

The Teacher Responds to His Students

Yearly, I teach the highest level creative writing course at Valparaiso University. At times I ask my students for questions regarding the craft. This is a sample of the responses I give them.

It may also serve to explain my personal notions of the creative craft.

Wangerin's Response to Certain Questions on October 21

Making oneself sit down to write (Mike Becker)

Whenever possible (for me) writing must become a part of my larger routine, not just its own act and responsibility, but something that shares structure and attention in my life with eating (a regular thing) raking, teaching, lecturing, sleeping. That is, my view of writing places it within the scope of all my responsibility. Likewise, you: if writing can possibly be seen not as a single class, but seen as an element of all classes; seen not only as an academic requirement, but seen as a piece of the whole fabric of your week and days and eating and everything else, the sitting down to it will come with the same natural approach as sitting down to watch TV or eat, etc.

(I know: every professor thinks her course the most important; but I'm not speaking so much of a course here as of an activity you may continue hereafter.)

Hanging on to ideas that come when one is away from writing: (Mike B.)

Yes, a constant notebook.

But as you more and more pay attention to a particular work, the work walks with you wherever you go; a small compartment of your mind opens up to hold all the activity of that process, and thoughts that come then are less likely to be forgotten: they find their place within the stream of the work immediately, and are there when you sit to write again. This has to do with your relationship to the work. It is a beautiful revelation and a whole new experience when that work suddenly transfigures and is no longer an assignment but a companion.

Get it, y'all? This is one reason why in this course we choose one thing to occupy us throughout the term.

The difference between good description, thin, and overwrought description: (Dennis F)

Good description (though the reader might see only description) is always furthering the story too! Good description has an internal progression, that is, the "eye" of the reader does not bounce crazily or illogically around, but rather follows a sensible, logical, right and "narrative" path through the scene (person) described, so that the sequence of description itself takes on a story motion.

Good description is like Chartre Cathedral: it makes the reader move forward, move, you see, in the direction (narratively and emotionally and interpretively) that the author intends.

Do I find writing to work me up emotionally? Is that good? (Dennis Fitzpatrick)

Yes and no.

Yes: there is an emotional participation in the act of writing; and yes, I do conceive feelings for the characters, and I can grieve their passing or delight in discovering new things regarding them; and action-passages, in order to get the language and pacing right, cause in me the tension of the moment, as if I were somehow an actor in that event too; and yes, (this is different!) there is often the sense of satisfaction when passages are well written beneath my fingers. All this may be good—

--so long as—

No: my emotions do not drive the text, do not force my language, do not take precedence in the whole complex of the self who writes. Though emotions have a place within the process, that place is not to govern or control it, for emotions forget the covenants! In particular, they forget (even dismiss and are irritated by) a calm reader.

Do I stick to a strict schedule of writing (D. Fitz)

Yes.

I learned this when I had other jobs, ministry, parenting, shopping and cleaning and cooking, etc. Then I absolutely had to learn it or fail the writing altogether. That's a flat fact. (Or I might, on the other hand, fail Thanne and the children and my congregation—and that's an immoral choice.)

Something external must impose schedule on those of us who are not, by nature, disciplined. Us, I say: I am one.

And therefore I have willingly taken upon myself the ugly task of being your external imposition, forcing y'all to time-discipline and a consistent attention to your "work" and your work.

Best Place to write? (Fitz)

Same place Wherever the place does not offer distraction.

Comment about process (Heidi Welling)

I offer here her words because they indicate a natural motion in the relationship between author and her writing:

“I have found it interesting that I am becoming more and more involved in the story as I continue writing and that the plot does not always move along in exactly the way I thought it would. I picture what is happening, and sometimes it leads me in a direction I hadn't planned.”

"I have had some difficulty keeping to my schedule because I need to feel ready to enter this created world if the writing is to work. Otherwise, I feel too distant from it. But I have been feeling more and more willing, even anxious, to enter it, as it has become

clearer and larger in my mind. In fact, it can even be a wonderful way to escape my present reality. During the time of writing I basically become very detached from everything that goes on around me."

Would you suggest writing and then trying to adjust it to make it rhyme? Or vice versa? (Scott Hufford)

Neither, now, Scott. In this day and age (unless you're writing songs, hymns, a Broadway type musical) the rhyme works best when it works for the author, the poet. Therefore, if you have already chosen to struggle with the explicit sound-values of words in order by that means to drive more deeply into your subject., and if this is indeed working for you, then you've already decided to attend to rhyme in the very composition of the piece. It is a process of the poem's very creation.

On the other hand, if the poem flows best without rhyme, why, it doesn't want rhyme and you don't need it. Rhyme after the fact (if there's no creative reason for it) burdens a poem exactly as Dante's "hypocrites in hell" were forced to wear ornate robes made completely out of lead.

For purely imagined pieces, where do ideas come from? -- from remembered events or things only imagined? (Scott H)

At the beginning (when the piece is new to the author) that author will likely use both self-consciously, making up scenes wildly, wobbly, broader than necessary (though this process itself is necessary) by imagining stuff out of the blue, whether in mind before writing, thinking it through, or whether while actually at the page/computer. This is a testing phase. Also the same author might model a totally fictional scene upon some similar scene recalled, in order to "get it right." And that, too, will later need its revision, since it tends to be wooden and memory-specific rather than story-specific and newly alive on the page.

Later, as the story earns more and more reality on its own within the author's mind and life and attention, it will teach the author how to go, and then the scenes will seem to come from the story (though unconsciously the author is drawing upon her experience and her own insights into human and nature's behavior, since nothing comes from nothing and good writing comes from the well of the memory and the soul: she isn't trying hard now). There will, of course, be times she draws consciously on past experience; but then the story will have become such a clear standard for transmogrifying the experience that her memory will likely not overwhelm her present work any more.

How to whittle characters and broad plots down to a single, continuous plot that best relates theme and best presents those characters. (Mike Andersen)

In-weaving. The first time through you may have little dangling threads, bits of description or plot or (especially) dead-end actions (whether big or little gestures) or dialogue which seem to accomplish one single thing for the story and then is dropped. Go back and take it as an exciting challenge to figure how that dangling thing can be woven into the story, now, in more ways:

- can it solve a later, unsolved problem?
- can it become a metaphor or an image that recurs?
- can it be changed in harmony with other (more dominant) descriptions, actions, character traits?
- can it nudge dialogue? Re-appear unobtrusively in dialogue?

can you take, say, three loose pieces and let one richer piece accomplish what all three do together,
especially if you find that the three (or four, whatever) constitute repetition?

How do you feel when it's time to end? (Brent Ewig)

Time, do you mean, to end an entire work?--as opposed to end work for the day? At the end of a long composition, I feel always a great relief, and I start to do housecleaning, cleaning up everything that got left while I wrote. I also feel somewhat uncertain; that is, I will have to return to that piece in time and read it with a cooler head in order to judge whether it needs revision and further work. But there must be time between those two tasks, in order for the author to achieve that distance and, at the same time, to recover normal balance and alertness. Also, I feel sometimes, a sort of postpartum depression, a nervousness that makes me vulnerable to the cracks or attacks or comments of silly people, a sense of searching for good reason to go back to work again. All that. More.

Are there techniques for isolating characters in the story better to describe them? (John Schaefer)

1. Actually, beginning with characters immediately together and in some conflict (even if that is no more than push-me pull-you conversation) is the best way to describe characters, because we always discover more about people in context of other people—and you, John, do not fail at that, though you might think you do. Readers are to be trusted. We have the complex capacity to meet several people at once, and at once to distinguish among them.

2. But that isolation may come later in the narrative, when it shall be more effective for the reader, and when you yourself are clear enough about the character's person to write steadily (and not boringly) of a low-action event which reveals that one alone.

Comment from John Schaefer:

"What has become most interesting up till this point is how these characters are developing for me, how I'm getting more and more of a picture of them in my own mind as I'm writing, which may explain why I'm having trouble conveying them to the reader."

Well, but the clearer the author is about characters, the likelier he is unconsciously to convey that character to the reader. Why? Because action, gesture, dialogue all will be more accurate and more condensed as the author knows what one would (or would not) say, do, be. Therefore, John, though you pay less attention to conveying the character (and so feel somewhat self-critical in that process) you're wrong. Your choices themselves become more and more effective to the reader's inner and spontaneous eye. If you explicitly describe, the reader must think to receive description; such thought can be interruptive. But if the character appears to the reader exactly as a real encounter in real life presents another person to her, she won't think about it, but she will know. Get it? Trust us. We're pretty good readers. And if you know the character and present it accordingly, so will we know.

"It comes out, and it's not there until I start writing and I don't know what it's going to be until it happens and when it's done, it's done, and I'm along for the ride."

Good, John. Even so it often is the case. Even within the stiff restrictions of time and page requirements.

DEAR CLASS, KEEP IT UP!

(So saith the teacher)

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