good at what they do whatever they may be? And second, how does a writer capture that craft in prose that is attuned and alive and itself craftily orchestrated and composed? In terms of format, this is how it'll work. I'll start off the conversation with a set of questions. The conversation will percolate between us for a while and then around five, we'll open it up for everyone in the audience. Okay, so let's dive in.

Scott Saul: So, let's dive in. Now, I've teed up a few passages from Carlo's wonderful writings, and Carlo will talk about the situation he was in when he was profiling this person or that person, and so on.

Scott Saul: But I thought I would start wide angle with kind of a foundational question then we can draw the subtleties from there, which is, how is it that writers, musicians, athletes, and others cultivate their talent? More specifically, what are these diverse sorts of craftsmen and craftswomen share in terms of the training that takes them on the path from apprentice to virtual, so I'll just lay that out.

Carlo Rotella: Okay. Thank you, Scott. Speaking of craft, Scott has to do the three different introductions for me today and introducing people as a craft. And these first two were totally different from each other. And I just want to show respect and appreciate.

Scott Saul: Wait till you hear the third, that's the real doozy.

Carlo Rotella: So, you know if you were led to believe that I'm now going to say something profound about how people get good at things so, forget it. But I thought what I would do and there's apologies to at least two of you who heard this in a class earlier today. I just want to say a word about a kind of a model that I have, in my mind when I think about ... I spent a lot of time writing about people who are good at things, and trying to figure out what and how they got that way into what it means what it tells us about the world in the larger world.

Carlo Rotella: And I have a sort of model in my mind and that model also applies to developing one's own craft as a writer and it goes something like this. I think of people as having a kind of encoded urge or an impulse, many people and so It might be an impulse to make noise. Or it might be an impulse some people have an appetite for hitting — I read that about boxers a lot. We have a variety of encoded urges and those encoded urges can lead to a creative impulse of one kind or another.

Carlo Rotella: And a lot of what I think about is how those urges get poured into vessels that give them shape. And there's two vessels in particular that I think about a lot. The first is what you might call the vessel of style, or genre. So if you have an urge to make noise, and you grow up — as I wrote about the blues man, Buddy Guy — in rural Louisiana and come to Chicago in the 1950s. One obvious vessel in which to pour the encoded urge to make noises is to become a blues guitar player and to use electric guitar and the blues as a genre, as a style, to explore your desire and give it some shape.

Carlo Rotella: So one way to think about the vessel is what styles or what genres are available. What containers does the culture make available in a particular moment into which to pour that urge? If you think of that urge is like water, it's going to take

the shape of the container. And then the next step is that styles and genres tend to be attached to institutions. By institutions, I mean, so this is where we sort of enter the kind of concrete world of history institutions like blues clubs, boxing gyms, record labels, publishing houses, magazines, schools is a big one. To this place right here, which is a container for people to pour their encoded urge to write.

Carlo Rotella: When I say it enters history, I mean that the institutions leave a kind of paper trail in history. They own property, they have employees, they pay taxes, and where producers can meet audiences. So one of the ways to think about it is you have this urge, you poured into the vessels of style or genre they're available to you. And those containers are attached to institution. So you end up pouring the urge into institutions. And what started out as an urge, without shape, or with indeterminate shape takes very determinant very definite shapes.

Carlo Rotella: And a lot of when I think about when I profile a musician, or a fighter or a writer or somebody else's, how did that work with them? What was that sort of deeper urge? What were the sort of social, economic and political conditions that they were moving through? What containers were available to them? How did the urge go into the containers? And how did you come out bearing that shape? And now that it has that shape? How can we read the consequences of that much larger, bigger picture between the lines of the work?

Carlo Rotella: So Buddy Guy, just take the example of a blues man. He came to Chicago in the 1950s and what you might call the high point of the industrial blues order. So there were a lot of clubs, a lot of record labels, there are a lot of really powerful band leaders like Muddy Waters, and he was a sideman. He was a guitar player. And there were limits on what he could do. You can only record a three minute single. And people like Muddy Waters or Junior Wells could tell him, "Hey, no long guitar solos and no feedback." And so he kind of made his way within the blues order. But the world changed in the 1960s and rock came along. It's now called classic rock, and made the blues sort of a junior partner in this blues rock combine.

Carlo Rotella: And Buddy Guy suddenly got the chance to go along. And there were all these audiences who had been raised on people who love Buddy Guy like Jimi Hendrix and Page, who were perfectly happy to have Buddy Guy play 35 chorus solos and have all the feedback he wanted. And who didn't insist on the singing voice being the main thing, which is what the old blues order had insisted on. So there is a case where you can hear in the music. There's much larger history of migration, and cultural change, and genres changing, and institutions changing. The old record labels dying away and the big newer labels coming along and all that, between the lines of music.

Carlo Rotella: So that's just a way to say that's kind of a model. And when I think about my own career, I think about all the containers into which I've poured my desire to write. Genre style containers, like the profile, the magazine feature, the essay, and also institutions. Schools, above all, but magazines, publishing houses, all those institutions in which I had to fit myself into the possibilities that, that container made available, that's a really long answer.

Scott Saul: That's a great answer about working with him. Before I put up the passage, I just want to ask a follow up question as kind of the devil's advocate. Because oftentimes, when we think about craft, those are the people becoming kind of virtuosos who are creative, who are not just craft people. And when you say things like containers and institutions, that kind of language, I think is in friction, with the idea that the real craft comes from leaving behind the institutions. And

you certainly dealt with people like Buddy Guy who were in a crisis of institutionality.

Carlo Rotella: Buddy Guy is an interesting example. Just to come back at you on that and say, he was liberated to do what he always wanted to do, which is he didn't specifically want to be a blues man. He wanted to go outside the boundaries of whatever genre he was playing and to get over the fence, and go on the other side, that's what he likes to do. He likes to make noise. And if the rise of rock enabled him to do it, there are many people who'd argue he was a more exciting musician, when he was constrained by the blues synthesis. And he had to pack it into a one chorus solo and he couldn't use feedback and there was Muddy Waters and Junior Wells hovering there saying that, "Don't make noise."

Carlo Rotella: And so he had to sort of work it in within very constraining limits, but Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck heard the excitement in his kind of constrained playing, and became his acolytes. And then when he switched and began to open for them, and the Rolling Stones, they sort of liberated him to tour Europe and make money and do all the things that he's done. So, that's a case where the constraint actually made the music exciting.

Carlo Rotella: I'm one of those people who sat down to write capital T, capital W, in his early 20s, and nothing came out. And it's like I had all the accelerator I needed and no break. And I had to go to a graduate school to find some things to say, and also to have assignments and papers do. And be around people who were trying to write their own stuff, and be in writing groups and edit other people's work and all that kind of limitation and constraint.

Carlo Rotella: Because when I was a completely free range writer, just nothing came out. And so I'm a big fan of assignments, word count limits, genre, it's a profile, it's got to be about one person, you got to follow the rules. And I chief and complain bitterly and rage at my editors and all that. But without the break, I can't get anywhere. So part of that is just me.

Scott Saul: Well let's look at some examples of what you've done. When I suggested this topic you chose the first passage and I chose the other one. So maybe you just want to talk about where this one is coming from and then read, The Lead with Taylor. I put the title of the craft of the blues singer.

Carlo Rotella: Okay, so this is a profile of Linwood Taylor. He's a fabulous guitar player from Washington DC. And I was assigned to write this piece that Congress declared 2003, The Year of The Blues, which I thought was interesting right there, the Senate, the piece begins by saying this Senate, which is an agust body but not known for making the E strings kiss by bending them. The Senate decided to do 2003 was the Centennial supposedly of the sort of first appearance of the blues in mainstream American culture. And so I wrote a profile of a Washington Blues Man. There's a constraint: you write for The Washington Post Magazine, it has to be DC local.

Carlo Rotella: For the New York Times Magazine, their beat is the universe. And it doesn't have to be local, but you need a Washington DC. angle when you write for them. But he was perfect for my purposes — he's a fabulous guitar player who can't sing. Because he's sort of been raised in the blues era that we live in, in which there's tons of great guitar out there, and YouTube is like an endless landscape of guitar to imitate, but he didn't grow up singing in church. He's not a Southerner. He can't really hold a note or bend a note. And so, this is an extreme example of a lot

of blues players these days, who are phenomenal guitar players and mediocre singers.

Carlo Rotella: So this is him. So I turned in the story. And I thought it was good, because it was full of my ideas. And my editor thought it was good. And he gave it to his editor who I despised — the editor-in-chief, he's long gone. And he came back and said, there's not enough scenes, there's not enough reporting. And I raged around the house and yelled at everyone and then I said, "Okay, fine." I flew back to Washington, DC and sat in on him getting a voice lesson.

Carlo Rotella: And it turned out to be by far the most important thing in the whole thing, which is this white woman trained in Broadway singing, teaching this black man how to sing blues. Because, it's not a genetic patrimony, it's a craft, and his breathing is messed up and he can't hold a note. So that's what's going on in this scene. And it's because most blues songs don't as strictly reproduce melodies in the same way that classical Tin Pan Alley or even rock songs to.

Carlo Rotella: Blues singers develop a set of vocal moves, bits of melodic DNA they can use to improvise a melody while executing swoops slides, growls, moans, the musical vocabulary, mimicking and elevating everyday speech, that opens up the rich emotional range of the blues. But Taylor doesn't work that way. He figures out a melody for a song with his voice teacher and he doesn't depart far from that line, not even to hold or bend a note in the usual blues manner. In that sense she isn't teaching him traditional blues singing.

Carlo Rotella: He's not going to be put in a box, that's what a black blues man supposed to sound like says Leadbetter-Hines, who was white, and she has a point. The tambor of his voice is not unpleasing and his approach to melody makes for a slightly more formal vocal style that could actually help him stand out among blues singers. But he has to keep working at his craft, honing it, reinforcing good habits and breaking bad habits. After spending half of the hour long lesson on exercises, they turned to a song that Taylor wants to add to his repertoire: Freddy King's "Me and My Guitar," a ditty about getting your woman to be as attractable as your instrument.

Carlo Rotella: Taylor unpacked and acoustic guitar and accompanies himself as he runs through the song wants to familiarize Leadbetter-Hines with it. Having the guitar in his hands makes him more confident, but it interferes with his concentration on vocal technique. They zero in on one especially awkward line in the chorus. "I'll play the blues for you." Taylor keeps letting the focus of resonance fall away from the sweet spot between the eyes, leaving the two prominent ooh sounds sounding especially off-pitch and forced.

Carlo Rotella: "Singing those oohs is just like singing moo in the exercises," Leadbetter Heinz reminds them. "I'll tell you what," she says, "Let's do it without the guitar." When he puts the guitar down, Taylor seems paralyzed for a moment. He has to silently hum the guitar introduce himself before he can begin to sing the first verse. And when he arrives at the chorus, he's so worried about blues and you that he seizes up and blows them. But as Leadbetter-Hines patiently walks him through the song, pausing for a quick *mi, me, mo, moo* to shore up is the technique, he relaxes and the sound flows more freely.

Carlo Rotella: Finally, at the end of the hour, she lets him use the guitar again and he sings the song for this time singing that oohs properly. "That's a lot better," she says, and it is. "This is everybody's problem," she tells him. "It's not just a Linwood thing. To take what we do in the vocal ease and put it in the song. That's the hard part."

Scott Saul: Okay, great. So can I just unpack why you think in retrospect, this scene works, and one, I guess a few levels to my question. One is, I think one thing you're quite good at, that you do in a lot of your work, is you focus on kind of the nonverbal arts. Whether it's boxing and people landing the left hook or musicians. So how to translate the nonverbal art here — singing — into the space of the page.

Carlo Rotella: Well, I think of a piece like this — a profile or any magazine piece — as a series of scenes and step-backs. So the scenes are like this, you could film them with a camera, you could block them out on the stage, and they would make sense. So in the language of writing workshop, it's all showing, and no telling. And then the step-backs are passages in which I step back and tell, when I explain things to the reader. And so a scene will resonate, and will work I think, because it's resonant of the step-backs. It's the characters living the consequences of the argument.

Carlo Rotella: So in this case, actually, the most important thing in the scene to me is not the quality of his singing, but his reliance on the guitar. Which is a figure of the blues is reliance on the guitar in this era. So what's happened to the blues in the last half century is that, the balance has gone off between the singing voice and the guitar. The singing voice used to dominate and the guitar responded to the singing voice. And then at a certain point, with the help of rock, the guitar began to dominate the singing voice. And the point was the wailing solo.

Carlo Rotella: So part of what is important in this is that he's paralyzed without the guitar, and almost unable to engage the blues without the guitar. And that works, and that resonates. I mean, I think it should resonate — you should feel for him. But also, as you read the step backs in the story, that scene should still be echoing, should still be resonating the ripples from that stone throwing the punch and still be there.

Carlo Rotella: So that you're saying, "Oh, yeah, that's totally true of Linwood Taylor." Because you're feeling like an expert. And so part of what I'm looking for is to not only set up an illustrated to step-back, but to show characters living the consequences of the bigger picture that the step backs explain.

Scott Saul: And so I mean, one thing I really feel for Linwood Taylor. I mean the rest of the piece to sort of like, he's trying to make it as a blues artists, like at a time when just you can't go that far. And then it's like, well, I play guitar, but I got to sing too. And like you're saying he's not a, quote natural singer and here he is in these. I mean, he's got everything against him. He's a Catholic, he's had no exposure to the soul singing or their church singing tradition, none.

Carlo Rotella: So he can, he can do what he can do, which he play the hell out of the guitar. And there's another scene in which he's the teacher giving lessons in a guitar store. And kids come in with like, a Metallica song, in a tricky tuning and he's like, "Oh, yeah, there's how you do that." And he returns his guitar and nails it. Because that's what he does really well, you can do any of that stuff really well.

Scott Saul: You take us pretty meticulously through the lesson, and even like the quick mi, me, ma, mo, mu... Why did you want to put in those details? Because I know you're somebody who we talked about how you have notebooks that are reporting for notes. That are full of tons of details. So the scene could have been even longer, but you chose these to highlight.

Carlo Rotella: I think there's a couple of things going on there. One, I think it's actually interesting, to find out how people get good at things, how people learn to sing. The other thing is that the biggest argument of the piece is that blues is a craft. One of the stepbacks considers the problem of assigning a genre of music to an identity. Country music is for white people, blues is black music. And the problem with that, is that even if it's historically often true, it runs afoul of the fact that these are skills, these are crafts, and you have to work at them and practice them. The blues is not just a philosophical attitude or like a cultural patrimony.

Scott Saul: If the blues was identified with the black community, it's probably because there were these segregated juke joints where people were playing or-

Carlo Rotella: But also it was invented by black people and until the rise of rock and what people in Chicago call the folk scare, it was easier to see the blues as black music. But that moment has in a lot of ways passed and it's also passed in the sense that the paying audience with the most clout comes to blues from rock. And they have rock-trained sensibilities, and they're listening for rock-like things in their blues. So part of the point of the mi, ma and all that stuff is to show that it is craft, it is a skill set.

Carlo Rotella: But it's also in the service of this larger argument that the blues is a craft and that you have to learn how to do it. And if you're not Southern, not raised in the Southern church, you're already behind the eight ball in terms of singing. You have to figure out a way to get that training from somewhere, and in his case, he doesn't have a lot of money. So he trades lessons — he teaches Alison Leadbetter-Hines' son to play rock guitar. And she teaches him to sing blues.

Carlo Rotella: And that's the deal, which I thought was just part of this whole deal — remember Congress has declared this the Year of Blues; is Linwood Taylor seeing any positive results from this? Is Congress sending him a subsidy? No. So that's part of the story too, what's it like to make a living as a blues man. And it turns out guitar lessons, in his case, are what make the ends meet — the gigs don't do it, the album's don't sell that much.

Scott Saul: But it also establishes a kind of neat sense of reciprocity between the teacher and the student.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, because she's not a blues woman. She's not a blues singer, but they're fellow musicians trying to make a living trying to piece together a living. I'm always fascinated by my how musicians make a living, especially musicians who make a living from only music. So he quit his day job a while ago. And that's, of interest to me because that's a classic example of how is this person, living within the set of possibilities that the culture, and the historical moment makes available.

Carlo Rotella: And being a superb blues guitar players isn't enough and they're a dime a dozen. On YouTube, there's an 11 year old from Serbia playing a solo, and then a 10 year old from the Philippines, crushes the 11 year old from Serbia. And then so, but there's not a ton of people showing you how to be a blues singer.

Scott Saul: Well, I want to move on to the next example, which is from Yale Alumni Magazine. I remember when this profile came out, it kind of broke the internet in the world of the Yale Alumni. It was about parenting, how to deal with difficult children. Everybody was talking about it.

Carlo Rotella: This was a profile of a guy named Alan Kazdin, who's one of the leading child psychologists in the world. And I got the assignment because I write about boxing. And the editors at the magazine said, "Hey, this guy deals with a lot of really violent children, so this sounds like it's up your alley." And I got really interested in him. He's There's probably two just like stone geniuses I've ever met. And because of my work, and he's one of them. He can get anyone to do anything.

Carlo Rotella: You can parachute him naked into a country where he doesn't speak the language. And he would be president at the end of the month. And he never says, I've been working with children all my life. It's always he says, if the research said hit them, I would say hit them. But the research says don't say hit him. He's just, he's a scientist. And what he's got is basically a technology; he can get kids to behave, especially ultra-defined kids. So the threshold to see him at that point was multiple police calls to the house, school suspension, hospital visit.

Carlo Rotella: So these are families that are in deep, deep distress. And what he does is simple behavior modification. He doesn't care about root causes, doesn't care about your inner life, regards Freud as literature. He's just interested in behavior. So this is a scene in which I asked him, "So what do you do? When you're working with a kid, and so this is him?" "Kazin gets up from his chair and comes around his desk to demonstrate how to deal with a tantrum. The youthful 60 year old slightly gaunt in his suit—" by the way, that's the one line that he objected to.

Carlo Rotella: "He has a mobile expressive face. That's pleasantly smile crinkled around the edges. 'This is practice,' he says to an imaginary kid seated in an empty chair facing his desk. 'I'm going to say no to you, just for practice. And if you can sit quietly and don't yell and scream when I say no, you'll earn a bubble.' A bubble is a token that can be cashed in for a treat, special food, activity or other privilege, the kid would be eager to accrue enough tokens to pay for.

Carlo Rotella: "When the imaginary kid finally manages to take no without losing it, Kazdin praises him and steps close to mind giving him a high five, all the while smiling warmly and sustaining eye contact. Then he checks outside the doorway to see if the coast is clear leans back in and says, conspiratorially. I'm not supposed to do this. Let's see if we can get you another bubble. I bet you can't do that again. Katherine's manner changes when he talks to the imaginary kid, his shoulders loosen, and he bends at the knees like a vaudevillian trooper.

Carlo Rotella: "He bobs in and out now muting his voice coming close and crouching download was seated child's level. Now moving back and standing up straighter filling the room with his beaming presence. His face lights up with enthusiasm, eyes opening extra wide to accentuate his smile, catching and holding the kids gaze. His ears seemed to grow bigger. It's almost disturbing to see how well he's clicking with his non-existent kid. Just the spillover from the connection feels so potent, that I find myself wanting to showcase and that I can sit quietly and not have a tantrum I could use a bubble too.

Carlo Rotella: "And yet beneath the practice charm of an adult who works with children, Kazdin] clinical reserve and intellectual commander evident. The hard boiled knowingness of a professional who's made a career out of breaking down even the most passionately out of control human behavior, into component elements that can be reassembled in desired form. For more than 20 years, he has devoted himself to research that has resulted in a high degree of confidence in the efficacy of his approach to treating children's conduct disorders."

Carlo Rotella: And the thing I'll say about that passage is that, every single thing he did is designed to fit the research. The sort of lowering the bar and doing it again, the fact that praise is much more effective if it's multimodal. So smile, word, touch. So, if the praise is delivered in multiple modes that increases the chances it will shape the behavior. So every single little thing he does the distance, the way he is, the expression on his face, the exaggerated quality is all just ... He's just acting out the research, that's all he's doing.

Carlo Rotella: It feels completely natural. But he's sort of living the consequences of the research that's what he's doing. And so he's ... Then what we're looking at is pure technique. And there's nothing about it that's special to kids, or define kids. He says he uses it under his department at Yale and the thing is, you can tell people you're doing it. You can say I am now going to reinforce the behavior and use that I want more of, and it still works. You just go to your college and like, "That was great, the way you made the meeting end quicker." And touch them, On the shoulder, and it's a very simple set of moves. It's sort of like a martial art with only six moves.

Carlo Rotella: But the existence of Kazden, and his crew — he has a crew of people to work with him — is like a parent's dream because any problem that you give them, they can rearrange the six moves of the martial artist, to solve the problem. How about a family with one super-defined kid, one incredibly well-behaved kid, but who's jealous of all the attention the super-defining kid is getting. And they're like, okay, program would look like this, and they rearrange the six moves and like it would work like this.

Carlo Rotella: And it's just like, it's a fantasy, of a parent that these people exist. Last thing I'll say about this story, just in general is that, I took this assignment because my wife ordered me to. Because we had a super defiant daughter and my wife read Kazden's book and typed up the main points and taped them to the kitchen cabinets. And she came back and is like, this guy's a genius, take the job. And then I ended up at the end of the story saying, look, this guy, people need to know about this work. Nobody knows about it. And I ended up writing two books with him afterward, two popularizing books precisely for that reason. Because I felt people should know about this, defiant kids get abused more than any others. And he says, we actually just work on parents. We don't actually work on the kids, kids respond to their parents, we teach the parents not to set the kids up, basically.

Carlo Rotella: And so that was, I mean, this guy's nothing but lessons in craft, and especially the incredibly complicated craft of how to be a parent. And it's so astonishing to realize there's somebody who's been thinking about like, "How close do you stand to the kid when you praise the kid." Stuff that is not ambiguous, not smarmy, not trying to reinforce his self-esteem, but no stand within three feet.

Scott Saul: Yeah, well, a few things I really love about the passage is that, you talk about how you can break down these, the human behavior into component elements that that can be assembled. And I felt like that's what your prose was doing as well with Kazden and I don't know if that was your intention, were like, I want to be like the kind of the camera eye. That in some ways is noting every move he makes. So that it can be processed by the reader in the same way. And even there's some terms of the straightforwardness of the syntax. Where you see every action, separated in different phrases and things like that.

Carlo Rotella: I think the main thing that the prose wants to convey here is just how purposeful he is. Everything he does is motivated. There's no vagueness, everything has sharply defined edges. And so I think you don't even really need a lot of commas

for that. In a lot of ways, you want to have a sense of kind of momentum and moving forward through a sequence.

Carlo Rotella: And this is fairly early in the story, but then I break down the whole sequence later in the story and sort of explain his theories behind ... The arguments behind the different things that he does. So I think in this case, I wouldn't want to go with kind of long, elaborate nested sentences, because what I want to convey is a kind of sharp edgedness.

Scott Saul: He seems to be engaging in some kind of emotional interaction. But in fact, it's just a fantasy person that he's engaging with. It's a little scary and it's just like an actor, who's so good at the role.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah. Well, it's also, he's embodying the research. And that's the feel I wanted to have. As he said, this is not my opinion. This is a technology

Scott Saul: I think one reason Kazden jumps out is because earlier if you've compared him to a vaudevillian. And we think of a vaudevillian is like, slapstick, or with these broad gestures, and there's an air of comedy to it, possibly entertainment. But then it's like, well behind that, vaudeville act is the hard boiled and also the sensibility.

Carlo Rotella: And also the thing about vaudevillian is that they just go and do it night after night. The same old bucking wing it always gets yucks, and there's some of that too, people come in seriously distressed families, parents who say, they don't love their children anymore. Come in, and he goes into the old bucking wing, and tries to fix it. So there is a kind of vaudevillian, repetition to it, too. I thought vaudevillian was the right word, because there's a certain cynicism to even the happiest kind of jokey is vaudeville, which is like, yeah, this always works. That kind of quality to it.

Scott Saul: And that also vaudeville is a little anachronistic. We think that parenting it's like, "Oh, you need to cutting edge technology," but it's like, actually maybe in the in space of vaudeville are the kind of talents that we need to connect with the child. Just like children would love cartoons and vaudeville. You know what I mean? Bigger gestures.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, the research is very precise, but there's no high technology to this. There's no ... It's very simple stuff. It's just very hard to do. It's hard to be disciplined. He's an extraordinarily disciplined person, and it's very hard for a parent to fall into this character, especially a parent who's enraged, or tired, or at their wit's end. So it looks very simple, but it's very hard.

Scott Saul: For me, the line that really stuck is that you were very good with last sentences of paragraphs. We could go through every paragraph you write and talk about the lessons. But for me that line, "His ears seem to grow bigger." Got a good laugh? But it's also like, yes, this is the technology, but the technology has an element of magic to it.

Carlo Rotella: Absolutely.

Scott Saul: What's happening? How did he transform himself? In that magic that the alchemy of his performance?

Carlo Rotella: Well, I think you put your finger on something really important for academic writers to understand too. Which is that I was spent a fair amount of time talking about this in writing workshops, which is that in trade writing. So we are all taught from third grade on that, you put the most important idea in the topic sentence. And then the paragraph deploys evidence to explain the topic sentence and then, you get to the end and the topic sentence has been elaborated. But in trade writing, I think it's the kicker. You tell a story or you show a scene and then in the last sentence of the paragraph, you draw the moral.

Carlo Rotella: With a lot with academic writers, you can string together the topic sentences. You'd pull the toxins out of every paragraph and you've got the argument. I think with a lot of trade writers, it's the opposite. You string together the kickers, and each paragraph sort of tells a story or shows a scene and then gets to this moment, and then you draw the moral. And so-

Scott Saul: That argument seems to precipitate out of the story.

Carlo Rotella: Exactly.

Scott Saul: In academic writing, you have to believe in the authority of the person, and they get supported. Where is the authority to see-

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. And also the kickers are often very brief. So Louis Menand in the New Yorker wrote a profile of Al Gore when he was running for president. And one is talking about Bill Clinton as Elvis. So the idea is that after Elvis come the Beatles, and that would be Al Gore. And then there's a parenthesis — the kicker's actually "(also, it's true, The Monkees.)." It's like that sort of trade writing and his best and he's an English professor.

Carlo Rotella: That's again, he had to pour his craft into a series of containers before he wrote for The New Yorker he wrote for an art magazine, he wrote for the New Republic. And so I learned this stuff writing for magazines too, I kind of reverse engineered a lot of this stuff from what editors did to my work. And when academics write a kicker, it tends to go like this, "Thus we see under conditions of late capitalism," And then whatever your point is, and you know, that's not a kicker, that's like blah blah blah.

Scott Saul: In terms of moving the reader, how do you hold that reader in your hands and give them an experience, that then leads them to think new thoughts and see new business?

Carlo Rotella: What you want the reader to be thinking of us we see under conditions of like capitalism. But you just be like, "His ears get bigger."

Scott Saul: Well, one more scene, one more of craft and then I'll open it up to everybody here. You can start this up. This is a Jack Vance profile.

Carlo Rotella: So this is a profile of Jack Vance who lived not far from here, in the Oakland Hills fantasy and science-fiction writer. And one of the properties of Jack Vance's career was that, although he was celebrated as a genre writer, he never really kind of became as big a deal as a Philip K. Dick or, some other genre writers. But a lot of writers were much more famous than him, were turned into writers by him. And so part of what happens in this story is, I interview all these people like Michael Siobhan and George R.R. Martin who say, "Yeah, I read Jack Vance, and that was it, I became a writer."

Carlo Rotella: And that also, although I'm not one of those famous writers, that was also my experience is that when I read him when I was about 13. I said, "Okay, that's it. This is what I'm doing." And so this is a moment from that profile when I talk about that. And so this is writing about writing, writing about a writer. I can remember the exact lines on the second page of Jack Vance's The Eyes of the Overworld. That's a passage, that sank the hook in me for keeps, a passing exchange of dialogue between two hawkers associate sorcerer's curios and a bizarre.

Carlo Rotella: "'I can resolve your perplexity' said Fire Master. 'Your booth occupies the site of the old give it and has absorbed unlucky essences, but I thought to notice you examining the manner in which the timbers of my booth are joined. You will obtain a better view from within but first I must shorten the chain of the captive herb, which rooms the premises during the night.' 'No need,' said Kugel. 'My interest was cursory.' The feral angling politesse, the marriage of high flown language to low motives. The way Kugel's clipped phrases rounded off Fire Master's ornate ones. I found myself seized by a writer's style in a way I had never experienced before. Vance didn't even have to describe the captive herb. The phrase itself conjured up rows of teeth and the awful strength of a long sinewy body surging up your leg.

Carlo Rotella: "Intricate plotting is not advancing forte but he artfully recombined recurring elements, the rhythms of travel, the pleasures of music, strong drink and vengeance. Touching encounters with pedants, mounted banks, violently opinionated, aesthetes and zealots loud bigots of all stripes. And boyishly slim young women with an enigmatic habit of looking back over their shoulders. His stories sustain an anecdotal forward drive that balances his digressive pleasure, and imagining a world and the hypnotic effect of his distinctive town which has been variously described as barbed, velvety, arch and mandarin.

Carlo Rotella: "Reading Vance leaves you with a sense of formality of having been present at an occasion. When for all the jokiness and the fun of made up words, the serious business of literary entertainment was transacted. And it teaches a lasting lesson about the writers craft. Whatever is on the cover, you can always aim high." So in this case, the form into which Jack Vance poured his inspiration was pulp, fiction, fantasy and science fiction. And he sort of never got the notice that he deserved, I thought and at the age of 92, I talked to my editors and letting me profile him in the New York Times Magazine. He died shortly after.

Carlo Rotella: So this was an attempt to engage head on that first of the containers style. That Vance had cobbled together from really bizarre sources P.G. Wodhouse, is one and even more obscure fantasy writers. A way to express his view of the world, which is that people are savages, but cover that up with manners and a sense of sort of inflated sense of themselves. And so I was trying to just capture that and trying to capture the sense of how a style can be the most important thing about an artist.

Scott Saul: Other than the other elements like—

Carlo Rotella: —The great themes of his work the, how many books he sold, how celebrated he was in his time. Then what I did in the book was went and found a lot of other writers Neil Gaiman and Michael Siobhan and others who said, "Yeah, I encountered that style and I realized that style was a thing." And so the other thing that this story was really about is how when you're 13 years old, and you read something and you get into it, you're like hot wax at 13 years old. You'll never get as into a thing you read again, as you do when you're 13 years old. And, and I wanted to capture that too. And to say, when he sort of dismissed as

like, well, he wrote literature for children is to say, "Well, actually, a lot of writers encountered him at that moment at that hot wax moment and it changed them forever."

Scott Saul: One thing I really love about this passage is that everything like you basically say yourself, like I fell in love with him. And then you give the passage. And I may stand for some readers when I'm like, well, this it's interesting what Jack Vance is doing. But he's kind of violating a lot of rules or regular style. Maybe if somebody was to write a profile of Linwood Taylor, in that kind of style, you'd be like, this is inappropriate. Why is your syntax all twisted up? And what's with the archaic reading this? What I love about this is that then you actually, you just sort of break down what he's doing. You give a name to the qualities of his style. And in doing that, you make it available for our inspection as an appreciation as readers.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, and the other thing I tried to do in that passage is reduces 74 novels to one list. So that you feel that you've read them all, it's like, yeah, there's a lot of travel and vengeance and louts. I think arguing with lists is another kind of one of the those trade skills that academics don't often—you aren't really taught in academia is that you can make a really evocative or resonant list. When you write about a writer in a magazine, you got to assume that the readers haven't read that writer. And so you have to make them feel that they have. And so part of it is quoting him. And then part of it is sort of reducing those 74 novels to one really long sentence with a lot of semi colons.

Scott Saul: What do you think? Is that how does a list make an argument or fill the mind of the reader in ways that story would not.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, let's start by saying plot is not his thing. And it's much more that there are these recurring pleasures, there these recurring things that happen in it. But, it's not an argument for his greatness. This piece, it's an argument for his effect, it's an argument for the power of style as the dominant feature of a writer's work. Rather than this is his greatest novel or you should read This or whatever-

Scott Saul: It's basically what you call the hypnotic effect of the tone. And even like the terms that are used to describe it like barbed, the velvety arch, and mandarin are themselves elevated terms, very particular terms.

Carlo Rotella: I think whenever you write about a writer you end up using even some falling into someone something of their rhythm and other people who love a writer. And people who love a particular writer end up sort of characters invented by that writer, and so people who love Jack Vance turn into sort of unreasonable Jack Vance characters. Think Jack Vance is the greatest, against all possible arguments. So that's also part of what's going on.

Carlo Rotella: But this is really a piece about enthusiasm. This is a piece about this, like when you're 13 and you read something and you like it, it just takes you over, it swallows you whole. And I never read stuff in magazines about that. And, usually magazine, profiles are about a literary writer who's written a very important new book. And you should read it because you're an educated person, and this is the opposite of that. Remember when you were 13, and you read something and you loved it, remember what that was like? And, I always think sort of what's in the foreground, what's in the background. And what's in the background is the power of pulp to shape people's lives.

Scott Saul: And also that you find the craft within the boy, that is, whatever is on the cover, you can always aim high. I mean, that seems like maybe a motto of yours as well.

Carlo Rotella: Absolutely. I wrote for Boston magazine, for years, read some of my favorite pieces I've ever written for Boston magazine. Boston magazines business model requires and on the cover is the 50 best lobster rolls from Boston, or even better, the hundred best schools in the Boston area. And what they do there is they just sit around and say, "You know what, let's not put Brookline first because then more people will talk about it. Let's put Newton South first," and so that's the condition.

Carlo Rotella: That's the nature of that container. But if they put 100 lobster rolls schools on the cover, then they get to run two or three real features inside. And I'm happy to aim high no matter what's on the cover of the magazine. I think when you enter into the world of trade writing, that's part of what you deal with every business, every vessel, every institution has a business model. And the question is, can I do what I do within that business model?

Scott Saul: I just feel like it's also a kind of a democratic ethos that I feel in a lot of your writing, where it's like, it could be how a goalie in NHL trainer, tries to make sure the pack doesn't go in or, whatever field it is, there is a craft. Anybody who's doing something a lot has to figure out how to do it efficiently, well, if effectively, residentially, or what have you. Or it could be the person who's cleaning hotels rooms. There's a craft to that as well and so on.

Carlo Rotella: And I think that's also the thing is that as soon as you have craft, you have what we look for in literary criticism, which is expressive form. The way you clean the hotel room, the way you throw a left hook, the way you do whatever. And as soon as you have expressive form, it becomes kind of flycatcher, or Velcro for meaning. So that we can say, I see in the way the person does that a much larger sweep of history.

Carlo Rotella: So in the case of Jack Vance, he grew up in a middle class family here in San Francisco, they lost their money in the depression, he was mistreated by a lot of people. And that really shows up in his fiction, where people are really nasty to each other. But he read weird tales magazine, it came in the mail every month, and he read Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Robert E. Howard and CL Moore and all these great pulp writers there.

Carlo Rotella: And that was the institution that gave him the vessel that he wanted to pour essentially his vision of the world, which is people are grasping and cruel, but they cover it up with a kind of inflated sense of themselves. And so what you see in the craft as soon as you have purposefulness of what you've described and the kind of repeated, honing of your skills, then you have expressive form. And when you have expressive form, you have a container, you have armature, a framework that can hold meaning.

Carlo Rotella: And it can hold the history that went into getting to that point you can read between the lines of it. I've written about a woman boxer. How did a woman who's getting a PhD in psychology end up as the most promising fighter in Erie, Pennsylvania? And the way she throws a punch contains a whole history of work, and play and what violent games girls are allowed to play. And how that changed after title nine, and how karate wasn't satisfying, and she moved up to boxing and why educated women were sort of leading the movement into legitimate boxing.

Carlo Rotella: For any like these much bigger stories about the gender nature of work and play, but it's all contained in the way she gets to the gym. Ties up long blonde hair and starts throwing punches at the bag. And so in the movement, in those practice repeated movements, you get the person living the consequences of these much larger histories. The de-industrialization of the Midwest, the changes in sort of the gender, and work and play and all those bigger things.

Scott Saul: That's great. I promised I would open it up. And this seems like an appropriate time to do so. So people have questions about anything. Carlo is in the hot seat.

Audience: I wanted to ask you, did you say that Vance created his own containers, and if so, how did that affect his career?

Carlo Rotella: No, he didn't. So he created his own style, but he had to pour it in the containers that were available, which is he started out writing kind of what he called, gadget science fiction stories kind of classic science fiction stories and that just didn't scratch the itch. He didn't care about spaceships and all that stuff. He cares about kind of world thinking and the way people treat each other. So the pocket paperback came along, and that became his. Thanks to the original vent Jack Vance novels are full of typos and editors mistakes and, omitted paragraphs, and all this stuff.

Carlo Rotella: Because he had to pour his inspiration to the container that was available. So what he did was, he would take his family to some exotic location and he would crank out a couple of novels, and they would get paid enough to move to the next exotic locations. But no, he had to operate, which meant he had to crank the work out. That's the other thing. The other reason that his work repeats itself so much is because he had to do a lot of it.

Carlo Rotella: So what he created was a particular style, and there are certain writers that he was copying P.G. Wodehouse writer named Geoffrey Farnell, a couple of others, but really, it's kind of his thing. But then he had to take that style and send it to editors who were not sympathetic to that and who were just like, "Can we please have more sword fights?" Because fans doesn't care about any of that stuff. He doesn't care about, magic or battles, he summarizes battles in two sentences, yeah, there was a battle now, this is what's going on in the lounge of the inn, where people were being incredibly impolite to each other, because that's what he cares about. And but he had to live within the world of pulp fiction, as more than one of the writers I interviewed said, If his name had been a Locale Vino, he would have been known as a famous fabulist but because his name was Jack Vance. He was a pulp writer.

Audience: I have a question about purpose with essays. In addition to form I've read some of your essays, and I've really enjoyed them. I probably haven't read more because my stack of unread New Yorkers. I think, from what I've read of yours, and the things you've discussed, I have a trust in your knowledge.

Carlo Rotella: Well, that's good.

Audience: Yeah. Well, it's not always given. That's the problem. So, you're researching, you're discovering you have knowledge, background knowledge, it's not like the first. Buddy Guy concert you went to and you're writing about it. Yes, that's really important to me. But I find that a lot of essays I write, oops, read. I'll read them. And then I'll kind of come back to them a while later and I realized that the writers style or their abilities are so good.

Audience: It's more me either making more of a polemic statement, rather than just saying this is what happened or something. And that I'm taken over by this, And then later I realize, wait, this person is operating out of their emotions, which is, fine But they're not saying it's their emotions.

Scott Saul: The authority leaks out of it.

Audience: Yeah. And this has happened. I mean, I'll just give you the example. So when I spent a lot of time in Berlin when I was in my 20s, and then I started reading a bunch of articles by Jane Kramer. Okay, she wrote a whole bunch in the New Yorker super long, back when, and I was so into it, and her writing was so incredible, just her detail her ability to catch everything was and towards the end, she became critical, and I took on this criticism like Berlin and what was going on?

Audience: This is like, before the wall came down but and then later engaging with some of the people from Berlin more in discussing it, I realized she was just angry for her own reasons. But so if you're that powerful the writer it's a problem for the reader. On the other hand, if you have like, sorry, I'm talking to much, a James Walcott or something, who write criticism about books and everything, he would just obviously be on the attack, he's like, I hate this person. And I'm going to be funny about it. So you know what you're getting, like, you're not being fooled.

Carlo Rotella: So I think there's two kinds for me, and I think you put your finger on something really important, which is that you can carry the reader with you without knowing what you're talking about. And so they fall into two categories. There's pieces like writing about Buddy Guy, or where I have a deep, well that I can reach back into but then most of the pieces don't fall in that category. Most pieces like writing about a Helen Kaz. And I know Nothing about child psychology. So there, I really switch hats and become much more of a reporter.

Carlo Rotella: I go talk to experts, I go borrow other people's authority. And in the case of Kaz and I interviewed a couple of his sort of people at his level of the field of psychology to ask what's up with Alan cast? And how would you place him, because I just needed their authority. I needed to borrow their authority. So I feel pretty confident about observing him in action, but I needed other people to pronounce on. So and there are pieces like I've read a profile of an opera composer and 99.6% of what I know about opera is in that piece, but it sounds pretty authoritative, There's just not any extra left.

Carlo Rotella: There's two in my mind. There are two kinds of essays. There's essays I write almost entirely from within what I know, those are sort of barroom rant essays, like Jack Vance, it's totally underrated. That's a barroom rant. But then a lot of other ones are, I got to go do the legwork so that I can cobble together the authority to make this point I try not to put myself in the position that you just described, which is I have a feeling and I'm going to try to use rhetorical skills to get the reader to share my feeling but all I've got is a feeling, Because I don't think that's necessarily worth writing about.

Audience: Yeah, I only, I mean, I won't take too much time, but I only brought it up because I become more sensitized to this kind of thing or there's I read, or there's more essays where I feel like, the author of the essay is just sort of polemical thing and they're making a big point. And now, I noticed it, I just put it down there because-

Carlo Rotella: Well, the other thing is that you can change the contract with the reader there and you can signal you can say the reader now. I'm going to, riff a bit, and sort of say, this is just me talking. And then I might do that, but I try not to confuse the two things. Thank you.

Audience: Hi, I'm a student at UC Berkeley. I just wanted to get some advice I guess just about burgeoning creatives and artists who are currently working with like multiple containers, not really sure, which one to pour it all into. I'm just like, I guess advice on how to decide, which one's right for you and, whether or not you can handle multiple at the time or even career wise, which one you should choose?

Scott Saul: Are we talking about stylistic ones?

Audience: For example, I used to work in journalism was, before I got to a high school and college level. And then I kind of dropped it after I was taking started taking more poetry classes. And I discovered I had a penchant for poetry. And then I just started kind of leaving my journalistic skills under developed and, kind of forgot about honestly, now that I'm going into post-grad I'm kind of thinking about it more. Like what I really want to do?

Carlo Rotella: Well, I wish the answer was five. No, but I guess. So there's a couple ways to think about that. One way to think about that is actually if you do that equation, I think the answer is the essay. If you want to sort of journalism plus poetry equals the essay. But the other way to think about is, it's precisely right in as its precisely sampled as many different containers as possible, so that you get a better sense of. It's not only who allows you to do what you want to do, but whose due diligence can you stand. And sometimes, you learn, "Okay, well, to do that kind of work. I have to do this kind of due diligence, and, I just don't want to do it. I don't like to do it. it's not satisfying to me, I find it onerous."

Carlo Rotella: But I think the only way to do that is to do some journalism and write some poetry. And figure out which one you are rushing through to make time for the other. And at that point, either you've got a decision or you're looking for the average of the two. And I think the average of the two is actually the essay. I think the essay is where the journalistic and the poetic impulses can meet and do business with each other.

Carlo Rotella: But I think if I was in that situation, I would try to get myself as some assignments to do some journalism. And I would try to ... In a discipline way, or take a class that forces me to write poetry on schedule. So that you get used to it, I think the only way to do it is to have both to do and, and to realize, which one you're putting off because you want to do the other.

Audience: Thank you.

Carlo Rotella: In my case, what I discovered was I like to write profiles. I didn't really want to write. What I wanted to do wasn't so much just magazine features. There's a lot of magazine features I don't really want to write, who's going to win the election. That's plenty of people want to write that and it's important, but I don't want to do that.

Audience: One of my favorite high school assignments was writing a profile high school teacher that was writing a book. It was very intimate because she was my favorite teacher. I'm like you're very well and had a lot of classes with her and was like her publishing a blog and I was happened to be at NG for the high

school newspaper, like running a profile about her. It was like very cathartic, I think.

Carlo Rotella: Yeah, well, it's worth interrogating. What about it made it that way? Was it the conversation? Was it the capturing a person was it ... What is it about that and then try to get more assignments to do that. Is [inaudible 01:04:34] didn't work out?

Audience: I just want to thank you for the closing sentence of the piece on Kazden. A couple things that I noticed was when you mentioned about Kazden that he's embodying the research. And thinking of embodiment, and particularly vaudeville, that's where the body kind of fits in this and I'm coming from a literature background. I was thinking of body, vessel, container, that and also the Linwood Taylor that the playing the guitar and then they kind of paralyzed, and the mi, ma, mu, that whole thing. And I was wondering, bit open ended, but I was kind of curious about embodiment or bodies.

Carlo Rotella: So I think it's really important in this kind of writing, you have to have scenes, and a face to face interview is not a very interesting scene. I mean, there's a few people out there who can carry a face to face interview as an interesting scene, but it's pretty rare. So I completely agree. I'm really looking for what people do with their bodies. That's one of the main things I'm looking for. And as I was telling the class earlier today, when I do a profile, I usually do two face to face sit downs with the subject, one of the beginning and one of the end. But in the middle, I do a lot of shadowing. And that means I want access, but I don't want them to talk to me.

Carlo Rotella: I want to go along while they do stuff. And I literally want to see them in profile. I want to look at them from the side. Because I think when you deal with people face to face, there's that they sort of got their armor and their mask on and there who they are, they're performing who they are. And when you see him from the side, sometimes you can see around that stuff. So yeah, you're absolutely right. I am looking for scenes in which people the way they carry themselves. The way they use their bodies shows us something about the meaning of what they do or the origins of what they do or the consequences of what they do.

Carlo Rotella: So yeah, I'm always looking for that and I get it mostly in shadowing rather than face to face interviews. As a general rule, that's not always true. There are some people I profiled the boxer Bernard Hopkins, who maybe my favorite person I've ever written about. And when you talk to Bernard Hopkins, he hikes his chair up like one inch away from your chair. And he like breathing on you, like he's breathing his hot breath on you, and he's always jabbing you like you're torso, he's always feeling you. And he's like, poking you and like he illustrates his point. He's grabbing your arm, and he's like when you find a left handler, he's always trying to get his foot outside your foot.

Carlo Rotella: So you're sitting, talking, and your foots moving further over, and I noticed he does this to everybody, not just me. So I put that on the story. And I said, “Why do you do that?” And he says, “Well, it's part of my diagnosis.” I'm feeling for weakness in the body of it, because Bernard Hopkins, his whole thing is he figures out what you want to do, and then he doesn't let you do it. So he makes it very difficult interview. But he also makes it a very eventful interview. So in that case, talking to him is a scene, because it's the essence of who he is, is that he keeps interrupting you, and jabbing you, and poking you, and clinching with you, and just making it impossible to ask him a question and get an answer.

Audience: Thank you so much for such a wonderful interaction with us. One question that always comes to my mind that he completes writers. How many hours a day on an average or a week do you write?

Carlo Rotella: I wish there was one answer to that. And it was a lot. I think of it in three stages, so the hours between 5 and 7am are worth six hours. So if I can just get up and write I can do all of my drafting for the day. And then let's say it's a writing day not a reporting day. So in a perfect writing day, between five and seven, I just type and then between seven and noon I like revise and whatever and I've got about 1000 words, 1-2000 words a day. And then the rest of the day I'm during my research or calling people, are checking things or, so but that only works if I can work every day.

Carlo Rotella: But I can just do that every day, but if other things get in the way, then I have to extend the writing and try and write maybe 3000 words in a day. But if I'm really rolling in a week, I can write 10,000 words. And I can do that with sort of two super concentrated hours. And then four or five, slightly less concentrated hours and then clean up and other stuff for the rest of the day. It doesn't always work that way and sometimes I got to force it. And sometimes I'll try to get another 5 to 7am in the same day by taking a nap. So if I take a nap and I reset, I wake up and I can do those two productive hours again.

Timothy Hampton: One last question here.

Audience: Thank you. It's been delightful, kind of a two part question. The first time I ever kind of tried to understand what I think you're doing was an essay read by Tom Wolfe called the New Journalism. He talked about a lot of things that I see and just really ignited me. So I'm wondering if you kind of think of yourself in that school and more important, who are the writers that are kind of in your genre that preceded you that looking back in now said, "Well, those are the people", not the Jack Vance, who seems like he wanted to make you a writer. But who are the writers who write in your genre, the New Journalist, for lack of a better term that you think the students here should know or better yet, that I should know?

Carlo Rotella: Well, so, I mean, Tom Wolfe, I like that sound like every music fan in the world. I like the early Tom Wolfe. First song on the first side of the first album, like the specialist, and that the early stuff really is, he has the same degree that we do. Comes out it comes out a PhD program American Studies at Yale, and he went straight to the New York Herald Tribune. And the city room was Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Dake Shap and Charles Portis, the guy wrote True Grit. And he was really doing American Studies without footnotes.

Carlo Rotella: He was the Tangerine Flakes Dreamland Baby. What's the rest, candy colored Tangerine Flakes streamlined baby is a series of kind of Bavarian sociological studies of out groups that are producing authoritative culture. And that's where you first encountered Caches Clay and the Rolling Stones and the Girl of the Year, and all that stuff is in that collection. So yeah, and he was doing what all the new journalists are doing, which is taking the tools of the novel and bringing them to non-fiction writing, he sort of hates people. So he's not like the greatest model, but when I think about the people who are doing this kind of thing at a really high level. And we are sort of in this golden age of non-fiction the last 20, 30 years it's just been amazing.

Carlo Rotella: I think Anne Fadiman, 'Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down.' William Finnegan 'Cold New World'. These are books that have all the kind of, it's sort of such a cliché to say it reads like a novel but when I say I mean it reads like a

novel me and then you capture the inner lives of the characters in action. And then you also get the inner lives of the characters and also the social setting and the kind of bigger history behind them. I think those two books more than any other two Cold New World in the Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down to me, we're sort of said whatever is on the cover you can even set the bar high that those are books where I thought Dave explained big things about the world.

Carlo Rotella: And introduce me to people who live and breathe, which is I think that's the split, that's the exact that I think good non-fiction writing needs to do, the characters need to live, but they also need to live the consequences of this much bigger picture, whatever the big picture is. And there's tons of that stuff out there. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc and who's the immersion journalism guy who wrote New Jack, Ted Connover, there's a lot of really high end non-fiction writing out there these days that just combines beautiful writing with deep reporting.

Carlo Rotella: One of the things about Anne Fadiman and William Finnegan do is, you read these books and you just see they spent a lot of time in people's kitchens. And they know them well enough to say like, Mindy will come in and she'll always say this kind of thing, because he just put in the time, the legwork is just out of this world. So there's a ton of that stuff out there. And just to come back to my opening statement, some of this has to do with the nature of the institutional situation, which is about a generation or two ago the money switched from fiction to non- fiction.

Carlo Rotella: So what your agent does not want to hear that you have a collection of poetry or a novel, your agent wants you to embed with a motorcycle gang and write a nonfiction book about that. Or if there's a war even better, and part of it that the action and the money is really moved over from non-fiction. So the publishing houses are willing to support and lionize and reward deep legwork. Katherine Boo on the 'Beautiful Forever's' as these are, as I said, kind of a golden age of this kind of work.

Timothy Hampton: We're going to end the discussion there.

Carlo Rotella: Thanks so much. I appreciate it, thanks for your questions.