

**SANTA FE, N.M.**—As I handed David Morrell a copy of the Centre Daily Times that contained a very positive review of his latest book, The Protector, he said: “Oh, you must be the fellow from Pennsylvania.” We had corresponded via the Internet several times and he knew I was going to show up for his one-day workshop on fiction writing. I was late and unable to introduce myself until the first break of the day.

But I was never late for Morrell’s 8 o’clock class in short-story writing at Penn State. I took the course in the winter term of 1970 as Morrell was completing his Ph.D. in English. The summer, he would head off for a job at the University of Iowa, the manuscript of his first novel, First Blood, tucked away with his belongings. And 33-plus years later at age 59, I was back in his class, only it wasn’t in the basement of Willard Building but in a private residence in Santa Fe.

Twenty-four adults have paid \$125 for the six-hour workshop (seven if you count lunch) and five of them have published fiction or nonfiction books already. One woman heard Morrell talk in California and when she learned about the workshop here, she and her husband planned their vacation around it. Another participant had read nearly all of Morrell’s 18 novels and was seeking a “catalyst to get me beyond thinking about creative writing to actually doing it.” Yet another, the author of three local nonfiction books, was seeking inspiration to help her with a novel in progress.

The person who has traveled the greatest distance is Chris Viola of Clinton, N.Y., a Pittsburgh native and Carnegie Mellon University



graduate who has read Morrell’s Lifetime of Writing: A Novelist Looks at His Craft and who was urged by a mutual friend to attend the workshop. He spent eight hours on planes and in airports to get here.

Morrell, 60, is wearing a green T-shirt with a pocket, tan shorts and tan tennis shoes. He wears glasses, which he occasionally removes. He uses a flipchart to list his points and he quickly cuts to the chase: No one should want to write for fame or fortune. He passes around a copy of the Myers-Briggs personality test and

then tells the audience how he tested.

“I’m an introvert,” he says, hoping that everyone will understand that the writing life is not filled with heady wine-and-cheese receptions and book signings attended by adoring fans, but is rather monastic. “You have to love being alone,” he tells the group. “It is draining for me to be with a lot of people.” Still, he mingles freely throughout the day and gladly discusses writing during breaks and lunch.

The flipchart already lists three of the five points he wants to make during the day: 1. Ability to tell a story, 2. Craft, 3. Discipline, and then he adds perhaps the most difficult of all, 4. Luck. He explains the long



path that First Blood took, conceived and written while he was a graduate student and instructor at Penn State. And how Sylvester Stallone's movie version in 1982 gave the book the publicity it deserved. The film provided a much larger audience than the publisher's first printing and even the Literary Guild, which offered it as an alternate selection.

Morrell's talk is part pedagogical, part psychological, part practical, part autobiographical. His life's story is an oft-told tale because he has written so often about his inspirations, his mentors, his ups and downs, including his decision to give up his tenured position at the University of Iowa to write full time in 1986 and the death of his son, Matthew, from cancer at the age of 15 in 1987.

Morrell credits retired Penn State English professor Phillip Klass for working with him diligently until he finally produced a good short story. Klass, Morrell tells his audience, urged him to write about fear and after many attempts the story that finally worked for Klass and became the motivation for Morrell was "The Plinker."

## Memories

Morrell has many happy memories of Happy Valley. He and his wife, Donna, and their 2-month-old daughter, Sarie, arrived in June 1966, most of their possessions stashed in a Volkswagen Beetle, and spent the first couple of nights in their apartment in Graduate Circle in sleeping bags on hard floors. On top of that, the thermostat was broken and the heat was on, a not uncommon situation for buildings at Penn State unless it is the middle of winter—then the air conditioning runs full tilt.

Morrell was entering the master's degree program in English. He became attracted to Penn State because he had read a book by English professor Philip Young (Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration) and knew he wanted to study under Young. In fact, he reread the book upon arrival "and the magic was there twice over."

Morrell remembers his time at Penn State as "a really positive academic experience" and one in which everyone was civil. He recalls being greeted in the mailroom by professors he had not met. As it turned out, because he was Canadian, he added an international flavor to the student body, which seemed, Morrell recalls, to please everyone.

Far from finding professors distant, Morrell considered them warm and welcoming. As part of his Ph.D. work, he had to take a course in Middle English from Robert Frank, later to become head of the department. Because only three or four students were in the class, Frank invited them to his house instead of meeting in a room on campus. Frank's wife, Gladys, served cake and coffee, creating an atmosphere that Morrell today says was "very pleasantly British."

Morrell was also captivated by the mountains. "Having lived in southern Ontario for all of my then-23 years," he wrote in an e-mail message, "I had never seen mountains. I can't describe how overwhelmed I was to drive into the Alleghenies and follow them to Happy Valley where gorgeous crests surrounded me, especially Mount Nittany. I've never forgotten how reassuring the dramatic scenery was, given my anxiety at having chucked my past to come to this brave new world. I've been attracted to mountains ever since."

And he was attracted to The Barrens in Patton Township, which became the setting for "The Plinker," the story of a person who goes into the woods to target practice, that is, to "plink," only to become hunted by someone with a rifle. Eventually, the wounded plinker kills the sniper, but then must crawl out of the woods to safety, hoping he does not encounter any snakes. It is all about fear. It is Morrell's leitmotif.

In your dreams

"If the worst-case scenario is being thrust upon you," Morrell tells his workshop students, "you've got a story." He explains that his novels are basically about a hostile world, bad things happening to the characters, the characters responding. He repeatedly makes the point that the more inner turmoil people have, the more fodder they have for fiction. "Fiction is friction," he says. For a writer, "Nightmares are a visit from Santa Claus."



Although Morrell is lecturing without notes, he relies frequently on Lessons from a Lifetime of Writing, which he likens to a hymnbook, and it serves as his outline. Several participants have purchased the book at

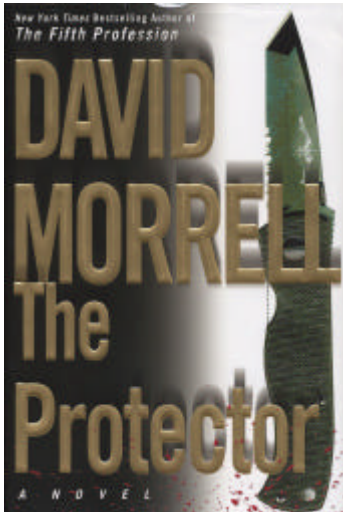
the door or, like Chris Viola (and me), have read it already. When Morrell reads from the book, someone in the audience asks for a page number so she can follow along—chapter and verse.

Despite his Ph.D. in English, Morrell likes to say: "This isn't Shakespeare. I'm just a working writer." But a worshipful reviewer on

Amazon.com called him “a genre writer with a poet’s soul.” Morrell disdains those who make the distinction between high brow and low brow and he mixes his talk with examples ranging from Stephen Crane to Stephen King, from Dante to Hemingway. After the workshop, one participant says she appreciated that Morrell’s talk was grounded in American literature. By e-mail a couple of days later another participant raved about “the depth and amount of information imparted.”

Morrell draws on Hemingway, the subject of his master’s thesis, to make the point about good writing. Use concrete words to create images in the reader’s mind; minimize the use of adverbs and adjectives. He cites John Barth, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation, to make the point that writing is either stained glass or Windex. Morrell advocates windows cleaned with Windex.

“I write action,” Morrell says, and advises his audience “to keep the story moving,” which is reminiscent of what he told us those many years ago: “Get the reader into the story.” On this last point, he contrasts films



and highly descriptive and verbose Victorian novels and praises films for getting audiences into and out of scenes quickly. Morrell tells me later that the longest scene he writes is no more than six double-spaced typewritten pages, about 1500 words, which keeps the reader reading rather than putting the book on the nightstand for another day. (I read The Protector in two afternoons.)

### **Digressions and allusions**

In 1992, David and Donna Morrell purchased a house here that had once been owned by Edward T. Hall, the well known cultural anthropologist. They converted the garage into a television room. Morrell feels at ease in the room and sat for an interview there shortly after the workshop. The room includes bookshelves, movie posters (both Morrell and non-Morrell) and photographs of Morrell with Stallone and with David Morse, who starred in the television version of Morrell’s novel The Brotherhood of the Rose.

The house came with a detached office, where Morrell does all of his writing. As he tells the workshop participants, he has a writing desk and a reading desk and he does not mix the two. Even though the writing desk holds a computer, it is a relic he keeps just in case he needs to access old files. He always reads on paper rather than a computer screen and will change fonts so he doesn’t glide over his words.

At the workshop he doesn’t always glide either, sometimes digressing and losing his place. When he is talking about his writing and

reading protocols and forgets what he wants to say next, he lists out loud the topics he has just covered:

“computers”

“font”

“first drafts”

“First drafts” are his next topic.

His digressions are literary or historical. He makes a point about showing rather than telling, which leads him to talk about radio plays and then radio shows he listened to as a child. He then asks participants to name the voice of Matt Dillon on the radio show “Gunsmoke.” But before anyone answers, he does. It was the late William Conrad, the rotund actor who later starred in several television series.

For the most part, he holds the audience’s attention. At 3 p.m. with an hour left, it is an above-average 95 degrees on the shadowed patio outside the workshop room. At the airport 12 miles away, the National Weather Service has logged the temperature as 93. The room is cooled only by electric fans and the occasional breeze that comes in through the opened windows. Most of the participants have a bottle of water with them. It will thunder toward the end of the workshop and threaten to rain, but the rain won’t arrive for another 12 hours and it won’t last long.

With 45 minutes to go, Morrell wonders aloud if the participants aren’t ready to go home. They aren’t and he turns to one of the workshop’s co-directors and, quoting from Shakespeare’s Henry V, says to her, “Once more unto the breach,” and then turns to his audience and keeps talking.

When he runs overtime, he acknowledges the restlessness of the participants, forgets the point he was making and says: “Ask me a question and maybe I’ll remember it.” Someone does and he remembers. What faculty member hasn’t used that mnemonic device countless times?

## **Evaluation**

Class is over and the students get a chance to evaluate the instructor. Of the five participants who responded to my request for comments, only one was dissatisfied, in part because he thought the workshop was not as advertised. He expected a wider range of fiction and more hands-on activities and told me he had shared his unhappiness with the workshop’s organizers. The others were happy.

The woman with a novel in progress said Morrell’s comments helped her “sharpen up certain ‘fuzzy’ passages” and that his discussion on dialogue was valuable. “I ‘fixed’ passages,” she told me, “in which my characters didn’t really say what they really meant.”

Another appreciated Morrell's advice about grabbing the reader from the start and making time to write every day. Although familiar with both concepts, hearing them reinforced the lesson.

And Chris Viola, now back in Clinton, N.Y., said he looks at his work and asks himself: "What would David do?" I sense that several participants will be asking that question in the years ahead.

### **Story ideas**

Morrell has told me in an e-mail that an idea for a novel "has kicked in." As one of the many who saw himself someday writing *The Great American Novel*, this is the lesson I want: Where do you get ideas? Journalism is easy; you write down what people say or what you see and make a story out of it. But ideas. How do you stoke your imagination?

Actually, Morrell has already answered that question in a collection of short stories titled Black Evening. The stories had been published individually before, but in this collection, he prefaced each one with a short explanation of how the idea for the story came about. For example, he once wrote a short story "The Storm" after his house in Iowa had been hit by lightning three times in one night. Another story, "Mumbo Jumbo," was inspired by a newspaper story about an Iowa football team that conducted a controversial ritual before each game. And so on.

As I had anticipated, he would not tell me what the idea was. Some writers, for their own good reasons, won't talk about an idea or a book until all is signed, sealed and delivered. Suffice it to say, it will be a sequel to The Protector, the first sequel Morrell has written. Morrell also has in mind a novel about the "blade culture," that is, people who are infatuated with knives. (See "The Blade Culture")

### **Where's "The Plinker"?**

Although Morrell cites "The Plinker" often, it has never been published. Morrell sent it off to *Argosy* magazine, where it was mislaid. When the magazine went out of business, an editor belatedly found the manuscript and apologetically returned it, saying it was worthy of publication. Morrell then sent the story to *Playboy*, which rejected it, and shortly after that read it to his fiction-writing class, the one I was taking. By then, though, James Dickey had published Deliverance and "The Plinker" appeared to imitate it and so Morrell has never tried to publish the story.

But he does make the point in the workshop that writers should not imitate other writers or attempt to write a novel that imitates a trend, trends in publishing having a maximum shelf life of three years. "Don't be a so-so imitation of another writer," he says. "Be a first-class version

of yourself.” Morrell has adopted that as a principle and it has served him well in his career “as just a working writer.”