

The Windswept Journal

Number 143

April, 2012

Writer

This article was written for the online magazine, Author's Bazaar, March, 2012, No. 14.

All of us writers have no doubt heard the famous quote, “Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.” Some have heard it attributed to various authors. (Wiki says it’s by Gene Fowler, journalist and playwright. Others ascribe a similar saying to sports writer Red Smith.) But I’ve never had a problem with creative writing and only occasionally with factual writing. Sitting down at a keyboard evidently sets up a chain reaction in my brain that leads to sentences coming out my fingers.

I write what I’ve read. Somewhere in my mind, banging around since I first began to read, is no doubt every phrase I ever laid eyes on. I’m just rearranging and repeating them as I type. A life time of voracious reading of decent prose has helped my craft immensely.

I remember opening a thin book as I stood in front of my grandmother and proudly declaimed, “See Dick run,” as though I were the town crier with a hot new story. My reading ability happened quickly. Only a few months before I had asked Mom if I was holding the hymnal upside right in Church while I pretended to read the lyrics and sing along with the congregation. I was one motivated reader. I am one motivated writer. I want to spill it out.

It doesn’t come out perfectly, of course. There was a time when I hated editing my own work. It felt like I was killing my issue, I guess, because I didn’t want to destroy what to my inner ear sounded so wonderful when it rolled out on paper. But today I view the process as an opportunity to crisp up my phrasing and smooth out the delivery. I believe good writing doesn’t call attention to itself. It goes right down the reader’s gullet, smooth as butter. If I watched his or her eyes they would not dart back to re-read a phrase or arch an eyebrow to ponder a muddy sentence. I would have scooped her up into my word wagon as I drove by and have her there with me, hearing my writer’s voice, understanding my context and recognizing my

metaphors. There would be a glint of expectation in her eyes as she avidly reached for the next sentence, one after another. Such wonderful writing doesn’t come directly out of my head any more than Premium Hi Test comes right from the ground. The product has to be refined.

Writing is a craft, of course. It doesn’t take long to get the basics down, but it is indeed a lifelong process of learning. I can’t speak as an expert, but I do have a few opinions on how to go about it. I won’t bore you with them here since you may have only a passing interest. I’ve penned a short article and placed it on my website if you want to pursue my suggestions. It’s at <http://www.windsweptpress.com/telstor.pdf> A more humorous view is at: <http://www.windsweptpress.com/realwriter.pdf>

We all have different ways of approaching our craft. I’ll have been thinking of a topic but often wait for a terrific opening phrase to pop into my mind, words I can’t wait to get on paper. It’s why I always carry paper and a pen with me. Look hard enough and you’ll find other authors writing on napkins in restaurants or on their boarding passes sitting in the corner of the airport bar. (Yes, the latter could be an aluminum salesman figuring his commissions.)

At home, my PC is set up and organized for writing, with electronic folders separating my projects into easily accessible categories of Complete and Working and Stuff (thoughts, research, and trial paragraphs.) Computerized folders hold a variety of writer’s tools and resources. I back it all up at least once each week ... immediately, if I’ve just written a story that will make me as famous as Stephen King!

My short stories are 500 to 2,000 words and I publish them on the Internet. Thirty or so essays and stories are rolled into a self published book each year. I seldom have a complete story or idea in my head when sitting down to write. I’m a big fan of the “stream of consciousness” method. If I waited for a story to flesh out in my mind I’d never sit down to write it. An early piece, “The Good Shepherd,” was in my thoughts for at least ten years. I became so disgusted bouncing it around in my head that I finally sat down and wrote it so I could forget about it. I might have written the tale a decade earlier and eliminated the time I wasted thinking about how to construct it.

When I feel like writing, I sit down and write. About anything. I might open my Working file and add a few sentences to a story in progress, get stuck or become

tired of it and switch to another piece I began a week or a few years ago. I have over a hundred “starts” as I call them, most having a few paragraphs, some a few sentences and others a few pages.

When writing, multiple resources are open on my PC, such as Wikipedia, Google and TheFreeDictionary, the latter for use as a word checker and thesaurus. I can't tell you where my paperback thesaurus is in this book lined room my wife calls my cave. Before we moved to a small modern house, we lived in an old farmhouse and I wrote in the cellar. My PC was set up among shortwave radios in the former fruit cellar beneath sturdy old floor beams. I could look upward to see the joists decorated with cob webs that were there when we moved in 35 years ago and were still intact when I left last November. They were probably a hundred years old.

Ideas come from everywhere. I believe a writer can write about anything. I approach all of my subjects as stories. In each piece, whether it's fiction or factual, I try to form a “story arc” and also put a hook in the intro. Finding an opportunity to include a twist or two to surprise the reader in a way that brings a chuckle is another goal. With memoirs I embellish, believing the story trumps the facts (and I freely admit it.) I'm a storyteller, not an historian, and my reader wants to be entertained. He doesn't care whether the homemade balloon a friend and I made when we were thirteen really rose high enough to fly me over my home town. He just wants to soar with my imagination over the neighborhoods and downtown buildings and land safely in a cornfield on the other side of town.

When I get a story down on paper and edited, it's no more than a vision typed out from my head. I need another person to read it and tell me if the words mean anything to them. Before I bother my wife for her impression, I always read the article aloud. (Later versions of Adobe Reader will do that for you.) It's a great way to catch mistakes and awkward phrasing. Next, I change the font and arrange the printing of the piece to somewhat resemble a magazine article. I often use a Caslon font and narrow columns to simulate The New Yorker. I find that reading the piece in that mock environment puts my brain in a highly critical mode where my expectations easily recognize poor writing. Grammatical mistakes and muddy sentences stand out sharply on this stage.

Posting my stories on the Internet and self publishing via PrintOnDemand allow changes to the copy any time. (See my PrintOnDemand article at:

<http://www.windsweptpress.com/pod.htm>

I constantly read and re-read my work and make minor changes. To me it's not a chore. I feel the way a sculptor might when he discovers a burr on the smooth surface of his work and carefully rubs it away to make the piece even more finished..

Input from others is essential. Probably the most helpful feedback on my writing in recent years has come from the bloody streets of Internet critique groups. Don't go there if you're thin skinned. I'm sure a few nascent authors have given up writing after suffering a beating or two from some of the nastier critics who inhabit these forums. The worst offender in one group I belonged to (the group I was proudly kicked out of, frankly) had never had even a single story published. But as vicious as the remarks could be, many of the group's writing insights were right on and I learned a lot. If you do join a tough group, just be careful. Don't believe everything you're told. Internet writing groups can get sidetracked on one aspect of writing and will begin to concentrate on it to the exclusion of all the good things in your prose. Some Internet writing critics would have scolded Thomas Jefferson for his lack of a hook and a story arc in the Declaration of Independence.

I wish I had begun an organized program of creative writing long before I retired. Today I'd know more about the craft and my writing would by now be more efficient. I don't know why I didn't start, except time was always in short supply and my story ideas didn't appear to form complete plots. How was I to know the best way to solve a plot problem (for me, at least) is to sit down and write it out. And if it doesn't make sense, change it. I've learned creativity doesn't happen when I'm thinking about a potential story. It takes place while I'm writing or in the midst of solving a writing problem.

Just because drops of blood don't form on my forehead as I write doesn't mean the effort isn't work. I spend quite a bit of time on it. But I figure that it's what I'm meant to do at this stage of my life. And if all the hours I put into writing were not enjoyable, I'd be fishing instead. Come to think of it, I do need to get some flies tied for spring!

copyright 2012 David Griffin

The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

Write to me. dave@windsweptpress.com