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Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:
Give writers suggested hints,
resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you
feel is most helpful and derive
inspiration from it- most importantly,
HAVE FUN!

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say
you're doing an art project and you
want to spice it up a bit. You reach
into a seemingly bottomless box full
of colorful art/craft supplies and
choose only the things that speak to
you. You take only what you need to
feel that you've fully expressed
yourself. Then, you go about doing
you're individual project adding just
the right amount of everything you've
chosen until you reach a product that
suits you completely. So, this is on
that concept. Reach in. find the



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things that inspire you, use the tools that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Writing and Reading Experimental Fiction

By Heather Momyer

There is an inherent problem with experimental fiction writing, and that is, the further you remove your writing from the traditional narrative structure, and the more you dabble and play with form and language, the less likely your writing will succeed if success is defined as publication and a meaningful experience for readers. Odds are against you.

The problem lies in the way we are trained to read. We have learned to read

short fiction by studying centuries of narratives that have relied heavily on the form established by the Greek dramatists. The story opens with the introduction of a conflict; the plot escalates the conflict (the rising action) until we reach the pivotal point and the climax of the conflict. This is Act III in the play and the protagonist is forced to the moment of crisis and a decision is made. From there on, there is the resolution, or at least in contemporary fiction, there is a moment when resolution is possible. This is the form we have learned to read. This is the form that makes sense and is meaningful. As readers, we know what to expect: plot, character development, conflict and resolution.

But, perhaps this form no longer does it for you. Perhaps you want to “make it new” as Ezra Pound would say. After all, what about Gertrude Stein, you might ask. And I have to say, yes, there was Gertrude Stein who wrote what she wanted to write and published it, in her lifetime no less. Unfortunately, most of us have not been blessed with the name “Gertrude Stein,” and without the name, we are left without the literary authority Stein could carry—we are not Gertrude Stein, so most of us will not be treated like Gertrude Stein.

We are then forced to make a decision. Where do we draw the line in our literary experiment? Do we dabble in subtle shifts in points of view or time and setting? Do we play a bit with structure while leaving the larger portion of the narrative conflict intact, leaving the reader in a mostly familiar zone, a zone that is somewhat navigable and therefore readable and meaningful?

Consider the fact that the short story consists of several elements—plot, character, point-of-view, setting, and language, to name a few. In general, genre fiction tends to privilege plot. What happens is what is most central to the story. In terms of literary fiction, it seems that character development is most central to the story. The nexus of the story lies in the manner in which the character changes, or fails to change. But, what if the privileged element is something other than plot or character?

For example, I would argue that the primary element of Joseph Conrad’s novel, *The Heart of Darkness*, is setting. For me, the crux of the reading experience and conflict of the novel lies in the juxtaposition of and

similarities between the Congo and London and the Thames. Marlow, the narrator, envisions the ancient Thames as a dark and murky place as the Romans began their colonization centuries earlier. The London past parallels his vision of the Congo, while Kurtz, who is never developed into a complete character, is simply another tie between the savagery of both London and Africa; he is a symbol of the general nature of human savagery that has its place in any setting where human beings are found.

For myself, I've been interested in privileging another element of fiction—language. Can I write a story, and not a poem, where the primary conflict is a language conflict, or a conflict of aesthetics? If language is my focus, I may choose to focus less on plot or character development. The question I've been working on is: how does one write a story where nothing happens in terms of plot and the characters are not central? In essence, my experiment sounds a lot like poetry where the primary meaning is found in sound and lyricism, but I am interested in maintaining the notion of conflict and resolution. I also wish I could say how this is done, but this is an experiment that has not reached its resolution.

Another important aspect in writing experimental fiction is to understand your experiment. What are you trying to accomplish? Calling a piece “experimental” does not give you permission to write nonsense and say that the piece is open to interpretation. You have a responsibility to your readers and that is that you are genuinely attempting to try something new and there is an idea behind it. You might not be able to fully articulate your idea, but you do have a thought and a purpose. I always like to compare this concept to the paintings of Jackson Pollack. Pollack is an artist who gets to have his work in prestigious galleries and museums because he had an idea. He was working on changing the very definition of art, a definition that he argued should focus on the process, or action, of painting, and not on the final product. We could certainly debate the aesthetic appeal of his work, but it is difficult to deny there is thought behind his work, and this is why Pollack's work is in museums and my work isn't. I simply don't know how to paint. Pollack experimented with intention. I'm just sloppy.

Finally, the last thing we can do to help make experimental writing more

publishable and, therefore, help expand the very definition of the short story as an art form is to train ourselves to be better readers. So, how do we learn to be better readers of experimental writing? Some people might argue that we need to let go of our expectations and assumptions of what a story is. Go in with an open mind, they sometimes say. I disagree a bit. Keep the open mind, but don't let go of those expectations. In fact, be highly aware of those expectations. How do you define "story" and how does this new piece you are reading meet those criteria and where does it fall apart? This is important because the next question to ask is why did the writer choose to write an unconventional story? Why did the writer choose to break those rules that you were expecting to be followed? Aha! Now, we are asking ourselves, "What was this writer's idea?"

In answering this question, a good place to start is with the content. Take a story that is about a confused character in a confused world. Perhaps then, establishing confusion for the reader is another method of pushing the theme of confusion. A prime example of this is John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse." I would guess that most of us were terribly disoriented in our first reading of this particular short story. The narrator goes back and forth between the narrator of a story about a boy who goes to a funhouse and the narrator who is trying to write a story about a boy who goes to a funhouse. The techniques shift between various modes of writing that have been common in literary history and the author-narrator is trying to decide how he will write the story as the story progresses. For readers, it's confusion. It's disorienting. We are often not sure who is speaking and what we are looking at. It is often like being in a literary house of mirrors where the narrative is always changing. It is often like being lost in a funhouse.

But, back to our initial question. Where do we draw the line of experimentation? We can experiment with one or two particular elements of fiction as I've been discussing, or, our other option is to go balls-out and jump entirely off of that literary cliff just to see where we land. We can ditch everything we know about this short story and begin to devise a new form. This new form is essential. You may destroy a form, but it must be replaced. A lack of form leads to literary chaos, and that will not make sense to anyone else; it might not even make sense to yourself. But, if you

can establish a new form, know that the difficulty in publishing will increase tremendously. Know that people will often not have the usual literary tools to read your work, because you just took them away, and this is why the new form is crucial. You must provide another pattern of meaning so your readers can learn to read your work. But also know that no experiment is ever a complete failure. You will always learn something about your craft with every word you write, and sometimes, if you feel failure on the horizon and your work is not going where you would like it to go, you might find that you just need to push further and fail grandly, because there aren't many innovations made when we are simply standing at the edge of that precipice looking downward. We have to take that leap to see what we can find.

"The greatest writers are those which are most useful to other persons"-
Aristotle

Writers' Observations

By Denise Bouchard

A few years ago I was in an eclectic art/gift store with everything from hand-painted furniture and jewelry to humorous cards. I suddenly spied a black and orange box which seemed to call out to me. This is what I like to call serendipity.

It read *The Observation Deck- A Tool Kit for Writers* by Naomi Epel. It is both inspiration and practical advice in a box, as best-selling authors share secrets with fifty cards and a corresponding guide book to help you to break through your blocks.

One of the cards is called "Ribe Tuchus" which roughly translated from the Yiddish means to "sit your bottom down on the chair". Simple,

perhaps, but poignant if you're avoiding your work like a pothole in an overcrowded restaurant near a bar full of drunken, screaming sports fans. It's amazing how the right card seems to pop up when needed and help you further along in your work.

The author, Naomi Epel, a former literary escort, had been a driver for touring authors. She asked a lot of questions and took note of her passengers' methods.

Not just a tool for writing, *The Observation Deck*, recommended by John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, is a tool for living creatively as well.

When feeling stuck, pick a card randomly, just as if you were divining your next writer's step, and be surprised at the thoughtful insights and inspirational anecdotes from some of the most seasoned professionals in the business.

To order or learn more, visit www.chroniclebooks.com or www.observationdeck.com

Writing Personal Myths

By Alana Cash

The first time I ever wrote what I now refer to as a “personal myth”, it was unintentional. I did not realize this was a story that could serve to give me insight into my own character. Quite the opposite, I was writing this story to show someone else how stubborn and unfair he was behaving in relation to me.

I had been dating a man who was still grieving over his divorce and who was unwilling to risk being hurt again. He wanted our relationship to be casual, while I thought I was in love with him. We were breaking up.

Determined to express my frustration, I decided to forgo my usual morbid poetry in favor of writing an allegory. This would be a catharsis for me and the final word on who was right and who was wrong

Normally when I write a story, I work on it until the characters become real beings and take on a life of their own. When I started to write the allegory, though, I simply chose words that the characters would personify – in this case RISK and PAIN.

Denying any ambivalence of my own, I completely identified with RISK.

RISK was a happy woman living on her own when she met PAIN. PAIN was an unhappy man looking for someone to discharge the grief he felt over the loss of his marriage.

I wrote about three more sentences and could go no farther. I felt awkward and stifled. In trying to manipulate the story so that my friend could see how right I was, I was blocking all natural flow that the story might have. And, as a writer, I knew I had to let go of the characters and let them live out the story instead of forcing them to do this or that so that the story would have the contrived ending that I had designed for it.

The initial problem was that I had not really created characters, only words that represented my own psychological projections. Along with that, my conscious mind was snagged on those words – RISK and PAIN. If I was to continue writing this story, I knew I had to get out of the subjective and into the objective – see my characters instead of just words. I had to quit manipulating the story and just tell it.

I still wanted to work with the genre of allegory and use symbols as characters, so in order to create the distance I needed, I decided to translate

the character names into another language. That way, my writing mind could retain them as symbols, but my conscious mind wouldn't get tripped up on the words and go off on emotional tangents.

I chose to use Spanish translations because I was somewhat educated in Spanish, although in no way fluent (which would have caused those nasty snags again). And, conveniently, I owned a Spanish/English dictionary.

It was in using this dictionary that I really began to define the characters for my allegory. The dictionary acted like a thesaurus because the translations usually gave several meanings for each word, and I could decide more clearly what emotion or trait of character I wanted my subconscious mind to be working with while I was writing.

For example: PAIN translated into Spanish as dolor or apenar. Looking up dolor to translate back into English, I found PAIN, AFFLICTION, GRIEF, or SORROW

Apenar translated back into English as TO GRIEVE or TO CAUSE PAIN

The process of flipping back and forth in the foreign language dictionary was fascinating, and I spent a long while reviewing all the translations possible, thinking about their meanings, getting clearer about what I wanted my characters to represent.

In the end, RISK remained risk which translated as Peligra. PAIN, however, went through a couple of stages of development. On the surface, I was dealing with my friend's fear of RISK because of the PAIN he might have to endure if things didn't work out. He was, then, not PAIN, but FEAR OF PAIN. Ultimately this character became PUNZAR (to pierce), a verb.

Now that the characters were refined, the story had to be set in time and place. Since I had read so many Grimm's fairytales as a child, it felt natural to choose some unspecified European country with a timeframe in the Middle Ages. Immediately, this instilled a sense of magic and wonder into the story and into me. Now I could feel the life of the story.

the story and into me. Now, I could feel the me of the story.

I began to write: There once was a girl who lived along on the side of a mountain. Her name was Peligra and she was blind.

As I wrote, I felt childlike. I was playing pretend. Relieved of the need to prove a point, my conscious and subconscious mind worked in harmony and the story flowed.

A few paragraphs later, Punzar arrived:

One day a prince came to visit her. Punzar wasn't a prince really, just a lonely man wandering the earth in search of friendship. Peligra imagined him a prince, however, because she had asked if she might touch his face and hands and shoulders so that she could understand the way that he looked.

When she touched the smooth skin of his face and felt the power in his hands, she felt sure he must be noble inside, and so imagined him a prince and told him so. He laughed and when he did, she could hear the joy he felt at having someone who saw him quite a bit better than he saw himself.

I began to write other "myths," and I read some of them aloud in a fiction-writing group I was conducting. One of the students in the class was a psychiatrist who ran a children's psychiatric hospital. He pointed out that all the characters that I wrote about in the myths were me. He suggested that what I had been doing was consciously choosing symbols and archetypes to work out inner conflicts.

Determined to look things squarely in the eye, I went back over the myths I had written and "interpreted" them. It was very difficult to acknowledge, let alone accept, that I was JEALOUSY, STUBBORNNESS, and DUPLICITY. That I live in the Village of Mente (Mind) and long for the Village of Ternura (Tenderness). The good news was that I was also CENEROSITY and FULFILLMENT and INNOCENCE. Various colors

GENEROSITY AND FULFILLMENT AND INNOCENCE. VARIOUS COLORS, none of them gray.

A few weeks later, I was invited to create and teach a seminar at the Jung Institute on writing personal myths. The first exercise I assigned to the students was to write a simple myth using a personal experience from work or home in which they felt that someone else was making life difficult. I told them to use only two characters: RIGHT and WRONG.

The absurdity of making one person totally wrong and the other totally right created some highly prejudicial and hilarious myths.

For example: WRONG kept reminding RIGHT to lose weight, which only made RIGHT eat a bag of cookies every day...

Perhaps you can see the multiple layers of fault and innocence that lie within this one sentence and how it helped the person who wrote it to objectify her feelings this way. This is the least complicated way to look at your own judgments about yourself and others. Write the myth one way and you see the humor. Put yourself in the myth as WRONG and you will learn other things – about shame, guilt, resentment and the various feelings that keep you stuck in the dynamic that you are writing (complaining) about.

Myth-writing is playtime. It gives us a chance to inject humor and compassion into the situations in which we feel victimized. And, if we cannot immediately find a solution to that sense of victimization through myth-writing, we can at least have a good laugh.

****(To read the actual myth Ms. Cash wrote, please refer below to the last text on this page)***





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Making Room for a Little Magic

By Nicole M. Bouchard

This is an anecdote that I'd like to share that sums up one of my main philosophies on writing, be it fiction or non-fiction.

While working on a travel piece about a charming village that a good acquaintance of mine had led me to, I received a bit of additional research that I hadn't sought out. After interviewing different residents and business owners, I believed that I had a clear picture of what the community meant. Stopping over in a restaurant a good distance away on my journey home, an old man met my eyes and sat himself at a table close to mine. With no introductions, he started to talk about his life and what was really important to remember. During the course of the conversation, he revealed that he had been the fire chief of the village I'd written about. He wanted to tell me about the people who had developed the area, the fisherman, the working class, the sense of brotherhood they felt in their culture and religion... and about the past which held for him a continuity that survived in spite of the changing times. This was another perspective, another voice telling the story of the same place. It gave my piece another

dimension of authenticity.

The strange part of the story is that he had no idea that I was a journalist, no idea that I was writing about that area. He handed me the gift of his story without knowing what use I would have for it.

I related the story later to one of the women I'd interviewed in the shops. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "I know him! He visits here and bestows little bits of wisdom from time to time..." I was relieved and yet oh-so-slightly disappointed. I had thought with delicious, imaginative indulgence that he was like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* and that I was the only who could see him...

The lesson I was reminded of through this experience was to keep an open heart, an observant mind, and allow a little bit of magic to happen. There is something divine about writing and if you stay open, the universe might just jump in to assist you. We, as writers, are dream keepers; we have to get out of the way a bit to let people convey their hopes, dreams, and passions through us. Nearly anyone can repeat facts, but an artist tells a story. A bit of the writer will always show through, but their subjects, whether in non-fiction or fiction should be able to show their inner core; those spectacular gems that make them who they are in the book of existence that has no beginning and no end. Be open and never force the pen- that's how we storytellers stay genuine.

(The myth as depicted in the myth writing article)

The Pierced Heart

By Alana Cash

There was once a girl who lived alone on the side of a mountain. Her name

There was once a girl who lived alone on the side of a mountain. Her name was Peligra and she was blind. She could touch her world with her hands and listen very closely and breathe very deeply, and in her imagination, she could see the world perhaps a little more beautifully than it actually appeared to others.

She loved being alive to experience the joy of listening to the birds singing and smell the scent of the flowers, to hear the soft fall of snow and feel the crispness of cold winter evenings. She loved to sing to herself and to dance and to smile.

There weren't many people who climbed the mountain to visit her because she lived very high up and it was a lot of trouble to get there. But once in a while, someone from the valley came up bringing her food or some clothing or something else that she might need. And sometimes, although not often, she would descend the mountain to visit in the village.

One day a prince came to visit her. He wasn't a prince really, just a lonely man wandering the earth in search of friendship. Peligra imagined him a prince, however, because she had asked if she might touch his face and hands and shoulders so that she could understand the way that he looked. When she touched the smooth skin of his face and felt the power in his arms and hands, she felt sure he must be noble inside and so imagined him a prince and told him so. He laughed at her and in his laughter she could hear the joy he felt at having someone who saw him quite a bit better than he saw himself.

He protested that he was a simple man who had traveled far away from home to forget the memory of his wife who had died one winter in a snowstorm. He had buried her in the woods near his home and the sadness had broken his heart in places that were difficult to repair.

He told Peligra that he was only one day's journey from his home on the other side of the mountain and asked if she might give him some food and water and allow him to rest overnight. Peligra provided all this for him,

and after their meal they sat by the warm fire and the stranger, whose name was Punzar, told her stories of his adventures.

As he spoke of himself, Punzar and Peligra learned that they were distant relatives in the family of Corazon. And, after hours of listening to him, she sang to him and held his hands in her lap to soothe his loneliness. He was comforted. She was glad to have his company.

They had so much to share with each other that Punzar remained with Peligra for the rest of the summer. They walked over the mountain and he described for her all the birds and butterflies and every flower. She listened and created the mountain within her mind far more beautifully than it really was, and it really was very beautiful already.

Each time Punzar told Peligra of how a butterfly wing was colored or how a flower looked in the distance, she smiled, and because he loved to see her smile, Punzar told her that he would stay until he had described to her every flower on the mountain. One day he described the last flower that he could find and told her that he must go home. He told her that he would return again after he had set his home in order and bring her there and describe everything of beauty on the other side of the mountain.

And so the man left her and traveled to his cabin on the far side of the woods. Although he rode away on a mule, the blind girl imagined it a great white stallion and that his home was a palace that glittered in the sunshine. She imagined it so because she had come to love him and she wanted it so for his sake.

His home was made of rough logs and had an earth floor and coarse furniture which he had made himself. And when he entered this hovel, he remembered his weariness at traveling for so long. He rested in his cabin for a long time before he thought again of Peligra, but when he did, he also remembered his sadness and why had had left. In this remembering, he closed the door of his cabin and sealed the windows and sat gravely beside

the fire.

Some mornings when he first awoke, he thought of Peligra and how she would smile. In those moments he considered returning to her, but his melancholy prevented him from doing so. That, and his shame. He knew that Peligra imagined him a prince in a fine castle and if he brought her to this wretched cabin, he imagined her disappointed and contemptuous.

Meanwhile, Peligra thought of Punzar who had brought her so much happiness in describing his adventures and in the gentle explanations he had given of her world. She missed his company and the roughness of his hand in her own. Day after day she hoped for his return, until so many days had passed that she began to believe that something had happened to Punzar and he might never return at all.

Then one night, she had a dream and she saw Punzar in a small cabin sitting beside a dim fire with his head in his hands and tears in his eyes. He wanted her to come to his home, but he was afraid that all he could describe to her was the sadness that he felt and the ugliness of his home.

When Peligra woke up, she decided to leave right away to find Punzar. She knew it would be difficult because she was blind, but she believed that if she imagined well enough that she would find the way.

That same night that Peligra had her dream, Punzar had one also. He dreamed that she was coming to visit him and needed his help to find the way, but because he no longer believed in his dreams, when he woke in the morning, Punzar dismissed the dream as foolish. He told himself that by now the girl had forgotten all about him. Only when he had the dream four nights in a row did Punzar walk out into the woods, and even then, he told himself that he was searching for a bird or something beautiful that he might describe to Peligra if he ever went to fetch her.

In the meantime, Peligra wandered about in the woods without food and with only the water she found when she listened for a stream. She lost her shawl on the branch of a tree and for four nights she shivered under a blanket of leaves. And she became ill.

She had become lost because each way that she turned and touched a tree she imagined that tree to be so beautiful as to lead to the home of her beloved Punzar. After the first day she knew she could not find him without his help and began to call out to him. For days she called him until finally she was too weak to say his name, and she sat down and leaned against a tree. She knew that she was dying and her sorrow was for her friend, Punzar, that he must remain unfulfilled.

When Punzar found her, she was still leaning against that tree. He cradled her and tried to make her warm as he told her how foolish she was to come searching for him. That she should have waited. He told her that he would carry her to his home and she would become well. He said that the snow would come soon and he would describe the shapes of the snowflakes and listen to the quietness of winter, and even though he did not have a palace as she had imagined, his house would keep them warm. And he would be happier because she was there.

Punzar told all of this to Peligra knowing that she lay dead in his arms. Knowing in his heart that he had been a fool to wait so long to believe in his dream. Peligra was dead now. And he didn't know if it was her love for him that had killed her. Or his lack of love for her.

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