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Is There a Source Text in This Class? Teaching Medieval Literature through Contemporary Retellings

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Abstract

In this article, we outline the lesson plan and pedagogical approach underlying a seminar we taught in the summer term of 2023 at the University of Freiburg titled “Retelling, Rereading, Rethinking—The Afterlife of Medieval Texts in Contemporary Literature.” Using Stanley Fish’s essay “Is There a Text in This Class?” as its springboard, this essay discusses how the absence of the source material affects students’ engagement with medieval literature. We decided to make the absent source the catalyst for discussing how the meaning of the source text is filtered through and inextricably linked with reception, i.e. translations, retellings, and the readers/students themselves. Taking into special consideration the particular knowledge our students brought with them into the class and how this influenced their reading of medieval literature, we argue that the instability and absence of the source can make for a better learning outcome and a more profound understanding of medieval literature, (medieval) literary practices, and the role of reception.

In “Is There a Text in This Class?”, Stanley Fish recounts how one of his students asked a colleague of his at Johns Hopkins University the question that eventually became the title of his seminal essay. When the colleague answered in the affirmative and named *The Norton Anthology of Literature* as ‘the text,’ the student clarified: “I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?” (Fish 1980, 305). The student, who had attended one of Fish’s classes, had evidently been inspired by his claim regarding “the instability of the text and the unavailability of determinate meanings” (305) as well as the role of the reader in the construction of meaning. For Fish, there is no such thing as a stable text; rather, a text is “the structure of meaning that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force” (vii), hence the student’s question regarding the existence of a self-contained text with a fixed meaning as opposed to a text whose meaning depends on the reader’s experience and knowledge.

In the class we taught on retellings of medieval literature at the University of Freiburg in the summer term of 2023,¹ there was certainly no text in the sense of an unchanging, inherently stable entity: retellings exhibit, *perform* even the instability of any given text as they themselves function as vivid examples of the various ways in which a text can be read and understood and is therefore in a constant state of flux. The question that seemed the more accurate and relevant in the context of our seminar was the following: is there a *source* text in this class? This question, similarly to the one mentioned by Fish, can be understood (and misunderstood) in more than one way depending on the context in which the question is asked, and thus allows for multiple answers: first, there is a source text in the sense that the retellings are based on particular works; second, there is no source text, namely in the Fishian sense that the reading of any text relies on the reader’s perspective and knowledge, nor in the medievalist sense since medieval texts do not come down to us in definite versions, but are themselves inherently unstable as they are usually extant in multiple manuscripts, often subjected to editorial (and sometimes translational) practices, and were presumably, whether intentionally or unwantedly, tampered with by scribes; finally, there is no source text in the very real sense that many of our students were largely unfamiliar with medieval literature and accessed the source material in question primarily through translations and summaries, if they encountered the source in any form at all. When teaching medieval literature, the question of a (non-existing) source text also pertains to the limitations of having a clearly defined set of medieval texts that are medieval and treated as objects of study.

The nonexistence of a (source) text, however, can be an advantage in the classroom. Teaching retellings illustrates conveniently what has become a fundamental premise especially in classical reception studies: “Meaning...is always realized at the point of reception” (Martindale 1993, 3). This is especially the case if the students enrolled in the class are unfamiliar with the medieval sources. Not only is there no meaning to be construed with respect to the source outside of the particular situation in which the students find themselves (namely that of not accessing the source directly), but the view of the source is also filtered through a product of reception, that is, the retelling the students read in class. In this article, we want to outline our lesson plan and pedagogical approach, taking into special

¹ We dedicate this article to the students enrolled in our seminar “Retelling, Rereading, Rethinking—The Afterlife of Medieval Texts in Contemporary Literature,” which was the inspiration for this article.

consideration the particular knowledge our students brought with them into the class and how this influenced their reading of medieval literature, and ultimately argue, building upon Fish's and Martindale's assumptions, that the instability, indeterminacy, and even absence of the source can make for a better learning outcome and a more profound understanding of medieval literature, (medieval) literary practices, and the role of reception.

The class we taught was titled "Retelling, Rereading, Rethinking—The Afterlife of Medieval Texts in Contemporary Literature."² Referred to as a 'Proseminar' in Germany, it was primarily aimed at students who major in English and are studying toward their BA. The majority of our students—our 'interpretive community,' if you will—attended the course in their fourth semester, that is, the second year of their degree, and had engaged with medieval literature only in the context of a (compulsory) lecture offering an overview of English literary history (the so-called "Survey of English Literature"). Students signing up for a 'Proseminar' usually gain six credit points (one credit point at the University of Freiburg is equivalent to 30 hours of studying; Germany uses ECTS, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). Among the requirements allowing students to obtain six credit points were active participation in class, preparation of the assigned reading material, a creative (ungraded) piece of writing, and a (graded) 6000-word term paper.

The assigned reading consisted of several retellings, including Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf* retelling *The Mere Wife* (2018); Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014), a poetic reimagining of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and three short stories featured in the Arthurian collection *Sword Stone Table* (2021), edited by Swapna Krishna and Jenn Northington: "Little Green Men" by Alexander Chee, a sci-fi retelling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; the Arthurian-inspired retelling "The Once and Future Qadi" by Ausma Zehanat Khan; and Sive Doyle's queer rendering of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, "Do, By All Due Means." In addition, the students had occasion to engage with some of the medieval source material. However, despite having announced in the course description that we would read the retellings "against the backdrop of their source texts" (see Appendix 1), we did, in fact, let them access the medieval works primarily through translations and other materials that fall under reception. Our students read the *Beowulf* translation by S. A. J. Bradley from 1982; the interlinear translations of the *General Prologue*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, and the *Physician's Tale* provided by Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website; summaries of the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, also courtesy of Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website; and finally, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.³

The absence of the source text, of course, robs us as lecturers of the opportunity to discuss the significance of Old English or Middle English words or phrases and thus complicates a close reading of the retellings, which is necessarily influenced by the chosen translation, as the students lack the information required. Selecting a suitable translation consequently becomes all the more important, and potentially requires the input of the lecturer in class regarding biased translation choices. The impact of translations on our understanding of medieval texts, however, is also a useful and important topic of discussion in the classroom. Maria Dahvana Headley's self-conscious engagement with this issue in *The Mere Wife* has raised our students' awareness of the influence translations wield. Headley,

² For the course description and schedule, see Appendix 1.

³ Bibliographic details of the assigned reading material can be found in the Works Cited list.

who has published her own translation of *Beowulf* in 2020, lists “Selected Translations” of three Old English words—*aglaca*, *aglæc-wif*, *hwæt*—before the prologue of her retelling begins. The stark contrast between previous translations of the masculine noun *aglaca* (“fighter, warrior, hero”) and the feminine noun *aglæc-wif* (“wretch, monster, hell-bride, hag”) illustrates to students gender biases present in translations and teaches them to approach any work of reception—as indeed any text—with caution. In the best-case scenario, such a discussion makes it plain to students not only how important translations are, but also how crucial research on the original text is for our understanding of the past.

In order to allow the students to get at least a glimpse of medieval English, we used Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website: the interlinear translations are a good compromise as students can enjoy the text in modern English—students in Germany whose first language is usually not English often struggle with the Middle English text, especially if they have little to no knowledge of French—while still being able to consult and familiarize themselves with Chaucer’s English. The website also features useful summaries of the tales, suggestions for further reading, definitions of medieval genres, and other additional materials, which students can return to as they prepare their term papers.

The inclusion of summaries in our reading list—at first, a mere makeshift solution owed to the fact that we did not want to overwhelm our students with too much reading material—proved equally effective as it raised the students’ awareness of Chaucer’s intricate narrative organization as well as aspects of the retellings that probably would have gone otherwise unnoticed. Indeed, an interesting, albeit unsurprising difference between basing the discussion on a summary rather than a translation was the emphasis on plot that was the result of the former. When confronted with a condensed version of one of Chaucer’s tales that only mentions the major plot events, the students’ attention is naturally drawn to causal links and the way the narrative is organized—concurrently, causality itself might be put into question as Walter’s reasoning behind the trials in the *Clerk’s Tale* elicited irritation rather than understanding among the students.⁴ Furthermore, the summary, precisely because it is a concise enumeration of the arguably most significant events and details of the text, sharpened the students’ analytical skills and enabled them to draw connections between source and retelling that otherwise would possibly have gone undetected. Reading Patience Agbabi’s “Joined-Up Writing,” for example, in tandem with the summary of the *Man of Law’s Tale*, drew our students’ attention to the fact that Agbabi has combined the Sultan’s mother and Donegild into one character. In the retelling, so the convincing argument of one student went, “The Sultan’s mother, enraged that her son has determined to take a new faith” and Donegild, who “by falsified letters makes Alla think Custance has borne a monster,” merge and become one, decidedly unlikeable character.⁵ And indeed, in “Joined-Up Writing” the speaker both complains that her daughter-in-law “marched him [her son] off to church twice on a Sunday!” (Agbabi 2014, 23) and admits that she forged the letter: “That fateful day I signed *his* signature” (25, emphasis in the original). The merging of the two characters into one allowed us to discuss in depth the similarities between the two mothers in Chaucer, whose deep distrust in their ‘foreign’ daughter-in-law is characterized as evil. In Agbabi’s retelling, this evilness translates into racism, which brings to the fore the historical continuity of racist thinking—a thinking that is all the more prominent because we have only one character in whom the racism crystallizes.

⁴ O’Connell and Colby (2023) also note the “strong reactions” (5) the tale calls forth in the classroom (5; 7).

⁵ The quotations are taken from the summary of Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website: <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/man-laws-tale>.

At the same time, only knowing a Chaucerian tale based on a plot summary also aroused the students' curiosity as to the how of the narrative design in Chaucer. At several points in our discussions, the students explicitly asked us about or speculated on the narrative perspective, the narratorial stance, and the depiction of details in Chaucer in order to better understand to what extent the retelling had deviated or, on the contrary, taken its inspiration from Chaucer's text. Thus, accessing the medieval texts exclusively through various products of reception also threw into sharp relief features of medieval literary genres and literary practices in the Middle Ages. We discussed the genres of estate satire, romance, hagiography, exemplum, and allegory, and compared genre expectations and their reversal in Chaucer with Agbabi's choices of poetic form, including narratorial stance, perspective, and voice.

Medieval narrative features also played a major role when we turned to Arthurian-inspired retellings which, for the most part, we discussed without providing any source material whatsoever. Retellings often playfully and self-consciously pick up genre conventions of their sources which enables students to identify characteristics of medieval Arthurian texts without actually accessing those texts. If they come across the medieval versions at some point in their academic career, they will, however, be able to recognize these features. Khan's short story "The Once and Future Qadi," in which a Qadi is invited by Arthur to Camelot for the purpose of instigating an investigation of the alleged infidelity of Guinevere, for example, takes up (and ridicules) concepts such as courtly love ("At the court of the Caliph in Seville, the poets vie to recite paeans of devotion to their ladies. Many a veil has fluttered in delight. ...Is this not akin to courtly love?" [17]) and chivalry ("These Franks think of honor differently to us. Perhaps their women matter less. ...Yet they pen such pretty odes in tribute to their maids. Their chivalry is coy" [4]), with which the students were thus familiarized. The focus on the literary reception of medieval texts also allowed us to acquaint our students with retelling as a literary practice in the Middle Ages. Our discussion of retellings enabled us to point out that the sources themselves are products of reception, thus complicating the students' ideas of originality as a concept in literary history. Because we rarely incorporated the source material in the curriculum, the students found themselves in the same position as a medieval audience listening to, say, one of Chaucer's tales.

Perhaps the most important affordance of retellings in a classroom context is the way in which they highlight the relevance of the Middle Ages, pointing their readers towards those elements of medieval literature that still speak to us today.⁶ Agbabi's *Telling Tales*, which skillfully transposes the Chaucerian tales to modern settings, responds to aspects of the medieval stories that readers might grapple with as they identify certain parts as racist or sexist, meanwhile pointing them to similar societal issues today. The students were quick to point out the not-so-subtle racism of the speaker in "Joined-Up Writing" ("I'd never understand her when she spoke. / Not that I'm prejudiced, some of my best / friends are foreign"; Agbabi 2014, 22) which highlighted racist undertones in Chaucer's tales as well as prevalent racist attitudes in our own society. In accordance with Martindale's formulation, meaning takes shape as the text is received by the retelling on the one hand, and the readers/students on the other hand. No text elicits a strong reaction from students like the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (one of the few sources the students had to read in preparation for the class), especially its ending. In our case, too,

⁶ See also O'Connell and Colby 2023, 4–5.

the passage reliably sparked outrage, or at the very least, strong confusion. Agbabi does not change the ending but dryly calls out what is disturbing about the conclusion by stating the obvious: “So she married a *rapist* / but he learnt his lesson” (2014, 36, our emphasis). Through the #MeToo Movement students are highly attuned to topics such as consent and female empowerment which they see unfold as transhistorical themes through the discussion of the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* and those texts’ afterlives.

Before we discussed a retelling (or set of retellings), we introduced the relevant medieval literary context. Thus, we offered introductions to *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the Arthurian tradition in greater detail. Our introductions were not meant to be exhaustive but rather geared towards providing a general overview of the historical context, including language issues and major events, as well as notable features of the Old and Middle English texts. In two sessions, we invited special guests: two current PhD students, Mareike Huber and Sonia García de Alba Lobeira, who gave expert talks on gender and intersectionality in *The Mere Wife* and *Beowulf* and on the origins on the Arthurian tradition, respectively. Including the PhD students’ input turned out to be beneficial as the colleagues’ expertise and their different teaching and presentation styles led to another, and very engaged, discussion and critical exchange in which both we as lecturers and the students participated.

In addition to retellings published in recent years, we integrated yet another component into our course plan, namely a creative writing exercise.⁷ Completion of this assignment required students to retell a medieval text of their choice which, in the spirit of our class featuring only a handful of medieval texts in their entirety, they could access through whatever text they saw fit (including translations, adaptations, etc.). We also allowed our students freedom of choice with regard to medium, genre, form, and length, encouraging them to pick whatever means suited their project best. Once all creative pieces were submitted, each student was sent an anonymized retelling of their peers and was asked by us to give constructive, written feedback. In their feedback, they could comment on any aspect that struck them as interesting, the only condition being that their critique was phrased respectfully. In order to ensure both the anonymity of the peer reviewer and the appropriateness of the response the feedback had to be submitted to and reviewed by us before it was sent back to the respective student author.⁸

The creative assignment was due about halfway through the semester, and the students confirmed to us that this was a convenient point in time for this particular exercise. Our previous discussions of Headley’s *Beowulf* retelling and Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* had already acquainted our students with some of the options writers of retellings have at their disposal. We did, for instance, introduce them to Jeremy Rosen’s “minor character elaboration,” a genre characterized by an emphasis on and expansion of minor characters from canonical works (2016, 2), and discussed ways of shifting the perspective and transposing the storyworld. At the same time, the students profited from the insight gained from this experience throughout the rest of the semester. The very fact that character turned out to be so important for the students, as was clear from their responses and in our discussions, may be surprising given that character is often properly thought to have its heyday with the novel. In our experience,

⁷ Several of the essays assembled in this special cluster indicate that creative exercises were used when teaching medieval material and their adaptations, and a few reflect on the use of this exercise, see especially Hindley 2023; O’Connell and Colby 2023.

⁸ For the handout detailing the guidelines for this task, see Appendix 2.

students found it easiest to engage with the characters as possible persons, that is, by psychologizing their actions and looking for ways to explain their behavior, especially with respect to the difficult cases of the *Physician's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, which we approached through Agbabi's "I Go Back to May 1967". Students' overall tendency to apply twenty-first-century norms and expectations of behavior led to fruitful discussions about historical distance and different models of ethics and behavior, as well as literary models and topoi and their fraught relation to real-life circumstances.

We were not only highly impressed by the creativity of the submitted pieces, but also by how well adapted they were to our historical moment. One particularly memorable text was Katharina Klotz's retelling of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, based on the interlinear translation from Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website. Titled "MeToo," the student had chosen to retell the tale from the perspective of the young maiden who is raped by the knight at the beginning of the story. The poem was preceded by an epigraph quoting the modern translation from Harvard's Website: "By God, if women had written stories, / As clerks have with their studies, / They would have written of men more wickedness / Than all the male sex could set right" (ll. 693–6).⁹ The retelling denounces not only the knight's crime, but also the legal system that fails to hold the offender accountable as well as the society that protects the perpetrator rather than the victim. This retelling and many others made it plain that the students' reading of the medieval works was very much embedded in and informed by the discourses that mattered to them. As Fish postulates, "communication occurs within situations and...to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions" (1980, 318). Similar to Fish's utterance whose meaning depends on the context in which it is uttered, the students' understanding of their chosen source does not come about in a vacuum but is always dependent on their particular circumstances and knowledge.

We were delighted by the lively dialogue that ensued in the session following the assignment deadline. We devoted an entire session to the discussion of the creative exercise, thus giving the students the opportunity to reflect on their retelling endeavors and the peer review experience. During this discussion we learned that the exercise alerted students in particular to the choices involved in retelling a text.¹⁰ One of our students jokingly remarked that he went through five stages of grief as he tried to decide what would be feasible with regard to form and content of his retelling. The exercise calls attention to difficult decisions regarding omissions and expansions, form and content, temporal and spatial situatedness, perspectives and voices. These, in turn, are useful categories to keep in mind when analyzing retellings and links between a retold text and its source.

One point of discussion we kept coming back to was, of course, the presence or absence of a source, or rather, a reference to it. We did not instruct the students on whether or not they should mention the source their retelling was based on in the submitted file, it being our understanding that all creative pieces would be grounded in a medieval work, and passed the document on to the peer reviewers unaltered, that is, with or without a reference to the source. Students who had received a text lacking a reference admitted that they tried to find out which source the author had consulted. Depending on how closely the retelling was modeled on its source and whether the source was a text

⁹ <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/wife-baths-prologue-and-tale-0>.

¹⁰ Choices also play an important role in the kind of interactive novel Timothy Miller discusses in his contribution to this cluster (2023). Here, the readers are time and again prompted to make choices, thereby influencing the course of the narrative.

previously discussed in class, this endeavor could prove more or less difficult. Students who knew the source or looked it up, in case they were unfamiliar with the material, read the retelling mainly in relation to the pretext. Students who did not manage to detect the source and were thus oblivious of possible links to another text wondered if they would have read the retelling differently if they had known the source material but ended up focusing on the retelling for its own sake. The exercise pointed out to us that of course knowing (something about) the source does add meaning to the retelling—and while a retelling can stand on its own, it cannot truly exist without one. To reference or not to reference, that is the question.

Overall, the class was successful in that we were able to open up new avenues of engaging with works of reception for students with little to no previous knowledge about medieval literature. The students were made aware of the power of reception and intertextuality: to know more—about *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and the Arthurian tradition—leads to deeper insights and a more profound understanding of what a retelling attempts to achieve, especially when it follows a revisionist or feminist or otherwise clearly political agenda. Given the current trend of retellings of premodern material, the class also invited the students to use retellings as a springboard: by reading something new and contemporary, they can discover something old and previously unknown to them.

Appendix 1: Course Description and Schedule¹¹

They transport *Beowulf* to the American suburbs, turn Chaucer's storytelling competition into a poetry slam, and let female knights take center stage—contemporary retellings rework medieval texts in multifarious ways and lead us to reread and rethink their sources in the process. In this course, we want to trace the afterlife of medieval works in contemporary literature and examine the current trend of retelling premodern material. How do contemporary authors approach medieval texts and rewrite them as they cater to modern readers? How do retellings guide and change our perception of the medieval material? What is at stake as old texts are recycled and rendered anew? These and other questions will guide our discussion over the course of the semester.

In order to tackle these questions, we will consider retellings across a wide range of genres and read them against the backdrop of their source texts. Primary texts include Maria Dahvana Headley's *Beowulf* retelling *The Mere Wife* (2018), Patience Agbabi's take on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in her poetry collection *Telling Tales* (2014), and the short story collection *Sword Stone Table* (2021), whose contributions draw on Arthurian material. This course, then, will serve as an introduction to medieval literature, medievalism, and retelling more generally as well as the contemporary trend of retelling medieval texts.

Part of this course will also be a creative component: students signing up for this class will submit a short retelling of a medieval text of their choice as part of their *Studienleistung*¹². The creative retellings will be circulated among the participants and discussed to help us gain a better understanding of the very practice of retelling and the choices it involves.

¹¹ The schedule has been expanded for the purposes of this article in order to provide a more extensive overview of the texts and topics discussed in class and therefore differs slightly from the one handed out to the students at the beginning of the term.

¹² In Germany, a *Studienleistung* is an ungraded assignment, as opposed to a (graded) *Prüfungsleistung*.

Topic & Assigned Reading	
1	Introduction
2	Theorizing Retelling Introduction to key terms from medievalism, reception and adaptation studies
3	The Afterlife of <i>Beowulf</i> I <i>Beowulf</i> (in translation) and Maria Dahvana Headley’s <i>The Mere Wife</i>
4	The Afterlife of <i>Beowulf</i> II Mareike Huber, M.A. (special guest) on intersectionality in <i>The Mere Wife</i>
5	The Afterlife of Chaucer’s <i>Canterbury Tales</i> I Chaucer’s <i>General Prologue</i> and Patience Agbabi’s “Prologue (Grime Mix)” (from <i>Telling Tales</i>)
6	The Afterlife of Chaucer’s <i>Canterbury Tales</i> II Chaucer’s the <i>Wife of Bath’s Prologue</i> and <i>Tale</i> and Patience Agbabi’s “What Do Women Like Bes” and “Joined-Up Writing” (from <i>Telling Tales</i>)
7	The Afterlife of Chaucer’s <i>Canterbury Tales</i> III Chaucer’s the <i>Physician’s Tale</i> and Patience Agbabi’s “Reconstruction” and “I Go Back to May 1967” (from <i>Telling Tales</i>) Due date: creative retelling
8	Creative Retellings & Retelling as a Practice
9	Arthur’s Afterlife I Sonia García de Alba Lobeira, M.A. (special guest) on the origins of Arthurian legend
10	Arthur’s Afterlife II <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> (in translation) and “Little Green Men” by Alexander Chee (from <i>Sword Stone Table</i>)
11	Arthur’s Afterlife III “The Once and Future Qadi” by Ausma Zehanat Khan and “Do, By All Due Means” by Sive Doyle (from <i>Sword Stone Table</i>)
12	Final Discussion & Term Papers

Appendix 2: Creative Writing Handout

Guidelines: piece of creative writing

- *Choose a medieval source text*
 - It can be a text we have discussed in class (e.g. Chaucer's *General Prologue*), but you can also choose a different source text as long as it is a medieval text produced in the British Isles.
 - You don't need to retell a text such as *Beowulf* in its entirety: you should focus e.g. on a specific passage.
- *Think about how you want to retell the text*
 - Anything goes. Flash fiction, sonnet, screenplay—you can choose whatever genre or form suits your creative project best.
 - Think about the decisions you need to make, e.g. regarding the setting (i.e. time & place), the characters, style, etc.
- *Length*
 - That depends entirely on your project. A retelling in 10 tweets will naturally be longer than a haiku.

Guidelines: feedback

- You can write a response and upload it as a Word document or PDF, or you can add comments directly to the text (it's possible to add comments to both Word and PDF files) and upload the annotated text.
- Comment on *how* something was done / what worked well / what you found interesting or noteworthy.
- Don't comment on whether you think it is a good or bad retelling / what you, personally, dislike about it
- Keep in mind that creative writing can be deeply personal!
- Don't give feedback you would not want to receive yourself.

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