

The Truth That Tells a Lie

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"LIKE HAVING A GOOD LONG TALK
WITH A WISE AND FUNNY
AND DEPENDABLE FRIEND."
— Lewis NORDAN, Author of WOLF WHISLE

A Guide to Writing Fiction

John Dufresne

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ALSO BY JOHN DUFRESNE

The Way That Water Enters Stone

Louisiana Power & Light

Love Warps the Mind a Little

Deep in the Shade of Paradise

.....

The Lie That Tells a Truth

A Guide to Writing Fiction



JOHN DUFRESNE

.....

*A good traveler has no fixed plans,
and is not intent on arriving.*

—LAO TZU

*For all my teachers and all my students
and for Agnes Berard,
at whose kitchen table I learned to love stories*

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Introduction



Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist when we grow up.

—Pablo Picasso

I'll assume that if you're reading this introduction, then you must want to write. Why else would you be loitering around the Writing/Publishing section of the bookstore when all the really interesting and dangerous people are over in the Self-Help/Addiction aisle? (And there are lots of them.) Well, the plain truth is that if you want to write, you can. And if you *want* to write but you *don't* write, you're inviting madness. (Kafka said that or something like it.) Wanting to write means, of course, that you're not writing. And wanting to write but not writing will lead to frustration, guilt, and regret. And regret eats the soul. Writing, on the other hand, leads to discovery, insight, and accomplishment. The fact is, it's easier to write than it is to want to write. Just pick up your pen, put down a word. Another word.

So what's been stopping you? Maybe you used to write poems and stories (in fact, you've kept them; they're in a box up in the attic), but then the kids came along and there was simply no time. Or perhaps all you ever wanted to be was a writer, but you succumbed to the wishes of your uncompromising parents, or you listened to your exasperated and very practical significant other or your own insecurities and you went off to law school, but now, years later, you can feel that old creative ache in your bones. You're cross-examining a defense witness, and you're thinking, Damn, I could have come up with a better story than this. Where are the details? Or maybe you've never written, though you've always wanted to, because the whole idea of writing seems overwhelming. Well, mean, Where do I start? Well, the *idea* of writing *is* overwhelming; the act of writing, however, is simplicity itself. Maybe you've quit writing a dozen times but find yourself thinking about your old characters again. Or you got your MFA in creative writing but landed this teaching job and all you seem to do these days is grade freshman compositions. Or everyone in your writers' group is producing like crazy; everyone but you, that is. And you joined the group to give yourself a kick in the butt. You're creatively frozen for some reason. Whatever your story is, if you have the itch, it's time to scratch.

Johann Sebastian Bach was approached by an admirer outside of St. Thomas School in Leipzig. The enthusiastic young man praised the master's work. Bach smiled. The man said, "Can you tell me how I can become a composer? It's my dream."

Bach said, “I have no idea.”

“But, sir, you *are* a composer.”

Bach nodded. “But I didn’t have to ask.”

To be a composer, Bach knew, you write music. No secrets. And when the music is ready, the orchestra will appear.

Now, maybe Bach said what I allege he did to the eager young man or maybe he didn’t. I made up the anecdote, but it could have happened. I chose Bach as a subject because he really did say this: “Anyone who works as hard as I do, can do as well.”

Remember when you were a child, and you were stuck in the house on a rainy day, and Mom sat you at the kitchen table, gave you a pencil, a sharpener, a box of crayons, and a ream of paper, and you went at it? You drew all day long and never got blocked, never concerned yourself with perfection, never worried about repeating yourself. All of your people had triangle noses, brilliant smiles, and arms like the branches of a tree. (You could write a fascinating essay about your childhood drawing, couldn’t you? Writing gives you the license to be impractical, to consider the marvelous and the arcane, and at what other moment in your day, in your entire life, do you take your own childhood seriously?) You were so good at this because you were into the fun of it. The play. It didn’t matter that only two of your masterpieces made it to the refrigerator door and the others got recycled. It was the making of the art that both compelled and rewarded you. The *doing*, not the *having done*. What this book aims to do is get you back into the fun of making things up.

So start writing today. You can begin right now if you remembered to bring a pen along—there are napkins in the coffee shop. Napkins are for writing. It’s not enough to want to be a writer; you need to write, and in doing so *become* a writer. (Okay, tomorrow, then. Today you’ll need to buy new pens, some writing tablets, and you’ll need to create a little office, a writing room or alcove or corner for yourself at home, put up the “Do Not Disturb” sign. But no later than tomorrow. Excuses—we’ve got a million of them. In the writing world, however, excuses are irrelevant.) There are no classes to register for, no entrance exams to take, no aptitude tests. No one else can or will give you permission to write, so don’t even ask. And no one else can stop you. No one to blame, no one to thank.

You don’t need to know what a plot is. We’ll get to that. You don’t even need to know what to write about—you’ll get plenty of suggestions. What to write about, I admit, can be very intimidating when you are beginning to learn the craft, but if you do the exercises in this book, you’ll have generated enough material and characters to keep you happily writing for the rest of your life.

This sounds so easy, but there is a cost. You have to pay for the privilege of writing with your time. But that’s not so hard. You only have to want to write as much as you want to watch TV or go to the movies. You manage to get those done. You can probably manage all three. You pay with your time, your patience, your passion, your persistence. And one more thing. You have to be willing to fail, to see that you aren’t half so clever as you thought you were. (But then, humility is the first step on the road to wisdom.) There’s really nothing mysterious about all this. If you want to hold your novel

your tight little fists in a couple of years, then you have to sit down right now and get to work.

In fact, before you leave the bookstore why don't we wander over to the Self-Help/Addiction aisle and pretend to browse? The air is thicker over here, isn't it? Someone's wearing patchouli. Can you believe these titles? *Think and Grow Rich* (I did; I didn't); *Wisdom of the Ages: 60 Days to Enlightenment* (Oh, please! I'm not opposed to gullibility, but where does it stop?); *Get Anyone to Do Anything* (An honest self-help book, at least); *Lesbian Sex Secrets for Men* (Thanks, but no thanks); *Power Thought Cards* (Power thoughts?); *Why Is It Always About You?* (Am I whining?); *Understanding Your Angels and Meeting Your Guides* (My God, I think he's serious); *Extended Massive Orgasm* (Hmm). Where were we? Oh, yes, we're here for material. So let's eavesdrop.

Did that woman standing alone with *Conversations with God* in her hand just say what I thought she did? She's in love with a noodle? You think she said poodle? Or strudel? (Mishearing invites invention.) And who's she talking to anyway? And what about the guy over by the Dr. Phil display? The guy with the headphones on. (Listening to Enya?) What's on his mind? Okay, he's going to buy the book. So let's picture him at home tonight reading it. Where's he sitting? Who else is in the house? Does he read with a pen in his hand? With the TV on? Why did he come to the store tonight to buy this particular book? Now you've got the idea. He and the woman who talks alone and that young man over there in the bondage pants and the "I Was a Teenage Malcontent" T-shirt are characters in our short-story-in-progress, "Singles Night at the Book Emporium."

You're going to meet resistance in your writing life (only some of which will come from your critical self). People who love you will tell you you're not being productive. You're wasting your time on a pipe dream. They'll say they could use some help with the supper. They'll say the garage needs cleaning. They'll say, Okay, you gave it a shot, and we're so proud of you for trying, but now let's get on back to the real world. Tell these people that you know your writing will not change the world but it may change you. (Is that what they're worried about?) Tell them you are not going to be good, that you're not going to do what you're supposed to do. If they persist, tell them that you're going to write about them. You've got a story in mind. It's called "Your Money or Your Life." Tell them you'll get the house painted, mop the dust bunnies under the bed, you'll pay the gas bill, but not right now. Tell them you love them, and you'll see them again just as soon as you find the verb that will make the sentence sing.

Laurence Sterne said he wrote the first sentence and trusted in God for the rest. God here is a metaphor for the Muse. Muse here is a metaphor for Work. Writing is, among other things, an act of faith, like engaging in conversation is an act of faith. You launch into a sentence not knowing where it'll go, but trusting that it'll make some sense and that it'll come to an end. A story is a long conversation between you and the reader. So let's get started. Let's be bad. Let's go looking for trouble. Let's commit some fiction.

Thanks to Florida International University for the Summer Research Grant that allowed me the time to finish this book and to the Florida Arts Council for an Individual Artist Fellowship. And thanks to Brother Joseph Gerard and Brother Capistran, who, way back when, turned me on to literature and encouraged my first efforts at writing.

And, of course, I want to thank Jill Bialosky and Richard McDonough for all their encouragement and support. And as always, thank you, Cindy. Thank you, Tristan.

The Process

✕

Getting in Shape

✕

Go to your bosom: Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know.

—*Measure for Measure*

Jesus said, If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.

—*The Gospel of Thomas*

You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to write, so let's write. We'll chat later. Get out your pen and paper or fire up the computer. Pour yourself a coffee. Unplug the phone. Once you start, you can't stop. Give yourself a half hour. Relax. Don't think too much. You're starting a journey, and you don't know where you're going. But you do know you're going someplace you haven't been before. Take ten minutes for each exercise. Here we go.

1. HERE AND NOW! Write about where you are physically right now. In the writing room or the kitchen or in a theater, on the subway. Write about the feel of the pen in your hand or the sound of the paper as your hand glides across it. Write in first person, present tense. The smell and the sounds. Even the silence has a sound—let us hear it. Keep jotting down sense experiences. What do you see out the corner of your eye? Think of a color and look up and write down what you see that's blue or green or whatever you chose. (Interesting how that invoked color suddenly jumps out at you, how the color itself determines what you see.) What about the textures of things? What does the seat feel like? Think about your body and how it feels configured as it is. Shift around a bit. How does that feel? What do you see now that you didn't see before? How could you have missed it? How can you look at something, you might wonder, and yet not see it? What else have you been missing all your life? ("The first act of writing is noticing." —W. H. Auden.) When you get distracted, go with the distraction. Write about it.

2. THE SHOE THAT DROPS. You are aware that something is missing in your life. And it's not money. It's something more important than that. What is it? Or who is it? Don't resist it now. It can't hurt you. No one else needs to know. Something (someone) you've never had or something (someone) you've had and you've lost. It is a hollowness that eats at your heart. It's what you think about when you're sitting alone in a quiet room, and it's three A.M., and you can't sleep. It's the shoe that drops

and snaps you out of your dreams. It's what you remember just when you think everything in your life is going so well. Or perhaps, when you consider dying, you think: This is what I need before it's too late. Write about this void, give this emptiness a shape.

3. HOMETOWN. Think about the place where you grew up, and, of course, the time you grew up there. How was that place different from any other place, than the place where you live now? And even if you haven't moved geographically, the place has changed, hasn't it? What were the local rituals that made it unique? Think about language, vocabulary, dialect, accent. Think about foods, think about the work people did. The work they didn't do. Remember the annual events that everyone looked forward to. The schools, the architecture, the folkways. The town or the neighborhood legends and character. This could be the setting for stories, remember. Walk around the town or the neighborhood and put your five senses to work. Stop and talk to the people you find there—the people from your own past. Think about the seasons, the light, the ground, the schools, the churches, the secret places you escaped to.

You just spent a half hour writing quickly, serenely, and without expectation, and in doing so you've gathered enough material to write any number of stories. And remember, you don't have to stop now. When you get a few minutes today or tomorrow, go back to the notes you just took, read them, and keep on writing. Let the words and the material, the memories and images guide you. This is where writing is the most fun. You've got nothing to prove and a world—your world, in this case—to explore. And now you'll be thinking about these recollections, these revelations, all day. Don't dismiss them.

“Refuse to write your life and you have no life.”

—PATRICIA HAMPL

The Lie That Tells a Truth is meant to be a plain-speaking guidebook that helps you to do what you've always wanted to do—write stories. I'm talking specifically to fiction writers, but I think most of what I have to say is applicable to memoirists as well. (The spell-check on my computer just told me there's no such word as *memoirist*, told me to use *memorist*, which, in fact, isn't a word, which is why you can never trust in spell-check or grammar-check, for that matter, which is often quite ludicrous in its pronouncements. You do it yourself. Is spelling important? [Grammatik just told me to change that sentence to *Is spelling importantly?*] You bet it is. And so is good grammar and accurate punctuation. What could be more obvious than that? Fortunately, there are dictionaries and stylebooks that will address just those issues—you don't have to memorize a thing. I confess to being a less-than-proficient speller. I know that every time I want to spell *occassion* [see there; got it wrong again], I will have to look it up. Words with double consonants are my downfall. And *its/it's*. You can use spell- and grammar-check programs, just don't rely on them.)

“It's never too late to be what you could have been.”

Where were we? Oh, yes. There's nothing mysterious about the writing process—unless you've never done it, of course. We'll talk about what a story is (and what a novel is) and how one gets written. Writing is a craft, and it can be taught and can be learned. I learned it. Writing is a skill, and none of us are born with skills. We work at them. What can't be taught, of course, is talent and passion. Talent is cheap, however. ("Talent is long patience." —Flaubert; "Genius is eternal patience" —Michelangelo; "Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage to follow the talent to the dark place where it leads." —Erica Jong.) Passion is much more significant.

We'll do more of the kind of writing exercises you just did. An exercise is an act of employing one's skills, putting into play; an activity that requires physical or mental exertion, performed to maintain fitness. It means practice. From the Latin *exercitium* n. *exercito*—"to keep at work." The idea of the writing exercises in the book is to get you fit, practiced, ready to write. This is the writing that comes before and between your stories and novels. This is the writing designed to get you ready to compete, as you were, to get yourself excited, to get you writing without effort and strain eventually. The idea is that writing is fun despite what they taught you in school. You may not be able to get to that story every day, but you sure can write every day. Exercises may help to keep you thinking and living like a writer. So let's do another one. This will take you a bit longer. Set aside a block of time. In fact, let's just talk about time for a minute. Time and writing.

"All the things one has forgotten scream for help in dreams."

—ELIAS CANETTI

In a chapter of *Becoming a Writer*, the chapter entitled "Harnessing the Unconscious," Dorothea Brande says that the first step toward being a writer is to hitch your unconscious mind to your writing arm. She contends that it is possible to write for long periods of time without fatigue and that if you push yourself past that first weariness, you will find in yourself a reservoir of unsuspected creative energy, a second wind. If you want the full benefit of the unconscious part of yourself (we might think of this as the right brain, the nonanalytical part of ourselves, or some other metaphor), you must learn to write smoothly and easily when the unconscious mind is in the ascendant. She says the best way to do that is to rise a half hour or hour earlier than normal, as early as you can. Begin to write without talking, without reading the newspaper, without making the coffee or turning on the radio. Begin to write down anything that comes to your mind, rapidly and uncritically. You are learning to write in the twilight zone (her phrase, not Rod Serling's) between waking and sleeping so similar to the true hypnopompic state you may just have left.

After a couple of days you'll find that there are a certain number of lines that you can write easily and without strain. In subsequent days, push the limit. Try to double it. Writing is now becoming part of your life. (Julia Cameron, in *The Artist's Way*, has a variation on this system. She calls it "Morning Papers" and suggests that every morning, without fail, but not necessarily on rising, you

handwrite three pages of whatever is there. Everything that comes out is important in at least one respect—whatever it is, often worries, was likely to impede your focused writing later on in the day. Now you're ready to teach yourself to write at any given moment. After you've dressed in the morning, look ahead at your day and find fifteen minutes that you'll have for yourself, and schedule that time for writing. Come hell or high water, keep the appointment. Keep this strategy up every day but vary the times. Morning, afternoon, late at night. Keep the date to the second. Vary the length as well. Maybe you can sneak in a half hour on Saturday, an hour here, twenty minutes there. (Camero has a variation on this exercise as well. She calls it the Artist Date—you make a date with your artist/the child inside/the creator and you actually take her out for an enjoyable time. You go to the park to write or to a café where you can linger, etc.)

“What one has lost, or never had, feeds the work. There is a chance to make things right, to explain and explore, and aided by memory and its transmutations, find a new place where I have not been and did not wish to go.”

—JOYCE CAROL OATES

There is a deep inner resistance to writing that is apt to surface at these moments, and your lazy self (your frightened self? your humble self?) will suddenly begin to find busywork to do. The easiest thing is to put off writing because you have a headache, or because the phone rings, or the person from Porlock is at the door, or the clothes need to be put in the dryer, or Kmart's having a sale on motor oil, or the bills have to be paid. Disregard it all. If you fail repeatedly at this exercise, Brande says, give up writing. Your resistance to writing is greater than your desire to write. I think she's being unduly harsh, but maybe not. Why force yourself to do something that you don't want to do? There's something unwholesomely puritanical in that. So try these two procedures in your notebooks for the next two weeks, let's say, and make them nonnegotiable. Early morning writing—three pages will do (and you do not have to read them at all); and writing by appointment—fifteen minutes will do. You will not only be learning how to write, you'll also be learning how to be a writer.

Now for the exercise.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY. You want to write your autobiography, but you don't know where to start. Well, you don't start by writing, *I was born on . . .* and continue on until today. Too large and daunting. You need to focus, gather material. Following is a list of questions and suggestions that might help. But don't limit yourself to them. Write about them in as much detail as you wish and write about anything else that these questions suggest to you.

The source of much of the material that finds its way into our writing is our own lives, our own values, our own emotions. Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who has survived beyond the age of twelve has enough fictional material for the rest of her life. And remember, too, the unexamined life is not worth living.

What are your tastes in music, books, painting, sports, cars, foods, beverages, films, plants,

furniture, houses, politicians, magazines, appliances, friends, television shows? (That should take the rest of the day.) Have your tastes changed as you've grown?

Describe what you remember of your childhood prior to beginning school. Do you remember your toys, your dolls, your room? Where did you play when you played outside? What is your earliest memory? Write about that. I've had people tell me they remember being in the womb. Other folks have said they can't remember anything before they were six or seven. Why do you suppose that is? I can remember a dream I had when I was two. I know my age because my sister, my competition, had just been born and carried home from the hospital. She was killed in my dream, suffocated by shadow men. (I've apologized.) I also remember being a year old and standing in my crib watching my father come home. But perhaps the memory was constructed from photographic evidence—there is a picture of me in his hat taken at that moment. Can it be a memory if you see yourself in it? Probably not. At any rate, memory is our autobiography. And the first memory is where you say your life begins.

“Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.”

—SAUL BELLOW

Discuss three events that have caused you to be profoundly unhappy. And it's not always the obvious events that make us the saddest. Think hard. What is the best thing that has happened to you in your life? The worst? (Just a reminder: There are no right answers. Do this again next week, and you'll likely have different answers.)

What are your major fears? We think of phobias as abnormal and irrational, but they still count. And not all fears are irrational. I've had friends tell me they aren't afraid of death. I don't believe them. I'm with Céline, who said, “If you have no imagination, death is nothing. If you do, it is too much.” Give examples of your fears and try to trace the fears back to childhood incidents if you can. Maybe you're afraid of the dark for a good reason.

When do you feel most at ease and comfortable? And where? And what are you doing when you are at this ease? Are you alone? (Why is it that we can stare at the ocean or at a fire in a fireplace for hours? What is the comfort we find there?)

Now that you're blissful, and since I brought it up: How do you think you'll die? How would you like to die? *Like*, I suppose, is the wrong word. (I think of Woody Allen's line about achieving immortality by not dying.) Imagine your own funeral, your wake, the gathering after the burial. (This is your only chance to be there.)

Describe some silly, foolish thing you've done. What does it feel like to remember this? How did you feel then?

What are your attitudes toward the opposite sex, love, money, insanity, suicide, abortion, violence, family life, animals, poverty? Remember that our attitudes are seldom simple, often ambivalent. Be honest with yourself. Maybe you're a liberal and a feminist and believe in a woman's right to choose, but you're not sure what you'd do if you were confronted with an unwanted pregnancy.

What would you like to change about yourself? Why haven't you done it already? When will you start the change? Wanting to write starts today.

What are the motivating forces in your life? What are your ambitions? Describe your life in ten years as you want it to be. How would you live if you could have anything you want? What do you want?

Describe any jobs you've had. Talk about the people you worked with.

Have you had any mystical experiences? What were they? What do you feel like when you talk about them?

What did you want to be when you were five? (Me, I wanted to be a cowboy-priest. Riding the range, delivering the sacraments.) When you were ten? Why aren't you that person you dreamed of being? Do you still long to be that person? What's stopping you?

Write about all of the places you have ever lived. Describe each house in great and loving detail. Recall if you were happy or unhappy in these places and why. Describe the kitchens, the yards, your bedrooms, the neighbors, the views, etc. What were the family dynamics in each house? List the smells that you remember and the memories they conjured. Remember the meals.

Remember the worst part of being a child. Dramatize it. Remember the best of it and dramatize that.

As a Matter of Fact

✕

All novels are burdened with the need to make life more interesting than it is.

—Wright Morris

Now that we've talked about mining your own life for fictional material, let's see what that implies. Let me give you an example of a story I wrote based on actual events from my life. The story is called "Surveyors," and it's in a collection called *The Way That Water Enters Stone*. It may be the most autobiographical story I've ever written. Why didn't I just write memoir, just write the facts, in other words? Well, first the real events. (If we can trust memory to furnish the real events—ever ask two people to recall a dinner they had together several years ago? You might wonder were they even in the same restaurant.)

When I was between, say, five and nine, I spent most of the summer with my grandparents in the apartment on Fairmont Avenue. Not far from our own house, actually. Still on Grafton Hill. In the evenings after supper, my grandfather and I would sit outside on the thin strip of crabgrass beside the gravel driveway and gaze out over the tomato garden he'd planted in the lot next door to his three-decker. He'd drink from a bottle of Tadcaster ale. In late July, when the tomatoes were finally ripe, he'd pick one and eat it. I didn't particularly like tomatoes, or any other vegetable (you could call them fruit, but I knew what they really were) except corn on the cob, and I would not have eaten a tomato, not raw, certainly, not off the vine. My grandfather would have carried a saltshaker along, and he'd sprinkle salt onto the tomato at each bite. (I'm trying to remember if it was the quilted glass shaker from the kitchen table or a tiny Morton disposable one.) And we'd talk.

The reason I remember the ritual at all, and the reason I wrote about it, was that it ended. Ended rather abruptly. One evening (could have been afternoon, actually), a couple of men (or maybe it was one) came and walked through the lot that was my grandfather's garden. No one walked in the tomato garden but my grandfather! He went to speak with them. I figured they were in big trouble. Later, in the kitchen, he told us that the men were going to build a house in the vacant lot. And before the next summer, they did.

"A good writer sells out everybody he knows, sooner or later."

—ALICE McDERMOTT

As you can see, I'm not very conversant with the facts, but what is indelible for me is the emotion

of those evenings and of their loss. And that's where the story came from. I loved sitting beside my grandfather, being pals. I hated when I could no longer do that. I hated that someone we didn't know took my grandfather's greatest pleasure, his garden, away from him. And we were helpless to do anything about it. And I wanted to address the truth of my feelings, my hurt and my anger, wanted the reader to feel what I felt then. Here's how I turned that summer and that loss into a story.

I don't remember how the tomatoes were planted; they were bushy, staked, unpruned, and seemed to cover every inch of soil from the sidewalk to the cyclone fence, from the driveway to Clarendon Street. But in the story there are "six rows of twelve tomato plants each." I figured there had to be a system to the planting, so why not this one? My grandfather was a carpenter as well as the painter, so I call him in the story, and he would have enjoyed the straight lines and symmetry. Why should he be denied them because I couldn't remember? And you, the reader, certainly don't want to be told something like "the plants were everywhere." Nothing is everywhere.

"When a writer is born into a family, that family is doomed."

—CZESLAW MILOSZ

Tomatoes were tomatoes to me at nine. Round, satiny red, and aromatic. I couldn't have told Nebraska Wedding from a Brandywine from a Cherokee Purple, but my grandfather could have, and so in the story he harvests several varieties, and you get to see them. It didn't make dramatic sense to spend paragraphs or pages describing the months of nights we sat outside together. Certainly some nights it rained, other nights my grandfather sent me back inside to get him another bottle of ale, and more than once Henry Potvin stopped by, and he and my grandfather talked about fishing. None of which was important to what I wanted you to feel. So the long summer became the one summer night. And in order for you to care about our little problem, you needed to know us a little better. So my grandfather had to tell a story. And the story had better have something to do with one of our themes. *Loss* would do. So he tells the boy—me, but not me—about how he lost the house he built with his own hands. Lost it to the banks in the Depression.

"The problem with fiction is that it has to be plausible. That's not true with non-fiction."

—TOM WOLFE

Or maybe he didn't tell me that particular story during that particular summer. It was a story I had heard many times in my childhood. I even played with the girl who then lived in the house my grandfather had built and lost, the house my mother grew up in. I longed to go inside, but was never invited to. The Bowmans were more formal people than we were. Protestants. Mr. Bowman was principal of Providence Street Junior High School. The apple tree that my grandfather had planted still grew in the Bowmans' backyard. But the pigeon coop and the mink cages were gone. And I never did see the eponymous surveyors with their transits. In the story, one of them wore a New York Yankee

ball cap. But dramatically and thematically their appearance worked. Weren't my grandfather and also surveyors of the garden? And didn't the baseball cap reflect more loss, the earlier televised baseball game resonating here, our beloved Sox losing to the Yankees earlier in the story? And we did not watch the men bulldoze the garden. If I did see it, I have repressed it. More likely I came back from the wading pool at Holmes Field one afternoon or home from a Little League game at night and saw that the lot had been cleared. In the story, by the way, the saltshaker is yellow and shaped like an ear of corn just because I liked looking at it.

“What is remembered is what becomes reality.”

—PATRICIA HAMPL

When you use material from your own life in your fiction you have the benefit of a familiar setting; you have incidents or events that will become your scenes; you have characters that you know, or think you know. You have a beginning, a middle, and an end to your story. All of that should make the writing of the story easier. But it doesn't. The advantages are also the disadvantages. Take character for instance. You think you know your grandfather, but then you realize you don't even know yourself, do you? You do things for no discernible reason half the time, don't you? If you can't know yourself, how can you presume to know another person? The point is you are not writing about a real grandfather, but a fictional one, the one you've made up, the one you've chosen to remember. The character on the page is immediately different from the character he is based on. (So what is memoir, you might ask. I don't believe that the autobiographer recalling his impoverished childhood can remember conversations he had when he was three. And I don't think you believe it, either. Invention is inevitable. It's all fiction. Memoir is a fiction about your own past. That's what I think now.)*

“We owe respect to the living; to the dead we owe nothing but the truth.”

—VOLTAIRE

Let me quote Janet Malcolm. In writing about Chekhov's story “The Lady with the Pet Dog,” she says, “If privacy is life's most precious possession, it is fiction's least considered one. A fictional character is a being who has no privacy, who stands before the reader with his ‘real, most interesting life’ nakedly exposed. We never see people in life as clearly as we see the people in novels, stories, plays.” And this is why we read fiction. It is honest and relentless. In coming to understand why the characters do what they do, we may come to understand ourselves. So forget the model and attend to the character. Characters who are based on folks you know have to displace the folks you know before they can come alive.

(Of his wife on her deathbed.) “I found myself, without being able to help it, in a study of my beloved wife's face, systematically noting the colors.”

—ÉDOUARD MANET

And then you think about the beginning and the end of your story, and you realize that life doesn't come with plots. You're writing about the dwindling relationship you had with a best friend, say. You're trying to understand it—a great reason to write about it, of course. The friend suddenly stopped talking to you after twenty years of companionship. When did the problem begin? you wonder. In the story, do you establish the friendship first? Why? Maybe the problem began when you realized this pal hadn't returned your last five phone calls. What did you do to him? Maybe he was hurt that you told him what you thought about the way he was treating that last girlfriend, what's-her-name? When did the problem—and when does the story—end? Is it over, in fact? Is there even any dramatic material there to work with? Have you done anything to save the friendship? Maybe you could start close to there, the first time you stopped by his house to ask what was going on.

“True to life becomes fiction when it perceives more than it observes.”

—WRIGHT MORRIS

When a story is based on autobiographical material there is a tendency to be slavish to the facts. You write a scene because “that’s the way it happened.” Well, we don’t care that it happened that way. Fiction is telling the truth, not telling the facts. (Truth is something like the essence of fact. Facts are subject to interpretation or we wouldn’t have a phrase like “The *true* facts may never be known.”) Let’s say you’re writing a story about a marriage in trouble and you base it on your own troubled marriage. In the scene you remember, the scene you’re writing, your wife is confessing her infidelity. The husband (he looks a lot like you) is stunned. He doesn’t know what on earth to say. How could she have done this to him? He looks at her. They’re in the car on the Interstate. He thinks for a second he should barrel into the guardrail. He collects himself. His wife is weeping—with shame? The cell phone rings. He answers it. It’s his brother saying he has tickets to the Marlins game on Saturday. And so on. Well, maybe that is the way it happened in your life, but is the phone call necessary in the scene you’re writing? Doesn’t it break the tension? Maybe you don’t need it. Most of what happens in our day is mundane. But fiction is not about trivialities. Once you begin your story, you owe your allegiance to the story and not to the facts of your life. Remember, the reader doesn’t care about your life, only about the lives on the page.

“Everything one invents is true.”

—GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

There’s a part of every writer, every artist, that stays detached, that is always observing, watching himself the same way that he watches others. It’s all material out there, after all. And of course, that must be disconcerting to those who notice the detachment. Especially if it’s your spouse and you’re having a heated discussion. Sincerity has nothing to do with it, either. A writer, naturally, can’t even be completely involved in the moment because part of her is taking notes. And eventually people catch on to your game. They know that you are stealing from their precious lives for your wretched

little stories. People may stop talking to you. Other writers will talk, but only if you promise you won't appropriate their tales.*

“Transformation—taking the raw materials of your life, making small and large changes to turn what you know into fictional material. Transformation gives you power over events—life is disorganized, here you impose order; protects you—no one knows who he is; provides new insights by trying to see it from the point of view of your characters, not the people you knew; gives you power over your story.”

—KIT REED

What, then, is your obligation to family and friends? I think your obligation is not to hurt anyone. And that means you may have to stuff that story about your Cousin Billy and his embarrassing trip to the emergency room into the desk drawer until Cousin Billy has died. Unless you can disguise it. I've modeled characters on people who have not recognized themselves, thank God. I was in a conversation with my mother, sisters, and other family members one afternoon and heard some wonderfully quirky and juicy material that I just knew had to be in a story, and before the chat was finished I had figured out how to use it. I wasn't so crude as to take notes at the kitchen table, of course. As soon as the others left the room, my mother looked across the table at me and said, "Don't you dare." And I haven't.

Other people see themselves on every page, even when they aren't there. You tell them, No, this is fiction. I made it up. They smile and say, But I was in the room when it happened. You tell them it didn't happen, and they start describing what else went on. They name all the other "characters" in the scene. People are disappointed when you tell them the guy on page 17 isn't them. So you let them believe it. Maybe they're right, after all. Memory is a rascal.

EXERCISES

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Genealogy

You can count on this. Your family is full of stories. With your parents' help or your grandparents or a professional genealogist, make up a family tree. And then find out everything you can about each of the people there. And then, with that information to go on, imagine the rest. Write an anthology of family stories. Call it the "Miami River Stories" or whatever.

Write about your Cousin Billy, who—oh, that's right, we're waiting for Billy to pass on. Write about your Uncle Gino (but change his name), who left home at sixteen, became a cowboy out West for a while, and the next time you saw him he was on TV holding his baby hostage with a pistol aimed at her head. This after his wife left him. Write about your Aunt Randeane, who smuggled rum from Barbados to Key Biscayne in the twenties; your cousin Weezie, who went to LA in the fifties to make her fame and fortune in the movies, married a page at NBC who left her and went on to become a well-

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